

PSD NEPAL

Partnership for Sustainable Development



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Langtang Valley, Rasuwa, Nepal

Introduction

Langtang Valley, in the district of Rasuwa, Northern Nepal, is located 120km due north of Kathmandu, the capital city of this landlocked Himalayan kingdom. The oldest national park in all of Nepal, Langtang was established in 1976, and now hosts more than 15,000 international tourists and trekkers annually. Langtang Lirung peak, standing at 7,245m, is the highest peak in the national park, and is situated on the northern side of the valley, with most of the other peaks reaching around 6,500m in its surrounds.

Langtang - meaning the 'ox follows' in the local Langtang language - is one of the longest valleys in Nepal, extending from the lush tropical forests surrounding Syabru Besi at the base of the valley, at 1250m, to alpine scrub and perennial ice at altitude. The highest base of the valley is just below 4000m, at Langshisha Karkar, a half day walk west of the last trekking town, Kyanjin Gumpa. Beyond this, the valley continues to the international border with Tibet, in China.

As a diverse and varied landscape, Langtang also boasts immense diversity and richness in culture, heritage, language, and ethnicity. The national park is home to the sacred lake of Gosainkunda, at high altitude (4,300m), and also the Dorje Lakpa range (6,988m). The park is also linked with the Qomolangma National Nature Preserve in Tibet, and coincides with international borders with China. The other boundaries of the park are bordered by the Bhote Khosi river and Trisuli river. The park is protected as both an Indo-Malayan & Palearctic ecozone.

This report introduces the geography, history, culture, and economy of the Langtang Valley, with a view to developing the projects and programs of PSD Nepal in the valley, notably a medical elective program, plastic recycling work, plastic upcycling in partnership with NAST, and ongoing support to the Langtang Health Post (in conjunction with NAFA Nourishes).



Geography

The Langtang National Park is one of seven national parks in Nepal, and one of fourteen conservation or national parks in the whole nation. Langtang National is the oldest of all these parks, established in 1976 as the first Himalayan national park. The park is located in the districts of Rasuwa, Sindhupalchok, and Nuwakot, between 30km and 80km due north of Kathmandu, the capital city of Nepal, as noted below (south of the gold star).



The national park covers an area of 1,710km₂ (660 sq miles) and ranges in altitude from 1,250m to 7,245m with the peak of Langtang Lirung. This central Himalayan region encompasses 26 village executives and is bisected east-west and south-east by the Dorje Lakpa range, tall at 6,988m. The park is linked with the Qomolangma National Nature Preserve in Tibet, and has an international borders with China. The other boundaries of the park are the Bhote Khosi river and Trisuli river. The landscapes of the park varies from lush tropical forests surrounding Syabru Besi at the base of the valley, at 1250m, to alpine scrub and perennial ice at altitude.

Climate in Langtang National Park is extremely variable, with great extremes in temperatures. The greatest climatic factor is the southwest summer monsoon, with rains from June to September. The rain-snow limit is usually around 3,000m. In the autumn, daytime temperatures reach 20 degrees, with cool nights. In spring, temperatures are cooler & nights below freezing.

Vegetation in the Langtang National Park is highly diverse, with 18 ecosystem types, grouped largely into upper tropical forests at the base of the valley and alpine scrub and perennial ice at the higher elevations. It is noteworthy to remember that the Himalayan mountain range formed some 50 million years ago, with tectonic collision between the Indian and Eurasian continental plates, advancing at the rate of 15mm per year. The geology of the Himalaya is an assemblage called a linear plutonic complex - with molasse sedimentary rocks, forearc & magmatic rocks. These derived from uplift of magmatic rocks, and the erosion that subsequently followed, with igneous rocks complexes including granites, diorites, and gabbros.



History & Culture

The inhabitants of Langtang National Park are a mixture of Nepali nationals of Tamang descent, and Tibetan refugees, from China, granted asylum by Nepal. Local culture reflects this rich and diverse lineage, with traditions stretching back to the ancestors of the present residents.

Local culture is predominantly maintained through oral traditions, such that written records are sparse. As such, a rigorous history of the local people of Langtang National Park is hard to come by. Rather, local stories, family lineages, and heritage traditions are relied on to fill in the gaps and provide an oral account of the various histories of the region.

The local language of the Langtang region is a hybrid blend of Tibetan, predominantly, and a dialect of the Tamang Nepali language, forming a localised 'Langtang language'. This is understood by all in the region, and spoken by the elder generations of parents and grandparents, with younger generations now starting to favour Nepali.

Buddhism is the overwhelming religion of the park, with relatively few if any instances of Hindu, Muslim, or Christian belief. Alongside Buddhism, however, there exists a panoply of mystic faiths including Animism, Monism, and Kirat Mundhum.

