

## China's building spree in Nepal casts shadow over Himalayan ecosystem

by Johan Augustin on 31 December 2021



- *China's role in Nepal has intensified in the period since the 2015 earthquake, mostly in the form of investments in rebuilding projects. In 2019 alone, China initiated a series of projects, including factories and hydropower plants, worth \$2.4 billion in Nepal.*
- *Many of the infrastructure projects run through sensitive environments, including national parks, and the construction of hydropower plants has been criticized by environmental organizations and local communities for destroying river ecosystems.*
- *For example, work on the Rasuwagadhi hydroelectric project, part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, resumed in 2016, despite protests from locals who blamed the dam for mass fish deaths.*

SYABRUBESI, Nepal — Trucks stir up dust on the gravel road here in Syabrubesi, an eight-hour drive from Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal. From Syabrubesi, the road winds 11 kilometers (7 miles) north to the border with China, the only open route north since a 7.8 magnitude earthquake in 2015 devastated much of the region.

The road itself is being widened, and the trucks carrying rock and gravel here are part of China's global [Belt and Road Initiative](#) (BRI), one of many infrastructure projects in Nepal being financed by its powerful neighbor. Next to the road, a group of Nepali workers are building a tunnel through a mountain, watched over by a Chinese supervisor. Further up the road, Neehima Sangbo Tamang is bracing for the inevitable moment when his land and home are lost to the road-widening project.

"We will have to move shortly," he says, adding that the government's promised compensation won't cover for the loss.

China's role in Nepal has intensified in the period since the 2015 earthquake, mostly in the form of investments in rebuilding projects. For decades, Nepal's southern neighbor,

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projects, including factories and hydropower plants, worth \$2.4 billion in Nepal — about 7% of the latter's GDP.

The BRI, under which China is building a web of roads, railways, power plants and other infrastructure across countries along key trade routes, arrived in Nepal in 2017. Here, it includes airports, hydroelectric plants and paved roads. There's also a planned 70-km (43-mi) railway line from Gyirong in the Tibet Autonomous Region to Kathmandu, which has raised concerns in India about Beijing's growing influence in the region.



Nepalese builders working for POWERCHINA, a Chinese state-owned enterprise, build a tunnel through a mountain. Image by Jonas Gratzler for Mongabay

### Finding a balance

But there's more than geopolitics at stake under the infrastructure boom. Tourism accounted for nearly 8% of Nepal's economy prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and was the fourth-largest industry by number of people employed. More than half of the million-plus foreigners who arrived pre-pandemic came to visit national parks, including the Himalayan ones that are home to the highest peaks on Earth.

Yet many of the road and tunnel projects run through sensitive environments, including national parks, and the construction of hydropower plants has been criticized by environmental organizations and local communities for destroying river ecosystems. Shakti Bahadur Basnet, Nepal's minister of forests and environment, says he's well aware of this emerging problem.



Construction is underway at a hydropower plant along the Bhoté Koshi River in Nepal. Image by Jonas Gratzler for Mongabay

"We need to find a balance to preserve nature and develop our infrastructure," he tells Mongabay at his office in Kathmandu, adding that the government conducts environmental assessments in sensitive areas before any projects are allowed to commence. "It's not prioritized to develop those areas."

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buffer zones," Basnet says.

He adds Nepal has ambitious replanting plans ahead. Forty-five percent of the country is already covered in various forms of forests, and 24% is protected in national parks and conservation areas. The government wants to add to that tree cover.

"We have a much higher percentage of protected areas than the international standard of 14%, but we still want to plant more forests," Basnet says. "We will focus on parts where there is no forest, and areas prone to landslides, as well as planting trees in urban areas."

He adds the government will plant native trees, as well as herbal and fruit trees.

Basnet says infrastructure projects, particularly road building, will boost development in Nepal by creating jobs and lowering transportation costs and travel time. Many parts of the Terai, the lowland region of southern Nepal, have already seen construction projects benefit local economies. But in the country's less-developed Himalayan region, where tourism and traditional livelihoods such as yak grazing and small-scale farming are the dominant economic drivers, many worry the environmental and social costs will be too high. They warn that infrastructure projects will pay little consideration to fragile alpine ecosystems, and that carving up the land for roads and tunnels could exacerbate landslides caused by the yearly monsoon.



