

<b>Institution: University of Aberdeen</b>
<b>Unit of Assessment: Theology and Religious Studies</b>
<b>Title of case study: <i>The Conservation of Sacred and Protected Areas</i></b>
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>Research by Dr <b>William Tuladhar-Douglas</b> on biocultural diversity and religion in sacred landscapes in the Himalayas has had significant impact on conservation policy and practices for ecosystems in the Himalayas. His research has reinvigorated debate about culturally appropriate modes of engagement and challenged the concept of 'religion' that conservationists use in their work with indigenous communities. This is particularly the case in terms of concepts of personhood which are held by certain indigenous peoples in relation to non-human creatures, and the ways in which traditional practices engage with non-human persons in the form of animals, plants and deities. Through directly influencing the policy and practice of the World Conservation Union (the leading international body in world conservation), <b>Tuladhar-Douglas'</b> research has led to culturally appropriate understandings of 'personhood' being recovered into the management of protected areas. This has changed the interplay between local cultural variation, threats to biodiversity, indigenous perspectives and international conservation norms. Furthermore, his work has determined that there is greater capacity to engage with traditional peoples in conservation, helping to transform them from being 'paper stakeholders' to genuine participants. The resulting policy changes are likely to help achieve resilient and successfully protected sites.</p>
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p>Research in the anthropology of religion and ecology conducted in Nepal (1992-present), Scotland (2005-present), Canada (2010) and on the internet (2008-10) led <b>Tuladhar-Douglas</b> (Aberdeen: 2004-present) to question assumptions about the 'persons' that interact in fragile environments. While anthropology is said to be the study of human societies, local communities regard a wide and variable range of non-human persons to be legitimate social agents: concepts of personhood simply do not equate straightforwardly with certain western assumptions about the distinction and interaction between human and non-human agents. In the central Himalayas, for example, the social processes underlying religious identity were founded in rituals and narratives that required action by goats, gods and trees as much as they did humans.</p> <p>However, 'secular' bodies (such as conservation NGOs) tend to draw on certain western secular assumptions to explain this form of interaction by using the terminology of 'religion'. This category is not value neutral: relegating non-human persons to the category of religion is a defensive rhetorical strategy rather than an empirically grounded claim in relation to the traditional communities themselves. Indeed, the claim that humans are the only persons ('human exceptionalism') is part of secularist ideology: it is a feature of international conservation and development work, which depends on the supposed neutrality of 'secular' language to achieve international agreements. The hidden assumptions of secularist humanism, however, are not shared by the members of the traditional communities where the conservation work is undertaken, and the difficulties imposed by secularist norms become especially challenging when dealing with conservation projects in sacred landscapes.</p> <p>This presents a critical challenge for conservation efforts because conservation landscapes are often inhabited by local or indigenous communities who use very different frameworks to understand their landscapes: their traditional medical, agricultural and ritual knowledge embody an understanding of local flora and fauna. Thus, there are strong links between ecosystem health and the social practices of the traditional communities that live there — a form of 'mutualism' between human and non-human 'persons'. The inconsistency between the language and conceptualization of secular agencies (such as conservation NGOs) and that of indigenous peoples suggests that human exceptionalism needs to be recognized as a particular, culture-bound, attitude within a spectrum of possibilities; other ways of understanding and describing the environment in which conservation is taking place need to be found and explored in order to respect, involve and include indigenous peoples (in terms that are culturally relevant to them) in the conservation of the sacred landscapes they inhabit.</p> <p>Around 2001, <b>Tuladhar-Douglas</b> came to the conclusion that ethnobiology (a reflexive, practical and collaborative discipline that involves indigenous intellectuals, stewards and healers as collaborators)</p>

## Impact case study (REF3b)

offered a response to this challenge. It allowed an opportunity for rigorous methods and results that would be relevant to conservation biologists while also challenging these implicit secularist assumptions in relation to indigenous knowledge. In pursuit of the link between ethnobiology and anthropology of religion in the Himalayan region, in 2005 **Tuladhar-Douglas** teamed up with Mark Watson of the Royal Botanic Gardens in Edinburgh to establish a transdisciplinary research group, the Scottish Centre for Himalayan Research (SCHR). The SCHR has been a platform for the critical study of eco-social interactions. The 2009 Edinburgh SCHR conference, 'Health in a Suffering Landscape', overtly linked questions of climate science, the living landscape, and ethics. This research not only addressed the problems of secularist assumptions about religion and understandings of personhood, but also enabled indigenous knowledge systems to be engaged, and practices by conservationists to be undertaken sensitively in relation to traditional peoples in areas where conservation is enacted.

