It was not for the Covid-19 pandemic, the climate emergency would have been the main topic of discussion the world over in 2020. In Nepal, politics would have still dominated the headlines, but erratic weather and receding snows would be much more prominent in the collective consciousness.

The Himalaya is warming between 0.3-0.7°C faster than the global average, causing extreme weather and water shortages. The 2015 Paris Climate Agreement pledges to reduce carbon emissions to cap global warming at ‘well below’ 2°C of pre-industrial levels. Countries agreed to voluntary carbon cuts under Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs).

Nepal is among 196 countries submitting its NDC on 12 December, the fifth anniversary of the Paris accord. The draft proposal is being circulated for comments, but it has met with lukewarm response from activists who say it either does not go far enough in some areas, or is too ambitious in others.

At 0.29 tons of annual carbon emissions per capita, Nepal has one of the smallest footprints in the world (the US is 16 and Qatar is 37). But it is rising sharply and Nepal’s growth in CO₂ emission is highest in South Asia, mainly because of increasing petroleum imports (see page 12). But the lockdowns in 2020 proved that fossil fuel use can be reduced, and air pollution cleaned up.

Nepal’s ‘Enhanced NDC’ has set a target of turning 25% of all private vehicles sales, including two-wheelers, to electric in the next five years. It also aims to make 20% of all new four-wheel public transport battery-powered by then. Planners hope to increase these numbers to 90% and 60% by 2030.

The NDC also pledges to generate 15,000MW of electricity by 2030, more than ten times today’s capacity. There will be 200km of an electric rail network, and 25% of all households will use electric stoves. Installing an additional 50,000 household biogas plants and 500 large scale plants will shrink Nepal’s carbon footprint further.

Says Manjeet Dhakal, adviser to the Least Developed Countries support group at the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC): “We cannot have economic development at the cost of nature. It is now time to lead the charge by committing to net-zero by implementing the targets set.

Activists say Nepal has a poor track record in implementing plans, and the NDC does not go far enough, for example in non-fossil transport. Shalja Yatayat’s Chair and environmentalist Bhushan Tuladhar says: “Motorcycles make up 80% of all vehicles, if we can convert them to battery power, and electrify public transport, we can cut emissions drastically. It will require subsidies and investment, but if the government wants to do it, it can.”

READ MORE: Blueprint for a net-zero Nepal

Indeed, if Nepal could act so decisively with lockdowns to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic, it could take the urgent action necessary to meet Paris climate targets. In fact, with its low carbon footprint and clean hydropower potential, Nepal can lead the way.

Secretary at the Ministry of Forest and Environment Bhaskar Nath Ghim says the NDC outlines Nepal’s plans to reduce its carbon footprint, and also adapt to the changes already altering the Himalaya. He adds: “We are among the countries most at risk from climate change, so our main concern is how to prepare communities to adapt to the impact.”

Sonia Awale
Kathmandu’s cosmopolitan nature is much to be desired about how inept and feckless we are. Our constant social media-led self-flagellation about our own international standing because it may be surprising to learn that there is little to be seen the global highh and seek to carve out their spheres of influence. Nepal’s position amidst this push and pull must be one of a country to be reckoned with. If such direct political overtures were not just costing the state its shares of influence, its global standing did suffer during its internal The arrival of the Tibetan Train in Kerung and the prospect of cross-Himalayan connectivity has suddenly been brought much closer. Kathmandu has jettisoned the Himalayan spheres of influence policy that had existed since Chen Hai-lai, who aggressively told Nepali leaders to maintain good relations with New Delhi. China’s current ambassador in Kathmandu Hou Yanqi, is an ever-convincing try to convince leaders of the Nepali Communist Party (NCP) to stay together, and the Nepali polity has been lax in alerting her that this activism is not in its best interests. If such direct political involvement continues, Beijing is sure to face a backlash similar to the one New Delhi has had to bear. China’s current ambassador should appreciate its own international standing because it may be surprised to learn that there is little to be deemed about how inept and feckless we are. Ka Look where we are at: Nepal has managed a Bhutan. From the archives of Nepali Times of the past 20 years, sit- 20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

No binary foreign policy

Online packages

When will Nepal’s Covid vaccine turn come?

Kali-Karnali jungle corridor proposed

What is it about Ama Dalam?

India should avoid making mistakes in Nepal.

China should avoid making mistakes in Nepal.

Kathmandu’s cosmopolitan nature is much to be desired about how inept and feckless we are. Our constant social media-led self-flagellation about our own international standing because it may be surprising to learn that there is little to be seen the global highh and seek to carve out their spheres of influence. Nepal’s position amidst this push and pull must be one of a country to be reckoned with. If such direct political overtures were not just costing the state its shares of influence, its global standing did suffer during its internal
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A postcard from Jan Morris 1926-2020

Remembering the last surviving foreign member of the first expedition to climb Mt Everest in 1953

T

he last surviving foreign member of the first victorious Everest expedition died at the ripe age of 94 just prior to midday on 2 November 2020 at her home in North Wales.

Jan Morris was unrecognisable from the heavily bearded, Oxford educated, ex-army journalist who strode across Advanced Base Camp and the well-kept hallowed grounds of Auckland’s Government House, the great and the good of New Zealand and world mountaineering went to mourn the national hero’s passing.

Under the spreading trees of the gently sloping garden, the sun shone weakly on the Governor General’s reception that followed a state funeral in the cathedral, led by Prime Minister Helen Clark. Jan attended as a government guest along with the bare handful of surviving 1953 members.

