

On the occasion of World Wetland Day 07, "Fish for Tomorrow" I wish to put forward once again the concept of conserving the mighty river Karnali for our future generations.

## **Dedicated to Conservation Martyrs**

Who lost their lives in Helicopter crash in Shankhuwasabha  
September, 2006

# **The Karnali**

**Nepal's Sacred Gift to the living earth**



By: Megh Ale - Founder President  
Nepal River Conservation Trust (NRCT)

## Introduction

Nepal is a kingdom of immense natural beauty with a deep-rooted cultural heritage. A great part of this natural beauty comes from the many rivers that flow through the majestic Himalayas to the lowlands of the Terai. For decades the isolation of Nepal has helped to maintain the pristine nature of this environment. The rural towns, political neutrality and ruggedness of the mountainous terrains have limited the development and exploitation of Nepal's few natural resources such as. Because of this Nepal has not followed suit with other developing countries such as India or China, by using modern technology to extract resources from it's landscape and therefore spoiling the pristine nature of the environment. It has not followed suit until now. It is our goal in this proposal to explain why we need to protect what some would call; "*The last, Best Place in Nepal: The Karnali River*".

## Background

Over the last 25 years, projects funded by the World Bank have researched the hydroelectric potential of most major rivers in Nepal. These sites have been evaluated on the basis of the cost of building a facility versus the profits to be made from Power Generation. To date major Dams have been built on the Marshyani, Kali Gandaki, Chilime and Bhote Kosi rivers. Construction is also nearing completion on the Modi Khola, middle Marshyangdi and Khimti and a new project is being planned for the upper Marshyangdi, Bhote Koshi, Tamba Koshi and Seti.

Almost all the rivers in Nepal have some form of hydroelectric development scheme planned for them within the next 10 to 20 years. The question is,

"*Where will it stop?*"

Nepal is currently modifying its 'Water Resources Policy Act' to encourage more foreign investors to quickly develop this resource. The Government has already received tenders from several energy companies from the developed world to bid for what has been dubbed as; "The Karnali / Chiso Pani and Middle Karnali Project".

Most countries that already use hydroelectric power have found that the benefits of this clean and energy efficient fuel source come at another price - the destruction of the landscape and fragile eco-systems around them. Entire species of fish can be lost due to dams and river ecology has been fractured because of rampant development. There are examples of this all over America where dams are being removed and organisations fight to return rivers to a free flowing state:

(1.1)

"*There are currently over 3000 permitted dams in the state of Pennsylvania. These dams can adversely affect the health of Pennsylvania rivers and streams*

*by altering channel morphology, flow regimes and sediment transport, changing water temperature and chemistry, modifying algal and macro invertebrate communities, and disrupting resident and migratory fish communities (Petts 1984)."*

(1.2)

*"The disruption of these linkages by dams represents a significant disturbance to the broad-scale base of production for entire river systems and can impair the way a river processes and assimilates inputs of sediment, toxins, and nutrients. Thus, dams have an influence on the interaction between watershed-scale processes, such as non-point pollution loading, and in-stream ecological health. (Nightingale 1998)".*

This is a current example of where Nepal could be in 20 years time. *Why do we have to repeat these same mistakes instead of learning from the mistakes of other countries?*

### **Benefits of Keeping Humala Karnali free**

Once Nepal agrees to donate the Humala Karnali to the living Earth some of the following will become long-term benefits:

1. Nepal will become a recognised World Leader in Eco-Tourism and this can be used to further promote our Tourism Industry.
2. This will in time (if we don't keep any other rivers free) become the only corridor in Nepal joining the Tibetan Plateau via the Himalaya with the Gangatic Plains.
3. The action of keeping Karnali free will carry a very real message of sustainable development in a region where it is most needed.
4. This would be the beginning of the Politicians aim to make Nepal the "New Switzerland".
5. Once this river becomes protected it will help to conserve the; Flora and Fauna, Aquatic Life, Ancient Cultures. In Humla and the Upper Dolpa region we see the Tibetan culture and Khas culture in Jumala, Mugu and the Dailekh regions, we see the Raji and the Rautes (the last nomadic tribe in Nepal) cultures and in the Mahabarat Jungle, Churia Hills and Karnali Basins we see the Tharus culture.
6. Protecting the river will maintain the pristine wilderness around it which includes forests that are still 60% untouched.
7. Hundreds of different Himalayan Herbs can be found for example in the low lands elephant grass and in the high lands yarsa gumba in this corridor.

