Governing caterpillar fungus: Participatory conservation as state-making, territorialization, and dispossession in Dolpo, Nepal

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Abstract
Protected areas account for nearly a quarter of the total area of Nepal and over eighty percent of its Himalayan region. National parks—which are governed by top-down policies enforced through militarized infrastructures—have become a crucial avenue and site for the Nepali state to expand its authority and territorialize its peripheral spaces. But such state-forming effects of the park are obscured by the stated goals of biodiversity conservation which are often implemented through participatory conservation policies that claim to promote local participation and development. Through a case study of Shey Phoksundo National Park and the contested governance of caterpillar fungus in Dolpo, Northwest Nepal, this paper examines the role of participatory conservation in state-making, territorialization, and the dispossession of Indigenous peoples in the Himalayan borderlands. After a brief background on the relationship between Dolpopa and the Nepali state, I introduce state-making, territorialization, and dispossession as corollary processes that define the experiences of conservation for Dolpopa. I conceptualize state-making and territorialization as intertwined state efforts and strategies to systematize local spatial practices and reorder socio-natural relations in ways that justify state authority and establish state territory in Dolpopa spaces. I approach dispossession as an ongoing, relational process of domination and removal, particularly of Dolpopa’s ability to access and govern their collective land including caterpillar fungus. In so doing, I neither reify the state as a monolith nor assume dispossession to be totalizing. Rather, I show how “the state” is constituted in moments by a range of actors, institutions, and processes; as well as how Dolpopa contest dispossession by asserting their claims to collective land both within and beyond state structures.

Keywords
Participatory conservation, state-making, territorialization, dispossession, caterpillar fungus, Indigenous peoples

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Introduction

It was a crisp June morning in 2014 when I woke up to a cacophony of distant noises outside my home in Dho Tarap, Dolpo, a high-altitude Himalayan region in Northwest Nepal. That morning, fellow Dolpopa had gathered to discuss the imperative to collect a nominal fee from non-local harvesters who had travelled from all parts of Nepal to gather the rare, highly valued and globally traded caterpillar fungus (O. sinensis), locally known by its Tibetan name yartsa gunbu. Around 4 pm, over fifty Armed Police Force (APF) officers, sent by Shey Phoksundo National Park (SPNP), chanted racial slurs and unleashed a brutal crackdown on the local gathering. Two Dolpopa were killed, thirteen were arrested and over fifty (including myself) were injured in the ensuing police brutality that lasted the whole night. Police also chanted racial slurs such as “bhote” (a derogatory term for ethnically Tibetan people from northern Nepal) and “it [Nepal] is not your country,” perpetuating longstanding treatment of the Dolpopa as an ethnic “Other” by the Nepali state. This incident of racialized police violence resulted from contestations between Dolpopa and SPNP over Dolpopa collective lands, specifically on the question of who had the authority to collect fees and govern caterpillar fungus harvest in the region. Park officials dismissed pre-existing Dolpopa community governance as “illegal.” However, Dolpopa defended their actions—through a petition and a series of protests—as a customary territorial practice and an Indigenous right to self-determination protected by the Interim Constitution of Nepal 2007 and affirmed by various international legal instruments and human rights standards including the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the International Labor Organization Convention (ILO) 169 that Nepal had ratified.

Control over caterpillar fungus, a hybrid of a fungus that parasitizes the larvae of ghost moth, is the central resource contention between the Nepali state and the Dolpopa. The commodification of the fungus as the most expensive biological commodity in the world within the past three decades has intensified state presence in this borderland space that is otherwise viewed as “a world far away from the political centers” (Kind, 2012: 164). Although yartsa gunbu is part of the local materia medica and has been used as a traditional medicine for centuries, Dolpopa started collecting it for commercial purposes only in the early 1990s in response to growing demand from China. Prior to 2001, the government had imposed provisions such as the Nepal Forest Act of 1993 and the Forest Regulation of 1995 that restricted its collection and trade for purported environmental reasons (Devkota, 2010: 94–95). Dolpopa nevertheless collected the fungus to earn cash, risking arrest and persecution by park authorities and soldiers. There was not any systematic management at the time because its collection was illicit and harvesters were mostly local Dolpopa, a condition that changed dramatically with the turn of the millennium.

The Nepali government legalized the collection and trade of the fungus through a regulation called Nepal Gazette 2001 and determined an export tax of 20,000 Nepali Rupees (NRs) (200 USD) per kilogram. Thousands of harvesters from all over Nepal turned up each year in Dho Tarap alone. The international price of the fungus, driven by demand in China and Hong Kong, increased astronomically—about 900% between 1997 and 2008 in Tibet and by about 2300% between 2001 and 2011 in Nepal (Shrestha and Bawa, 2013; Yeh and Lama, 2013). Yartsa gunbu quickly became the largest contributor to household income constituting about 53.3% of cash income and 21.1% of total household income in lower Dolpa (Shrestha and Bawa, 2014). Moreover, the fungus also became the biggest source of Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) revenue for the government, accounting for 40.5% of the total NTFP revenues (GoN 2011). These transformations and the opportunity to collect revenue from caterpillar fungus traders and collectors provided the impetus first to the Maoist rebels and then to the Nepali state to assert their monopolistic authority over the control and management of the fungus. Dolpopa developed their own systems of management and governed the fungus for nearly a decade on their own
after the Maoist rebels, who had dismantled remnants of state structures, left in 2006. Since the post-2006 “political transition,” the Nepali state has capitalized on the institution and infrastructure of national parks and conservation to advance state-building and territorial projects centered on the management of natural resources.