The Tibetan calendar continues to inform the temporal structure of the region, though Nepali and Western influences can be increasingly noticed. As such, the present year in the Tibetan Calendar is 2145 (or 2074 BS in the Nepali Calendar, and 2018 in the Gregorian Calendar). This is noted as the Year of the Dog - of prosperity and happiness, of achievement and motivation. The Year of the Dog is a year full of expectation and determination. The Tibetan New Year - called Lhosar - falls in mid-February in the Western Calendar.

As noted, the Langtang National Park was established in 1970 with royal approval, and gazetted in 1976. The buffer zone, which extends 420km² around the park, was designated in 1998. This buffer zone conserves both forests and wildlife, but also cultural and natural resources.

A selection of local names give a flavour of the people groups and common tribal names in the park; Tshering Pema Tamang, Tashi Tshering Tamang, Sandu Chusang, Dindu Jangba, Chopema Tamang, Sedar Tamang, Pasang Tenzen Tamang, Pasang Lama, Karsang Tamang, Lhakpa Lama.



Economy

Traditionally, subsistence farming dominated the economy of the Langtang National Park, with potatoes forming the staple crop at altitude, and rice padi fields and lentil cultivation at lower elevations. This continues to be the case in many of the villages and towns at lower altitudes. The local economy has, however, drastically changed with the advent of the modern tourist, since Nepal opened its borders in 1950 to outsiders. With affordable airfares and tourist companies proliferating through the 1980s and 1990s, in particular, Langtang National Park now boasts a thriving tourist economy, centred on three treks in particular;

1. Langtang Valley trek (Syabru Besi to Langtang and/or Kyanjen Gompa)
2. Langtang Heritage Trail trek (Syabru Besi to Tatopani)
3. Gosaikunda and Helambu trek (Dunche to Gosaikunda Lake)

Langtang National Park now hosts between 10,000 and 15,000 international tourists and trekkers annually. On the ranking of Nepal, this makes LNP the third most popular park, after the Everest (Sagarmatha) and Annapurna (ACAP) parks. Langtang Valley boasts 101 trekking lodges, charging 500npr per tourist per night, alongside food and drink. Each lodge can reportedly take revenues exceeding 10 lakh NPR (>\$10,000 USD) per season.

Under the Langtang Buffer Zone Management Guidelines, LNP conserves forests, wildlife, cultural resources, and natural resources. The development of alternative energy is another priority in the buffer zone. This is evident in the new developments between local communities, supportive NGOs, and district officials, in the development of hydro-electric power (HEP), for example in Kyanjen Gompa (British Gurkha Association), WiFi (Everest Link towers), solar power panels, and fresh water production plants.

Langtang National Park is also dissected by a major arterial trading route to Tibet and China, at the border town of Rasuwa Ghadi and Timure, in Rasuwa District. This road - the F21 - forms a major trucking route for merchant traders, between China and Kathmandu. The majority of goods transported between China and Nepal, along this specific trading route, are either fruits and vegetables (such as the large Fuji apple, grown in large quantity in China) or clothes, shoes, and other fashion items, which now stock shops and outlet stores across Kathmandu.



Earthquake

Nepal was devastated by a powerful earthquake in the Spring of 2015. The major tremor that occurred was on the 25th April 2015 (7.8 magnitude), followed by a powerful aftershock on 12th May 2015 (7.2 magnitude), all of which claimed the lives of nearly 9,000 people, injured 22,000, destroyed over 600,000 structures, and inflicted approximately \$10 billion USD of damage. The April earthquake, also known as the Gorkha earthquake, had an epicentre at Barpak, in the east of Gorkha District, approximately 100km west of Kathmandu. The hypocentre of this earthquake was at roughly 15km in depth, and was graded severe (VIII), as Mercalli Intensity.

Langtang National Park was one of the worst affected regions in Nepal, with a stone avalanche and rock fall triggered by the earthquake. At the time, nearly 329 people were reported missing. It is now understood that almost 400 locals and tourists lost their lives.

Langtang Village, in the valley to the east of Syabru Besi, was particularly badly hit, with reporters from BBC News immediately flying in by helicopter to survey the damage and loss of life, as depicted below (www.bbc.com). The epicentre of the second major tremor was in Rasuwa District, near the Chinese border, and left many homeless and more than 2,500 injured. Furthermore, geological models suggest that the frequency and intensity of future landslides in the Langtang Valley will likely increase in coming decades. This is due to fracturing and rupturing of ground in the Langtang area, provoking greater instability and a legacy of risk.



Nepal earthquake: 'Worst-affected' village of Langtang

Emergency workers in Nepal continue to face challenges after the devastating earthquake.

Their priority is to reach the country's remote, mountainous villages, feared to have been wiped off the map.

South Asia Correspondent Justin Rowlatt is the first reporter to visit what is thought to be the worst-affected village, Langtang.