## Recommendations

The Government needs to research specific areas with regards to the Karnali Project in order to understand further the reasons why it should be left alone:

1. To research the whole area of Karnali including all aspects of its development and keeping in mind the vision of "Karnali after 98 years".
2. The research needs to be done in 3 different sections; Firstly on the flora, fauna, geology and geography of the area. Secondly on the Culture and Sociological heritage of the area. Thirdly on the eco-tourism potential of the area.
3. A "Right of the River" system needs to be implemented. For example a band of 3km on either side of the river to be protected from Government encroachment or private development. The local inhabitants would be allowed to stay and a new trail as in point (5) would be built to encourage tourism.
4. The flora, fauna, aquatic life and culture would need to be kept intact and protected along this river corridor in order to enable Nepal to showcase the Karnali as a real blend of sustainable development and Eco-Tourism.
5. A long tourist trail along the Karnali needs to be constructed, on a similar plan to the Annapurna circuit. This trail could begin in Bardiya National Park and work its way up through Nepal via, Chiso Pani, Dailekh and Humula it could then connect to a trail crossing the border into Tibet and progressing to Rakchhestal, Lake Manarwvor and ending on the Mount Kailash Circuit. Along the trail where there are no convenient villages, campsites could be built for the tourist groups to stop at. In villages along the route home stay and teahouses can be set up as in Everest or Annapuran region.
6. In reference to point (5) the trail would be taken care of by the local communities it passes through and they in turn will be beneficiaries of the increased tourist trade. The Government should develop a system by which this trail is maintained in much the same way as the trails in the Annapurna region.
7. In reference to point (5) a National Park fee must be charged to tourists as in the Upper Dolpo or Annapurna regions.
8. In reference to point (5) the local communities should be encouraged to maintain their farming lifestyle, fishing as well as working with tourists. This will avoid a similar situation as is arising in the Everest region where the indigenous population are forgetting their cultural trades in favour of tourism which can be devastating on an area if the tourism is reduced for any reason.
9. Nepal needs to avoid falling into the tunnel vision trap of thinking that once we have hydroelectric power we will all be rich. The Government has

been systematically privatising the rivers to the highest bidders, such as Bhote Kosi, Khimti and Chilimne. We need to bear in mind that most of the rivers have already been registered to Indian and Nepali businessmen. The leading Industrialist Mr. Pravaker Ram has said that the Seti Dam on it's own has the potential to raise the per capita income of Nepal by over \$2000 / year. We need to seriously look how the country can be developed for the benefit of everyone and not just a few selected individuals. With the privatisation of the rivers the rich will get richer and the poor will get poorer.

10. Nepal needs to develop a long term vision with a specific plan to carry on in its mission to manage the natural resources for the benefit of the Nepalese people. When looking at developing the hydropower we should consider dividing Nepal into 3 different zones.

- East Nepal - Leave the river from Sagamatha the Dudh Kosi untouched. The rest of the tributaries: Indarwati, Tamba Koshi, Arun and the Tamur can be built on. While building these dams the local tourism and ecology must be considered.
- Middle Nepal - From Kali Gandaki, Mardi, Marshyangdi to Trisuli can be developed for Hydro Power but leave Madi alone.
- West Nepal - The last free flowing river in Nepal the Karnali should be declared as our Himalayan River Heritage. In the far west the bordering river Mahakali can be exploited between the two countries.