*A bus struggles across a narrow mountain road in Nepal. Image by Jonas Gratzer.*

Raj Bhatta, a trekking guide in the Himalayas for the past 17 years, is among those who are wary of the projects in this region. He says they will ruin villages, farmland and trekking trails. The explosives being used to carve tunnels through the mountains disrupt farming activity, he says, and push wildlife out of their natural habitat. Bhatta cites reports of monkey troops raiding villages for crops.

"Nepal needs roads and hydropower, but at the same time the government needs to develop our country sustainably," he says.

He adds that many nature trails that previously wound through serene and ancient landscapes have been expanded into roads, which has affected the trekking industry negatively: "Tourists don't want to trek dusty roads."

Critics say the new roads will also open up access for illegal loggers into once-remote forests and help fuel the trade in endangered species, such as parts from tigers, rhinos and elephants, which are highly prized in China.

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Trekking guide Raj Bhatta. Image by Jonas Gratzler for Mongabay.

## Natural haven

Raj comes from a village near Langtang National Park, Nepal's first Himalayan national park, created in 1976. A day's drive from Kathmandu, the Langtang Valley is one of Nepal's most popular trekking sites and rich in biodiversity. The park is home to species like the red panda (*Ailurus fulgens*), as well as deer, wild boars, Nepal gray langurs (*Semnopithecus schistaceus*) and occasionally Indian leopards (*Panthera pardus fusca*). The more elusive goat-like Himalayan tahr (*Hemitragus jemlahicus*) and snow leopard (*Panthera uncia*) prowl the park's higher altitudes.

The narrow trekking trails through Langtang National Park weave through lush subtropical forest, where ferns and mosses clothe the tree trunks, and rivers rush by from snowcapped peaks and glaciers. These forests, at an altitude of 4,000 meters (13,100 feet), are home to Indigenous Tamang communities.

Now, this natural haven is under threat from modern development.

"I have heard plans of road construction in Langtang," Raj says, adding he worries that the national park will end up like the famous Annapurna Circuit, where roads have been built. Another such area is the Manaslu Conservation Area, also in the Himalayas. The Manaslu treks are, like in Langtang, famous for their breathtaking scenery. Manaslu, centered around the world's eighth-highest peak of the same name, is also protected and of high value to the trekking industry. Despite this, several road projects are underway that will cut through its ancient forests and isolated valleys.

"I'm really worried. This will destroy our environment and scare away the tourists," Raj says.



Image by Jonas Gratzler for Mongabay.

## Exporting electricity

Further up the gravel road from Syabrubesi, and closer to the Chinese border, lies the village of Timure. Since the 2015 earthquake razed the area, the rebuilding, with Chinese



the road. Prior to the pandemic, the area was buzzing with foreign tourists, Nepali truck drivers, Chinese businessmen, and officials. Work on the Rasuwagadhi hydroelectric project, part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, resumed here in 2016, despite protests from locals who blamed the dam for mass fish deaths.

Taxi driver Njawang Dorje, one of around 20,000 Tibetan refugees living in Nepal, says the Chinese presence in the village has been good for business, but he still resents it. He says the environment is ruined, and describes the river where the dam is built as "once pure white rapids, and now ... a clogged-up waterway with filthy dark water."



*A hydropower plants along the Bhote Koshi River in Nepal. Image by Jonas Gratzler for Mongabay.*

A detonation shakes the massif above the river; work is still underway on the 111-megawatt plant. It won't benefit the Nepali people, Njawang Dorje says, since the electricity will be sold to India.

"It's only the government making money, and at the same time China controls the river and road," he says.

For Basnet, the minister of forests and environment, Nepal's rivers cutting through mountainous terrain are an untapped powerhouse. The country currently generates 787 MW of hydroelectricity, but could potentially boost this to 100,000 MW within a decade, with the help of China, Basnet says. That's more power than Nepal needs, and it can sell the surplus to neighboring countries.

"Nepal takes advantage of the collaboration, both directly and indirectly," Basnet says. "Hydropower generates electricity that we can use in our factories, as well as selling the residual electricity to India and Bangladesh."

But Njawang Dorje, the ethnic Tibetan, warns against betting Nepal's resources on China, which he says has "no respect for the environment."

"We Tibetans have no freedom in China," he says. "It will be the same situation here."

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