



**ENVIRONMENT AND CULTURE:  
THE HIMALAYAN ECOSYSTEMS PROJECT**

**September 22 – November 4, 2016**

**Meeting Place: Delhi, India  
15 quarter credits/10 semester credits**

**FULL PROJECT DESCRIPTION**

Thank you for your interest in our Himalaya Program. Wildlands Studies has led field study programs into the Himalayan backcountry since 1991, and we are excited to have you join us beneath the grandeur of the Himalayan mountains. Our remote field study takes us into the heart of the Indian Himalaya where we will study the ecosystems, botany, ecology and culture of this special region. We are very proud of our coursework in this spectacular part of the world.

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**I. Background Information**

The Himalaya is Earth's tallest and most dynamic mountain system. This fall, our team plans to return to conduct field studies in Kumaon, a region of the Indian Himalaya that lies near Tibet and the western part of Nepal. Kumaon is ideally suited to our program because landscapes here exhibit a dramatic transition from subtropical pine forests to alpine valleys enclosed by some of India's tallest summits, including the revered peak, Nanda Devi. In the course of our field study, we will investigate warm river valleys, complex agricultural landscapes, moss-laden cloud forests, and spectacular alpine habitats. Throughout Kumaon, at all elevations, the local people practice subsistence lifestyles that are remarkably well adapted to local ecological conditions.

We will divide our fieldwork among different elevations and ecological zones as we move upward into the mountains from the south. River valleys are warm and dry with scattered monsoon forest and many tropical birds and mammals. With luck, we may spot a jackal, leopard, or barking deer. Somewhat higher, steep hillsides are farmed with orchards and terraces of hemp and maize. Adjoining patches of protected forest, under local control, conserve the watershed and provide fodder for domestic animals that fertilize the fields. Villages are inhabited by communities of Kumaoni farmers with distinctive customs and subsistence strategies.

The mid-elevation forests support a high diversity of plant and animal species. Pines and deodar cedar grow on grassy hillsides, broad-leaved forests are cloaked with mosses and ferns. Higher still, the forests give way to alpine pastures. If the weather cooperates, we may investigate the high alpine zone to the foot of the glaciers, with the awe-inspiring Himalayan summits as our backdrop.

The people of the Kumaon Himalaya face life with a spirit refined by centuries of self-reliance and acclimation to a demanding environment. Despite limited access to goods and services, they retain a deep cultural heritage and a finely-honed sense of place. Time spent among them should provide some of the richest, most enlightening moments of the program.

## **II. Project Goals and Activities**

The format of our class program is an extended foot journey through the varied landscapes of the Kumaon Himalaya. Most of the hiking trails that we'll use are narrow mountain footpaths, sometimes rather steep. A few sections at low elevation are wide enough for a jeep. As we trek, we'll take time to study various aspects of the local ecology and relate local patterns to more general themes. Most nights we'll camp in the backcountry at remote, breathtakingly spectacular sites. Some nights, we'll stay in established camps near small towns or villages. Occasionally we may stay in a lodge with electricity and hot water.

Traditional classroom learning encourages the idea that different fields of knowledge are somehow discrete and isolated from one another. In the field, the boundaries that separate the natural sciences, conservation politics, and cultural anthropology tend to fade. With some guidance, all this information can be interpreted as a richly integrated text. **Please note that previous field experience is not required to participate in our program. All necessary skills to conduct our ecological fieldwork will be taught on-site on the slopes of the Himalaya, enabling all of us to participate fully.**

As we teach, we also try to engage the group in field work that can make small but significant contribution to the region's future. In this spirit, we bolster our lessons about wild nature and the ecology of mountain peoples with practical instruction, including biological activities (collecting information about species diversity, and ecosystem structure), cultural studies (interviewing local people about resource needs), and field research examining scenarios for climate change in this mountain region. Team members learn to use sampling equipment like a global positioning system and more traditional implements like altimeter and compass. We will also meet with and learn from local residents of the Himalaya. Team members interested in bird, insect, or plant identification can contribute to what is known about these groups in the Himalayan region. Expect to learn how to identify a tree covered with moss and orchids on a steep hillside thick with bamboo; or how habitat differences affect the architecture of a forest. Opportunities also exist to explore topics such as medicinal plant use, gender roles in mountain societies, agriculture ecology, and human-wildlife interactions.

Team members take part in both group and individual field study activities. Participants are expected to take two or three written exams, give one oral presentation to the group, and complete a guided independent study project. Bilingual staff members enable students to interview local people as part of their project if they wish. Wild plants and animal groups we'll encounter include trees, epiphytes (plants that grow on other plants), birds, and mammals. Through participation in the group research exercise, team members learn how to use a variety of field study techniques to gather data accurately and efficiently. By the end of the program, each of us will have gained a new appreciation for the mountain peoples of the Himalaya and some direct experience conducting ecological field studies in a part of Asia that holds great conservation significance.

### Program Format

The spirit of our Himalaya program is good-natured, flexible and very accommodating to team members' diverse interests. At the same time, we approach our fieldwork seriously, not only because it is significant, but

because we want to provide a solid experience base for team members who think they might want to make mountain science a part of their future. Throughout the program, we work closely with local support staff who help teach and who take responsibility for many of the logistical aspects of our class. As a small international community we have a great deal to share and to learn from each other. Team members will also become acquainted with the local residents of Kumaon – their culture, social customs, food, folk songs and games. We will endeavor to understand as best we can the singular relationship that exists between these people and the Himalayan environment.