By 2010, **Tuladhar-Douglas**' work on bats was well-received among ethnobiologists and his work on historical anthropology of sacred sites was fundamental to Himalayan anthropology. In 2010, **Tuladhar-Douglas** convened a panel of international academics on 'Biocultural diversity and montane social science' in the Mountains II conference at Perth. In that same year, **Tuladhar-Douglas**, together with Rick Stepp and Bron Tylor (both University of Florida), organized an international conference at the University of Florida that yoked ethnobiology and anthropology of religion to develop useful tools or case studies for working with indigenous peoples in conservation work in areas of sacred landscapes. The insights derived from these collaborations were refined and applied through meetings with sacred site managers and other IUCN (the World Conservation Union) officials at the World Conservation Congress in Jeju, and changed how protected sites that claim 'sacred status' as part of their cultural inventory are proposed, bounded and monitored.

### 3. References to the research

- 1) Tuladhar-Douglas, W. 2008. 'The use of bats as medicine among the Newars of Nepal' *Ethnobiology*, 28(1), 68-91.
- 2) Tuladhar-Douglas, W. 2010. 'Collusion and bickering: landscape, religion and ethnicity in the central Himalayas' *Contemporary South Asia*, 18(3), 319-32.
- 3) Tuladhar-Douglas, W. 2012. *The work of mending: How Pharping people manage an exclusivist rejection of the procession of Vajrayoginī, in Sharing the Sacra: the Politics and Pragmatics of Inter-communal Relations around Holy Places*. Berghahn, Oxford.
- 4) Stepp, R. & Tuladhar-Douglas, W. (eds). 2012, *Ethnobiology, Religion, Nature and Culture* special issue of *Journal of Religion Nature and Culture* 6(4), Equinox Publications.

Research grants:

- 1) RSE grant, 2009-10, Immigrant Buddhists in Scotland (£2,422).
- 2) Wellcome Trust Research grant, 2011-13, Traditional Newar medicine: flows and practices. (£185,000)

### 4. Details of the impact

Through a series of conference papers, publications, appointments to leading international organizations and community-based research projects, **Tuladhar-Douglas**' research has generated impact by bringing a new awareness to NGO's of cultural diversity and its implications into their processes of policy making regarding sacred landscapes, hence improving the protection of the biodiversity of these sites. This impact has arisen from research on the theoretical, methodological and practical implications of biocultural diversity and the obstacles to its understanding imposed by secular norms of personhood, and the down-grading of practices to the 'religious'.

Much of the cultural diversity in these landscapes is bracketed by conservation NGOs as 'religious' (and undervalued as a result). Yet it is exactly those social practices involving non-human persons that have the strongest impact on sustainable biodiversity. For example, in a landscape where trees are respected, where one must gain permission from medicinal plants before harvesting them, and where animals are connected to humans through kinship relations, social practices may tend to restrict excessive harvesting and unsustainable extraction. However, if such behaviour is downgraded to the category 'religion' then it is, by definition, not considered accessible to 'secular' conservation management practices. Furthermore, such secular discourse and assumptions are a mark of western privilege, leading conservation managers recruited from local communities to disparage local values in order to bolster their authority. The research of **Tuladhar-Douglas**

challenges this status quo and enables a recognition of such diversity, thereby rendering conservation plans in sacred sites intelligible to all parties (both for indigenous peoples in relation to conservation NGOs, and for conservation NGOs in relation to indigenous peoples) through his emphasis on the importance of the religious thought of indigenous peoples in relation to their landscapes and the different understandings of personhood used by stakeholders. The recognition of the importance of local practices and beliefs for conservation transforms traditional peoples living in conservation sites from paper stakeholders into genuine participants. The impact of these insights enriches the models used for conservation management.