National Parks in Nepal remain firmly under the control of the central state and are governed by strict conservation policies enforced through a militarized structure (Dongol and Neumann, 2021; Thing, 2019; Thing et al., 2017). National and international conservation agendas and their top-down governance structures often clash with and limit the resident populations from their daily resource use and governance practices (Brower, 1991; Campbell, 2005b, 2013; Stevens, 1993, 1997; Thing, 2019). Yet SPNP park staff and conservationists in Kathmandu I interviewed rebuffed these criticisms as a thing of the past and raised participatory conservation in defense of national parks. Indeed, dominant conservation narratives in Nepal celebrate participatory conservation as “progressive” (Heinen and Shrestha, 2006), asserting that its “socio-economic benefits outweigh the costs” (Bajracharya et al., 2006: 2765). However, critical scholarship on the region has shown that participatory conservation bureaucratizes village political process and recentralizes state power (Campbell, 2004; Dongol and Neumann, 2021; Heinen and Mehta, 2000; Ojha et al., 2014; Ribot et al., 2006), marginalizes Indigenous peoples, their knowledges, management practices, and lived ecologies (Campbell, 2004, 2005b; Stevens, 1997, 2013; Thing, 2019), reinforces unequal power relations in deciding the terms and outcomes of participation (Campbell, 2004: 163), and reproduces social hierarchies and intersectional inequalities (Nightingale and Ojha, 2013; Paudel, 2006; Paudel et al., 2007).

Building on these scholarship, this paper provides a case study of SPNP to investigate how participatory conservation—and the institution of Buffer Zones in national parks as an example of participatory conservation in practice—advances state-making and territorialization, and in turn, drives the dispossession of Indigenous peoples of sovereignty over their collective lands or their self-determining capacities. Put differently, I show the ways in which participatory conservation actually serves as a mechanism for the state to exercise its authority over a bounded space by controlling natural resources, (re)ordering socio-natural relations, and disarticulating Indigenous peoples therein from their land-based relationships and removing their sovereignty over their collective lands. Rather than reifying state-society or state-Indigenous binaries, I attend to fragments and moments of state-making in progress (Nightingale, 2018) as well as the “deliberative politics” of environmental governance, or the “contestations and argumentations involving rational debates as well as explicit resistance around particular forms of authorities regulating collective resources” (Ojha et al., 2016: 2). This study contributes an analysis of the context of a high-value natural resource in a Himalayan national park to the existing scholarship on the “participatory wave” (Ojha et al., 2014) in resource management in Nepal which is dominated by national parks in Southern Nepal or community forestry in the middle Hills. It also contributes an Indigenous-centric perspective to political ecological literature on the relationship between biodiversity conservation, state-making and dispossession.

The materials for this paper comes from ethnographic field research carried out between May and August of 2019 at multiple sites in Nepal: Dho Tarap valley in Dolpo Buddha Rural Municipality (DBRM), Tsho village in Shey-Phoksundo Rural Municipality (SPRM), Suligad and Dunai in Thuli Bheri Municipality, and in Kathmandu (see Figure 1). I conducted 31 in-depth interviews with Dolpopa, national park staff and bureaucrats, and those who straddled multiple positions. I also draw from participant observation in and beyond the interview setting including over a decade of engagements with my community in Dho Tarap. Of particular relevance here is my participation in the community management of yartsa gunbu in Dho Tarap between 2010 and 2013. In addition, I was also a witness to the 2014 violence recounted earlier (when I was injured) and subsequently helped organize justice movements.
in Kathmandu in its aftermath. As a Dolpopa scholar with ongoing relational ties to Dolpo and invested in advocating for Indigenous self-determination, I follow Indigenous scholars like Coulthard (2014) to write and argue explicitly from a situated “perspective of the dispossessed.”

In what follows, I first present a theoretical overview of the intertwined processes of state-making, territorialization and dispossession through conservation. Next, I review critical studies on participatory conservation highlighting patterns that contradict the stated goals of local participation and decentralization of authority. I then turn to a case study of SPNP and situate it within the broader context of protected areas in Nepal and the world. This is followed by an examination of Buffer Zones—the signature institution of participatory conservation—in Tsho and Dho Tarap to illustrate how the contradictory effects of participatory conservation unfold on the ground. The final section discusses the contested governance of caterpillar fungus following the legalization of its trade and harvest in 2001 and highlights the role of SPNP in displacing Dolpopa management of caterpillar fungus in Dho Tarap.

**Dolpo within and beyond the Nepali nation-state**

Dolpo traditionally refers to the geographical region consisting of ten and a half settlement units spread across the four valleys of Tangshyong, Dho Tarap, Bentsang and Nangkong. Today, it is demarcated into three rural municipalities under the new administrative structure of the Nepali state: Chharka Tangshyong, Dolpo Buddha, and Shey Phoksundo. The boundaries of Shey Phoksundo and Dolpo Buddha rural municipalities overlap with Shey Phoksundo National Park and its Buffer Zones which extend over two-third of the total land area of Dolpo. Dolpopa, the

![Map of Dolpo region](image-url)
people of Dolpo, constituted a total population of 7891 in 2021 (CBS, 2021). Dolpopa are recog-
nized as one of the 59 Indigenous Nationalities of Nepal under the National Foundation for
Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN) Act of 2002. Although the Indigenous
Tibetan-speaking people of northern Nepal hadn’t mobilized as an ethnic or Indigenous group to
articulate their discontent against state neglect (Ramble, 1997), sections of Dolpopa have recently
taken up indigeneity to articulate shared experiences of marginalization and to advance their col-
lective aspirations as peoples including the right to self-determination with respect to resource
use and environmental governance.