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f t s e Share

Devastation in the village of Langtang immediately hit global media reports, with aid and support rushing in from both neighbouring countries - India and China - and further afield, notably the UK, Germany, Switzerland, USA, and France.

The earthquake of 2015 was the worst natural in Nepal since the 1934 Nepal-Bihar earthquake.



Non-Governmental Organisations

A number of NGOs work within the bounds of Langtang National Park. Historically, the Langtang Valley Health Clinic was supported by an Australian Health Foundation led by Virginia Dixon. Since the earthquake of 2015, a number of other NGOs have committed to providing longer-term relief & support to the people and communities of Langtang National Park. These include;

1. Chhiring Foundation (American NGO) - based in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, USA, they helped build the new Langtang Health Clinic after the devastating earthquake of 2015. The Chhiring team visited the valley both before reconstruction work started, and again in November 2017 when the new health post was complete (chhiringfoundation.org).
2. Sustainable Steps Nepal (Canadian NGO) - help support the sponsorship of Langtang students and children studying in Kathmandu, Nepal. SSN also provided help to purchase the land for the construction of the new Langtang Health Clinic in Mundu, in November 2017. They also provide medical support and help with hospital expenses for the people of Langtang, when emergency hospital visits are required (sustainablesteps.org).
3. PSD Nepal (Nepali NGO) - a local Nepali NGO based in Kathmandu, PSD have been helping support the work of plastic recycling and upcycling in the Langtang Valley, in partnership with the KGLS community (psdnepal.org).
4. NAFA Nepal (American NGO) - the Nepali Adoptive Families Association (NAFA) works in partnership with the nurses of the Langtang Health Clinic, providing additional supplies to the medical post, training for the local nurse and health assistant, as well as public consultation and health awareness days. NAFA are based in Manhattan (nepalafa.org).
5. Anitié Association (Swiss NGO) - the team from Anitié in Switzerland are starting to support the Langtang Health Clinic in Mundu. Their help will be directed towards equipment, as needed, in the health post, as well as the compensation of the clinic staff.
6. Action Against Hunger (French NGO) - some 30 million inhabitants in South Asian nations fight poverty and undernutrition daily. In April 2018, 21 chefs from the UK are raising £110,000 towards this work, by trekking the Langtang Valley (actionagainsthunger.org).
7. Red Panda Network (American NGO) - conservation, development and awareness programs in rural communities, including Langtang in Nepal (redpandanetwork.org).

Other key stakeholders in Langtang National Park include; KGLS (Kyanjen Gompa Langtang Society), a board of local elders and community leaders that support students, the Mundu Health Clinic, and emergency medical treatment (langtangkgl.wordpress.com); NAST (Nepal Academy of Science and Technology) who work on plastic upcycling and clean-up in Langtang Valley (nast.gov.np); ICIMOD (International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development), who serve communities across the Himalaya, and also conduct research in Langtang (icimod.org).



Respect, pride, responsibility

The Tibetan-Tamang people group inhabiting the Langtang National Park in Northern Nepal, are an endangered culture. With significant rural-urban migration toward Kathmandu, the economic opportunities that tourism affords, and the increasing pressure on local habitat and resources, pressure is mounting on a culture that reflects many centuries of rich history.

Partnership and co-created projects in these valleys are as much about preserving the wellbeing and longevity of a historic heritage culture, as they are about promoting pride, respect and responsibility in a changing world, for both an endangered culture and a fragile environmental landscape.

Respect - simply the honour due towards something that is valued - is marred in a terrain littered by plastic, waste, and tourist trash. These threaten both the natural assets of the spectacular Himalayan scenery, and also the very foundations of a thriving eco-tourist economy based on trekking.

Likewise, pride - the satisfaction derived from qualities that are widely admired - should be reflected in a clean and well-maintained national park, boasting great Himalayan wonders and rich natural resources in tumbling rivers, diverse jungle, and precious forests. These are qualities to be proud of.

Finally, responsibility - of being accountable - is in the very nature of the federal republic of Nepal, as a landlocked country nicknamed the 'Himalayan kingdom'. Home to the longest chain of Himalayan mountains of all Asian countries, Nepal has the responsibility for these natural wonders. With great responsibility comes difficult decisions. The longevity, sustainability, and ecology of these breathtaking mountains need to be considered ahead of simply the economic potential of the Himalaya.

As Robert Bateman (2000:117) writes in 'Thinking like a Mountain', gazing on his local Mount Maxwell or Saltspring Island; *'the story of the creation of this mountain evokes permanence, patience, adaptability and nobility—characteristics worth emulating'*. Indeed, he charges us all to 'think like a mountain' - with a sense of permanence and a long view.

Permanence pays dividends. The long view never disappoints.



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