Having established in his fieldwork the importance of cultural variation and the conceptualization of 'personhood' in conservation work, **Tuladhar-Douglas** was recruited to the IUCN in 2010. The IUCN supports scientific research globally and brings governments, NGOs, UN agencies, companies and local communities together to develop and implement policy. The IUCN is the world's oldest and largest global environmental network, with more than 1,000 government and NGO member organizations, and almost 11,000 volunteer scientists in more than 160 countries. In 2008, its revenue was 133 million CHF. **Tuladhar-Douglas** was asked to use his research to move the working group on Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas (CSVPA) past a naïve faith-or-secular model of sacred landscapes. CSVPA agreed to co-sponsor the Florida conference on ethnobiology and religion, and its output (a 2013 special issue of *Religion Nature and Culture*, see above) is now being used by IUCN staff to revise policy. Documents from the symposium are being used in the run-up to the WILD 10 conference in Salamanca, and in preparing for the World Parks Congress in Sydney in 2014.

The effect of **Tuladhar-Douglas'** research into conservation and indigenous peoples on public policy has led to five discrete shifts in conservation management:

a) **Tuladhar-Douglas'** research has driven critical reflection within Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas (CSVPA). Due to **Tuladhar-Douglas'** work the CSVPA steering group have agreed to rethink the CSVPA's fundamental remit, moving away from the language of 'values' and towards a less patronising understanding of traditional and local knowledge. At the same time, **Tuladhar-Douglas**, on the basis of these research insights, helped negotiate an agreement between UNESCO and IUCN that establishes CSVPA as the group that links cultural and biological diversity in heritage site assessments.

b) As a result of his Himalayan research and work on montane social science, in 2011 **Tuladhar-Douglas** was appointed a visiting scientist at the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), an international NGO working in all seven countries of the Himalayan region. While at ICIMOD he has been closely involved in trans-boundary landscape projects, especially the Kailash Sacred Landscape Initiative. This landscape covers a large and complex protected area of 31,175 square kilometres in China, India and Nepal. It is orientated around Mount Kailash, sacred to nearly a billion people in multiple traditions (Buddhist, Jain, Hindu and Bon), and the source of the Ganges, Sutlej and Indus rivers. **Tuladhar-Douglas'** work has been used to clarify project planning for sacred sites; to train staff in methods to expose causal links between biological and cultural diversity; and, with ICIMOD staff and representatives of three governments, to establish methods for discovering culturally relevant and commensurable indicators of biocultural diversity to measure the ecological health of the Kailash region over time.

c) Prior to the 2010 Perth Mountains conference, **Tuladhar-Douglas** was recruited to the GLORIA project (a long-term study of montane biodiversity change due to global warming) to help ecologists learn to work with traditional knowledge holders to achieve a better picture of how changing climate affects montane ecosystems. Discussions at the 2010 meeting resulted in the formal agreement to include social research protocols, arising from **Tuladhar-Douglas'** research, in the GLORIA project manuals— increasing both the accuracy and the relevance of GLORIA's work in some 200 mountain areas worldwide (see GLORIA's draft field manual version 5, which for the first time includes assessment of traditional knowledge, for which **Tuladhar-Douglas'** research has argued: <http://www.gloria.ac.at/?a=20>).

d) **Tuladhar-Douglas'** research insights have caused conservation professionals to reconsider