Scholars suggest that Dolpo was once part of the ancient kingdom of Zhang Zhung before its
subjugation by the Yarlung dynasty in the 7th and 8th centuries, during the Tibetan imperial
dynasty fell in 842, it splintered into smaller kingdoms including Purang in Western Tibet,
which encompassed Dolpo up until the fourteenth century when it was incorporated into the
Kingdom of Lo (Mustang) as a tax paying unit. By 1789, the Kingdom of Lo, and thereby
Dolpo, became part of the expansionist Gorkha Kingdom which colonized smaller
fiefdoms to form the modern Nepali nation-state. In the period that followed, Dolpo was formally tied into
an extractive relationship with the Nepali state that focused on national land reform and taxation
to bring small landholder households into the folds of the state (Regmi, 1976, 1988). Yet these
distant rulers did not exercise permanent, direct or absolute control in Dolpo. State presence in
the forms of bureaucratic infrastructures, police, resource management, and the regulation of every-
day life was limited to non-existent. Dolpopa thus governed access to land and common resources,
particularly grazing areas in the mountains and agricultural fields in the valleys, through their own
systems of property and governance (Bauer, 2004; Gurung, 2020). Although Dolpo has been linked
to distant powers for a long time, Dolpopa had been self-governing peoples when it comes to
internal social and environmental affairs.5

The emergence of nation-states gradually eroded forms of self-governance and customary
resource use arrangements in the Himalayan borderlands. In the early 1960s, Nepal and China
signed a series of border treaties and protocols that formalized Dolpo as a Nepali territory and
eroded centuries-old customary resource use and management practices among pastoralists
across the border (Bauer, 2004: 82–83). These border demarcations and the declaration of territorial
sovereignty were accompanied by Nepal’s state- and nation-building projects. The Panchayat
regime (1961–1990) sent teams to survey the border in early 1960s that kickstarted the “transition
from local political autonomy within distinct enclaves to a centralized state” (Bauer, 2004: 101). Its
nation-building projects focused on teaching the Nepali language to assimilate Dolpopa into the
Nepali national culture (Gurung and Bauer, 2022: 159). Consequently, Nepali state’s bordering
practices (Shrestha 2022) and policies towards its northern border citizens, designed on the princi-
pies of the Muluki Ain of 1854 that institutionalized a national caste system, discriminated against
them on the basis of their linguistic and cultural difference. The rise of the global conservation
movement in the 1970s pushed the Nepali government to create national parks, including SPNP
in 1984. Conservation governmentality entailed the assembling of particular institutions and
legal apparatus that aided state-making and the disciplining of the Dolpopa into state subjects.
Conservation policies, state regulations and park administration superseded Indigenous manage-
ment practices in the Himalayan national park areas (Brower, 1991; Sherpa, 2013; Stevens,
2013). Like their Himalayan counterparts, Dolpopa consequently lost de jure governance authority
over their collective lands which were nationalized under the administration of SPNP.

The Maoist civil war (1996–2006) presented new challenges to state territory as the Maoist
rebels debilitated state infrastructure and wrested control of natural resources in rural Nepal
(Dongol and Neumann, 2021). After decades of local governance vacuum resulting from the
civil war and post-war deliberations over the making of new constitution and federal restructuring
of the state, a three-tiered administrative structure was formed in 2016 and local elections were held in 2017. While the full effects of the recent state restructuring on local socio-ecological lives is yet to be ascertained, it has nevertheless reinforced state presence in the forms of increased investment in infrastructure development and more systematic administration of local lives. The local governments in Dolpo which now boast an exclusive local representation have combined state mandates and funding with traditional governance systems. Such hybrid governance-in-practice complicates any neat state-Indigenous division and indicates how Indigenous environmental governance operates within and beyond state structures.

This broad brushstroke of Dolpo’s political history highlights the extractive and racialized nature of the relationship between Dolpopa and the Nepali state and the gradual ways in which the latter has attempted to usurp the former’s use practices and governance of their collective land and resources. It also illustrates the status of Dolpopa as self-determining peoples exercising a level of “social sovereignty” within overlapping sovereignties (Yeh, 2019) of external powers including the Nepali state (Figure 2).

**Conservation-led state-making, territorialization, and dispossession**

The intertwined processes of state-making, territorialization, and dispossession often occur through the management and control over the environment (Mitchell, 1991; Peluso and Vandergeest, 2001; Scott, 1998). I use the term “state-making” to refer to the production of knowledge and institutions that systematize local spatial practices and relations to render them legible and governable to the state. It is a contingent process that involves both coercion and the participation of “local” subjects and has the effect of legitimizing state authority and institutionalizing formalized control (Agrawal, 2001; Corrigan and Sayer, 1985). Further, state-making is always spatial and is intimately tied to territorialization; as Wainwright (2008: 21) writes: “territory is the fundamental spatial ontology of the modern state.” Rather than a pregiven geographical unit or static container, territorialization involves the production of spatial relations through cultural, social, and political-economic processes (Bryan, 2012; Yeh, 2013: 5). Here, I am not as much concerned with the demarcation of

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**Figure 2.** Timeline showing key events relevant to SPNP and caterpillar fungus governance in Dolpo. Image created by Phurwa Gurung.
nation-state boundaries than with forms of “internal territorialization” (Vandergeest and Peluso, 1995: 388), or state practices of “excluding and including people within particular geographic boundaries, and… controlling what people do and their access to natural resources within those boundaries.” I therefore use “territorialization” to refer to state strategies of controlling natural resources and the people who depend upon them by reorganizing bounded space and regulating spatial and socio-natural relations (Rasmussen and Lund, 2018; Vandergeest and Peluso, 1995). Conversely, drawing on Indigenous studies, I use the term “Indigenous territoriality” to refer to Indigenous sense of place as relational and land as more than a resource or productive space (Carroll, 2015; Coulthard, 2010; Ybarra, 2018).

Political ecologists have critically examined the unintended impacts of conservation projects on local socioecological lives that range from the displacement of resident populations around the world (Cronon, 1996; Goldman, 2011; Neumann, 1998, 2004; Peluso, 1992; Spence, 1999) to forms of in situ displacement, or displacement without physical removal (Feldman et al., 2003; Jagadeesh, 2020; Rai et al., 2019). These scholarly works have shown, in particular, that protected areas are central to, indeed constitute, state-making and territorial projects (Dongol and Neumann, 2021; Neumann, 2004; Nightingale, 2018; Ybarra, 2018). For example, in the context of colonial game reserves in East Africa, the imposition of national parks advanced the Tanzanian state’s civilizing mission and amounted to a rational reordering of its territory (Neumann, 1998, 2004). Likewise, in her analysis of the impacts of conservation on the Q’eqchi peoples in Guatemala, Ybarra (2018: 6) argues that protected areas not only secure resources but also legitimize state violence and claims to territory in the Maya forests. Within Nepal, Dongol and Neumann (2021) have recently illustrated how post-war (re)securitization of conservation territories after decades of political instability contributes to the state’s broader drive to reterritorialize and reassert its authority in contested rural spaces. Thing et al. (2017) have demonstrated how the discursive and material practices of participatory conservation have reinforced state presence in the forms of normalized state violence and dispossessed the Indigenous Sonaha of their subsistence livelihoods and lived ecologies. In addition to documenting the role of conservation in extending state authority and territory, these works demonstrate varied processes of dispossession although dispossession (often couched in the languages of “marginalization,” “displacement,” or “disenfranchisement”) is mostly understood as physical removal or material forms of expropriation.

