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# Landscape management of the Great Himalayan National Park Conservation Area, a World Heritage Site

## BACKGROUND

The Great Himalayan National Park Conservation Area (GHNPCA) is located within the state of Himachal Pradesh in the Western Himalaya region. It is a critical landscape for biodiversity conservation as well as water security. From the biodiversity perspective, it intersects the Palearctic and Indomalayan biogeographic realms and includes floral and faunal characteristics of both. The area is important for water security because it encompasses multiple rivers that eventually feed into the larger Indus River and its tributary Beas. Further, the region has its unique cultural heritage.

GHNPCA was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2014, which brought increased visibility and tourism to the region. There is scope to progressively increase the size of the World Heritage Site from the current cumulative 90,540 hectares with an associated buffer zone of 26,560

hectares. However, such landscape-level expansion comes with its own set of challenges and requires a comprehensive and multi-dimensional approach



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*Crevices along the trek to Pin Parvati pass.*



to the management of GHNPCA. The Nature Conservancy (TNC) supported a Working Group<sup>1</sup> to identify the current limitations and potential solutions to these challenges, and thereby support the work of management agencies.

## KEY INSIGHTS ON MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES

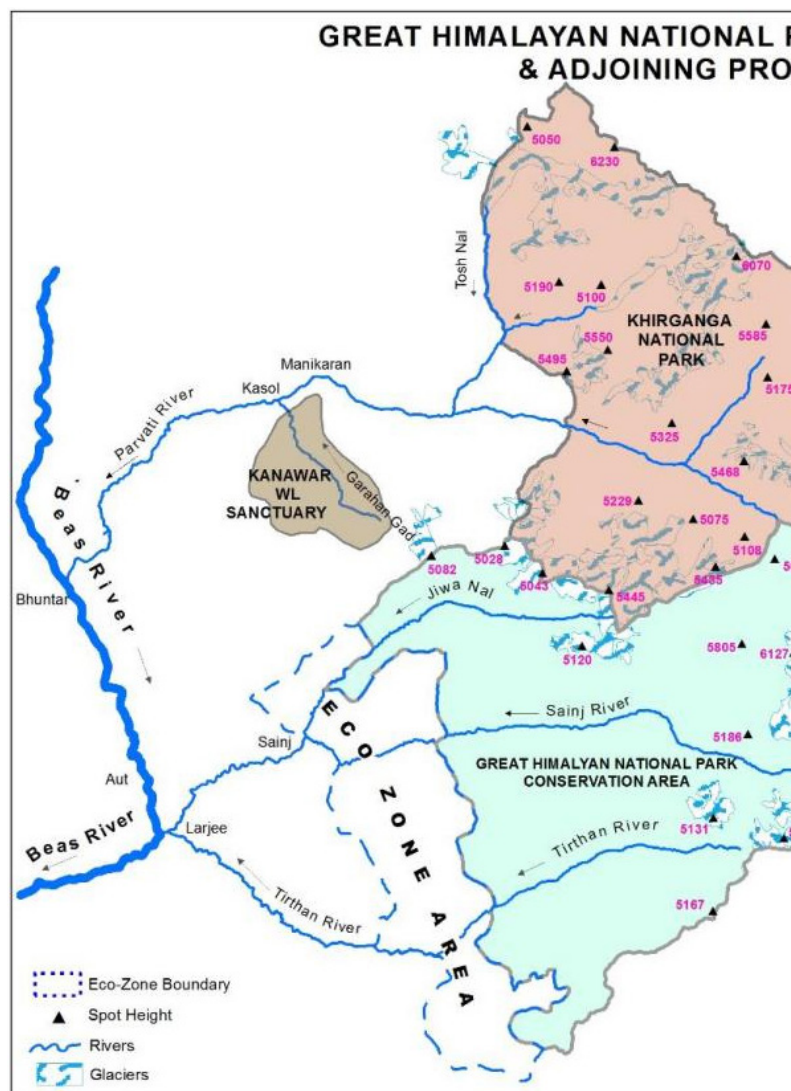
The following limitations currently exist in the integrated and holistic management of the GHNPCA:

- ◆ **Limitations in scientific knowledge:** Robust quantification of ecosystem services flowing from the region is lacking while such knowledge could help increase support for the conservation of the GHNPCA. The current carrying capacity of extractive uses (such as livestock grazing) as well as non-extractive uses (such as tourism) is not well understood; having this knowledge could help ensure an adequate balance between ecological needs and economic benefits. The traditional knowledge possessed by local shepherds, herb collectors, and farmers is documented insufficiently and is therefore at risk of getting lost forever. Finally, long-term ecological monitoring to assess (and hence, mitigate) the impacts of tourism and climate change is currently unavailable.



