

## Sustaining the cultural landscapes of the South Asia Silk Roads

Numerous historic routes crossed the Himalayan plateau and mountain chain, connecting western and southwestern China, Central Asia and South Asia. These routes facilitated complex interactions – not just trade, but also the movement of people, ideas and cultures. Chinese pilgrims, for example, such as Faxian (c. 337–422 CE) and Xuansang (c. 602–664 CE), travelled these routes when returning from their epic journeys to the home of Buddhism.

Within the context of World Heritage nomination of the Silk Roads, the South Asian Silk Roads World Heritage nomination project was conceived to broaden our understanding of these routes and their impact upon world cultures. A UNESCO/Republic of Korea Funds-in-Trust project (2013–2016) provided the opportunity to explore the potential of these outstanding examples of human endeavour for future nominations to the World Heritage List. The countries involved have made significant progress, particularly in considering the role of cultural landscapes in the comprehension and protection of the region's multifaceted heritage.

### The heritage corridor approach

The complexity of studying the Silk Roads is evident, given the vast geographical and chronological scope of the route networks. To assist the participating countries in the Silk Roads serial nomination project, the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), under the direction of UNESCO's World Heritage Centre and in close collaboration with the relevant Asian states, was commissioned to conduct a thematic study. It focused on exploring the routes during the heyday of the Silk Roads between the 2nd century BCE and the 16th century CE. It sought to reflect their scale, diversity and complex chronologies, charting the ebb and flow of empires and peoples as they adapted to very different climates, terrains and ecologies.

The study adopted a 'corridor' approach to mapping: identifying major settlement nodes and exploring the landscapes between them, ascertaining probable routes and then broadening those to represent the corridors of movement. This approach was able to capture a wider range of sites and to reflect the impact of movements on the greater landscape, such as the development of waystations, forts, bridges, smaller towns, religious sites and agricultural systems. The corridors thus mirrored the overall diversity of geopolitical responses along the Silk Roads, and indicated how this diversity could demonstrate the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of specific sections that might be candidates for the World Heritage List. The study was set within an overarching concept of the Silk Roads' impact on a range of societies and communities.

### The Silk Roads in South Asia

Many important routes connected western China (Qinghai, Yunnan, Sichuan, Tibet Autonomous Region and Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region), Central Asia (especially Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan), Afghanistan and South Asia (Bhutan, Nepal, India, Pakistan, Myanmar and Bangladesh). Three principal networks of routes were defined in the ICOMOS Silk Roads Thematic Study, going broadly from east to west: the so-called 'tea and horse roads', between southwestern China (Yunnan and Sichuan), through the



The Paro Taktsang temple complex is located in the cliffside of the upper Paro valley in Bhutan.

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Hengduan Mountains, to Myanmar, India and Bangladesh; those across the Tibetan Plateau and the Himalayas, through Nepal, Bhutan and/or northern India, to the Gangetic Plain; and those from the Southern Taklamakan and Central Asia, through the Greater Himalayas, including the Kunlun, Pamirs, Hindu Kush and Karakoram mountain ranges, to northwest India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. These routes, running roughly north/south, connected with primarily east/west routes, such as the ones along the southern Taklamakan Desert and through the Gangetic Plain.

The routes encompass diverse landscapes, and the issues concerning their management and sustainability differ. The archaeological evidence of the complex societies that inhabited these areas is similarly varied, and in many areas under-researched. The challenge for any nomination strategy would be to find ways to encompass these diverse elements, to use the process to drive forward our understanding of the landscapes, and to ensure these efforts lead to greater awareness and protection for the resources, especially in certain remote areas.

### South Asia Silk Roads nomination strategy

Between 2013 and 2018, a series of workshops initiated by UNESCO developed the approaches to site and landscape selection in South Asia. These discussions have proposed that the nomination project should encourage comprehensive documentation, undertake cultural landscape assessments, initiate value-oriented preservation and presentation, and engage local authorities and communities in planning, management and sustainable tourism, in support of the United Nations' 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The countries within the South Asia project have advanced considerably towards these objectives over the past six years. In



Patan, one of the seven groups of monuments and buildings that display the full range of historic and artistic achievements of the Kathmandu Valley (Nepal).

