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Ongoing Research Projects:

Impacts of Expanding Road Networks on Communities in the Annapurna Conservation Area
ongoing research

Contemporary development studies recognize road networks as a key element in economic development, socioeconomic well-being, and poverty alleviation. However, the outcome of road construction projects has not always met the original goals of the project, has contributed substantially to environmental degradation, and in some cases has led to the loss of cultural traditions and marginalization of indigenous peoples. The World Bank, one of the main financiers of road construction projects, admits that there is a paucity of empirical evidence about the amount and quality of the benefits, who receives them, and how they are dispersed, despite the numerous socioeconomic evaluations of road projects already conducted. Environmental studies have shown few, if any; positive environmental impacts of road construction projects. To date, there have been very few studies on the sociocultural impacts of roads and no studies on how all three spheres of impacts influence each other. My research seeks to fill this gap by evaluating the impacts of the recently completed (2008) Kali Ghandaki Road, and the ongoing construction of the Marsyangdi Road, along the Annapurna Circuit Trail in the Annapurna Conservation Area of Nepal. I conducted 231 interviews in 45 villages along the road alignments. Employing a multiple case study framework derived from quantitative and qualitative data and methods, I explored the following questions: What impacts are the new roads along the Annapurna Circuit Trail having on local communities? How do socioeconomic, sociocultural, and environmental factors influence each other in road construction projects? What adaptive strategies are communities' using to cope with the changes the road is bringing, and how do those strategies evolve? Given the complexity of the interaction of environmental, socioeconomic, and sociocultural spheres of road construction, I developed a Coupled Human and Natural Systems model of road impacts based on the analysis of Case Study 1. I then apply this model as a template to illuminate specific road impacts in each of the case studies. Ongoing research continues to follow the development of these road systems in addition to the expanding road networks further north into Upper Mustang and the Tibetan border.



(1) the road into Lo with stupas and old truck wreck June 2014

(2) sharing the trail that is now a road-Trekkers, horses, jeep, dust after Sangboche heading to Kagbeni June 2014

Discordant Landscapes and Purloined Mobility: Friction, Gendered Fluidity, and Transient Livelihoods along the Trans Himalayan Highway

ongoing research

Mediated by recent events in Nepal including the 2015 earthquakes and the promulgation of the new Nepali constitution (September 2015) this ongoing research embarks on a trip along the recently (2012) Chinese financed and constructed Rasuwa Road from Syaphrubesi to the Tibetan border of Rasuwagadhi north west of Kathmandu. Along the way, it seeks to understand the complexity of this contested terrain at the intersection of socially and culturally constructed tropes of gender and mobility. In doing so, it hopes to shed some light on an area that is largely ignored in the policy, planning, and execution of road projects. In general, road impact studies have concentrated primarily on only two spheres of concern, environmental and economic. Only recently, institutions such as the World Bank have recognized that broader social impacts should also be studied. These broader social impacts are influenced by a number of different factors, one of the most important of which is the ability to access and use transport. Access and use of transport is mediated by sociocultural factors such as traditional gender roles. Gendered mobility is a field of study that investigates the ways in which mobilities and gender intersect and “...how mobilities enables/disables/modifies gendered practices”¹. As we journey up the Rasuwa Road this research visits communities along the road viewed through the lens of gendered mobility. It engages in conversation with the diverse elements that interact to mediate both the motility and mobility of this recently expanded fluid space. The following overarching questions guide this research.

1) How do expanding road rural road networks influence gendered mobility and gendered identity in the culturally diverse landscapes along the Rasuwa Road?

2) How does gendered mobility influence gendered livelihoods? 3) How do culturally normative tropes of gendered power relations influence both gendered access and use of transport as well as gendered livelihood options?

Himalayan Mobilities: An Exploration of the Impact of Expanding Rural Road Networks on Social and Ecological Systems in the Nepalese Himalaya

book with James P Lassoie in preparation for SpringerBriefs [under contract], website, and ongoing research

As a strategically located developing country, the rapid construction of roads across remote mountainous regions of Nepal is having profound and far ranging impacts on the country's socio-ecological systems. This book examines this complexity. We first summarize and update information about the history, distribution, functions, and impacts of road development, both globally and at Nepal's national level. We then explore the idea of mobility and the Mobility Turn, that is the ways in which diverse social science disciplines are using mobility as a lens to reinterpret former notions of fixity and movement, both corporeal and virtual, in our daily lives.