I was there with Elizabeth Hawley and the five officiating Sherpa leaders, although by the time we arrived from the crematorium the shadows were lengthening and the crowd was thinning. The day before we had been sitting with the family around LadyJune’s Remuera kitchen table when Jan arrived down the carpeted staircase directly from her London flight, a booming presence bearing flowers, slightly awkward and wonderfully unselfish with wild white hair and another chunky necklace.

A prolific and eclectic writer, in her 2008 ‘thought diary’ in My Mind’s Eye, Jan explained that her daily exercise was a thousand steps down the narrow green Welsh lanes lined with stone walls with distant views of the sea. ‘The thousand paces is my self-imposed basic discipline, rain, shine or earthquake,’ she wrote. As I trudged in the rain I could not escape the certainty of this, the last of her ‘thought diary’ tales.

Jan Morris has reached the end of her ‘tangled life’ and set off on her greatest journey. But even in death she plans never to be separated from Elizabeth, the love of her life. When buried together on a small island on the River Dwyfor, their headstone will read: ‘Here are two friends, at the end of one life.’

At the 2008 funeral of Sir Edmund Hillary in Auckland, Jan Morris chats with Lydia Bradey, New Zealand’s most successful female mountaineer.

On 30 November 1966 Jan Morris published her book Conundrum, written 46 years ago about risky and experimental surgery, is an elegant classic of the gender genre and still in print, a slender volume that poetically and comprehensively addresses today’s transsexuality debate.

Reflecting on her transition, Jan said: ‘I would never use the word change, as in “sex change” for what happened to me. I did not change sex, I really absorbed one into the other. I’m a bit of each now. I freely transition the previous year was not our focus. We consulted Jan Morris about our route and particularly the intricate details of ancient Venice, one of her most popular books and home to Marco Polo, the peripatetic 13th century trader whose Travels about journeys to China had first revealed the Orient to avid European readers. I remember Jan as strong, straightforward, enthusiastic and helpful, lots of hair and heavy jewellery.

Baring her soul, Conundrum published the following year in 1974. In response to my no doubt naïve gushing fan letter about the book’s profound effect, admiration of her bravery and reminder of our Marco Polo meeting, Jan’s handwritten postcard to me arrived dated 30 October 1974 from their home in Bath.

Recently I retrieved her card during a Covid clear out, a precious reminder of a long-gone encounter, although the casual multiplicity of our respective travels struck me as completely extraordinary in these static times. Despite the sentiments in her card, Jan and I did not meet up on her return from ‘S Africa and Australia in the New Year’. I had already returned to Nepal, and stayed.

The next and last time that I would meet Jan Morris was at Sir Edmund Hillary’s funeral in 2008. In
Museums reopen after 8 months

S
ince March, Nepal’s museum curators have been in deep despair due to the extended Covid-19 lockdown, and the ban on public gatherings. But finally, some museums reopened on Saturday after the Cabinet decision to allow visitors into the facilities. Especially beneficial from this will be children who have also been unable to go to physical classes for most of 2020. Patan Museum, Nepal’s world-renowned establishment and a premier repository of Hindu-Buddhist devotional art, is set to reopen later this week.

"We are very much looking forward to reopening, without visitors, a museum is dead," says Sundar Lakhe of Patan Museum, who is working on a temporary photographic exhibition in collaboration with the Kathmandu Preservation Committee that will also be open to the public this week.

The National Museum in Chitwan opened to the public on 29 November, but there were not too many visitors since most did not know about it.

On Sunday, the Narayanthit Palace Museum also reopened with visitors allowed into Shree Swaminarayan Temple, the private residence of King Birendra, for the first time in 20 years.

There is a lot of anticipation about the opening of the new wing where King Birendra lived with Queen Ashwarya and Prince Niraj and Princess Sheri. All four were killed in the 1996 palace massacre.

The rooms have been kept intact, just as they were on 1 June 2001. Prince Niraj’s room still has his college class timetable stuck to the wall, the abode has a bottle of the king’s favourite brandy, and the car where Birendra’s favourite dog slept is exactly where it was 20 years ago.

Museum chief Bhish Naryan Dahal and his team have worked right through the lockdown to make Shree Swaminarayan ready for public viewing. There were up to 150 people waiting in queue even before the museum opened its doors on Sunday, standing at 15-feet intervals. But surprisingly, there was no public response so far has been phenomenal, and there are more people interested in Shree Swaminar than the main Narayanthit Museum.

Although the government has also allowed art galleries and exhibitions to restart, some are not taking any chances yet because of the initial surge in coronavirus cases in Kathmandu Valley.

At Timure Museum, Roshan Mishra’s hands are full. He is busy with the archives, documentation, and renovation of the museum that is run by the Serai Foundation. He says he is in no rush to reopen the exhibition space, keeping in mind the strict stick it might bring to the visitors as well as employees.

"If we open the museum now, we’ll just have about three to four people walking in every day and it’s not really feasible, so our focus is now on documentation and archives until we reopen possibly in January," says Mishra.

The lockdown has actually been a blessing in disguise to curators like Mishra who would otherwise be too busy for research, and design new shows.

Even though the museums were locked up for eight months, staff there also worked on renovation and maintenance. The National Museum in Chitwan has finally finished reconstruction of a wing that was damaged in the 2015 earthquake.

"It’s time we get back to operations, this is the new normal, and for how long can we stay idle?" asks Jayanta Thapa of the Chitwan museum. "The Cabinet decision was good, better late than never."

Keeping in mind the Covid crisis, mandatory precautions will be put in place such as wearing masks, hand washing and sanitization. The museums are required to be decongested every morning and evening. Visitors are also required to maintain physical distance, and at Shree Swaminar, for example, only 10 people will be allowed to enter at a time. Visitors are not required to register their names at the museum.

