

# The K-2-Siachen Peace Park

Moving from concept to reality<sup>1</sup>

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*“Yet behind these obvious and immediate hopes and fears,  
there lies a deeper meaning, known only to the mountain itself.”*

Aldo Leopold, *Thinking Like a Mountain*, 1947.

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## Prologue

As historical ironies go, Aldo Leopold, the first conservation advisor to the United Nations, assembled his environmental essays in 1947, the year India and Pakistan gained independence from British rule. He died in 1948 – the year both countries fought their first territorial war. Yet the mighty Karakoram mountains which have been the battleground ever since have endured, and Leopold’s invocation still resonates with the same clarity and vision. Indeed indigenous traditions in Asia among various religious and cultural institutions have venerated mountains in a similar vein.<sup>2</sup> Mountains and the conservation of their environments strike common chords even among ostensible adversaries. Whether such conservation is a cause or a consequence of peace, the efforts to galvanize support must continue to gain momentum.

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<sup>1</sup> This document is the outcome of a meeting to integrate ideas for the K-2 peace park proposal held at the University of Vermont (UVM), Burlington, Vermont, USA on October 9, 2003. The ideas generated here have benefited from the work of (alphabetically) Ishtiaq Ahmed, Aamir Ali, Saleem Ali, Nigel Allan, Harry Barnes, Louis D’Amore, K.C. Cariappa, Ardito Desio, Jamie Cerretti, Richard Fromer, Sayed Hamidullah, Larry Hamilton, Rodney Jackson, Harish Kapadia, Jeffrey Kargil, Farooq Kathwari, Daniel Laven, Rajendar Pachauri, Roger Payne, V.R. Raghavan, Nazir Sabir, Bittu Sahgal, Nikhat Sattar, Teresita Schaffer, George Schaller, Ashok Sharma, David Sheppard, Joe Schwartzberg, Beth Schommer, Jack Shroder, Mandip Soin, Daniel Taylor, Sandwith Trevor, Jim Thorsell, Sebastian Winkler. Further details about this effort can be obtained from the project web site [www.k2peacepark.org](http://www.k2peacepark.org) or the coordinator Saleem H. Ali ([saleem@alum.mit.edu](mailto:saleem@alum.mit.edu))

<sup>2</sup> The word “Himalaya” means “realm of the snow Gods” in Sanskrit.

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Crises shape our perception of conflicts and provide opportunities for changing course. Such is the situation today – all over the world, there is a crescendo of pugnacious rhetoric on the one hand and a strong drive towards peace overtures on the other. Such confounding trends reflect the desperation and ambivalence of our times and make the need for reconnecting with our common natural heritage all the more urgent. For the past several years, various constituencies in South Asia and beyond have been trying to follow this vision of environmental cooperation to establish a jointly managed conservation area or “peace park” in the Karakoram mountains. They have had limited success so far but they have not given up. Rather, they have regrouped and reconfigured their efforts to achieve maximum traction. The document which follows is a prospectus of how these efforts from diverse sources hope to proceed to make this peace park a reality. It is a call for support based on both science and symbolism.

### **A Gathering of Forces**

All parties working on this project are doing so because of their primary respect for the natural environment – their stance is thus inherently apolitical, while recognizing and respecting the political process which would be necessary to achieve their goals. There are primarily three areas of topical activity on this topic which have gathered pace independently and are now joining forces on the K-2 peace park idea.