Next the environmental, socioeconomic, and sociocultural impacts of expanding rural networks in the Nepalese Himalaya are discussed based on original research that examined the recently completed Kali Ghandaki Highway (2007-2008) and the expanding construction of the Marsyangdi Highway in the Annapurna Conservation Area of West Central Nepal. Lastly, we introduce an integrated ecological,

¹ Uteng & Creswell 2008:1

socioeconomic, and sociocultural study of the impacts of expanding rural road networks conducted on communities along the most popular trekking route in Nepal, the Annapurna Circuit Trail. Results show that roads can have numerous impacts that extend far beyond the immediate area adjacent to the road. These impacts can be both positive and negative and are differentially distributed contingent on a number of factors including villagers occupation, gender dynamics, proximity to the road alignment, the pace of road construction, environmental factors, and local and national politics. These results will be helpful in planning future road projects in Nepal and elsewhere in mountainous regions, as they point to the importance of a more integrated approach to infrastructure development that includes a comprehensive assessment of environmental, socioeconomic, and sociocultural factors of socio-ecological systems and how they interact and influence each other.

Impacts of Expanding Road Networks on Communities along the Kawakarpo Kora, Meili Snow Mountain, Northwest Yunnan, China

ongoing

This ongoing research looks at the exponential road growth of the Western Development or “Go West” Campaign (Chinese: 西部大开发; Pinyin Xībù Dàkāifā) in China and how it has impacted Tibetan communities in Yunnan, Sichuan, Gansu, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), and Qinghai provinces. The first phase of this research focuses on the traditional Tibetan kora (circumambulation of a sacred site) around Mt. Kawakarpo (one of the ten most sacred peaks for Tibetan Buddhists) on the border of North West Yunnan and TAR and the tourist areas in and adjacent to Shangri La County. New road networks around this kora and in the area are having a profound impact on the traditional Tibetan kora and how it is practiced and on traditional Tibetan culture in general. In Gansu the recently completed (2013) Gansu Highway and the massive new “Tibetan themed” development of areas such as Gannan has made access to these areas much easier and is both changing and shaping Tibetan identities and customs. Similarly expanding and newly constructed roads in Sichuan, TAR, and Qinghai are having modernizing and sinicization (Chinese: 汉化; pinyin: Hànhuà) influences on Tibetan populations. This trend in road expansion in China has no sign of slowing down and figures indicate that it will continue to increase. “In 2015, industry [highway construction] revenue is expected to amount to \$340.8 billion, up 9.2% from 2014. Over the past five years, revenue has been growing at an average annualized rate of 11.2%. The total length of road in China increased from 3.7 million kilometers in 2008 to 4.5 million kilometers in 2014. Meanwhile, the total length of highway in China rose from 60,300 kilometers to about 111,900 kilometers.”²

As these roads get closer to the Nepalese border, for example the recently completed road-connecting Kyirong (a.k.a. Gyirong, Gyirong County) TAR to the Nepalese border at Rasuwagadhi combined with the plans to expand the Chinese rail system from Shigatse to Kyirong by 2020, we seek to learn from the changes happening in Tibetan areas of China and speculate what changes may be coming for Nepal as described in the research project below “A Handshake Across the Himalayas”.

“A Handshake Across the Himalayas”- Chinese Investment and Trans-Border Infrastructure Development in Nepal

This ongoing collaborative research with colleagues Galen Murton (U.C. Boulder-Geography) and Austin Lord (Cornell University-Anthropology) looks at the increasing aid in the form of a “gift of development”³ from China to Nepal for infrastructure (primarily for roads and hydro power) and its implications for state

² <http://www.ibisworld.com/industry/china/road-highway-construction.html>

³ See Yeh (2013) China’s Gift of Development

formation and changing demographics, livelihood options, and identity formation in Tibetan borderland regions of Nepal. It considers contemporary patterns of Chinese investment in Nepalese infrastructure and the ways in which Chinese development projects shape political and economic climates across Nepal. Particularly in the wake of political volatility and natural disaster, Chinese interventions support the material and imaginative projects of a Nepalese state seeking coherence, security, and economic growth. Bringing ethnographic methods to bear on political geographic analysis, this paper examines intersections of Chinese infrastructure development and investment in Nepal’s northern border district of Rasuwa. Development interventions in Rasuwa are emblematic of larger patterns of Chinese engagement with Nepal and underscore the spatial reorientation of borderland territories implicated in new formations of political economy. Long perceived as peripheral to the state center, Rasuwa is rapidly becoming central to Sino-Nepal relations in the context of what we identify as an emerging “power corridor:” the site for massive new flows of trans-Himalayan commerce, a leading edge of the booming frontier for hydropower development, and a theater for Chinese humanitarian relief following the Nepal earthquakes of 2015. By examining the relationship between transnational and local scales, we present the uneven aspirations, concerns, and tensions that characterize the lives of Nepalis who are being implicated in the array of Sino-Nepal projects and partnerships that constitute an increasingly firm “handshake over the Himalayas.” In this way it seeks to synthesize data from our ongoing research on infrastructure in Tibetan border areas of both China and Nepal.



(3) Syaphrubesi Police check point after the April 2015 earthquake Rasuwa District Nepal