

THE VERTICAL

From Koshi Tappu to Kangchenjunga, this unique biodiversity conservation and learning region will stretch 8km into the sky

RAJEEV GOYAL AND PRIYANKA BISTA

Two years ago, we proposed the Koshi Tappu to Kangchenjunga Belt (KTK-BELT) to provide a continuous forest corridor in a 'vertical university' to conserve Eastern Nepal's rich biodiversity.

The region rises from Koshi Tappu (67m), Nepal's first RAMSAR site and largest aquatic bird reserve, to Mt Kangchenjunga (8,586m), the third tallest peak in the world and home to more than 6,600 flowering plants, 1,200 gymnosperms, 800 bird species and 180 kinds of mammals. The goal is to help restore the ecological connectivity between the mountains and plains.

The eastern region of Nepal comprises one of the world's 34 biodiversity hotspots, with more species than most places in the world – a physical heterogeneity associated with the Himalayan range which has 118 forest types and 27 important bird areas (IBAs).

The 'vertical university' was born out of the simple proposition that with Nepal's exceptional diversity from the plains to the Himalaya, conventional education where students sit behind the four walls of a classroom, disconnected from their surroundings, make little sense. The 'teachers' in the vertical university may not hold a Masters degree or even have set foot in school, but as local farmers, they possess intricate, intergenerational knowledge about local fauna and flora.



PADAM GHALE



NIRMAN SHRESTHA

A greener world

It was always important for Nepal to have environmentally-sustainable development, but there is an added sense of urgency because of the earthquake and blockade as the country rebuilds.

Which is why self-reliance and renewable energy development were key themes of the 'Make Nepal Green' conference in Kathmandu this week.

The conference piggybacks on a reunion of recipients of the Right Livelihood Award (also known as the Alternative Nobel Prize) that recognises individuals who have pioneered groundbreaking solutions to national problems. It was first presented in Sweden in 1980, with subsequent awardees in fields such as environmental protection,



GOPEN RAI

human rights, sustainable development, education and health.

Shrikrishna Upadhyay, himself the first Nepali recipient of the award in 2010, hosted the event. He was honoured for a lifetime of work on micro-credit and rural development through his NGO, Support Activities for Poor Producers of Nepal (SAPPROS).

"It is a great honour for us to be holding this conference, and our Kathmandu Declaration will

send out a strong message that being green is not an alternative anymore, it is a mainstream concept," Upadhyay said.

Also present was noted Chinese solar entrepreneur, Huang Ming (*pic. above*) who won the Right Livelihood Award in 2011. Recipients like the Ladakh Ecological Development Group and the Seikatsu Club Consumer's Cooperative of Japan were also represented.

"If China develops with the

same energy-intensive economic model as the West, we would need the natural resources of five planets to sustain it," Huang told *Nepal Times* in an interview at the sidelines of the conference. "The future is in decentralised solar systems that address wastage of energy as well as renewable energy generation."

Huang Ming's Hi-min Company manufactures and promotes stand-alone solar systems for homes, hotels, businesses with the motto 'Blue Sky for Our Children'. He is worried about deteriorating air quality in cities across Asia, including Kathmandu and says this calls for a paradigm shift in government policy for economic growth.

"Energy saving is not about saving money, it is about saving lives," Huang Ming said.

Also attending the conference was Monica Griefahn, former member of the German parliament from the Green Party and currently Chair of the Right Livelihood Award Foundation. She said she was very happy to

bring Right Livelihood laureates to Kathmandu.

"The key to self-reliance is participation of people in decision-making in a democracy," Griefahn said, "and that can only happen when the public puts pressure on government and parliament to implement green policies that benefit communities in the longterm."

The conference also heard success stories of community-based efforts, like those introduced by SAPPROS in Nepal, to achieve sustainable infrastructure development, employment, income generation and public awareness, keeping hundreds of thousands of people in rural Nepal gainfully employed.

On the second day of the conference, Huang revealed upcoming plans for solar projects in Nepal. The entrepreneur, who showcased innovative solar products during the seminar, said the plans would serve the needs of the rural poor and social entrepreneurs. **■**
Liew Yu Wei

UNIVERSITY

KTK BELT: Kangchenjunga from the north.

A view of Banpala community forest in the upper BELT, one of the many large community forests safeguarded by Yangshila by village ancestors.

A fisherman in Bhairstaar on the Koshi.

The vertical university will deepen skills in sustainable technology, craft, and medicinal plants, and seeks to conserve and activate local knowledge while also creating sustainable livelihood opportunities. It does this through 'learning grounds', which are micro-conservation hubs and the

'classrooms' of the university at different elevations in the landscape.

With public attention focused on post-earthquake reconstruction, crippling fuel shortages, border strikes, the hills and the Tarai are being torn apart, why should anyone care about deforestation? With the huge demand for wood, one could even contend that without cutting millions of additional trees, those rural farmers at the bottom of the economic ladder will remain hungry and homeless. To understand why deforestation lies at the heart of Nepal's current social, political and economic challenges, one must look towards what caused it in the first place.

The absence of sustainable economic

alternatives has led to 'land plotting', where large swaths of forested land are purchased, divided up and sold as smaller plots for a profit. Inadequate material and financial support for farmers has resulted in people having no choice but to turn towards logging, sand mining, rock excavation and other unsustainable practices for survival. The lack of pragmatic, land-based education for Nepali children and youth has resulted in a lack of awareness about the place-based livelihood opportunities inherent in the forest. And the lack of support for agro-forestry has resulted in conversion of forest into agriculture or built settlement.

Even as Nepal loses its forest cover,



however, between 1998-2008, 353 new species were discovered in the Himalaya. The tragedy of this is that some species will go extinct without having been discovered.

The vertical university could be replicated also in earthquake affected districts, and serve as a model for a new approach to post-disaster regeneration and resilience by linking habitats and people place-based education, conservation and livelihood hubs. **■**

Former Peace Corps Volunteer Rajeev Goyal and Canadian Architect Priyanka



RAJEEV GOYAL

KICKSTARTING V.U

The prototype Vertical University Kickstarter was started last month to raise \$100,000. Funds will support the creation of an educational plant trail where more than 600 local species will be tagged, an agrodiversity seed bank, and a bird conservation zone. More than 240 people from around the world have since joined the campaign and contributed \$101,693. www.theverticaluniversity.org

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