In Pokhara, International Mountain House has been receiving 10 to 20 queries every day about when it will reopen. Shunark Bahadur Gurung at the museum says, "This is such a huge relief, museums are for gathering knowledge and have an educational function. So, if we strictly follow the Covid protocols, there is no harm to reopen."

Still Bharthara Art Gallery at Babah Mahal has been shut since March, and did not opt for online exhibitions like other galleries. Stillbharthara’s Sungeeta Thapa explains: "Collective viewing and physical presence is important for the visual arts and the difference between government museums and private art galleries is that museums are bigger and can ensure physical distancing. We do not have that kind of space, and we cannot compromise on the safety of the artists, our gallery staff, and the visitors."

The gallery is planning to open its doors by mid-January with an exhibition of artists (Jagadish Moktan and Priyanka Singh Mahat). Thapa is also giving up for the mammoth Kathmandu Triennale that was to begin next month, but has been postponed to 26 October-26 November 2021.

Thapa adds: ‘‘Since the festival is for both locals and the international community, we cannot take the risk now. Which is why it has been postponed till next year.”

museum was reopened for 14 days in its previous recommendation for a 90-day quarantine. The recommendation has been given with direction. Suddenly, the travel trade executive. “You have just stipulated that only foreigners who want to travel and a museum are allowed. What if they wanted to go elsewhere? Why only looking, and management? And now you have another layer of uncertainty.”

The government seems to be working at cross purposes. The Ministry of Tourism has asked the CMA to open Nepal to all foreigners, as long as they follow strict quarantine protocols. On Wednesday, the Cabinet decided to agree to the Nepal-India Special Flight proposal for tourists to be flown into India and Nepal have been banned for months because of the lockdown.}
**EVE NTS**

**Film festival**
The Human Rights Film Center’s eighth Nepal Human Rights International Film Festival is going virtual. Watch 52 feature films, short films, animated films, and documentaries from 25 countries through Chalchithra TV at https://www.chalchithra.tv. 20–30 November

**Art Saturday**
Art Saturday is a weekend studio art session from 10am to 4pm. ArtStudio under the mentorship of celebrated artists, different theme-based workshops will be held every Saturday. (01) 4251998

**Museum tours**
Google Arts & Culture has teamed up with over 230 museums and galleries around the world to bring everyone virtual tours and online exhibits of some of the world’s most famous museums.

**ONLINE ARCHIVES**

**Seeker**
Seeker tells award-winning stories about the natural world and its ongoing interactions that impact lives, the planet, and the universe. Look for their videos on technology and medical advancements. Find Seeker on YouTube and Instagram TV.

**Reply All**
Get answers to most common questions about how people shape the internet, how the internet shapes people, and how to survive the internet age. Listen on Stitcher for podcasts.

**Nepal Literature Festival**
Listen to Nepali literary figures, artists, politicians, and people in the public eye talk about the Nepali Literature Landscape. Head on to YouTube and start from the 2019 festival.

**Organic Farmer’s Market**
Support local farmers. Buy fresh organic produce, chocolates baked goods, dairy products, honey, homemade jam and more at the Budhanilkantha Organic Farmer’s Market. Saturdays, Ban-som, Pokhara Village, Budhanilkantha, 9871064288

**TEN Fellowship 2021**
Apply to the TEF Nepal Fellowship 2021. The TEF Nepal Fellowship is an intensive leadership training program designed to take young leaders and shape their career paths. Apply online and submit an online application at https://tefnepal.org.

**DINING SEPARATELY**

**Mojio & BBQ Saturdays**
Enjoy good food and cold drinks on Mojio & BBQ Saturdays at Ratnadeep. Don’t miss the fresh watermelon and coconut drinks with the grilled BBQ. Saturdays, (01) 4538489

**La Casita**
La Casita is the go-to place for the best of Spanish food. Choose from a variety of tapas, fish, meat, and burgers. Don’t miss their famous Churros for dessert. Blackbushe, 0193371477

**French Bakery**
Enjoy scrumptious breakfast from the French Bakery. Sipper on cold coffee, fresh expressed juice, and enjoy a variety of mouthwatering dishes like croissants, baguettes, pastries, and muffins. Check out the menu for more: 014525890

**Hankook Sarang**
Satisfy the hankering for Korean food during the lockdown and enjoy a variety of mouthwatering dishes like Tteokbokki, Sajangmyeon, Japchae Buldakwem, and more from Hankook Sarang. Call for additional details: (01) 4267177

**Dining with Kesang**
Kesang, a Gurkha, which shows the journey of a young Nepali prodigy, and her rise to becoming the British Gurkha. Watch the documentary at https://culanth.org/2017/10/dinner-and-a-movie-13/ and find out more. Online application at https://culanth.org/2017/10/dinner-and-a-movie-13/

**Online application**
Apply for the Teach for Nepal Fellowship 2021. The development of video conferencing has enabled more people to work from home and conduct business meetings online. When it is safe to do so people can also opt to use public transport more. Online application at https://tefnepal.org.