Following Coulthard (2014), I use the term “dispossession” as a conceptual scaffolding to refer to the ongoing, relational processes of domination and removal, particularly of Dolpopa territorialities or relationships to territory, as well as their ability to access and govern their collective land including caterpillar fungus. While an important critique of capitalist expansion as imperialism, Marxist analysis of capitalist dispossession as primitive accumulation does not fully capture dispossession as a relational process (Ybarra, 2018: 14). For Coulthard (2014), dispossession is more than Marxist critiques of capital’s spatial expansion and accumulation (Harvey, 2003)—it is also a colonial relation of domination that is both material and epistemic and operates along axes of social difference. As Byler (2021: 100) points out in his recent work on the Uyghurs, Coulthard’s (2014) conceptualization of dispossession thus “speaks to a relational process of removal across the entire spectrum of social life from the perspective of the dispossessed....” Drawing on these works, I take dispossession to be a piecemeal process, rather than an one-off spectacular event, in which Indigenous territorialisations and relationships to land are fundamentally altered. I consider the particular ways in which conservation-driven state-building and territorialisaton constitute a broader structure of domination and process of removal of Dolpopa social sovereignty over their collective lands. Violence is certainly a part of the process (as the opening vignette demonstrates) but dispossession also operates in seemingly benevolent ways (Coulthard, 2014). Particularly, I investigate how the progressive rhetoric of participatory conservation that bespeaks benefiting the resident populations paradoxically contributes to their dispossession.
Yet in doing so, I neither reify “the state” as a monolith nor assume the process of dispossession to be totalizing. Rather, following recent political ecological conceptualizations of “the state” (Angel and Loftus, 2019; Harris, 2012; Loftus, 2020; Nightingale, 2018) that draw on Mitchell’s (1991) “state effect,” I emphasize the hybridity and unfinished-ness of state-making, territorialization, and dispossession by accentuating the contested relations of power. “The state” in this post-structuralist vein can be more productively traced through its effects or state-like qualities emergent in everyday interactions and recursive acts of governing; as well as in the moments when power, authority and control are exercised, contested, and reproduced through struggles over resources, institutions, and knowledge (Nightingale, 2018; Nightingale et al., 2018). Fragmented and hybrid effects of the state thus transpire not only through the national park and its staff but also through unlikely actors such as the Maoist rebels and multiply positioned actors such as members of the police force who assisted illicit Dolpopa governance of caterpillar fungus or Dolpopa community members who are also members of the buffer zone user group and participated in park management of the fungus. Relatedly, Dolpopa governance practices and territorial struggles are neither outside nor inside “the state.” Rather they operate “both within and outside of the state apparatus” (Angel and Loftus, 2019: 211; Carroll, 2015; Ybarra, 2018). Dolpopa environmental politics, therefore, simultaneously constitute and exceed “the state” and challenge any notion of dispossession as totalizing.

**Politics of participatory conservation**

Participatory conservation is a specific form of the broader trend of the decentralization of environmental governance in Nepal (Campbell, 2005a; Ojha et al., 2014; Sherpa, 2013; Thing et al., 2017). Global decentralization movements emerged in the wake of the collapse of socialist economies and the fiscal crises of the developmentalist states in the 1980s (Larson and Soto, 2008; Ojha et al., 2014; Ribot et al., 2006) and the failure of top-down conservation and resource management regimes in the 1990s (Bixler et al., 2015). Driven by the rationales of democratization and justice (McCarthy, 2005) and the logic that local knowledge and participation would generate more efficiency, inclusion, and accountability (Ribot et al., 2006), decentralization entailed the transfer of powers to the lowest level of governance (Larson & Soto, 2008) often through community participation in a multi-stakeholder process (Bixler et al., 2015; Ojha et al., 2014). In Nepal, this post-1980s global trend toward decentralization was driven by local resistance to antecedent top-down projects that were often coercive, international funding practices, local resource conflicts, and later the Maoist movement (Nightingale, 2018; Ojha et al., 2014; Paudel et al., 2007). This “participatory wave” (Ojha et al., 2014: 5) took several geographically specific forms. Its widely celebrated (and researched) community forestry program dominated in the middle hills but not so much in the Terai, where lucrative, commercially valuable forests made the state reluctant to devolve authority in favor of generating revenues (Ojha et al., 2014: 5; Ribot et al., 2006: 1872). Nor has there been much community forestry in the Himalayan region, 83% of which is occupied by protected areas (Stevens 2013: 33). Instead, participatory conservation approaches such as “conservation with development” and “park buffer zones” emerged there as the primary form of decentralization (Campbell, 2005a: 283; Sherpa, 2013; Stevens, 1997).

Participatory conservation, in turn, implied several policy changes from the fortress conservation model to allow extractive use and public participation in resource management. It resulted in the creation of two specific institutions: Buffer Zones and Conservation Areas (Heinen and Mehta, 2000). Buffer Zones (BZ)—a subject of this paper—were created inside or adjacent to existing national park territory through a 1993 amendment to the National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act. The subsequent Buffer Zone Management Regulations (BZMR) of 1996 and the Buffer Zone Management Guidelines of 1999 outlined the formation of a three-tiered structure...
to govern the collection and redistribution of revenues from areas adjacent to then-existing park boundaries. These new institutions include the Buffer Zone User Groups (UGs) at the household level, Buffer Zone User Committees (UCs) at the Village Development Committee (now Rural Municipality) level and an umbrella Buffer Zone Development Council (BZDC) at the national park level (Heinen and Mehta, 2000; Paudel et al., 2007). In addition to the decentralization of resource management, the point of departure of these regulations from earlier conservation policies was the provision to redistribute 30–50% of the total revenues collected by the park for community development projects.