11. We would like to put forward four major agendas as our nation's long term vision and Mission for the future sustainable development of our country which have to be developed simultaneously:

- The Tourism Industry is recognized as the back bone of Nepalese Economy and should be put forward in National priority and we should build a good infrastructure accordingly. It applies to education, HRD, security, all means of transportation and nature conservation.
- Nepal to be developed as a "Trade Transit and Banking" institution. Just trading links between the two industrial giants in Asia (India and China) and providing the banking services to these two countries would be good enough for Nepal's economic growth. Nepal can be as good as Hong Kong or Switzerland in South Asia for trading and banking.
- Nepal to develop the hydropower industry to sell to India but since India is the only buyer, India will have the monopoly in pricing so Nepal has to be careful. Nepal must look to other options for development so we are not too dependent on the hydropower business so the above two options must be taken into close consideration. When we want to build a hydro dam we must look over 75 years or more, would the dam still be viable after that many years, what would be a better option for long term

sustainable development? Would the hydropower industry help sustainable development? For example Nepal may get very rich by selling the power to India, will that money give jobs to more people in the country? We do not want to see people just collecting unemployment benefits. On the other hand this will also create severe problems in nature.

- Go Organic within the next 10 to 15 years, develop Himalayan herbs and develop handicrafts and cottage industries: Our two neighbours the economic giants of Asia will be the biggest market for our Organic and herbal products. Nepal cannot be an industrial Country, there is no way we could compete with India and China or some of the south Asian countries. We must smartly think what are the other alternative ways to compete in this Global Market, what are those industries where we can be ahead then rest of the countries? We must think of how we could cater to the middle class people of these most countries which are the most populated in the World. Every visitor who comes to Nepal will have organic food, the finest handy crafts will be exported, the Himalayan Herbs are already in big demand but it has to be managed well in a sustainable manner.

### Points for Discussion

As a group *we are not against* hydroelectric power. For development in some major areas of Nepal it is needed. There are areas however where it is not needed. As a country Nepal tends to give favour to hydroelectric power in some areas over the current highly sustainable tourism development and other activities. Hydro-electricity does provide much needed power and foreign revenue but it has been shown that sustainable tourism can also generate as much revenue and with this the profits don't go to private investors, they go to local people.

Tourism in Nepal has gained popularity in the last 20 years. More and more people come to Nepal to trek and to sightseeing and to enjoy its beautiful rivers. Rafting in Nepal is one of the most popular activities for tourists, second only to trekking. The Karnali is an excellent river for both these activities. For Kayakers and Rafters alike, Nepal is undoubtedly the number 1 destination in the World.

Nepal claims to be the second richest country in the World (after Brazil) in its Natural Water Resources. If this is really true then why do we hesitate to leave even a few of our rivers in their natural state for our future generations? If we don't leave any rivers untouched then we can hardly claim to be rich in Natural water resources.

In International tourism Nepal's Brand Name is: "*Naturally Nepal*" and we do not hesitate to claim our status as the land of "*Eco-Tourism*" - But how in

reality after damming all our rivers can we expect the rest of the World to take us seriously in our claim to be an Eco-Tourism destination.

Our Politicians are quick to say that they want to make Nepal the New Switzerland or Singapore. *They all talk about our countries long-term vision but what will the vision of Nepal really be after 50 or 100 years?*

The Karnali River, meaning "Turquoise River" is one of the 3 great rivers in Nepal. Starting at the base of Holy Mount Kailash, the Karnali travels slowly across the Tibetan Plateau, before gradually speeding up through the Himalayas and churning itself into a mass of white water that spills into the Mahabarat, the Shiwalik hills and then eases off in the lowlands of the Terai and dispersing into Ganges tributaries in the Gangatic floodplains. The Karnali is considered to be connected to the Holy centre of the World as well as its source in Mount Kailash.

This river has served as the base for the Khas civilisation, which was the root of the present Nepalese civilisation. Throughout the Dolpa, Jumla, Humla, Kalikot and Mugu districts there are abundant religious sites and in the Karnali area there are also many pilgrimages for the faithful like Reling and the sacred Tumkot Monastery. An example of this history was shown in the movie "Caravan" which was based and filmed in the Karnali watershed in Dolpa District.