**ECOLOGIC WITH MISS MOTI**

**Krisha Joshi**
Krisha Joshi is an award-winning Nepali documentary filmmaker who has received a number of national and international awards. Her documentaries have been screened in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and Europe. Check out her award-winning documentary Who Will Be a Gurkha, which shows the rigorous selection process of Nepali youth into the British Gurkha, Watch the documentary at https://culanth.org/2017/10/dinner-and-a-movie-13/ and find out more. Online application at https://culanth.org/2017/10/dinner-and-a-movie-13/

**OUR PICK**

**Queen’s Gambit**

**Bhikram Thapa**

**DIY WASHABLE FACEMASKS**

**Health Tips**

**Air Quality Index**

**KATHMANDU, 20 - 26 November**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>AQI Range</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<td>20</td>
<td>101 - 150</td>
<td>Unhealthy for sensitive groups</td>
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<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>201 - 300</td>
<td>Very Unhealthy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>&gt;300</td>
<td>Hazardous</td>
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**Health Tips**

**Reducing food waste:** Food waste is a critical issue that contributes to global warming and climate change. It is estimated that 1.3 billion tons of food waste is generated each year worldwide. This waste ends up in landfills, lakes, and oceans, posing a severe threat to the environment. To reduce food waste, individuals and communities can take the following steps:

- **Reduce** the amount of food you buy by planning meals and shopping only what you need.
- **Reuse** leftover food by using it as a base for new dishes or repurposing it for different meals.
- **Donate** excess food to local food banks, shelters, or schools.
- **Compost** food waste to create nutrient-rich soil for gardening.

**Storage tips:** Proper storage can help you extend the shelf life of your food items. Make sure to store food in airtight containers or sealed bags, and keep it at the appropriate temperature. Refrigerate fresh fruits and vegetables separately from meats and dairy products to prevent cross-contamination.

**Transportation tips:** Reducing transportation emissions is crucial in combating climate change. Some effective strategies include:

- **Choosing public transportation or carpooling** instead of driving alone.
- **Biking or walking** for short distances.
- **Eco-friendly vehicle** options like electric or hybrid cars.

**Eating local:** Supporting local farmers and businesses promotes sustainability by reducing the carbon footprint associated with long-distance transportation. Choose local, organic, and seasonal produce to minimize your environmental impact.

**Conclusion:** By adopting these practices, we can all contribute to reducing our carbon footprint and mitigating the effects of climate change. Make small changes in your daily life and encourage others to do the same. Together, we can create a sustainable future.
Nepali Sikhs prepare for Guru Nanak Day

Small Sikh community gears up to mark holiest day on calendar amidst a pandemic

Just as Nepal’s many festivals have been muted in 2020, the Sikh Gurudwara in Kathmandu dons a forlorn look as it prepares for Guru Nanak Day on 30 November.

There are just a few caretakers at the Guru Nanak Satsang Gurudwara, and they are preparing for a small celebration on the three day festival this weekend that marks 551st birthday of the Sikh guru.

To be sure, even before the Covid-19 crisis, Nepal’s Sikh community has been shrinking — many went to India or migrated overseas in a process that started during the Maoist conflict. There was a time when the Gurudwara in the Kupondole neighbourhood used to see queues of people for the vegetarian langar meals outside the gates.

This year, for the first time in decades the Gurudwara will not be serving free vegetarian meals for guests irrespective of caste, religion or status. Sikhs believe this is service to the community as per instructions from Guru Nanak.

“The Covid-19 cases have been spreading so rapidly in Kathmandu that we may just allow 20 to 40 people in batches into the shrine and have a quiet celebration,” says Pritam Singh of the Guru Nanak Satsang Gurudwara.

In the Kupondole-based Gurudwara lives the head priest Dular Singh Bhatti, who says: “If we have to remain far apart, so be it. We cannot risk our lives in the name of celebration. We can celebrate in full once the pandemic is over, this can wait.”

Sikhs first came to Nepal in 1869, following the exiled queen Maharani Jind Kaur, wife of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. The queen sought asylum and lived for a decade in Thapathali’s Charburja Darbar across the Bagmati River from where the Gurudwara is now located. She established a number of small Gurudwaras across the Valley by placing the 1,436-page holy book Guru Granth Sahib in Kupondole.

While the Gurudwara in Kupondole is the most prominent and relatively new shrine, the first Guru Granth Sahib was actually placed in Nepal by Sri Chand, Guru Nanak’s son in the Balaju forest, in what is now called Prachin Udasin Shri Guru Nanak Muth.

There are other lesser-known Gurudwaras in the Valley: Rajeshwori Udasin Niraula Akhada and Guru Nanak Muth Udasin Bhimeshwor, both in the premises of the Pashupati Conservation Area and three others in Slokha Bhaiwati.

While many Sikhs settled in Kathmandu Valley, many in Maharani Jind Kaur’s large retinue, settled in Nepalagaj. A second wave of Sikhs arrived in Nepal, driven away from Pakistan during the Partition in 1947.

Sardar Amarjit Singh is 65, and remembers his parents’ struggle in making Nepalagaj their home after being forced out of Lahore during the Partition. Today, Amarjit runs a medical shop and a fuel trucks for Nepal Oil Corporation in Nepalagaj.

“I was born and brought up in Nepalagaj, so this is my home and Nepal is my country. With so many Sikhs in Banke district, I do not feel like an outsider at all,” he adds.

Many Nepali Sikhs first worked driving and owning trucks as roads were built in the mountains. Pritam Singh came to Nepal after being introduced to King Mahendra in 1959, and his friends and families soon followed and the clan has grown over the past decades.

Today, Pritam Singh no longer has a transport business. He is the founder of Modern Indian School, and the chief elder of the Sikh community in Kathmandu Valley.

Many younger Sikhs have moved out, and the third generation of Nepali Sikhs are making their mark all over the world. Jagjeet Singh Sethi, 29, fondly recalls his grandfather Mammohan Singh Sethi who helped build Patan Hospital.

Now based in Sydney, Jagjeet Sethi works for Ikea. Even after having lived away from Nepal and his parents for over 13 years, Jagjeet says, “Nepal will always be my home and there will always be that sense of belonging, my heart and mind is there.”

Another Sikh who has carved a niche for herself is Preeti Kaur, a singer in the Nepali entertainment industry. Although she has the same to her name, she yearns to receive Nepali citizenship which she has been struggling to get for over years. She is now working on her new single, Chimlera Aakha, due for release next week on her YouTube channel. She adds: “There is the identity issue, but my family and I like to live a quiet life here, there is any other option?”