Although appearing to allow for local participation and benefit-sharing, the Buffer Zone regulations in reality reorganized Dolpopa spaces and expanded the managerial authority of the park warden over conservation and development programs in the BZs. The creation of BZs resulted in the demarcation of Dolpopa space as conserved territories through the incorporation of more areas and settlements under the park jurisdiction. BZs have thus materialized Nepali state-making and territorialization as it engendered the territorial expansion of existing protected areas and the concomitant intensification of state authority (Bhusal, 2012; Dongol and Neumann, 2021; Heinen and Mehta, 2000). This is particularly explicit in the policy realm where, for example, the BZMR regulations have granted discretionary power to the warden to form and dissolve the UGs, prepare buffer zone management work plans, oversee the redistribution of funds to the UGs and audit their accounts, fine UG members for violating the management plans or their responsibilities, and halt actions within buffer zones at will. Local participation has thus been nominal at best, limited to the top-down dictates of policies and the implementation of centralized projects.

Shey Phoksundo national park and its buffer zones

The case of Shey Phuksundo National Park demonstrates how participatory conservation has expanded state territory and re-entrenched state authority, negatively impacting livelihood and governance practices of the Dolpopa in Tsho and Dho Tarap valley. The “participatory wave” discussed above was prefigured by and overlapped with the post-1970s “conservation wave” (Ojha et al., 2014: 5–6) when King Mahendra established centralized institutions of protected areas. The “conservation wave” was a national-scale response to the global environmental crisis narratives stemming from Nepal itself (Brower, 1991). The National Park and Wildlife Conservation Act of 1973 and the establishment of the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC) in 1980 provided the institutional basis for creating and governing the protected areas. To date, Nepal has 20 protected areas including 12 national parks, a wildlife reserve, a hunting reserve, and 6 conservation areas that account for 23% of the country’s total area. Although the DNPWC implemented a bifurcated policy that allowed the inhabitants of the Himalayan national parks to reside inside park boundaries, conservation has nevertheless severely restricted the Indigenous peoples from their everyday resource use and traditional systems of self-governance. Consequently, protected areas have served as an avenue for the Nepali state to expand its authority into and territorialize the Himalayan “wild” nature (Dongol and Neumann, 2021: 3; Ojha et al., 2014).

Making Shey Phoksundo National Park (SPNP)

Established in 1984, SPNP extends across the districts of Dolpa and Mugu and is Nepal’s largest national park with an area of 3555 square kilometers. The park was designed following the Himalayan National Parks Regulation of 1979. A small group of park staff assisted by a regiment of the Nepal Army were tasked with enforcing conservation regulations. The gazetting of SPNP
inflated the state’s formal territorial control in the region. It was partially funded by international conservation organizations including World Wildlife Fund (WWF) which implemented a USAID-funded project called Northern Mountain Conservation Programme (NMCP) between 1996 and 2006. The headquarters of SPNP was originally located at Polam, located at the confluence of two streams just south of Phoksundo lake. In 2004, Maoist insurgents set the headquarters on fire because they viewed the park as an infrastructure of the oppressive state. The park relocated its headquarters further south, two days’ walking distance from Polam, in the safer environs of the Nepal Army base at Suligad, next the district headquarters (see Figure 1).

The park was established with the stated goals of protecting the endangered snow leopard and blue sheep (Bauer, 2004: 145). In contrast to the goal of stimulating development through nature-based international tourism, as was the case in southern Nepal (Dongol and Neumann, 2021), the establishment of SPNP is directly linked to the Nepali state’s geopolitical goal of securing the “sensitive” border region by restricting non-Nepali travelers during a geopolitically uncertain period not long after the Tibetan guerilla movement in the region was defunded by the CIA (see McGranahan, 2010). The park later provided a foothold for the state to expand its authority and dispossess the Dolpopa in a piecemeal manner through the enclosure of household agricultural land, criminalization of Indigenous farming practices, restricting timber use, and by seizing control over the management of and revenues from caterpillar fungus.

Consider an example of the enclosure of agricultural land in Tsho village in Phoksundo. Nearly half of the nearly fifty households lost their farmland on the shore of the lake after the park arbitrarily prohibited cultivation beginning circa 1986. An army base was constructed near the area in 1987 and an administrative building was constructed in 1997. Tsho elders still recall the routine harassment by the park staff and members of the army including verbal threats and confiscation of their rakes, shovels, ploughs, hoes, and sickles. Villagers were told that it was “illegal” to use metal implements to till the earth near the lake. Such routine harassment continued unabated despite the implementation of participatory conservation in the 1990s. In 2016, the District Forest Office constructed a wall around the enclosed land which now serves as a camping site for tourists. Despite promises, Tsho residents are yet receive compensation for the loss of their lake-shore agricultural land.

In addition to the enclosure of household agricultural lands, the park has also prohibited Tsho residents from their traditional practice of cultivating common lands through swidden farming. Tsho villagers practiced shifting agriculture, periodically burning certain patches of forested areas for farming. They rotated not just the primary crops—buckwheat, wheat, potatoes, and mustard seed—but also the cluster of farms each year to increase yield and regulate livestock foraging. The park has since criminalized swidden cultivation practices and forced the locals to subsist from only the land they obtained formal titles to. This has dramatically limited the agricultural yield in the village and affected its subsistence economy. Moreover, the park has also placed severe restrictions on the collection of timber for household construction and fodder for animals. In theory, those who resided inside the park area had permission to use timber for household and community needs. Yet in practice, the warden arbitrarily put restrictions on timber use, for example in 2019 when the warden refused to give a permit to the local Tapriza school to obtain timber for an under-construction classroom building.