## Impact case study (REF3b)

assumptions, including: that religion is about belief; that there are no indigenous Buddhists; that any community has a single religious identity; and that sacred sites are intrinsically biodiverse. His research has led directly to changes in the next edition of published guidelines for protected area managers: the 2008 edition of Sacred Natural Sites: Guidelines for Protected Area Managers is currently under revision in light of **Tuladhar-Douglas'** findings. These changes have already led to more involvement of indigenous peoples in conservation work: they have led to open conversations between indigenous leaders and protected area managers, as can be seen in the meetings in 2011 in Nepal between TILCEPA (the Strategic Direction on Governance, Communities, Equity and Livelihood Rights in Relation to Protected Areas) and indigenous leaders; engagements between indigenous Tamang and Sherpa leaders and protected area managers; and increased indigenous participation at WIN 2013 - a major indigenous forum as part of the lead-in to the World Parks Congress 2014, which will provide opportunity for indigenous peoples and conservationists to come together, connect and share stories and experiences. The apex of these changes can be seen in eight traditional stewards of sacred sites being invited to participate as part of the Sacred Natural Sites initiative, and asked to provide input for the Theme on Indigenous Peoples, Local Communities, Equity and Protected Areas (TILCEPA) mountains working group at the 2012 World Conservation Congress at Jeju.

e) Because of the effect of **Tuladhar-Douglas'** research on the policy of the IUCN on conservation work with traditional communities, worldwide cooperation among mountain communities, traditional stewards and ecologists has begun to create a framework within which local knowledge is accepted as an equal partner in conversation with secular experts at world forums. For example, while working with the CVSPA, **Tuladhar-Douglas** was recruited, because of his work on indigenous notions of personhood in sacred landscapes, as a commissioner in the Commission on Environment, Equity and Social Policy (CEESP) and the World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA). At the Jeju conference, he was appointed co-chair of the Mountains working group within TILCEPA and, together with Miriam Torres and Ed Birnbaum, established a new Mountain Trails Network that coordinates biocultural stewardship of long-range heritage trails on every inhabited continent. As a result of **Tuladhar-Douglas'** research, representatives from the Himalayas and the Andes are already collaborating on questions of indigenous knowledge and tenure, landscape connectivity, and ecotourism. The impact of this is ongoing: the TILCEPA Mountains working group will make a major presentation at the 2014 World Parks Congress highlighting traditional trade routes and new trails in the Appalachians, Altai Shan, Andes, Himalayas, and Ruwenzoris.

Beneficiaries of this research include: the international organizations working towards the conservation of the most fragile ecosystems on the planet IUCN (CSVPA, TILCEPA, CEESP, WCPA, SSG); ICIMOD; and the communities living in sacred landscapes and montane protected areas worldwide (human or otherwise) - especially Himalayan indigenous communities and traditional stewards of sacred landscapes.

##### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- 1) The chair of IUCN TILCEPA has provided a testimonial to corroborate impact on IUCN.
- 2) The Director of Operations, ICIMOD, will corroborate the work related to the Kailash initiative.
- 3) The Senior Curator of Missouri Botanic Garden has provided a testimonial to corroborate impact on GLORIA.
- 4) The Director of Programme Operations at International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development has provided a statement confirming the impact of research undertaken by **Tuladhar-Douglas** during his time there as a visiting scientist.
- 5) [http://www.iucn.org/news\\_homepage/news\\_by\\_date/?12646/IUCN-and-UNESCO-World-Heritage-Enhancement](http://www.iucn.org/news_homepage/news_by_date/?12646/IUCN-and-UNESCO-World-Heritage-Enhancement) corroborates TILCEPA's work and role and **Tuladhar-Douglas'** role as co-chair.
- 6) <http://www.icimod.org/?q=9457> will corroborate the existence of the Sacred Landscape Project.
- 7) GLORIA's draft field manual version 5: corroboration that there has been a shift in policy and practice to include social indicators and evidence: <http://www.gloria.ac.at/?a=20>
- 8) World Park's Congress impact in Respecting Indigenous and Traditional Knowledge and Culture: [http://www.iucn.org/about/work/programmes/gpap\\_home/gpap\\_events/gpap\\_wpc/gpap\\_wpcstreams/](http://www.iucn.org/about/work/programmes/gpap_home/gpap_events/gpap_wpc/gpap_wpcstreams/)
- 9) Guidelines for Sacred Site Protected Area Managers and email corroborating use of **Tuladhar-Douglas'** work as underlying research in the production of the new guidelines.
- 10) Email correspondence inviting **Tuladhar-Douglas** to join the WPCA steering committee.