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Pritam Singh
H umans and elephants have shared environments for thousands of years, but what might surprise readers is that a quarter of the world’s Asian elephants live in captivity. These elephants are a vital and vibrant part of Nepal’s history, and their care has been documented since at least the fifth century in accounts by magicians, living monuments to royal power and wealth, rewards for service and currently as tourist attractions.

Elephant tourism has become a major financial windfall for local businesses in the Chitwan National Park area, and photos of elephants on the streets of Sauraha have become synonymous with the location. Visitors to the area often mention their desire to ‘see’ elephants in both the wild and in captive settings. Tourism vendors must keep up the appearance of happy animals in their settings in order to maintain a steady flow of income.

However, there is no ‘sound science’ supporting elephant-backed-tourism, and no studies that provide data that shows anything but substandard conditions in the majority of stables within the area.

In fact, I have spent the last four years as a research scientist and elephant researcher in Nepal, and have just completed an assessment of the stables in Chitwan.

In a series of articles, Brown, et al. found that elephants in tourism venues varied in weight, fecal glucocorticoid measurements (a sign of stress), and other hormonal changes depending upon their management practices and expected performance duties.

In a few studies, the elephants used in elephant rides showed worse weights and lower concentrations of certain hormones than those used in exhibitions-only venues. However, while these analyses were conducted by reputable sources, the Nepali Times article misrepresents their results. Rather than concluding that elephant captivity, these studies called for further research, acknowledging that the weight differences may be due to the practice of overfeeding sweet treats such as bananas and sugarcane to elephants kept in exhibition visitation stables.

In addition, being chained or kept in one place may impact exercise habits of these individuals, and increasing their activity via non-riding activities may be needed. Further studies showed that simply being exposed to humans was a stressful event, causing spikes in the stress hormones of captive elephants.

Hopefully, new measures such as an examination of secretory hormones will allow researchers to assess positive or negative experiences in elephants.

Other oft-quoted studies used by tourism agencies to promote elephant rides include those who say that the bullhook is not a danger and in use of it. This is a very true statement, just as any weapon is essentially harmless when disconnected from a human.

Sadly, much traditional mahout knowledge regarding safe elephant handling has been lost, and bullhooks are now used nearly exclusively for fear and boring-based training, along with nails, knives, and sticks.

Experienced mahouts have moved on to better jobs to escape the stigma of being low-caste or poorly-paid, researchers have found, leaving younger or inexperienced men to handle elephants using dominance and violence. Blowings often take place in view of visitors, and present tourists with a negative view of Nepal. There are no laws specifically protecting elephants in Nepal, and this lack of legislation puts an uncomfortable spotlight on the country.

A reality that animal welfare advocates must acknowledge is that none can simply expect elephant riders to stop overnight. Those of us working in elephant research and welfare acknowledge the need for a gradual change which provides training and better employment opportunities for mahouts, financial stability for owners, and opportunities for local community members who rely on elephant tourism for their survival.

By pushing for better elephant standards, we are not clamouring to immediately eradicate elephant tourism. In fact, most researchers realise that government-owned elephants are a necessary part of anti-poaching, emergency rescue and wildlife census activities. During the monsoon season, these elephants remain the only way to enter the park.

Happy elephants

The elephants at Tiger Tops Tharu Village, who were participants in my study, have significantly different lives than most elephants in Nepal. These elephants are kept in chain-free enclosures, and have a large number of well-trained and experienced mahouts to care for them and are allowed more agency in their daily activities.

In addition, the staff of Tiger Tops has agreed that they will no longer purchase elephants once this herd passes. But these humane conditions are absent for captive elephants in Nepal.

Surveys into the health and wellness of privately-held elephants have shown nutritional deficiencies, physical deformities and injuries, wounds from abuse and abscesses from saddles, death from preventable diseases, old age and near-reproductive constant issues. The majority of elephants in the Saurnaha area are not allowed to recline for rest, get dirty or dig (a necessity for feet and joint health), but are instead chained by front and back legs. Recumbancy for sleep is incredibly important for elephant health, as is digging. Simple, inexpensive changes to stables — such as providing dirt for the expansion of natural behaviours or more appropriate nutrition — would be a game changer for the elephants of Nepal.

Look, don’t touch

The captive elephants of Nepal also represent a population which may impact the life span of wild elephants in the area. Because they carry diseases such as TB, found in at least 23% of the captive population and has recently resulted in the deaths of two government-owned elephants, the risk passing along a variety of bacteria to wild populations.

Furthermore, studies have shown that the pressure placed on forest resources by captive elephants impacts the availability of resources for wild elephants. Preserving these endangered species in their natural habitats should be a priority for the government of Nepal, and allowing the keeping of captive elephants in shared spaces is a risky practice.

Because Nepal is a CITES signatory, the trade and sale of those endangered species is illegal. No amount of description of peaceful single walks or ‘ethical’ activities will change the fact that the use of those animals for commercial purposes is illegal.

Owners should refrain from buying or selling elephants in the future, as a sign of their commitment to creating lasting changes in Saurnaha. Visitors to the area should be aware of the laws surrounding elephant trade, and consider this fact when booking travel to areas advertising elephant tourism.

Currently, there are multiple plans in place to create a non-riding sanctuary in the Chitwan National Park area of Nepal, and NGOs such as Jane Goodall-Nepal and World Animal Protection have been in talks for years with the local elephant owner’s cooperative group about this issue.

If all owners agreed to stop tourist elephant riding, these organisations, and others, have indicated that there would be a great deal of financial support available. But because there have been holdouts among cooperative members, talks have stalled when booking travel to areas advertising elephant tourism.