However, the most consequential impact on local livelihoods has resulted from restrictions on access to and control over yartsa gunbu. Until 2001, when the yartsa gunbu harvest and trade was legalized, locals risked beating and persecution by park authorities who organized frequent mountain patrols. Even after its legalization, soldiers still spelled fear among harvesters as they patrolled pastures and erected surprise checkpoints between May and June, the peak yartsa gunbu season. Harvesters share many stories about traveling at night and sneaking around treacherous mountains to avoid the soldiers, even after its legalization.
Military presence sometimes resulted in fatal incidents like one in 2013 when a person fell off a cliff and perished while running away from soldiers at night in Chuthang, between Phoksundo and Dho Tarap. After its legalization in 2001, for about five years, local residents in Phoksundo and Dho Tarap were caught between the coercion of the Nepal Army soldiers and that of the Maoists insurgents, as discussed below. Here, I underscore the fact that the park has dispossessed the Dolpopa residents from their vital resources including land, timber and caterpillar fungus, quite ironically, through its policy and practices of participatory conservation. As such, participatory conservation has served state-making through its production as a dominant state institution and knowledge, and furthered internal territorialization by bounding space, controlling local residents, and regulating access to resources within the park boundary.

**Participatory conservation and buffer zones**

The SPNP Buffer Zone was instituted in October 1998, two years after the Buffer Zone Management Regulation (BZMR) was passed. The buffer zone constitutes a total land area of 1349 square kilometers. Although the settlements inside the park boundary were also recognized as buffer zone, the buffer zone largely encompassed adjacent territories that were newly incorporated into the park system. SPNP buffer zone today extends across four rural municipalities (RM) and two municipalities. Except for Shey Phoksundo RM, which was already part of the park, all other RMs were newly incorporated into the park system with the formation of buffer zones. The dawn of participatory conservation and the creation of buffer zones thus amounted to a second wave of territorialization that reorganized Dolpo space through the expansion and the intensification of the jurisdictional authority of SPNP.

The SPNP buffer zone currently constitutes seventeen User Group Committees (UGs) that function as “grassroots organizations” under the umbrella of the Buffer Zone Management Committee (BZMC). The UGs are further broken down into sub-committees, including committees dedicated to anti-poaching and snow leopard conservation. These committees are tasked with the dual responsibility of achieving conservation goals and implementing development projects and are funded by the 30–50% of the revenues the park is supposed to redistribute to the community under BZMR. The SPNP Buffer Zone Management Plan (2018–2022) outlines the objective of the buffer zone as “… institutional development (social capital), alternative natural resource development (natural capital), capacity/skill building (human capital), financial management (financial capital), conservation education and awareness, gender and special target group mainstreaming” (SPNP, 2018: 23).

Here I consider the formation, working, and concerns of two of the seventeen UGs to examine local frictions of participatory conservations: Nyasamba Buffer Zone User Group Committee (NUG) in Dho Tarap, Dolpo Buddha RM, located outside the core park boundary; and Phoksundo Buffer Zone User Group Committee (PUG) in Tsho village, Shey Phoksundo RM, located inside the core park boundary (see Figure 1).

Dho Tarap valley and its territories were incorporated into SPNP in 1998 when SPNP buffer zone was formed. The unilateral declaration of Dho Tarap as a buffer zone without any consultation with the locals established the jurisdiction of the park to the entire territory of Dho Tarap valley. Not a single resident of Dho Tarap I interviewed recalled the park conducting formal meetings nor consultations before or during the incorporation of the territory into the park. Villagers were promised, in retrospect, a range of development projects and access to otherwise restricted timber from the park as perks for joining the buffer zone. However, the authorities have routinely failed to deliver on any of their promises.

In Phoksundo, given the already strict restrictions by the park, it would seem that the residents had nothing to lose and potentially much to gain by becoming a buffer zone. This explains in part
why the chair of PUG was optimistic about the buffer zone: “It is more beneficial for the locals to be part of the park as a buffer zone because we will get 30–50% of park revenues to invest in community development.” However, he was quick to admit that the funds have rarely translated into concrete programs in the village. He also expressed concern with the park’s enclosure of common lands and the limited authority of the local residents to their collective lands: “We are islands of people in the sea of the national park territory.” This dispossession by territorial expansion of the park was cartographically cemented by the state restructuring process in 2017, when the local Shey Phoksundo Rural Municipality was assigned only an area of 123.07 square kilometers, a miniscule territory compared to its actual size of 7889 square kilometers.

Both NUG and PUG are committees of eleven local members each. They also have a snow leopard conservation committee. The key role of UGs, according to the park warden, is to act as “a bridge between locals and the park” regarding the management of yartsa gunbu and implementation of development projects. In order to allocate funds and report accounts, the park enforces a complicated bureaucratic process including a requirement for the UG chairperson to attend three annual meetings at the park headquarters. However, the chairpersons of both NUG and PUG were unable to attend the meetings regularly because they were usually informed of the meeting only a day or two prior, which is too short a notice for making the three-days’ journey from their respective villages to the park headquarters.

The park requires these meetings to redistribute revenues allocated for community development through the UGs. The fund should theoretically be spent on specific programs planned by the warden under five categories: conservation, community development, income generation, conservation education, and administrative cost. However, the fund was frozen more than once due to the inability of the park to implement the programs, for example, in 2019 when the park failed to conduct elections for the UGs and BZMC. Although the park claims that redistribution accounts for 30–50% of total park revenues per the BZMR stipulation (see table below), anecdotal accounts from four UG members agree that the actual funds are subject to the warden’s discretion and have amounted to fractions of the revenues collected from caterpillar fungus from the two villages (see Table 1). For example, an NUG member claims to have received only NRS 200,000 in 2015, a desktop computer in 2016, and funds for constructing an office building in 2017 for NUG.

The chief complaint of NUG and PUG members is that although the park collects the largest parts of its revenues from harvesters and tourists bound for Phoksundo and Dho Tarap, these areas are not prioritized when redistributing the revenues. For example, the park claims to have distributed NRs 2 million and 1.1 million to PUG and NUG respectively over the course of two years (2019 and 2020) but collected approximately NRs 13 million and 7.5 million respectively from those areas.

