

▼ RUMINATIONS ON A ROAD

Mustang, Nepal, has been a trading route and Buddhist pilgrimage site for centuries. Although remote, Mustang is far from provincial. The Thakali, an ethnic clan from Lower Mustang, make their homes around the globe, and many Loba, ethnic Tibetans from Lo (Upper Mustang), have emigrated to Kathmandu or the United States. Likewise, planes and helicopters land daily at Jomsom, Mustang's district headquarters, delivering lowland goods and tourists. Still, Mustang is a place of footpaths and mule trains. But not for long.

Last summer, a coterie of officials convened at the Nepal-Tibet border for the Korallo-Jomsom Farm Road

groundbreaking ceremony. At that time, six kilometers of earth stretching south had been graded. The regional government views it as a possible Himalayan highway to provide a trade link between Mustang, Chinese-occupied Tibet, and Kathmandu that will cheapen the cost of imports and facilitate the export of Mustang's famous apples. District officials plan to encourage Nepal's Ministry of Foreign Affairs to approach the Chinese to secure transboundary transport privileges. Informed sources say the road will also encourage mining in Upper Mustang.



Mustang: view overlooking village of Gelung

Some locals fear political repercussions will result from traversing Chinese territory and favor building a road south from Jomsom along the deepest gorge in the world; others from Lower Mustang extrapolate that building a road along their economic corridor—a landslide-prone stretch of earth—will be expensive and squelch tourism revenue. But alternatives to the road, such as a pulley transport system or augmenting helicopter flights, have not been fully explored.

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Upper Mustang was opened on a restricted basis to tourists in 1992, a status that requires the region's 1,000 annual visitors to employ a trekking company, travel with a government liaison officer, and pay a restricted area fee of \$70 per day. This generates \$700,000 a year for the Nepali government. Sixty percent of these funds were to be allocated to Upper Mustang for community development projects; for the past two years, less than 3 percent has been returned, according to the Kathmandu-based Mountain Forum, an Internet organization dealing with development, conservation, and cultural issues in the Himalayas. If this road succeeds in connecting Mustang to Kathmandu via Tibet, a reassessment of Upper Mustang's "restricted" status will be in order. However, changing this status is anathema to the Nepali government's collection of restricted-area fees

as well as the Thakali monopoly on tourism and trade throughout Mustang.

For most Loba, the road comes laden with expectations of cash and cheaper goods, electricity, and education—accoutrements of the 20th century that elude this remote region. Moreover, a road could squander conservation efforts. Upper Mustang's trans-Himalayan ecosystem harbors some of Asia's most unique and threatened wildlife: Argali sheep, Tibetan wild ass, and snow leopards, as well as rare medicinal herbs. Yet no environmental impact assessment of the road has been undertaken. Upper Mustang may instead become inundated with Chinese goods, mostly cigarettes and alcohol.

The first stretch of road is being financed primarily by Upper Mustang's village development committees; the Loba have also committed community

labor resources. The King of Lo has expressed grave concerns about this project, which could curtail tourism, increase local inflation, and harm the environment.

In the West, Upper Mustang is often viewed as a last bastion of "undisturbed" Tibetan culture. Yet many Loba feel they have been relegated to a cultural zoo and crave the symbols of development. The Korallo-Jomsom Farm Road makes us pause to consider impermanence: how modernity, in motorable stretches, changes an ancient Buddhist landscape.

—Sienna Craig

For Sienna Craig's article about the horse culture of Mustang, see *Tricycle's* Summer 1998 issue or the *Tricycle* website: www.tricycle.com. Related websites include: www.drokpa.org; mf-asia@lyris.bellanet.org; and www.info-nepal.com. ▼