#### *1. Research Potential*

Academic researchers who have been interested in the scientific value of the region – for both natural science and social science research -- have proposed the idea of a peace park. The initiation of the Karakoram Science Project by former U.S. Ambassador to India, Harry Barnes and the eminent geologist Jack Shroder in 2003 with linked support from institutions such as the National Geographic Society is a key initiative in this regard. There is also interest from planetary scientists and glaciologists such as Jeffrey Kargel, potentially under NASA auspices to have the area available for research experiments due

to its high altitude, rocky, glaciated environment (suitable as terrestrial research corollaries for planets such as Mars).<sup>3</sup>

Under the auspices of the Kashmir Study Group (initiated by the Kashmiri-American businessman Farooq Kathwari), the idea for using the peace park concept as a tool for conflict mitigation has been proposed by geographers Joe Schwartzberg and Nigel Allan.<sup>4</sup> To provide a sound research base for this purpose, Allan has also compiled an authoritative bibliography on the region.<sup>5</sup>

Additionally, environmental researchers such as Saleem Ali, are interested in the planning mechanisms by which common environmental protection goals can be used to bring hostile players together. Unlike, peace parks between friendly neighbors, the K-2 peace park provides a greater empirical challenge.<sup>6</sup> Thus, understanding the process for peace-building in this context has great value for other areas of conflict resolution.

## *2. Mountaineering and Tourism*

Mountaineers have also been avid supporters of the peace park idea, particularly since the establishment of the Sagarmatha International Peace Park between China and Nepal. The momentum in this regard is coming from both indigenous mountaineers such as Harish Kapadia and Sayed Hamidullah, as well as from foreign mountain climbers such as the Italian group *Montagna*. The Italian effort also has a research component, inspired by Professor Ardito Desio, as well as direct government backing from the Italian Ministry of agricultural and Forestry Policies and the parliamentary group “Friends of the Mountains.”<sup>7</sup> This initiative is aimed at first providing support for the implementation of

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<sup>3</sup> The US Geological Survey also has an important research effort in this regard called HIGH ICE: Himalayan Institute(s) of Glacier, Hydrology, Ice, Climate, Environment,.

<sup>4</sup> Allan and Schwartzberg have prepared a document entitled *A Karakoram Peace Park: A High Road toward Peace in South Asia*, alongside a series of other confidence-building-measures for resolving the Kashmir conflict.

<sup>5</sup> Allan, Nigel (1998). *Karakorum Himalaya: A Bibliography*. Bangkok: Orchid Press.

<sup>6</sup> Ali, Saleem H. (2003). “Environmental Planning and Cooperative Behavior: Catalyzing Sustainable Consensus.” *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, Vol. 23, No. 2.

<sup>7</sup> A preliminary proposal in this regard has been prepared by Beth Schommer of Montagna under the Ev-K2-CNR Project.

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the Central Karakoram National Park in commemoration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first ascent of K2 and secondarily at the establishment of a peace park.

Some joint climbs between Indian and Pakistani mountaineers have also been conducted to support this cause. Two notable climbs were held in 2003 – one in Switzerland<sup>8</sup> and the other in South Africa. The latter was organized in association with the World Parks Congress and led to the Didima Declaration on September 7, 2003. This declaration was signed by 60 delegates from 27 countries at the Maloti-Drakensberg mountains peace park between Lesotho and South Africa calling for further international efforts “to strive for a just world which secures our shared resources for the benefits of all people through peaceful cooperative efforts which transcend national boundaries.”

Additionally, the tourism potential of this area is immense and there are numerous adventure tourism outfitters who would revel at the opportunity for safe access to this unique region.<sup>9</sup> The International Institute for Peace through Tourism is also highly supportive of the K-2 peace park proposal and is willing to share experiences of other economically-driven tourism ventures that have led to peace initiatives.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, this may be the most direct utilitarian / market approach to the establishment of the park.

### 3. *Environmental Conservation*

Environmentalists in both India and Pakistan have also been advocating the establishment of such a peace park for several years. The area comprises fragile ecosystems that have been impacted by military presence and the lack of proper conservation management regimes.

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<sup>8</sup> Organized among others by Aamir Ali, author of an article on the need and benefits for such a peace park: Ali, Aamir (2002). “A Siachen Peace Park: The Solution to a Half-Century of International Conflict.” *Mountain Research and Development*, Vol. 22, No. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Outdoor magazine recently profiled the region in one of its issues.