The park justifies this lack of correspondence between places of revenue collection and redistribution by its territorial logic that views all the seventeen buffer zones as equally deserving of the park revenue. While convincing, this logic is solely based on the territorial order of SPNP as

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**Table 1. Collection and redistribution of caterpillar fungus revenues by Shey Phoksundo National Park.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Revenues NRS</th>
<th>Revenues USD(^a)</th>
<th>Redistribution NRS</th>
<th>Redistribution USD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2077–78 BS (2021 AD)</td>
<td>54,664,819</td>
<td>462,477</td>
<td>2,500,000</td>
<td>21,150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2076–77 BS (2020 AD)</td>
<td>73,050,000</td>
<td>616,455</td>
<td>22,000,000 (approx.)</td>
<td>185,654</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2075–76 BS (2019 AD)</td>
<td>44,600,000</td>
<td>396,444</td>
<td>0 (Frozen)</td>
<td>0 (Frozen)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2074–75 BS (2018 AD)</td>
<td>30,600,000</td>
<td>279,452</td>
<td>11,200,000</td>
<td>102,283</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Shey Phoksundo National Park.

\(^a\)USD estimates based on the average exchange rate of July of the respective year when revenue is calculated.
opposed to the de facto Dolpopa territoriality that has long structured and still continues to organize local resource access, governance, and their articulation of grievance to the state. Indigenous territorialities, which still govern local resource use in spite of the park regulations, are thus eclipsed within the park regime which frames natural resource access through laws and bureaucratic infrastructure that reinforce the park boundary and state territory. This clash between contrasting notions of state and Indigenous territories fueled the 2014 violence when the park dismissed Dolpopa territoriality as “illegal,” a discursive logic that precludes the possibility of Indigenous territoriality and struggles for self-determination.

NUG and PUG have also been tasked with supporting the team of park staff and soldiers who are deployed in the villages to collect taxes from harvesters. The park team collects taxes and reports it to the headquarters. The local UGs, who reserve no direct claim on the park tax, however collect a nominal amount from harvesters as a “service charge.” In contrast to the primary tax that goes to the national treasury, the UGs have the power and right to use the service charge at their own discretion. This supplemental fund has allowed the UGs to dig trash pits in the pastures and villages, repair trails and bridges, and carry out other projects. For the Dolpopa of Phoksundo and Dho Tarap, this nominal fund from yartsa gunbu has thus proven more consequential than the lion’s share of revenues that the park collects each year.

Despite the inclusion of Dolpopa in the capacity of UGs, the participatory model of buffer zones has served to further expand and intensify state authority and centralize resource governance. Local residents I interviewed accuse the UGs of lacking transparency and accountability to the community members. As an offshoot of the park with no decision-making power outside their local confines, UGs are held upwardly accountable and report only to park officials. They are not formally required to coordinate with the elected local government. Nor are they obligated to report and answer to the local community. Participatory conservation thus unfolds on the ground in contradictory ways. While appearing to cultivate the participation of local residents, it has centralized decision-making, expanded and reinforced park authority through the UGs and enabled territorialization by the state expropriation of local resources.

**Governing caterpillar fungus in Dho Tarap**

**From Maoist control to Indigenous governance**

The opportunity to extract revenues from caterpillar fungus first attracted the Maoist rebels and then SPNP in Dho Tarap. The Maoist insurgents, who first appeared in Dho Tarap around 2003 when the caterpillar fungus trade was booming, overthrew the local governments and forced park authorities to retreat south near the district headquarters. Bauer (2004: 199) reports that there were at least 50 Maoist soldiers patrolling the upper valleys of Dolpo in 2003. They instituted Jana Saarkar or “People’s Government” at the local level and imposed a per head “war tax” (Baral and Heinen, 2006; Oli, 2005) on caterpillar fungus collectors and traders between 2003 and 2006. The rebels encouraged harvesters from districts such as Rukum and Jajarkot to travel to Dolpo so they could collect more revenue. This had major impacts beyond Dolpopas’ loss of access to and control over the fungus. In contrast to the broader Maoist aspiration to establish ethnicity-based federalism to effect progressive political change in Nepal, their cadres used coercive tactics and demonstrated glaring disregard for Indigenous self-governance in Dho Tarap which they deemed irrelevant to their People’s Government. Although the Maoist control can be interpreted as a part of a broader state-unmaking strategy pursued across Nepal (Dongol and Neumann, 2021; Nightingale et al., 2018), for the Dolpopa, this was another imposition of external rule and amounted to a form of parallel state-making that dispossessed Dolpopa of their self-governance and control over caterpillar fungus. Indeed, the Maoist control over caterpillar fungus
formed a precedent for the national park to eventually institute its own apparatus of extraction, coercion, and dispossession. Although the park preceded the Maoist period, it was not involved in extracting revenue from caterpillar fungus until the Maoists had left.

When the Maoists joined the Nepal government following a historic peace process in 2006, the local community reclaimed control and developed a community-based governance system to collect fees, regulate harvest, and oversee local development projects between 2007 and 2014. This de facto Indigenous governance departed from the prior Maoist control and the subsequent national park management of caterpillar fungus because it was a democratically formed grassroots arrangement founded on Dolpopa conceptions and practices of territory. Specifically, Dolpopa territoriality includes secular and religious regulations and internal community procedures to determine the opening date for caterpillar fungus harvest, collection and redistribution of fees, inclusion and exclusion criteria and attendant regulations such as livestock and waste management. Access to designated pastures that are important for livestock grazing in the winter and spring and sacred sites was restricted for non-local harvesters. Significantly, the inclusion and exclusion criteria used to determine bona fide residency that allowed access to pastures and enjoy benefits from caterpillar fungus revenue were defined in accordance with customary territorial practices that required allegiance to the community pledged in the forms of making obligatory offerings (phyag dang mchod pa) and participation in community rituals (e.g., smyang gnas) at the village monasteries, as opposed to the Maoist and Nepali state’s delineation of local government boundaries or national park borders.