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China, for example, the Chinese National Administration for Cultural Heritage (NACH) has funded extensive archaeological field surveys in Qinghai, Sichuan, Yunnan and the Tibet Autonomous Region, to explore the surviving evidence of the Silk Roads and assess their regional impact. In Nepal, the Department of Archaeology has made valiant efforts despite limited resources to increase the scale of documentation, particularly along the Silk Roads corridor from Lumbini (in the south, the Birthplace of the Lord Buddha, already inscribed as a World Heritage site) to Ghansa (Mustang, in the north), a corridor that Nepal has made their priority for nomination. In Bhutan, the Division for Conservation of Heritage Sites has started a programme to create a digital national heritage inventory, to help manage, protect and promote the country's rich heritage. Bhutan has also focused efforts on cultural landscape approaches to sustainable development (Lin, Mukai and Samdrup 2019).

Some significant challenges have been identified while attempting to develop South Asian Silk Roads World Heritage nominations. The first remains that countries need to develop their capacities for scientific documentation, particularly for large-scale historic cities, landscapes and mountain passes. The information collected while documenting heritage sites and landscapes, and more generally the approaches to inventory-building, need to be systematically compiled and recorded. Participating countries are now making efforts to harmonize approaches to documentation and information-sharing and to set up data standards, which should avoid problems later, when transnational nominations are considered.

It is urgent to ensure the legal protection of sites, landscapes and specific features (e.g. historical settlements, landscapes, mountain passes, but also often-neglected elements such as petroglyphs) under local and national planning laws. Countries need to consider

how to provide adequate protection for an ensemble of smaller monuments and their landscape setting, and more broadly for cultural landscapes. While improving planning processes, adopting an effective management system and extending the scope of legal protection are all possible starting points, formal collaboration is required between the state and local authorities and communities to understand clearly what protection is required.

Collaboration between departments, ministries and donor agencies has room for significant improvement, especially when it comes to clearly defining the scope and goals of various activities. While such issues are understandable across a vast region, drawing together efforts and defining mechanisms to draw upon the skills of different partners will be key to advancing the project.

Additionally, integrating already-inscribed World Heritage properties within the nomination project presents unique challenges. The properties include the aforementioned Lumbini (inscribed in 1997), the Kathmandu Valley (1979), the Mahabodhi Temple Complex at Bodh Gaya (2002), and the Historic Ensemble of the Potala Palace, Lhasa (1994). The sites will need to demonstrate how they contribute to the attributes of OUV for the Roads, which may be entirely different from those attributes for which they were originally inscribed on the World Heritage List.

Finally, the management of such large-scale sites as an ensemble remains a key consideration for the Silk Roads. This is especially relevant as transboundary properties require not only management for individual component sites, but also an overarching coordination structure. This has proved to be a challenge for many serial transnational inscriptions, and finding a mechanism to draw out the benefits of transboundary work, rather than seeing it as an administrative burden, remains crucial.

### The bigger picture

Despite the considerable work ahead for the South Asian Silk Roads nomination project, its accomplishments so far demonstrate the enormous goodwill and motivation of the relevant cultural heritage management authorities across this region. The broadening appreciation of cultural landscapes, and of the integration of culture and nature, offers huge potential for the project's future. The region is under systemic strain from the climate crisis and its impact upon the 'third pole', the Himalayan glaciers, with widespread repercussions for hydrology, access to water resources, and the sustainability of agricultural practices. To meet these challenges, heritage management policies and protection will need to be integrated within wider environmental management, to help ensure vibrant and resilient communities. The Silk Roads serial transnational project is an opportunity to bring these debates to the fore, and to have a wider impact on approaches to resource management, beyond the nomination process itself.

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