As well as it's Cultural ties the Karnali is acclaimed as a classic example in Nepal of a "Pristine Free Flowing" river. The upper Karnali has the lowest population density in Nepal. There are no large towns or cities on its banks and in Nepal it is only crossed by one road the Mahendra Highway near the border of India. This environment, virtually clear of man's progress has ensured an abundance of wildlife second to none in Nepal.

The Karnali corridor has got the most abandoned and diverse flora, fauna and aquatic life compare to any other rivers in the world. Animals such as; snow leopard and blue ship to One horned rhinoceros Leopard, Deer, Bengal Tiger, wild elephants, over 230 different species of mammals can be found, many different species of reptiles including India and Burmese python, king cobra, Ghariyal and mash mugger crocodiles and over 800 different species of Birds can be recorded from Mansrowar lake to Bardiy National Park, Nepal's the best aquatic life is also found in this river including Himalayan trout, freshwater dolphin, giant catfish and golden masher. The river also cuts through the magnificent gorges, steep pine forested slopes, subtropical Jungle all the way to the Bardiya National Park. The park is respected as being one of the best National Parks in Asia. All this area by its location and good luck to be so far relatively untouched should be protected in its natural state. *For such a pristine area of wilderness it seems illogical to want to build new dams there.*

The Karnali is classified in International Rafting Standards as 1 of the top 5 rivers in the World to Raft down. This is largely due to its almost perfect natural condition and the technically difficult level of its white water. Tourism

has only been in the area around Karnali for the last 5 years and the area since then has been dogged by political turmoil.

In future years the Karnali has the potential to be as popular a tourist attraction as "The Grand Canyon" in America. The Annapurna Conservation Areas and the Mustang require permits of Rs. 2000 up to \$700 per week for the privilege of trekking in them. The Karnali could be established as a "Himalayan River Heritage" and access could be arranged along the same lines as other Conservation Permits for Nepal.

The current plans however are in danger of ruining the tourism potential of this area and diluting the cultural heritage and spoiling the wilderness. In this new World of Eco-Tourism and Sustainable Development, tourism in Nepal has the potential to meet both of these goals at once. Several Government schemes have been suggested for the Karnali. They all focus on **exploitation and not protection**.

The Karnali may be a good river for producing Hydro-electricity but Nepal is not in short supply of good rivers for this purpose.

The late King, as one of his "*sacred gifts for a living planet*", doubled the size of the Royal Bardiya National Park.

*We propose that the Nepal Government follows suit and donates the Karnali River as a "sacred gift for a living Earth" to the World and just as importantly to the Nepalese people.*

Other river-based communities will be able to pay subsidies towards the upkeep of the park, for example: Gold Panners and the fishing community.

If we build a track right the way to Mount Kailash then there will be many wealthy Buddhist and Hindu pilgrims on the trail even out of the tourist seasons thereby maintaining the income to the area throughout the year.

The flow of tourists into the park should be controlled. Bhutan has very specific limits on the numbers of tourists they allow in every year. They also charge very high visa and park fees thereby attracting the "right sort" of high paying clients. We should aim to attract nature lovers and wildlife watchers. This area is known for its protected species such as; Tigers, Dolphins, Himalayan Black Bears, Snow Leopards and Musk Deer, probably the richest area for Himalayan Herbs in entire Himalayan Region as well as in culture. *Surely conserving the Flora and Fauna as well as the culture of this corridor is as good enough reason on its own for the concept of the "Karnali National Park" or the Himalayan River Heritage.*

### **Immediate Action Plan**

We need to try to consider Tourism as our Number 1 Industry in Nepal. It is an industry where currently 1 tourist employs 11 people. Therefore if we have 1 million tourists then 11 million people will benefit. If Bali, one little island in Indonesia can have 3 million tourists per annum then what is to stop Nepal from

having the same number of tourists every year. Nepal's unique bio-diversity, geography and culture are more than enough reasons to attract high numbers of foreign tourists each year to our country. Nepal just needs to focus on developing the infrastructure to support tourism, maintaining its natural beauty and promoting Nepal as a destination for Nature, Culture and Adventure Tourism.

