

## Wetland Tourism: India – Lake Tsomoriri



*India, Lake Tsomoriri ©Pankaj Chandan / WWF-India*

**Lake Tsomoriri** is one of the highest lakes in the world, at 4,595 metres altitude, and lies in the Changthang Cold Desert Sanctuary of Ladakh in the Jammu and Kashmir state of India. Surrounded by marshes of sedges and reeds, the lake covers almost 12,000 hectares (120 km<sup>2</sup>). It provides vital breeding grounds and key staging posts on migration routes for over 40 species of water birds; in particular, it is important as breeding ground for the highly threatened Black-necked Crane (*Grus nigricollis*) and Bar-headed Goose (*Anser indicus*) (Chandan *et al.* 2006).

The region also supports the Himalayan blue sheep (*Pseudois nayaur*), Tibetan argali (*Ovis ammon hodgsoni*), Kiang (*Equus kiang*), Tibetan Wolf (*Canis lupus chanco*), Lynx (*Lynx isabellina*), and Snow leopard (*Uncia uncia*).

A tent-dwelling tribe of nomads, the Changpas, live and graze their livestock on pastures around the lake. The Changpas depend on livestock for their livelihood and produce the world famous Pashmina wool used as raw material to produce pashmina (Cashmere) shawls (Gujja *et al.* 2003).

**Tourism** to Ladakh has been growing over the past 20 years (Dawa 2008). In 1989, the region received very few visitors, and this was followed by fluctuating numbers of tourists as the region experienced a period of political instability. By 2006, however, as the political situation became more stable, numbers increased dramatically to around 50,000 tourists a year. This increase was also linked to the development of transport infrastructure in the region, India’s updated national policies on tourism, and investment in marketing and promotion. During the summer season of 2011 Ladakh saw a huge growth in tourism with the area receiving more than 170,000 tourists, the highest total so far.



*India, Lake Tsomoriri Black-necked Crane (Grus nigricollis) ©Pankaj Chandan / WWF-India*

**Tourism** now plays an exceedingly important role in Ladakh’s economy, and the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Council (LAHDC) has set out objectives to scale up tourism’s contribution to the economic and social well-being of the people of the region, while protecting the region’s fragile ecosystems and cultural heritage through sustainable development. Tourism to the lake is run by the tour operators of Ladakh, based at Leh, and is promoted by the Jammu & Kashmir Department of Tourism and the All Ladakh Tour

Operators Association (ALTOA) based at Leh.

Tsomoriri, which is major attraction for tourists, has experienced rapid development of tourism ever since it was first opened up to outside visitors in 1994. At present about 20,000 tourists, mainly from European countries and other parts of India, visit Lake Tsomoriri each year during the short summer season between June to September. The construction of a metalled road which connects the capital of Leh and the village of Korzok near Lake Tsomoriri has made it much

easier for tourists to reach the lake. In fact, the reputation of the lake is an important feature in attracting tourists to visit and travel in the Ladakh region, even though comparatively only a small proportion of the tourists visiting the region actually travel to the lake itself.

A survey of tourists visiting Tsomoriri has found that tourists come to experience its scenic beauty and remoteness, as well as the local culture – which includes the 300-year-old monastery at Korzok, the local village and the nomadic herders. It also attracts tourists who want to see the lake’s birds and wildlife, as well as adventure tourists taking part in trekking and jeep safaris. The survey also showed that most tourists feel that the local communities should benefit from tourism.



*India, Lake Tsomoriri ©Pankaj Chandan / WWF-India*

Unfortunately, tourism development around Lake Tsomoriri has taken place without any systematic planning or controls. As a result, tourism camps have been located in areas where there is a high risk of disturbing wildlife, and provisions for garbage and sewage disposal are inadequate. Tourist facilities have been built near the lake shore without proper impact assessment, and this unplanned development has long-term negative impacts on biodiversity and key habitats, as well as on the scenic value of lake.

The peak tourism period also coincides with the peak breeding period for the lake’s avifauna. In addition, although the economy of the Ladakh region has benefited from tourism, most of the benefits have accrued to tour operators at Leh and others based outside the area. The Changpas and the inhabitants of Korzok have so far received relatively limited benefits from tourism, while experiencing all the problems caused by the uncontrolled influx of tourists, including damage to pastures, accumulation of wastes in the environment, and social tensions.

The evidence shows that wastes, pollution, and environmental damage are increasing around trekking routes and campsites, and they affect both people and wildlife (Geneletti & Dawa 2009). Grazing, without local consent, of pack horses accompanying tourist groups is reducing pastures available to livestock owned by local people. Off-road driving of jeeps over the pastures is causing soil compaction and damage to vegetation, reducing productivity, and opening these fragile soils to erosion. There are also reports of jeeps being used to chase kiangs and other species. Thus, overall, one of the biggest threats to Tsomoriri comes from unregulated tourism.

Lake Tsomoriri is under the administrative control of Department of Wildlife Protection, Government of Jammu & Kashmir. WWF-India initiated a conservation project in the area in 2000 to involve all the key stakeholders, especially the local community, in the conservation process. A management plan for the site was prepared in 2007 and is designed to ensure that tourism is operated and developed in a sustainable manner that contributes to the livelihoods of local people and protects the lake’s environment and wildlife (Chandan et al. 2008). The management plan sets out guiding principles for tourism in and around the lake – these include protecting community interests to ensure that local people receive a fair share of benefits from tourism, and that their rights to use the key sources of their livelihoods, such as pastures, are respected; conserving the natural heritage of the wetlands, including the role of traditional management by local people; and managing tourism to sustain the wetlands as

an important place for tourism and recreational use, through proper planning, community-based tourism such as local homestays and local guides, and protection of key habitats from damaging tourism activities.

The management plan was prepared in consultation with the local communities, which now regularly participate in management decisions at the site. A local community trust called Tsomoriri Conservation Trust has been created with technical support from WWF-India and is active in promoting community interests,

including the development of community-based tourism. WWF is also working with the tour operators of the region to involve them in the conservation of the lake. Many tour operators are regularly helping, for example, in various garbage cleanliness drives in the area. In addition to this, regular education and awareness programmes are also organized for the armed forces personnel present in the area. All these efforts are collectively directed towards the conservation of this lake to ensure a better future for local communities through sustained livelihoods and for wildlife through protection of critical habitats.



India, Lake Tsomoriri WWF-India Training Programme ©Pankaj Chandan / WWF-India

The Ramsar Secretariat selected 14 case studies for a publication on wetlands and sustainable tourism, to be launched at the 11<sup>th</sup> Conference of Parties, July 2012. [www.ramsar.org/tourism](http://www.ramsar.org/tourism)



## *A Ramsar Case Study on Tourism and Wetlands*

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Information provided by Mr. Pankaj Chandan & Ms. Archana Chatterjee, WWF-India

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