<sup>10</sup> International Institute of Peace through Tourism: <http://www.iipt.org>

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Endangered species such as the snow leopard,<sup>11</sup> the Marco Polo sheep, the Tibetan gazelle are found at lower elevations of the Karakoram ranges. Furthermore, the huge amount of freshwater stored in the glaciers are an important feature of the hydrologic balance for much of South Asia. Melting of the glaciers due to activities in the immediate vicinity or as a result of climate change deserve careful monitoring and attention and is ranked within the Worldwide Fund for Nature’s Global-200 areas “critical to global conservation.”

The World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA) alongside various officials from the World Conservation Union (IUCN) have formed an ad hoc working group on the prospects of peace parks and published a detailed report on transboundary parks of this kind.<sup>12</sup> The idea for a peace park specifically in the Karakorams was brought up at a workshop of the WCPA held in Dhaka in June 2003. As a follow-up to this report, an ad hoc working group has been formed and an electronic petition forum started by the Mumbai-based environmental group Sanctuary Asia.<sup>13</sup>

### *A Unified Stance*

All these initiatives reflect the broad specter of support for this project from the grassroots and beyond. The next step lies in bringing the issue to policy makers and overcoming some of the physical and political constraints to the idea.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The Snow Leopard Conservancy, led by biologist Rodney Jackson has also called for a peace park: <http://www.snowleopardconservancy.org>. The International Snow Leopard Trust is also an organization with similar goals: <http://www.snowleopard.org>

<sup>12</sup> Sandwith, Trevor, Clare Shine, Lawrence Hamilton and David Sheppard (2001). *Transboundary Protected Areas for Peace and Cooperation*. Cardiff Wales: World Conservation Union and Cardiff University (Best Practice Protected Areas Guidelines Series, No. 7)

<sup>13</sup> Sanctuary Asia is led by the famed environmentalists Bittu Sahgal. The petition can be found at their web site: <http://www.santuaryasia.com>

<sup>14</sup> The peace park idea has recently received some positive, albeit speculative press coverage in both India and Pakistan. See for example the article by Rubina Jabbar “The Height of Peace,” in the Pakistani daily *The News* (September 21, 2003) and the article by Aarti Dhar, “Support for Siachen Peace Park Plan,” in the Indian daily *The Hindu*, October 15, 2003

**The challenges and how to overcome them**

First, let us consider the physical challenges of the establishment of the peace park and its subsequent management. It is important for the initiative to have certain palpable impact on visitors in order for it to truly be a peace park. Thus the park should be accessible to visitors from both countries and should also have a sound conservation management plan. Since much of the terrain is at extraordinarily high altitudes, it will be exceedingly difficult to enforce conservation plans without ongoing logistical support and resources. This is where the army's experiences on both sides may indeed be put to valuable use as discussed below.

*Military imperatives*

Ideally, a peace park would be a demilitarized zone where weapons of any sort would not be allowed. However, such absolute demilitarization is unrealistic in the Karakoram case. Rather, a possible approach would be to encourage existing military establishments on both sides to lend their logistical support for conservation management of the park. Thus the militaries would act as rangers to help in the management of the park. Such an approach would serve two purposes: first it would allay any fears on both sides about border security; second it would provide a means for militaries on both sides to work together for a constructive purpose – thereby building camaraderie and friendship.

*Territorial delineation*

Most of the proposals for a peace park in the Karakorams begin with the outline of the existing Central Karakoram National Park on the Pakistani side of the line of control. This park was officially established in 1993 and an official management plan prepared by IUCN in 1999, though it is largely a park on paper only and the military primary controls all management of the region. Adjoining this park to the west is the Khunjerab National Park which has within its boundaries the Karakoram Highway and road access to China. This region, which was part of the ancient silk route has also been proposed for World

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Heritage site status but because of the ongoing tension the proposal was stalled at UNESCO. On the Chinese side of the border is the Taxkorgan Conservation area, which was established under the leadership of the conservationist George Schaller.

