

Nepal Safeguards Four Sacred Himalayan Lakes

KATHMANDU, Nepal, December 24, 2007 (ENS) - To commemorate the Ghunsa tragedy, in which the lives of 24 conservationists from the Nepalese government and WWF were lost in a helicopter crash, the government of Nepal has announced the designation of four new high altitude Wetlands of International Importance.

The helicopter went down on September 23, 2006 in Ghunsa, Nepal. WWF lost seven colleagues - Chandra Gurung, Mingma Norbu Sherpa, Harka Gurung, Yeshi Lama, Jill Bowling Schlaepfer, Jennifer Headley and Matthew Preece - in the crash.

The country lost its minister of state for forests and soil conservation, the secretary of that ministry, the director general of national parks and wildlife conservation, the director general of forests, several of its most distinguished defenders of natural resources and overseas specialists who were champions for conservation in Nepal.

They were returning from a trip to Ghunsa, in the mountains of eastern Nepal where they had participated in a ceremony in which the government of Nepal handed over to local communities responsibility for managing the Kanchenjunga Conservation Area, a place known for its beauty, biodiversity and rich cultural heritage.

At the ceremony in Kathmandu on the first anniversary of the crash September 23, 2007, Ramsar's Assistant Advisor for the Asia-Pacific Pragati Tuladhar delivered an address on behalf of the Secretary General and presented Ramsar site certificates for the four new sites to the government of Nepal.



Phoksundo Lake is inhabited by many rare and unique species. (Photo by [WWF Nepal](#) courtesy [Ramsar Secretariat](#))

site of Mount Everest, the world's tallest mountain.

The Ramsar Secretariat commended government of Nepal for this initiative, and acknowledged WWF Nepal "for its considerable assistance in preparing the groundwork for these designations."

The paperwork has now been completed and the sites have been added to the Ramsar List of Wetlands of International Importance.

The designation of these lakes under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands means the government undertakes to protect them and report on its progress in doing so.

Together they are an extraordinary group of Himalayan lakes, says the Ramsar Secretariat. All are within national parks and the first of these is already a UNESCO World Heritage site - Sagarmatha National Park - the

Gokyo and Associated Lakes - 4,710 - 4,950 meters

Gokyo and Associated Lakes. 23/09/07; Sagarmatha; 7,770 ha; 27°52'N 080°42'E. Within Sagarmatha National Park, UNESCO World Heritage site.

A system of glacial lakes at 4,710m-4,950m altitude in the high Himalayan region at the base of Cho Oyo (the world's 6th highest mountain), not far from Mt. Everest, at the headwaters of the Dudh Koshi River which is part of the Ganges river system.

The alpine pasture meadow and sloping mountain terrain support IUCN Red listed rare and vulnerable species, such as the kutki plant, the Himalayan tahr or goat, the snow leopard, wood snipe, endemic species like the flowering plant *Kobresia fissiglumis*, and many important birds.

The system is a vital source of water for downstream communities.

Eight hotels with campgrounds serve ecotourists and religious visitors. Garbage and sewage left by visitors is difficult to dispose of and such pollution pressures represent a potential threat, as does overgrazing and deforestation caused by mountaineering expeditions seeking firewood.

The site is two days' walk from Namche, the nearest town.

Gosaikunda and Associated Lakes - 4,054 - 4,620 meters

Gosaikunda and Associated Lakes. 23/09/07; Bagamti; 1,030 ha; 28°05'N 085°25'E. Within Langtang National Park. A treeless region with shrub land interspersed by rocky slopes and alpine pasture, with a complex of at least 15 lakes and ponds.

IUCN Red listed endangered and vulnerable species of animals and plants are present. The site has religious associations for Hindus and Buddhists and is the locus of the important Gangadashahara and Janaipurnima festivals.

Human uses include grazing during summers, and there are four hotels with campgrounds for trekking groups and pilgrims. Threats to the site include pollution from the huge gathering during the festivals. There is a religious ban on the killing of animals within much of the site.

Phoksundo Lake - 3,611 meters

Phoksundo Lake. 23/09/07; Karnali; 494 ha; 29°12'N 082°57'E. Within Shey-Phoksundo National Park. A glacial lake near Ringmo in the Dolpo region, the deepest lake in the country, that is the centre of endemism in the eastern Himalayan region and a vital source of freshwater for downstream, with the highest waterfall 167 meters in Nepal a short walk from the lake.

The lake, alpine meadows, and bogs provide habitat for a number of rare and vulnerable plants and animals, including the snow leopard, musk deer, and grey or Tibetan wolf.

The site has great cultural and religious importance, with traditional Tibetan culture of the upper Dolpo and both Buddhism and the ancient Tibetan Bon-Po religion of the lower Dolpo

both observed in Ringmo village. There is some grazing and cultivation, but tourism, dependent upon the wetland, is the base of the economy.

Overgrazing and pollution from the 42 households of Ringmo village are seen as potential threats to the site.

Rara Lake - 2,900 meters

Rara Lake. 23/09/07; Karnali; 1,583 ha; 29°30'N 082°05'E. National Park. The largest lake in Nepal, lying at about 2,900m altitude and providing water to the important Kamali River.

The area has developed unique floral and faunal assemblages with a number of rare and vulnerable animal and plant species, and the wet alpine pasture, moraines, and damp stream banks along the lake area are the natural habitats for endemic species of plants.

The endemic frog Rara paha is found at only one other location in the Central region, and three endemic species of snow trout are found only here.

Two temples in the area are the venue for a number of religious festivals. Principal threats come from pollution caused by army personnel and tourists and unregulated fuelwood collection, especially during festivals.