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*Tirthan Valley, a bouquet of biodiversity.*

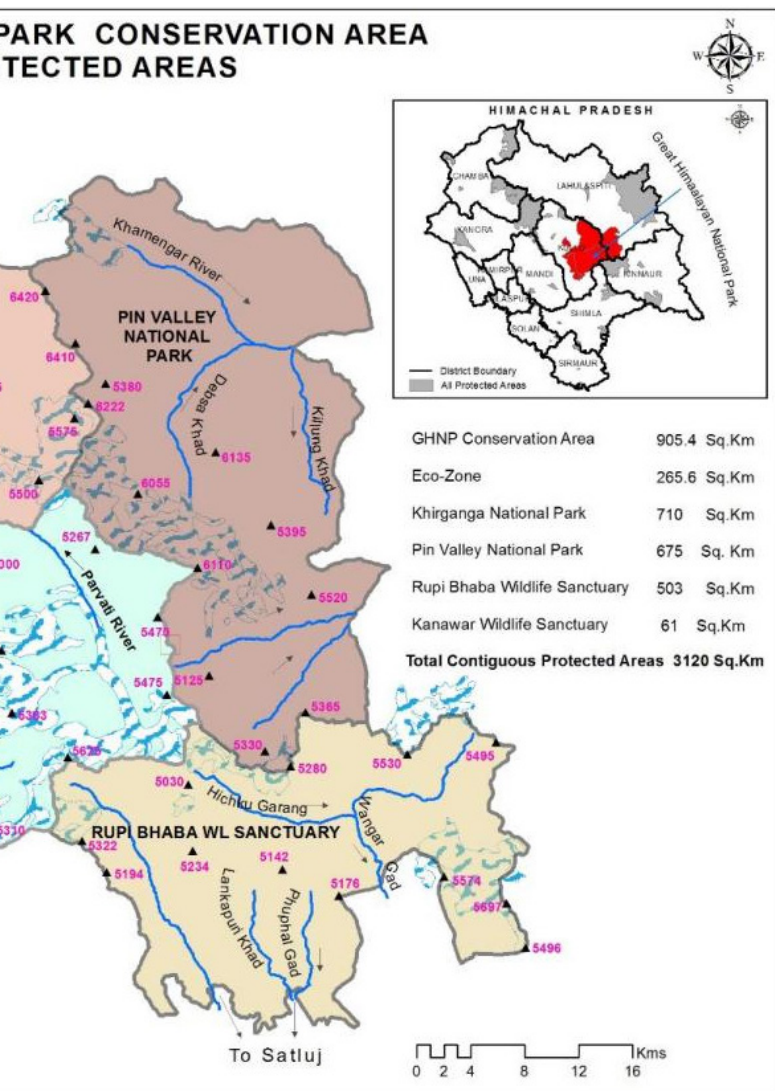


Source: O/o Director-cum-Conservator of Forests, Great Himalayan National Park.

- ◆ **Limitations in local support:** Engagement of local communities in the landscape management decision-making process is limited, producing outcomes that might be culturally not sensitive or effective. Further expansion means providing settlement of grazing and other rights, a process that can be slow and expensive. Representatives of local communities have not championed the idea of expansion so far, possibly due to inadequate sustainable livelihood opportunities.
- ◆ **Institutional challenges:** The management of the GHNPCA is shared by different departments, often resulting in delays or conflicting decisions.