There is now discussion of a cooperatively-owned facility housing a few of the members’ elephants which will provide viewing of elderly individuals and riders of younger ones. However, this hardly fits the definition of a true sanctuary.

Instead, Saurnaha has the unique opportunity to become a completely ride-free, chain-free venue due to the relatively small number of captive elephants, and the acknowledgement by owners that these elephants now require a change in treatment and management.

These elephants have the chance to establish Saurnaha as a more ethical tourism venue, while still creating income for themselves and maintaining employment opportunities for marginalised communities of mahouts. This is a once-in-a-lifetime chance for Nepal, and the elephant owners, to create a world-recognised facility. Hopefully, owners will embrace this opportunity and create lasting changes in the elephant industry.

Luckily, there is already one smaller NGO in the Chitwan area working with local stakeholders to purchase elephants out of riding situations, and quietly transfer them to true sanctuaries. In addition, other organisations are working with hotel owners to lease elephants, keeping them off safari.

In addition, there are other ethical venues open for tourist visits. One way to ensure your destinations are animal-friendly or ethical is look at the accounts of treating animals. If the venue allows human touching of animals, then it is best to avoid. Use your tourist dollars to support facilities that care about animal health and welfare. Look, but don’t touch.

The bottom line

No one wishes to ban tourism in Nepal. It is a beautiful location with much to offer, and has set a high standard in preserving natural habitats for wildlife.

What must change, however, is for tourists to take responsibility for their own impacts on both wild and captive elephants as well as local communities. This enhanced species deserves our respect and better treatment in return for their years of hard work.

They deserve a life with proper nutrition, agency, and space. Well-informed tourists will continue to visit the area, and should use their tourist dollars to support ethical activities and stay in hotels that promote chain-free corals and well-nourished elephants.

Michelle Sigdlowski is a PhD candidate with the University of Exeter Anthropology Department. Her research focuses on pachyderm-people relationships in Nepal, captive elephant welfare, and sustainable tourism.
Climate change: new threat to Nepal’s rhinos

They endured habitat loss and poaching, now endangered rhinos are at risk from the climate crisis

Mukesh Pokhrel in Chitwan

Nepal’s population of one-horned rhinoceroses that survived hunting, a shrinking habitat and wildlife trafficking are now faced with a new threat: changes in their living environment due to a rapidly-warming atmosphere.

Eight rhinos have been found dead inside Chitwan National Park since 11 July – half of them due to unprecedented floods on the Narayani River that submerged their grassland habitat.

The latest rhino to be washed up on the river bank on 7 October, followed two days later by a rhino that fell into the Balmiki-Gandaki irrigation canal and drowned.

One of the rhinos is believed to have been shot on 10 September by poachers taking advantage of the lockdown, the first such instance after four years of zero rhino poaching in Nepal. Rhinos have been rescued from the brink of extinction in Nepal’s Terai plains, Chitwan alone has 665 of them, with a dozen more in Bardia National Park.

“After watering holes inside Chitwan National Park started drying up in spring, rhinos loitered around Sauraha for a drink in the river (right). The rhino’s favourite grasses are being over-run by invasive mikania vines (below).”

This year’s floods also washed away wildlife, including leopards, other ungulates and a dozen more in Bardia National Park. “But when rhinos drown, or are washed down to India, there have also been instances of rhinos being electrocuted or poisoned by farmer-zones farmers fearing loss of crop.”

Ashok Ram of Chitwan National Park says he has noticed rhinos now roaming through streets have been electrocuted or poisoned by farmer-zones farmers fearing loss of crop.

He says erratic weather, including heavy rains and floods during the monsoon and prolonged drought in the dry season have altered the rhino’s riverine habitat.

Rhinos, tigers and other species that need watering holes in the dry season are suffering because many of them have gone dry. Part of the reason is increasing erratic weather with too much rain in the monsoon, and too little in spring.

The water table has also gone down due to over-extraction of groundwater by farmers outside the park.

The Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation has dug 500 ponds in the Terai parks, with another 200 being readied for coming dry season. It has also tried to restore native grass in the floodplain grazing area of rhinos, and other ungulates that are prey for tigers and other carnivores.

The drowning deaths of rhinos this monsoon season have worried Chitwan National Park authorities, who blame unprecedented heavy rainfall probably due to climate change.

Eight rainfall measurement stations across Nepal this year registered record-breaking rainfall probably due to climate change.

A rhino washed down to India in a flood in 2017, being tranquilised and returned to Chitwan National Park three years later in August (above). After warning signs inside Chitwan National Park turned drying up in spring, rhinos loitered around Sauraha for a drink in the river (right). The rhino’s favourite grasses are being over-run by invasive mikania vines (below).
As Nepal’s economy takes a nose dive due to the global pandemic and faces a looming unemployment crisis, what is happening in this jarring phase are the special needs of women who depend on income from the informal sector.

The Covid-19 crisis does not come with a single set of challenges, and nor can its effects be tackled by a one-size-fits-all policy intervention. This is especially true of the impact on Nepal’s women who were either in the pink-collar labour sector, or did unpaid household work.

Estimates show that about 70% of Nepal’s women were employed in the informal economy in pre-Covid days. Most of them have now been rendered jobless, and among them the percent of women that are less likely to return to such work is higher than for men.

Nepal’s working population above the age of 15 in 2018 was 71.5% of the total 30 million population. Of them, the proportion of working-age females was actually higher with 11.53 million – as opposed to 9.2 million males. Only 8.5 million Nepal’s working age were in the labour force, either employed or in search of employment. And among them only 2.8 million (22.5%) of the women in the labour force had jobs.

