NR24 / Sustainability Under Strain: A Political Ecology Reinterpretation and Policy Options for the Indian Himalaya

Topic : Research

Chair : Amit Kurien (RV University, India)

Second Chair : Dipika Adhikari (The Australian National University)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

The Indian Himalaya and neighbouring highlands are a unique geologically active, ecologically diverse, yet fragile ‘skyland’ that cradles voluminous rivers feeding hundreds of millions of people in South Asia. It hosts much of India’s forest cover and biodiversity and is home to hundreds of ethnic groups of people, many of whom were excluded from mainstream development and belong socially and politically to the vulnerable sections of Indian society. Recent critical scholarship has identified how the politics of development and conservation manifested through large-scale infrastructure projects like dams and solar power projects, oil and gas exploration, conservation interventions, and climate adaptation strategies have generated socio-ecological disruptions include rampant deforestation, the loss of biodiversity, geological and soil erosion and disaster-prone lands, loss of land rights, poverty, water scarcity, and nutritional insecurity, and rising vulnerability and loss of resilience for livelihoods (Bruijnzeel et al. 2024; Pandit et al. 2007; Qazi et al. 2017; Rana et al. 2022; Sandhu and Sandhu 2014; Wisner et al. 2003). Climate change amplifies these vulnerabilities—shifting patterns of agriculture, water availability, and forest-environmental dynamics. The current situation lays bare the contradictions of economic growth and development and calls for a rethinking of sustainability for Himalayan landscapes. This panel calls for papers that adopt a political ecological or other interdisciplinary approaches to examine the contours of the contemporary development paradigm that threatens people’s rights & livelihoods, ecological sustainability and engenders risk and vulnerability in this economically detached, fragile, and disaster prone region. It is specifically interested in the pivotal issue of land as a primary lens to examine cross-cutting forest-agriculture-water-climate linkages and looks to provide insights for policy alternatives that prioritize ecological sustainability alongside social equity.

Research questions

1) What are the configurations and/or iterative mechanisms of the modern development paradigm that shape environmental transformations? What is the nature of environmental politics that emerge around infrastructure expansion, wildlife conservation, and climate adaptation initiatives?
2) How do contemporary development interventions—hydropower, solar energy, plantations, conservation efforts—reconfigure land rights, access, tenure security, livelihoods, and ecological outcomes in Himalayan uplands? What are the socio-ecological consequences of land use transitions in fragile mountain ecosystems?
3) How do forest-agriculture-water nexus dynamics shift under climate change and development pressures?
4) What alternative development pathways, ways of seeing the landscape and people, and ways of reimagining public policy, can prioritize both ecological sustainability and social justice?
5) How can we rethink sustainability for the Indian Himalaya, keeping in mind conservation needs, livelihood development, and community institutions?

References:

Bruijnzeel, L.A., G. Sun, J. Zhang, K.R. Tiwari and L. Hao (2024) Forests, Water, and Livelihoods in the

Lesser Himalaya: https://eos.org/features/forests-water-and-livelihoods-in-the-lesser-himalaya

Qazi, N. Q., L.A.Bruijnzeel, S.P. Rai, C.P. Ghimire (2017), Impact of forest degradation on streamflow regime and runoff response to rainfall in the Garhwal Himalaya, northwest India, Hydrol. Sci. J., 62(7), 1,114–1,130, https://doi.org/10.1080/02626667.2017.1308637.

Pandit, M.K., N.S. Sodhi, L.P. Koh, A. Bhaskar, and B.W. Brook (2007) Unreported yet massive deforestation driving loss of endemic biodiversity in Indian Himalaya. Biodiversity Conservation 16:153–163. DOI: 10.1007/s10531-006-9038-5

Rana P., F. Fleischman, V Ramprasad, and K. Lee (2022) Predicting wasteful spending in tree planting programs in Indian Himalaya, World Development 154: 105864. DOI: 10.1016/j.worlddev.2022.105864

Sandhu, H. and S. Sandhu (2014) Linking ecosystem services with the constituents of human well-being for poverty alleviation in eastern Himalayas. Ecological Economics 107: 65-75. DOI: 10.1016/j.ecolecon.2014.08.005

Wisner, B., P. Blaikie, T. Cannon and I. Davis (Eds.) (2003) At Risk: Natural Hazards, People's Vulnerability and Disasters, 2nd ed. Routledge: London.

CALL FOR PAPERS

We are open to diverse contributions that attempt to examine and rethink sustainability in the context of the Indian Himalaya:

Empirical papers documenting case studies of land use transitions, renewable energy impacts, conservation-livelihood conflicts, water security issues, plantation effects, human-wildlife conflict, migration patterns, or community responses across the Western Himalaya and northeast Indian regions.
Theoretical papers developing frameworks for sustainable development in fragile ecosystems, analyzing environmental justice, examining political ecology of infrastructure development, or critiquing dominant development paradigms.
Methodological papers exploring participatory approaches, multi-scalar analysis, or interdisciplinary methods integrating ecological and social dimensions.

Priority topics include land tenure dynamics, hydropower/solar energy politics, forest-agriculture interactions, water scarcity debates, conservation displacement, and pathways toward equitable, ecologically sustainable development alternatives.

Please submit abstracts with the following details:

1. Include title, author(s), affiliation(s) and contact information
2. Abstract length: 250-300 words