

Khawa Karpo: Tibetan Traditional Knowledge and Biodiversity Conservation

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Khawa Karpo: Tibetan Traditional Knowledge and Biodiversity Conservation

By Jan Salick and Robert K. Moseley.
St. Louis, MO, USA: Missouri Botanical Garden Press, 2013.
274 pp. US\$ 55.00. ISBN 978-1-935641-06-03.

Sacred natural sites are some of the oldest protected areas that exist today. Spaces rich in the variety of species as well as cultural traditions, these sites are known to conserve “biocultural diversity,” defined by Maffi (2007: 269) as “the diversity of life in all of its manifestations: biological, cultural and linguistic, which are interrelated (and possibly coevolved) within a complex socio-ecological adaptive system.” Khawa Karpo, or “White Snow,” in northwest Yunnan is one such sacred landscape, embedded within a biodiversity hotspot, Mountains of Southwest China (Conservation International 2013). Its tremendous topographic variation, ranging from below 2000 to 7558 masl, endows the Khawa Karpo landscape with a mosaic of 22 different land cover types, from warm needleleaf forests to alpine meadows to snow and glaciers. This land mosaic hosts hundreds of animal species and thousands of plant species, many of which have long been used in traditional herbal medicine. Khawa Karpo, therefore, is a working landscape rather than a museum: a landscape that has been shaped by millennia of human presence enriching its biocultural diversity. Some recent drivers of change are threatening the Khawa Karpo landscape, its biodiversity, and its cultural heritage. Although climate change is pushing many species up the mountains, tourism is increasingly claiming spaces where these species would have thrived. Salick and Moseley’s book provides an excellent overview of biocultural diversity in Khawa Karpo and the threats that it faces

with all-pervasive changes in social and ecological settings of this hitherto remote mountain landscape.

The book is divided into 3 key chapters, each focusing on 1 aspect of Khawa Karpo. The first chapter provides an overview of the history and geography of the mountain landscape and a brief account of expeditions by Western researchers who attempted to document the area’s rich natural history. This chapter also highlights contemporary research in the landscape by two leading Western institutions actively working in the region for more than a decade: The Nature Conservancy and Missouri Botanical Garden. The chapter concludes by highlighting collaborative research efforts by the two organizations in northwest Yunnan. The second chapter focuses on research conducted by Salick, Moseley, and their teams. It reports their wide-ranging findings: from indigenous knowledge of medicinal herbs to the sacred geography of Khawa Karpo. The chapter also summarizes innovative research methods, including participatory landscape mapping, participatory photography, and repeat photography, to understand landscape-scale changes over time. The third chapter identifies priorities for conservation in the Khawa Karpo landscape and strongly argues for incorporating local people and traditional ecological knowledge in decision-making. The chapter also highlights some of the pressing conservation issues, such as unsustainable harvest of rare and medicinal plants and the effects of climate change on the distribution of native species. These three chapters cover about 100 pages. The rest of this 274-page book is organized in appendices of vegetation types, checklists of vascular plants and animals, bibliography, and index of species names. All this contributes to a volume that is packed full of useful information for a researcher starting work in northwest Yunnan.

Khawa Karpo is also full of stunning images of the Tibetan land-

scape and people, as well as a variety of interesting anecdotes. For example, the images of Tibetan elders marveling at early 20th-century photos of their landscapes are very imaginative. Contemplating these images, the reader can imagine the vigorous discussion and debate what might have happened between the village elders, carefully scrutinizing the old photos against the contemporary landscape of their own experience. Participatory photography also portrays other facets of modern-day Tibetan village life. The harsh environmental conditions that the Tibetan people are used to living with are portrayed in a rather humbling photo taken by Mama, a 49-year-old woman from Yubeng village. It captures three schoolgirls, all carrying firewood from the mountains in harsh winter and still smiling. The evidence of climate change is portrayed effectively in some of the other visual imagery. A vineyard of cabernet sauvignon grapes in the Lancang River valley and the award-winning ice wine from this region are particularly fascinating, revealing the extent of climate change in the most unexpected fashion. But the book goes beyond mere anecdotal evidence, presenting scientific data comparing biodiversity at sacred and non-sacred sites, the distribution and uses of common medicinal plants, and the threats they face. All these quantitative data, depicted in charts, graphs, and tables, published before in journal papers, provide baseline information on the distribution of biodiversity along elevational and other gradients in this complex and heterogeneous mountain landscape.

One area in which this book could have gone beyond providing extensive checklists or synthesizing already published data in one volume would have been to present these data in ways allowing the reader to interpret them more visually. Apart from the maps of the study area and of vegetation zones,

there is very little spatial information. A map of geographical priorities for conservation in the Khawa Karpo region would have been useful. The absence of such a map is particularly surprising, because the book reports such a mapping exercise has been carried out recently with the help of 90 Chinese experts from 40 institutions (p 14). Other maps could also have been compiled from the impressive checklists of plants and animals and their geographical distribution. This would have made the content more accessible. In-text citations are also missing, even though an extensive bibliography has been included in the appendix. Such citations would have

helped the reader to cross-reference published research on nature and culture in the Tibetan mountains. One of the appendices acknowledges author contributions, but missing from this list are perhaps Tibetan authors, without whom insights into the rich natural and cultural heritage of this fascinating part of the world would have been impossible. Despite these shortcomings, however, *Khawa Karpo* provides an excellent resource to any new researcher who wants to embark on understanding the nature-culture interaction in northwest Yunnan. It also provides a much-needed baseline dataset for future research in this sacred landscape.

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