A firsthand investigation of the Himalaya involves much walking. Access to our backcountry field sites requires successive days of moderate hiking through a stunningly scenic mountain landscape of river valleys, forests, and terraced hillside villages. During our days in the field, we eat together, camp in tents, and travel on mountain paths that range from centuries-old trading routes to meager hunting trails. In Kumaon, the trekking segments are divided once or twice by visits to small towns where we may sleep in a lodge and check email. Some jeep travel will supplement the backcountry trekking.

Along the way, we plan to spend two or three nights at each of several locations that are of special field study interest. We allocate much time to teaching and research, which for us means practicing ecological survey methods, discussing local natural history, interviewing villagers, and collecting other information useful to local conservation workers. In the early evening we hold class outdoors or in a large community tent. These evening class activities may include a lecture or a student presentation, or a chance to discuss park management issues with our local colleagues.

In general, on our program, the hiking days begin early with ample time to cover the distance to camp at a leisurely pace. Some days are physically demanding, but we try to set a pace that allows time to study ecology, chat over tea with the local people, and discuss interesting features of the local environment. Our pace is well-suited to those who hike at different speeds. When necessary, our staff can translate, assist with the loads, and help keep us moving throughout the hiking day.

The fall program begins near the end of the summer rainy season. The air is generally clear at this time, the landscape is lush and green, and crops are near harvest. Local fruits and vegetables are available in abundance and butterflies abound. Summer solstice has passed, so days are shorter during the fall with sunset about 6:00pm. Days are warm at low elevation, cool at mid-elevation, and cold in the alpine zone with nighttime temperatures below freezing at the highest elevations. Fall weather tends to be clear and sunny most of the time, although we can expect some lingering summer rain showers during early October. The Kumaon people have important festivals during fall to coincide with the harvest and the onset of cool, clear weather. These festivals add an important cultural dimension to the program.

### **Academic Credit**

Students will receive 15 quarter credits/10 semester credits from Western Washington University. Our staff will be happy to explain the program in further detail to the applicant's advisor, if necessary. This field studies program gives credit in three courses:

ESCI 497T, Environmental Wildlands Studies (5 quarter credits/3.35 semester credits)

ESCI 497U, Environmental Field Survey (5 quarter credits/3.35 semester credits)

ESCI 497V, Wildlands Environment and Culture (5 quarter credits/3.35 semester credits)

Students receive letter grades that are based on: (1) examinations; (2) an oral presentation to the group; (3) participation in class and field activities; and (4) a guided independent study project.

Team members are expected to conduct themselves in a mature and responsible manner. Wildlands Studies reserves the right to require any student to withdraw from the program if their conduct is detrimental to or incompatible with the interests, safety, or welfare of any course participants. We ask all students to read the Student Program Manual before joining the project on-site.

### **III. Team Logistics**

Participants will fly into Delhi, India and meet at the Delhi Airport. Participants can decide whether to fly home on the scheduled date or remain in Asia to travel on their own.

In the Kumaon Himalaya we will spend most of our time trekking and conducting ecological field research in roadless areas. All reasonable efforts will be made to follow the activities outlined above. However, please understand that on our Himalayan program, travel arrangements can remain slightly uncertain until the traveling actually occurs. Weather conditions, road closures, political and bureaucratic considerations may affect our plans. Wildlands Studies has put together a unique and innovative program, so team members need to be flexible, patient and prepared to adapt to unexpected situations. Being flexible also allows us to take advantage of unique opportunities that inadvertently arise during our journeys, often producing some of the program's most memorable moments. Participants are required to provide their own camping and hiking equipment for this program, including a sleeping bag, backpack, duffel, and water filter. You may bring your own tent, or use one of ours. Stoves and other cooking supplies will be provided for the group.

### **IV. Accommodations**

Primarily camping, occasional guest house or rural lodge.

### **V. Official Documents/Visa**

You will need a current passport that does not expire until six months after the end of the program. You also need to obtain a tourist visa for India. The visa is available from an Indian Embassy in the United States (or in most countries except India). **Indian visas are *not* issued upon arrival in India – you must obtain your Indian visa in advance.** We will provide full instructions on how to obtain your Indian visa.

### **VI. Language**

The course will be taught English.

### **VII. Pre-Program Mailings**

Detailed information regarding travel/flight and visa information, equipment/gear requirements, food costs, meeting plans, group expenses payment, medical and vaccination recommendations, and academic preparations will be sent to all team members in a logistics letter emailed about 8-10 weeks before the project initiates.

### **VIII. Project Leader**

CHRIS CARPENTER works as an ecologist and conservation scientist for Wildlands Studies. Chris has conducted field studies and led natural history programs in Asia and North America for many years. Chris lives in Chiangmai, Thailand and currently teaches field courses in Southeast Asia and the Himalayan region.

## IX. Project Costs

Program Fee:	\$4000 plus \$150 Application Fee. Program fee due August 1, 2016. Enrollment on a space-available basis after the fee due date until the program is full.
Estimated In-country Expenses:	\$2650 per person Includes practically all group-related expenses in India, including meals, lodging, transportation, trekking and logistical support costs, group supplies and research costs.  Other expenses not covered by the Program Expense Fee include a few meals during the first two days and the last two days of the program, your Indian visa cost (paid for prior to departure), airport taxes, and personal items (beverages, snacks, phone and internet), gratuity of about \$100 that will be collected at the beginning of our program and distributed to our India staff at the end.
Personal Spending Money:	\$400 - \$450 (this varies according to taste - but don't be caught short)
Estimated Airfare:	\$1500

Students should inquire at the financial aid office of their home campus regarding the use of their loans or grants for this course. Wildlands Studies is not responsible for non-refundable airline or other tickets or payments or any similar penalties that may be incurred as a result of any course cancellation or changes.

## X. Contact Information

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