



WWF

FACT SHEET

LIVING
HIMALAYAS

Living Himalayas

Bhutan India Nepal

Few places on Earth can match the breathtaking splendor of the Himalayas.

It is a region that boasts towering peaks, secluded valleys, pristine freshwater lakes and rich forests. It is also a place with a diverse cultural and spiritual heritage. Here, on the “roof of the world,” nature and people have coexisted since time immemorial, resulting in a rich tapestry of life across Bhutan, India and Nepal.

Threads of this unique tapestry, however, are showing signs of wear. Forests are being overharvested for timber or cut down for agriculture expansion and development purposes, wildlife poaching is rampant and climate change is melting its mountain glaciers.

To ensure that the tapestry does not unravel, WWF is working to ensure that the Eastern Himalayas are effectively conserved and managed for the people living in the region as well as for all those who visit this magical land.

THE PLACE

Stretching across Nepal, the Tibet Autonomous Region of China, Bhutan, northeastern India and Myanmar, the Eastern Himalayas are home to the most

spectacular yet fragile, unique and threatened collection of plants, animals and habitats in the world. It boasts the highest peaks, including the tallest: Sagarmatha, or Mt Everest, at 8,848m. Glacial melt from these mountains feed the tributaries that flow into major rivers like the Ganges and Brahmaputra, which are the vital lifelines for millions of people.

WWF’s Living Himalayas Initiative unfolds into temperate forests, subtropical jungles, savannas and rich alpine meadows, and spans Bhutan, Nepal, the Terai Arc Landscape in India spread in the states of Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh and the northeastern Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Sikkim and parts of northern West Bengal. It comprises the Eastern Himalayan broadleaf and conifer forests, Eastern Himalayan alpine meadows, Terai-Duar savannas and grasslands, and freshwater ecosystems.

THE PEOPLE

The people of the Eastern Himalayas are diverse in their traditions, faith and ethnicity and make up a rich cultural mosaic of life that has evolved closely with nature for millennia. Many of these communities live in isolation; their

customs, lifestyles and livelihoods have been shaped by their environment, and they remain deeply dependent on the resources nature provides. Despite the high levels of poverty and considerable population pressure on the Eastern Himalayas, strong cultural traditions and religious beliefs have and continue to help ensure the conservation of natural resources and wildlife in some parts of Eastern Himalayas that are highly threatened or extinct in other parts of Asia.

THE SPECIES

The Himalayas are one of the biologically richest areas on Earth, harbouring a staggering 10,000 plant species, 977 birds, 300 mammals, 269 freshwater fish, 176 reptiles and 105 amphibians; a third of all plants and reptiles are endemic as are 40% of all amphibians {Ref: *New Species Discoveries-The Eastern Himalayas: Where Worlds Collide* (WWF Report)}.

Only in the Eastern Himalayas can one find tigers living alongside Asian elephants and greater one-horned rhinos. The forests are also home to Endangered snow leopards, golden langurs, Vulnerable red pandas and the unique goat-antelope takins. The world’s rarest freshwater



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dolphins are found in its rivers.

Even today, the rugged and largely inaccessible landscape of the Eastern Himalayas hides the real extent of the region's biodiversity. From 1998 to 2008, more than 350 new species have been identified here, including one of the world's smallest deer, a flying frog, a 100 million-year-old gecko fossil and Nepal's first scorpion. Many more species are yet to be discovered {Ref: *New Species Discoveries- The Eastern Himalayas: Where Worlds Collide* (WWF Report)}.

THE THREATS

The Himalayas are facing a number of serious problems: deforestation, habitat loss and degradation, wildlife poaching and climate change impacts. As a result, only a quarter of the Eastern Himalayas' original habitats remain intact with some 163 species found here considered globally threatened {Ref: *New Species Discoveries- The Eastern Himalayas: Where Worlds Collide* (WWF Report)}.

Deforestation and Habitat Loss:

Conversion of forest to agriculture land and for development purposes and exploitation of forests for timber, fodder and fuel wood are some of the main threats to biodiversity in this region. Other threats include wood-charcoal production and intensive grazing. Many rural people depend on cattle for their livelihoods but do not have sufficient land holdings. It is not uncommon to see cows, water buffalo and goats grazing in forests, which can cause significant damage to natural ecosystems.

Wildlife Trade: Poaching is another major threat to wildlife in the region, especially Endangered species like tigers, elephants and rhinos because of their high commercial value on the black market. Killing wildlife also takes place as a result of conflict with humans. Retaliation against tigers and snow leopards for killing livestock, and against elephants and rhinoceros for raiding crops, is prevalent and continues to intensify as humans and wildlife compete for land and other

"People and wildlife form a rich mosaic of life across this rugged and remarkable landscape, making it among the biologically richest areas on Earth. But the Himalayas are also among the most vulnerable to global climate change."

**—Tariq Aziz,
Leader- WWF's Living Himalayas Initiative**



resources.

Climate Change: It is widely accepted that climate change is the main factor behind the accelerated glacier retreat observed in the Himalayas. The Eastern Himalayas have the largest concentration of glaciers outside the polar region, and hold vast stores of fresh water. Continued climate change is predicted to lead to major changes in freshwater flows, with dramatic impacts on biodiversity, people and their livelihoods.

THE VISION

For close to 50 years, WWF has been operating in the Himalayas and is uniquely positioned to scale up its conservation work to ensure that the tapestry of life in the region is preserved for generations to come.

Through its Living Himalayas Initiative, WWF is working closely with the governments and people of Bhutan, India and Nepal to restore and protect ecological processes, reduce the human footprint and support local economies.

WWF will mobilize decision-makers and major stakeholders, from communities to large companies, in the region to implement the following transformational actions:

- Develop a shared vision and plan between Bhutan, India and Nepal for the conservation and sustainable development of the Eastern Himalayas
- Secure 7 million hectares of forests, grasslands and wetlands in the Eastern Himalayas
- Protect threatened animal and plant species and their habitats
- Ensure the integrity and climate resilience of critical ecosystems

These goals are stepping stones to achieve WWF's vision for the region:

A harmonious mosaic of healthy, vibrant landscapes providing plentiful resources for people while giving wildlife space and securing the ecological and cultural treasures of the Himalayas.

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