1 Comprised of Mr Vinay Tandon, IFS (Retd.); Dr Sanjeeva Pandey, IFS (Retd.); Dr Gurinderjit Singh Goraya, IFS (Retd.); Dr Kunal Satyarthi, IFS; Dr PK Mathur; Dr Gopal Singh Rawat; Dr Yash Veer Bhatnagar; Dr Badrish Mehra; Dr VP Uniyal; Dr K Ramesh; Dr Vaneet Jishtu; Mr Payson Stevens and Dr Anthony Gaston.





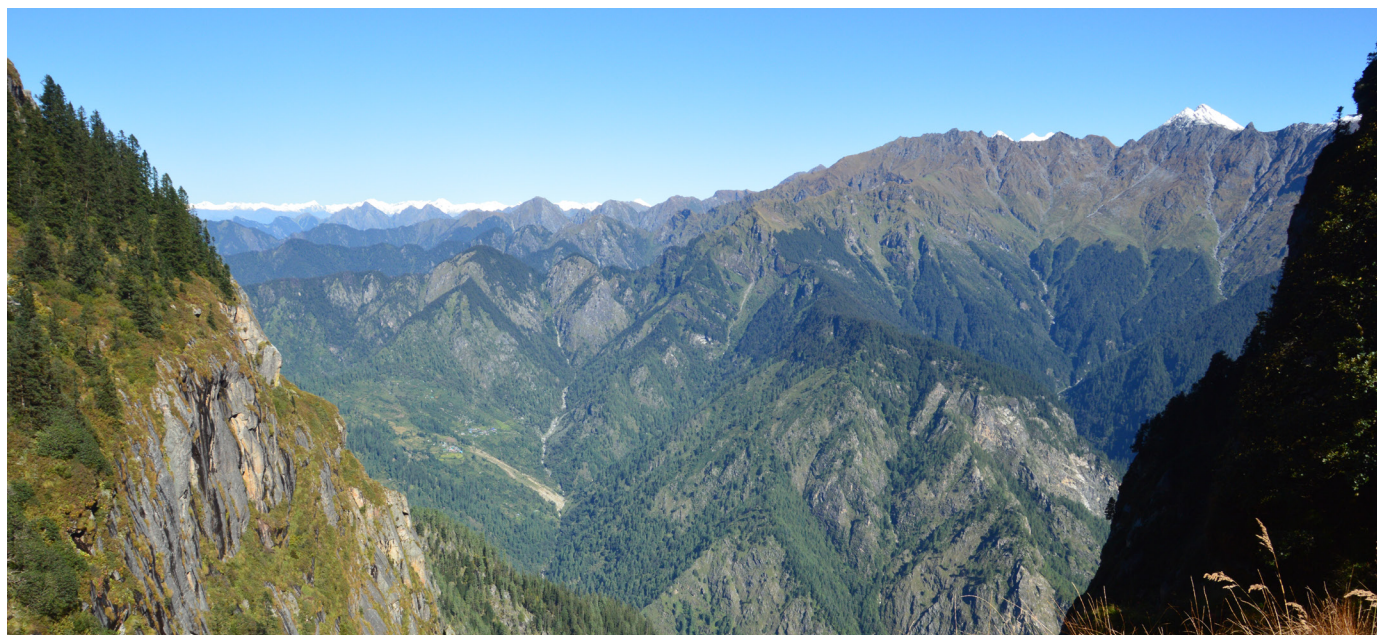
Park, Shamshi

Institutional mechanisms to manage the area via a unified management plan are lacking. There are relatively few frontline staff against the number required to manage conservation and tourism effectively, a challenge that is further compounded by the inadequate capacity of the staff as well as infrastructure limitations.

