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Association of American Geographers Annual Meeting

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Conference Reports

Association of American Geographers Annual Meeting

**New Orleans, LA
10-14 April 2018**

The Annual Association of American Geographers Meeting took place in New Orleans, LA April 12-14, 2018 at the Sheraton and Marriott hotels. More than 7,000 geographers from around the world attended the five-day conference, which featured over 5,000 presentations, workshops, posters, and field trips by prominent experts, researchers, scholars, and graduate students. In addition to the numerous sessions organized around featured themes, special tracks, and subfields, there were special events with keynote speakers, an awards luncheon, the World Geography Bowl, workshops and training sessions, career and networking opportunities, an exhibition hall with exhibits and booths highlighting new geographic technologies and recent publications, and numerous field trips showcasing the physical geography and rich cultural traditions of the New Orleans area.

There were at least 38 sessions that had papers dealing with different aspects of Nepal and the Himalaya. Of particular note was the panel Geographies of Nepal: Development, Politics, Ecologies, and Disruptions Across Himalayan Landscapes organized by Galen Murton (James Madison University), Dinesh Paudel (Appalachian State

University), and Katherine Rankin (University of Toronto). This was not a papers session but rather a gathering of nearly 30 geographers working in Nepal to discuss collaborative opportunities and current research projects in the context of development, geopolitics, environment, and culture. After everyone introduced themselves and spoke about their research, several topics were discussed, including a name for the group, which was agreed for the time being would be named the Nepal and Himalayan Geography Group (NHGG). It was encouraging to see the enthusiasm of the group and its continued growth since the first meeting at the 2017 Annual AAG Meeting in Boston when 22 attended—word is spreading.

The presentations that featured Nepal and the Himalaya are grouped under general themes below.

China's Belt and Road Initiative

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was a hot topic at the conference, with six specific sessions spread over two days. Overall organizers for these sessions were Yang Yang (University of Colorado-Boulder), Alessandro Rippa (LMU Munich), Galen Murton, Tyler Harlan (Cornell University), and Gustavo Oliveira (Strathmore College). Two sessions highlighted Nepal and the Himalaya and the importance of BRI as a field of study. Murton's presentation focused on how Chinese financed

border road connections in Mustang and Rasuwa Districts are influencing socio-cultural and political economic dynamics while creating new experiences in modernity for borderland populations. Austin Lord (Cornell University) and Murton's presentation explored the subtleties of Chinese investment in hydropower and roads in Nepal after the 2015 earthquakes, focusing on Nepal's aspirations for energy sovereignty at the intersection of humanitarian aid and post disaster reconstruction.

Tourism

While not part of the six BRI sessions mentioned above, Roger Chan's (University of Hong Kong) presentation investigated whether the enhanced connectivity between Nepal and China promised by BRI would have an effect on tourism. Narayan Bhusal (Tribhuvan University) also discussed tourism in his presentation, which described the advantages of the homestay model of tourism in Nepal. Sanjay Nepal's (University of Waterloo) research used a photovoice project in Chitwan National Park to determine the impacts of wildlife conservation on the villagers of Bacchauli and to question whether tourism can mediate conflicts between wildlife conservation and local communities.

Gender and Mobility

Ritodhi Chakraborty's (University of Wisconsin-Madison) talk considered the circular migration of young

men from the village to the city and back in the Himalayan state of Uttarakhand, India and the impact this has on their lives and identity formation. Anu Sabhlok (Indian Institute of Science Education and Research) used a feminist geographic lens to trace the processes of Indian and Nepalese migrant road construction workers in the Indian Himalaya. Hanna Rusczyk (Durham University) considered the role of women as invisible social and economic infrastructure in Bharatpur, one of the largest cities in Nepal. Kaitlyn Spangler and Maria Elisa Christie (Virginia Tech) looked at how the feminization of agriculture has been oversimplified in mid-western Nepal, ignoring many important factors. Siddharth Menon's (University of Colorado-Boulder) research in the Kangra valley of Himachal Pradesh investigated the gendered materiality of built space.

Environment

Uendra Bom's (Texas State University-San Marcos) presentation addressed how socio-economic factors are affecting adaptation to climate change among agriculturalists in the central/western Nepal Himalaya. Arica Crootof (University of Arizona) and Rashmi Shrestha (independent researcher) examined the competing demands for water between Nepal's rising hydropower development and local villages. Keshav Bhattarai (University of Central Missouri) and Dennis Conway (Indiana University-Bloomington) addressed the various strategies for hydropower development in Nepal in relation to water geo-politics with India. Focusing on spring water in the Indian Himalaya, Rachel Lynn Murray (University of Arizona) compared a successful government springshed program in Sikkim with

a springshed program in northwest India, concluding that discrepancies in measurements for success and weak governance have hampered the program in the northwest.