The informal sector was the highest employer of workforce (82.7%) of which 66.5% were female while 33.5% were male.

Those numbers have been severely skewed during 2020 with the onset of pandemic, especially for those employed in the informal sector. A World Bank Report projects Nepal’s economy to grow by a measly 0.6% after an average growth of 7.3% for last three years.

Those employed in the informal sector in towns and cities are more vulnerable to such a sharp economic slump, with many of them at a higher risk of falling into extreme poverty – compared to those in rural areas who can rely on subsistence farming for sustenance.

As more young Nepali men leave for the cities or employment in India and overseas, it was projected that the domestic labour force would lose its momentum.

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A tale of two viruses

Lessons for tackling the Covid-19 crisis from Nepal’s successful effort to reduce HIV/AIDS prevalence

Jhabindra Bhandari

Nepal is facing a rapidly spreading Covid-19 contagion somewhat similar to the surge of HIV/AIDS during the 2000 decade, and the country’s success in reducing the scourge has important lessons for fighting the current pandemic.

Given the epic dimensions of this emergency, there is a need for the kind of national unity and solidarity for concerted action that we saw 20 years ago to tackle the socio-economic challenges of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Just as with HIV, SARS-CoV-2 is having a severe impact on the most vulnerable communities. While one virus is air borne, the other spreads through the exchange of bodily fluids, getting the message out on prevention and safety measures is important for both diseases.

In addition, the current pandemic crisis threatens to undo a lot of the progress that Nepal has achieved in reducing the prevalence of HIV/AIDS from 0.3% of the adult population in 1997 to 0.13% today.

Nepal’s AIDS response worked because of effective partnership with civil society which was crucial to find local solutions while we waited for the anti-retroviral treatments to become available. The free distribution of this therapy also set an important precedent for Covid-19 in providing Nepal with access to vaccines and treatments when they are ready.

As in HIV/AIDS, Covid-19 response should place affected communities at the centre. More importantly, it should be a rights-based approach grounded on equity and justice. These lessons from the HIV response provide critical insights for governments and development partners to build resilient health system which will be as effective, accountable and inclusive.

The first HIV case in Nepal was diagnosed in 1988. After this, the epidemic evolved from low prevalence to a concentrated epidemic. Key populations such as sex workers, injecting drug users, migrants, prisoners, transgender people, and gay men and other men who have sex with men are at high risk of acquiring HIV infection. Discrimination and social exclusion makes them more vulnerable.

Despite global progress, millions of people around the world are still at risk of contracting HIV infection, and AIDS remains a leading cause of death among women of reproductive age and young adolescents. Nepal has made remarkable progress in its HIV response over the past decades. According to National Centre for AIDS and STD Control (NCASC), an estimated 29,503 people are currently living with HIV in the country. Despite the reduction in the prevalence rate, much more needs to be done.

In order to further reduce the incidence of HIV infection among key populations, a range of development partners and civil society organisations are reaching out to key populations with prevention, treatment and care services across the country. Community-based HIV interventions are largely guided by National HIV Strategic Plan (2016-2021) that focuses on scaling up innovative prevention services to young key populations. Despite impressive progress, HIV still continues to be a public health challenge because services are still limited in remote districts.

There is a need to reduce disparities in access to treatment and care by addressing human rights, gender-based violence, stigma and discrimination which continue to hinder access to HIV services for key populations. The United Nations General Assembly adopted the 2016 Political Declaration on a fast-track to end AIDS epidemic by 2030. This requires an accelerated expansion of comprehensive HIV services across the country.

The global 90-90-90 targets aim for 90% of people living with HIV knowing their HIV status, 90% of people who know their status receiving treatment, and 90% of people on HIV treatment having a suppressed viral load.

However, there are significant gaps in Nepal to access treatment services that need robust health sector response. And those targets can only be met with strong political commitment, community engagement and resilient health system. And on top of this challenge, we now have the public health crisis caused by Covid-19.

Both epidemics require a sustained multi-sector response to mitigate its adverse socio-economic impacts on individuals, families and communities. Meaningful engagement of people living with HIV and evidence-based actions can significantly reduce the burden of HIV in developing countries.

The role of civil society networks and media has been instrumental in spreading awareness, reducing stigma and stigmatisation, and they have shown it is possible to break the silence that surrounds HIV, and practice safe behavior.

Over the years, national networks of people living with HIV and their key populations are playing critical role to empower poor and vulnerable populations in accessing essential health services. In Nepal’s remote communities, they have been delivering antiretroviral medicines to the homes of people living with HIV during the coronavirus pandemic.

Community ownership is cornerstone of the civil society response which is why strengthening civil society is crucial to reaching out to the people living with HIV and other marginalised communities for the services they need. It is also equally important to enhance social accountability of local governments in order to ensure the provision of comprehensive HIV services in the communities.

Political commitment for universal health coverage is therefore crucial to ensure no one is left behind and the rights of key populations are protected. This is instrumental in enabling social and institutional environments for Nepal to reduce the prevalence rate even further.

On World AIDS Day on 1 December, we also have to remember that gender inequality and HIV risks are intricately linked. Adolescent girls and young women face particular challenges that can leave them at high risk of unwanted pregnancy, violence and HIV.

Many are still unable to access the sexual and reproductive health services they need. Sexual and gender minorities face even more difficulty in accessing health and other social protection services.

Nepal's climate targets are either unrealistically ambitious, or unnecessarily ambiguous

Sonia Awale

The global pandemic hijacked 2020 and sweet promises, but countries now need to regroup and renew their commitment to cap global warming at well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels, as agreed in Paris in 2015.

On 12 December, it will be the fifth anniversary of the signing of the landmark climate accord by 196 countries, including Nepal, will be presenting their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) to reduce the impact of the climate crisis.