We now need to develop a clearly structured plan of action for how we are going to achieve the goal of creating a new "**Karnali National Park**". Our immediate actions should be to:

1. Petition the Government to declare the Karnali a "Free River" where no hydroelectric construction will take place. To make it a "Sacred Gift to the Earth".
2. Survey the entire length of the river and draw up plans for its protection and trekking routes etc. This should be done by a team of; Geologists, Hydrologists, Ecologists, Anthropologists, Guiding specialists and financial consultants.
3. Prepare a proposal and implement the action plan for developing this area as a sustainable eco-tourism destination.

### **Conclusions**

Nepal's main problem it seems is that our Politicians seem to have no "Long Term" vision. After every 6 months the Prime Minister changes and each Prime Minister has his own agenda to develop the country. They come along and say they want to make Nepal the "*Switzerland*". But is this the right approach? Surely Nepal can be developed into a beautiful country in its own right - if we manage our natural resources and our basic infra structure properly.

With the recent advent of Democracy coming back into Nepal, now is a good time to speak out and say that we are not happy with the state of things and that there must be a change. Our Government needs to look at the long-term sustainability of projects for the benefit of the whole of Nepal for generations to come. Privatising Hydro-electricity will benefit only a few Nepalis for a short time. But developing Nepal as a leading International Eco-tourism destination will benefit many more people and will provide a Natural Nepal for generations to come to enjoy.

We need to take notice of our two main neighbours who are fast developing into Internationally wealthy centres of commerce and realise that the future of tourism doesn't just lie with Western Tourists but also with those countries closer to us.

As **Anil Chitrakar** said:

*"First of all Nepal and Nepali's must understand and build on the confidence that we are not a poor, but rather a poorly managed country. We are not land locked but we are a land linked country" (Anil Chitrakar)*

Nepal needs to follow the example of countries like India where **Ghandi** and **Neharu's** vision was for long term development seeing far into the future 50 - 100 years of their country.

Nepal' own domestic problems and political turmoil have held us back from developing at the same rate as India and China but their economies are now booming and whilst we are working to catch up with them through projects such as Hydro-electric power we need to not lose sight of our other advantages, namely our beautiful natural environment and the potential that Nepal has to become a World leader in Eco-Tourism.

All too often in Nepal our best academic minds and our hardest workers are looking to emigrate abroad to seek work in better paid countries and to settle in countries with stronger economies.

The eminent Mr. A. Chitrakar stated that: *"We Nepali are successful as Individuals but collectively we are a failure". (A. Chitrakar)*

But with good vision, structure, policy making and perseverance we now have the opportunity to make our own country as desirable a location to live as the others that our young are moving to.

With the cooperation of the Nepal Tourism Board and the Ministry of Tourism we will be able to promote our programmes and our new form of Eco-tourism to a World forum.

It seems at the moment that the politicians all care only about "The bigger the dam, the bigger the investment, the bigger their commission" we need to stop the malaise and the current thought pattern of *"More Pacchi Dumai Raja"*. We need to make our voice heard and the politicians to sit up and listen.

Perhaps now is the time to have a new beginning for our Nation. We are a free democratic country full of love and compassion for our heritage and the Nepali way of life. Saving Karnali and making it a National Park/Himalayan River Heritage for Sustainable Eco-tourism /sustainable development will be a strong positive step towards a new structured way of developing our country and sustaining it as a profitable source of income for everyone for the future. Not only that this would carry the real respect to those conservation Martyrs who lost their lives while working for nature conservation and there will be the fish for our many generations to come.

See you down stream.....

Regards,  
Megh Ale  
Founder/President  
Nepal River Conservation Trust  
alemegh@yahoo.com, nrct@wlink.com.np