## KEY FUTURE NEEDS

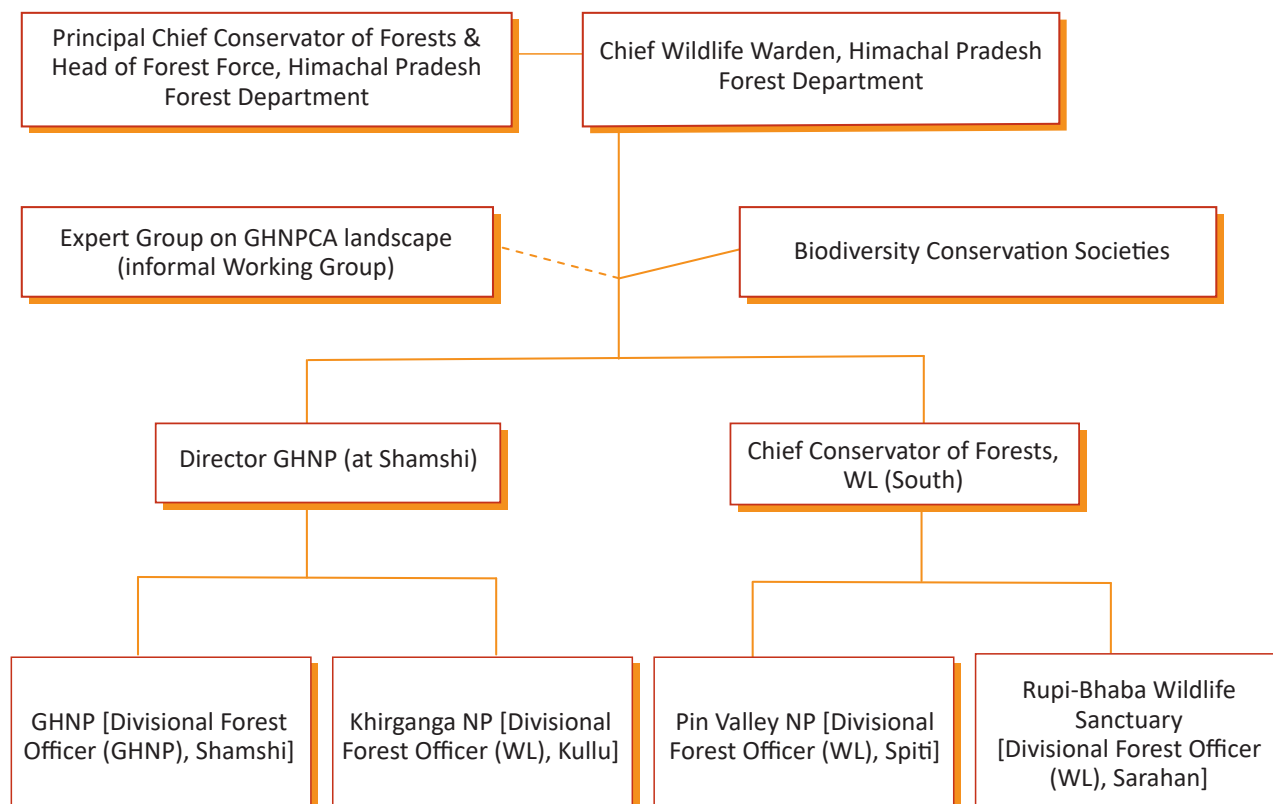
GHNPCA's designation as a World Heritage Site is both an opportunity and a challenge. With the right institutional mechanisms, community involvement, and sustainable practices, it can serve as a model for other such sites globally in balancing conservation, culture, and economy. The following key recommendations may be considered:

- 1. Action research** to answer key questions of management relevance, particularly for the quantification of ecosystem services and estimation of carrying capacities for tourism. These will help calibrate the balance between ecological and economic gains. Improved documentation of traditional ecological knowledge could also include updation of People's Biodiversity Registers where required. The deep-rooted knowledge that local communities have of the landscape can guide culturally sensitive and effective management practices.



Forests of Sainj Valley, GHNP.

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*Suggested structure for integrated management of GHNPCA.*

**2. Improved integration of multiple stakeholders in decision-making**, such as via stakeholder mediation platforms that allow discussion and alignment for a common vision. Such platforms can help establish a balance between infrastructure development (particularly for tourism) and ecological integrity. This collaboration needs to be combined with effective control over illegal practices, such as species of caterpillar mushroom (*Cordyceps sp.*).

**3. Innovative financing mechanisms** such as public-private partnerships, grants, and revenue from sustainable tourism can ensure the area's long-term sustainability; strengthen the programme-implementation ability of the frontline staff; and build their capacity as well as resource support to achieve effectiveness.

**4. An integrated management structure** that consolidates the functions of different administrative units could help in landscape-level planning and implementation (see figure). This unified body should take a holistic approach, considering ecological, cultural, and social aspects.

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