NDCs are voluntary commitments by countries to reduce their carbon footprints, but there are doubts that a world in the throes of a Covid-19 induced economic crisis will not follow through on past commitments—even as scientists warn that the earth is warming much more rapidly than forecast five years ago in Paris.

The Himalaya is literally a hotspot because the mountains are warming faster than the global average. But activists say Nepal’s own Enhanced NDC does not go far enough in mitigating carbon emissions, or adapting to the impact of the climate emergency.

The document has been put up for public comment and is subject to revision. Its highlight is that Nepal for the first time mentions ‘net-zero emission’ as a future goal.

But the document does not give a timeline to achieve it, and only says the country will formulate ‘a long-term low greenhouse gas emission development strategy’ sometime next year.

In the region, Bhutan has already declared itself carbon neutral—meaning its forests absorb more than the CO2 it emits. China, responsible for 28% of total annual carbon emissions, recently pledged peak emission before 2030 and attain net zero by 2060. President-elect Joe Biden has committed that the US, which contributes 15% of CO2 annually, to zero carbon emissions by 2050.

Nepal activists say the country’s NDC could have gone much further to set realistic firm pledges, since it is starting from such a low carbon base.

“We could have easily set a target of net-zero by 2050. In fact, we can achieve it by 2030 if we are really committed,” says environmentalist Bhushan Tuladhar.

“Our emission is negligible, we are a low carbon economy and have much cleaner sources of energy like hydroelectricity at our disposal.”

A report in 2016 showed that Nepal’s forest area had doubled in 25 years, and it absorbed half of Nepal’s total emissions from burning fossil fuels. However, another report said land degradation was rising faster than vegetation cover, and frequent wildfires were themselves pumping out CO2 into the atmosphere.

Manoj Dhakal, adviser to the Least Developed Countries support group at the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) says: “I am confident we will achieve net-zero by 2050. But what is important in this discussion is that, while we may be among the smallest emitters, our emissions are increasing and forests are not absorbing CO2 as they used to.”

Nepal’s annual per capita CO2 emission is one of the lowest in the world at 0.29 tons. In comparison, an average American pumps out 14.5 tons of carbon every year, and Qataris burn 37 tons. However, Nepal’s per capita emission is rising significantly due to the growing

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Nepal’s annual per capita CO2 emission

Electricity transport will need subsidies from the government and investors but it also means utilising Nepal’s clean energy from hydro-power and further reducing our carbon footprint. Last fiscal year, Nepal’s petroleum import reached Rs200 billion—2.2 times higher than the country’s total income from exports. Imports of diesel, petrol, aviation fuel and LPG went down slightly in 2020 due to the pandemic and lockdowns (see chart).

Switching to electric public transport and battery vehicles to reduce the petroleum import bill by just 10% would save Rs21 billion a year, also cleaning up the air. Air pollution killed 4,000 people in Nepal last year. This winter that risk for patients with respiratory issues is combined with Covid-19 complications.

Nepal’s Enhanced NDC has set a target of turning 25% of all private passenger vehicles sales, including two-wheelers, to electric. It also aims to make 20% of all new four-wheel public transport battery powered by 2025. Most of Nepal’s three-wheel vehicles are already electric.

Planners hope to increase those numbers to 90% and 60% by 2030. Similarly, in 10 years Nepal aims to develop 200km of electric rail network.

But activists are sceptical. Prime Minister KP Oli has declared in 2018 that 25% of all vehicles in Nepal would be electric by 2020. But then, Finance Minister Yubraj Khatiwada scrapped tax subsidies for electric vehicles in this year’s budget, although his successor has restored some rebates for smaller battery powered cars.

But even if targets are met, they are too conservative, says Bhushan Tuladhar. “Our targets are often too ambitious or too relaxed. With the new NDCs, we can see this pattern in sectors such as industry, waste and agriculture which are either too vague or too conservative,” he adds.

Planners have also not taken into account that the cost of electric vehicles is already at par with diesel vehicles of the same capacity, and will decline further as the price of lithium ion batteries continue to fall. Increased affluence means more people will opt for two-wheelers and automobiles, most likely electric, especially as India and China phase out production of petroleum vehicles.

While Nepal’s voluntary commitment sets a target to reduce coal consumption and air pollution from brick and cement industries by 2030, it does not mention how, and by how much. The NDC document only says the government will formulate guidelines and establish mechanisms’ by 2025 to monitor emissions from large industries.

On the waste sector, the NDC says that by 2025, 386 million litres/day of wastewater will be treated before discharge in industries, factories, and 60,000 cubic meters/year of faecal sludge will be managed. But it has overlooked only 573 municipalities for waste segregation, recycling and waste-to-energy programs by 2030.

Nepal’s 2016 NDC pledged to increase forest cover to 40% of the total area, but the country exceeded the target and current forest cover stands at 44.74%. The new NDC has included more community forests, and forecasts that 60% of Nepal’s area will be forest, pledging to stop deforestation of the Chure range.

Similarly, intercropping, agroforestry, conservation tillage and climate-smart agricultural technologies are all mentioned in the NDC, but missing conspicuously from the discussion is farm mechanisation.

Planners hope to increase hydropower generation from the current 1,400MW to 15,000 by 2030. Of this, 3,000MW is an unconditional target, and the remainder is contingent on funding from the international community. In fact, Nepal will need $25 billion to meet its NDC targets, and most of this will be dependent on foreign aid.

Manoj Dhakal admits the targets in the new NDC may not be ambitious, but he says they are realistic. “For the longest time Nepal was the most vulnerable to climate change. But time has come for us to show our leadership and commitment to net-zero by implementing the targets set.”