Rajinder Jutl (Missouri State University) evaluated the environmental consequences of the continuing growth of Shimla, the popular Himalayan hill station tourist attraction and capital of Himachal Pradesh. Deepti Chatti (Yale University) employed her ethnographic research in the western India Himalaya of Himachal Pradesh to analyze how new energy technologies changed people's lives and how their good life aspirations related to energy services. Arun Tripathi (University of Delhi) spoke about the Tehri Hydro Development Corporation's corporate social responsibility program that uses academicians working in public outreach programs to bring learning from the lab to the field and, in return, academics learned traditional knowledge systems that they could then share in their classrooms. Marie Louise Ryan's (Pennsylvania State University) study in Lamjung used a feminist political ecology framework to investigate how Dalit farmers' residential location determines their access to resources, affecting their opportunities for household food security and agricultural development. Birendra Rana and Kate A. Berry's (University of Nevada-Reno) paper investigated the uneven landscape of indigenous populations ability to participate in hydropower project development in different parts of Nepal. Shobha Kumari Yadav and Eungul Lee's (West Virginia University) research used a Planet Simulator (PlaSim) model to interpret the effects of the Tibetan Plateau heating on the summer monsoon in western Nepal. Bhuwan Thapa (University of Arizona)

investigated the sustainability of farmer-managed irrigated systems in central and western Nepal. Yogesh Dongol's (Florida International University) paper exposed the conservation violence in Chitwan National Park used by park enforcers against poachers and other illegal activities in the Chitwan. Nina Hewitt (University of British Columbia) and Sher Wali Khan's (Karakoram International University) research investigated the spatio-temporal vegetation dynamics of the Central Karakoram Himalaya in response to environmental changes.

France Azema's (École des hautes études en sciences sociales) presentation used the Ganga as an example of sacred rivers in India that bear mythic qualities serving as vital energy that brings the geography of India to life for all Hindus. Jingye Li's (China University of Geosciences-Wuhan) research assessed the impacts of land use and land cover on ecosystem services near Qinghai Lake on the Tibetan plateau. Xiangmei Li and Selena Ahamed (Montana State University) investigated the impact of China's "Comfortable Housing," "Build a New Socialist Countryside" policy that will relocate more than 2.6 million (three-fourths of the entire population) of the Tibet Autonomous Region into new or rebuilt houses by the end of 2020.

Natural Disasters

Richard Marston (Kansas State University) and colleagues investigated resilience in Solu Khumbu communities building back after the 2015 earthquakes. Dinesh Paudel's (Appalachian State University) paper filled an interesting gap in the literature by looking at the uneven economic landscape of disaster capitalism that has surfaced in the "build back the country better" World

Bank concept following the 2015 earthquakes. Lulu He's (University of Queensland) research found that involving the local community in designing post-disaster recovery enhances the fairness and efficacy in Barpak VDC of Gorkha District. Bimal Paul (Kansas State University) and colleagues' presentation described how they used a Bayesian spatial regression model to examine the spatial patterns of deaths caused by the 2015 Nepal earthquakes to help identify the determinants of earthquake mortality. Gita Bhushal Adhikary (Montclair State University) and colleagues' research determined 89.16% of their respondents suffered emotional trauma from the 2014 Rapti River flood in Banke District. Megha Shrestha and Chandana Mitra's (Auburn University) paper used the SLEUTH model to predict the future growth of Kathmandu as well as investigating the impacts of natural disasters on future growth scenarios. Bradley Wilson's (University of Arkansas) presentation discussed the sensitivity of eleven vulnerability indicators based on household-level survey data from 11 rural districts in Nepal after the 2015 earthquakes. Sanam K. Aksha (Virginia Tech) and colleagues' study used the Disaster Resilience of Place model and cluster analysis to determine disaster resilience across the entire country of Nepal.

Development

Kingsley Hayne's (George Mason University) paper revealed that in Nepal districts with higher poverty levels have fewer local NGOs, and although NGOs can help reduce poverty, the government should expand its poverty reduction program. Elsie Lewison's (University of Toronto) presentation focused on a dis/articulations perspective of value-chain-as-intervention approach

to development interventions in northwest Nepal.

Culture

Sarah Speck's (University of Zurich) presentation considered ageing populations' experiences with access to implemented services in western Nepal. Sara H. Smith (University of North Carolina) and Mabel Denzin Gergan's (Georgetown University) research on Himalaya youth rounded out the AAG sessions centered on the Himalayas by considering the co-constitutive affiliation between India's Himalayan margins and urban centers. Their study drew on texts and images from their year-long collaborative project to show how mountain youth create their own new spaces of consumption and performance in India's "New Urban Worlds."

In conclusion, the Annual AAG Meeting 2018 was immensely successful with significant participation from Nepal and Himalayan scholars across sessions. The increasing number of participants in the Nepal and Himalayan Geography Group speaks to the rising enthusiasm and interest in consolidating this group and moving forward on communications and collaborations. In fact, the group is already moving forward with a panel presenting on the prioritized topics of disaster, sustainability, and infrastructure proposed for the 2019 Annual AAG Meeting (April 3-7 in Washington, DC) as well as scheduling a regular meeting there also. Furthermore, Katharine Rankin has sent out a call for papers for a special edition of the *Studies in Nepali History and Society* (SINHAS) journal titled Nepal Geographies that addresses the themes of disaster, sustainability, and infrastructure. Geographers are a diverse group representing many subfields and overlapping disciplines.

It is exciting indeed to see the new research coming out of the Nepal and Himalayan region and the future looks even brighter.

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