The border delineation for the proposed peace park would need to be undertaken in phases to develop trust between the various parties to the process. The initial phase would extend the boundary of the Central Karakoram National Park beyond the Line of Control at grid reference point NJ9842 to the Siachen Glacier area. Thus a majority of the initial phase of the park would be within territory occupied by Pakistan with the extreme eastern portion in areas occupied by India. While this may seem like an asymmetric arrangement that India may be reluctant to accept, the underlying reasons for Indian acceptability are compelling. Through a peace park mechanism, India would have easier access to large swaths of the Karakoram region and hence provide added security. For Pakistan, the incentive would be to also have access to the eastern segment of the Siachen, and for both countries the joint peace-building measure would substantially reduce military expenditure. Later phases of the park would include further expansion into Ladakh to the east, and the Khunjerab to the West. Additionally, China would be a natural partner to the North, where the Taxkorgan Conservation area could be extended to the Shaksgam Tract and form a trinational peace park. However, the later phases of the park can only be developed once the initial phase is successful with regard to visitor access and security.

### *Visitor Rights*

Visitor access to an international peace park should ideally not require conventional visa documents – as is the case with locations such as the Sharm-al-Shaikh region of Egypt. However, this is again not practical here, since such a mechanism requires direct international airport access to the region. While Skardu and Leh could potentially provide such access, the prospects for such a high level of internationalization at this stage are remote.

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Instead a more realistic approach would be to allow visitors from either India or Pakistan to be able to enter the peace park on their entry visas from either country, while not allowing for crossover into the other country beyond the borders of the peace park (an arrangement similar to the internal border which China keeps from Hong Kong and Macau to the mainland). Over time these restrictions could be eased as tensions subside.

The development of a joint commission to monitor the impact of tourists and also to provide a mechanism for approving research projects that can be carried out within the park boundaries would be needed. The involvement of China in a commission of this kind would be advisable even at the first stage, given the strengths of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, and the access which researchers and visitors may need from the Chinese side of the border. Such a commission would also provide a forum for direct collaboration between scientists in India, Pakistan and China.

### *Management Plans*

While management plans have already been prepared for the CKNP by IUCN, larger international guidelines for managing a highly diverse and potentially contentious assemblage of stakeholders are needed for the purposes of the peace park. There must be collective ownership of these plans by the governments as well as the local tribal leadership in the surrounding hill tracts in order for the initiative to be successful.

The K-2 peace park would probably be categorized as a Category-V conservation area under the World Commission on Protected Areas categorization Scheme, indicating that it is a “protected landscape, managed mainly for landscape conservation and recreation.” There are various methods for managing such areas that are inclusive of local communities in the decision-making. In particular recent work by Adrian Phillips for IUCN could be instructive in further developing the management plans for the CKNP.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See Phillips, Adrian (2003). “Turning Ideas on their Heads: The New Paradigm for Protection Areas.” *The George Wright Forum*, Vol. 20, No.2.

## **The Next Steps**

This document has aimed to provide the rationale and implementation mechanism for the K-2-Siachen peace park project. The actual agreement to make this a reality would quite simply require a willingness on both sides to overcome institutional inertia and sign a simple agreement of principles along the lines suggested here. The economic incentives for reducing military expenditures, conserving an endangered ecosystem, and ensuring collective security are all present in this proposal. What is needed is a unified grassroots campaign as well as a strategic push from various influential forces assembled here to convince the leadership to move forward. The year 2004 is particularly auspicious in this context as the fiftieth anniversary of the first ascent of K-2.<sup>16</sup> Let us celebrate and conserve the common environmental heritage of this magnificent region, and show how mountains can move us to positive action.

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<sup>16</sup>On the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of K-2's first ascent and its unique features for mountaineers see the article by Kevin Fedarko, "The Mountain of Mountains." *Outside* magazine, November, 2003.