Yet this Indigenous governance of caterpillar fungus was neither outside nor inside the state; rather, it simultaneously constituted and exceeded the state. I suggest that the Dolpopa engaged with the Nepali state through a strategic “both/and” politics, a modality of Indigenous governance that operates both within and beyond state structures (Carroll, 2015; Ybarra, 2018). For instance, they collected fees through a community-based Non-Government Organization (NGO) registered under the Social Welfare Council of Nepal, believing that its status as a registered organization under the state provided some cover for collecting fees—an action that exceeded and challenged state authority. They categorized the fees to be collected under the letterhead of the organization as “donations” instead of “tax” in order to avoid any potential consequences for an NGO to collect a tax. The entanglement of Dolpopa governance with state structures and the hybridity of state-making can also be illustrated by the contradictory roles of the Nepal police officers temporarily stationed in the valley during the yartsa gunbu season. Dolpopa mobilized the Nepal police officers who accompanied the local team that collected the designated fees. Isolated from the district headquarters and fully dependent on the local community for basic necessities, the police assisted Dolpopa to enforce the illicit Dolpopa governance of caterpillar fungus. Moreover, the park operated through the local buffer zone user group, NUG, which also collected fees and reported them to the park. NUG members navigated multiple roles as both community members and representatives of the park. Such multiple positions and contradictory roles of the NUG members and the police officers demonstrate the hybrid and fragmented nature of the state and how state “authority is constituted and maintained under ‘ordinary’ conditions” (Nightingale et al., 2018: 861).

Nevertheless, similar to the impacts of Indigenous management of caterpillar fungus in other high altitude areas of Nepal (see Childs and Choedup, 2014), Dolpopa governance of caterpillar fungus served to fill the gaps left by the lack of state-sponsored development. Between 2006 and 2012, nearly half of the fees collected was used to purchase and distribute subsidized rice that the government delivered across the border through China. Significant amounts were donated to the local school, to renovate monasteries and stupas, and to pay the salary of an amchi or traditional medical practitioner. The community also spent the caterpillar fungus revenue on community development projects including building fences and bridges, repairing irrigation canals, waste management, community events and festivals. Any leftover funds were equally
distributed among households who met the inclusion criteria discussed earlier. Thus, Indigenous governance of caterpillar fungus allowed Dolpopa to significantly increase their household cash income while undertaking pressing community development projects on their own accord and independent of state assistance.

While the Maoist control was a form of state-unmaking in the literal sense, the Dolpopa reclamation of control over caterpillar fungus contributed to community-building and Indigenous self-determination in a period when there was limited state presence. But this period of Dolpopa self-governance was curtailed after the violent clash with the park in 2014.

**Conservation-led resource extraction and dispossession**

The SPNP’s attempts to monopolize caterpillar fungus governance have not only contributed to state-making and territorialization through the expansion and intensification of its authority and territorial order but also displaced Dolpopa governance practices and limited their access to and control over the fungus and the revenues thus generated. The 2014 violence was an inflection point in the broader history of unequal relations between the Nepali state and Dolpopa. Despite the incorporation of Dho Tarap valley as a buffer zone in 1998, the park presence was limited to NUG members who are local residents and its authority was secondary to Dolpopa in terms of control over caterpillar fungus. However, since 2014, the park has intensified its presence and revamped its efforts to collect revenue by suppressing pre-existing Dolpopa governance of caterpillar fungus. It drastically increased the tax by many folds and redefined the criteria for access and taxation based on the park boundary. The park has since employed violence and coercive tactics to impose and administer this extractive regime within its boundary. Instead of NUG, the park today deploys the military and park staff from the district headquarters to collect tax. Given the brutality of the 2014 violence, community members are particularly fearful of the soldiers and hesitate to directly oppose their imposed mandates. Instead of collecting revenue themselves as they had done before, Dolpopa are today required to pay taxes to collect *yartsa gunbu* on their own land.

Dispossession occurs as an effect of the expansion and intensification of park authority and territory through participatory conservation policies that reorganizes spatial relations. The park has regulated access to resources and the collection of fees based on a set of criteria that erases Dolpopa notions of territory and resource access. For example, it classified the fee categories based on the park and district boundaries rather than Dolpopa practices of territory. In 2019, the park collected five hundred rupees (5 USD) from buffer zone residents, two thousand (20 USD) from residents of districts where the park is located (Dolpa and Mugu), and three thousand (30 USD) from those who are not from these two districts. The park has also rejected Dolpopa claims to self-governance by arguing that all Nepali citizens irrespective of their residency have the constitutional right to access resources within the country. These criteria and classification for resource access—that draw on the discursive and institutional calculus of citizenship (Povinelli, 2002)—displaces Dolpopa territoriality such as obligatory participation in community rituals to enjoy access to and benefits from resources within a collective territory.

Despite the overwhelming park authority, Dolpopa continue to contest state authority and assert their claims to their common resources by working with and against state structures. For example, Dho Tarap residents strategized ways to reclaim control over the pastures after the park suppressed them from collecting fees since 2014. This included declaring swaths of pastures as winter grazing areas that are restricted from non-locals, defined in Dolpopa understandings of territory. Despite protests from non-local harvesters, the park authorities have provided tacit support as locals went about enforcing the restrictions. However, given the informal nature of this arrangement, it is susceptible to arbitrary overruling by the park. When I asked one of the higher-ranking park staff, he told me that the park has for now turned a blind eye to
this because of potential backlash: “the locals of Dho Tarap are rebellious and will turn to fight against us [as they did in 2014] if we take action against it.” NUG has since taken a stand for the locals to try to formalize this arrangement by registering the winter pastures as a charan chhetra or “grazing area,” a designation that would allow preferential local resource use. The process to formalize such a preferential local access to caterpillar fungus is fraught with juridical and bureaucratic hurdles and its success is contingent on many political economic factors beyond the control of the Dolpopa. In any case, Dolpopa struggles for greater control over their territories is now more firmly nested within the territorial order and jurisdiction of the national park. While piecemeal informal arrangements might offer temporary respite and provide a level of autonomy to the Dolpopa, they are vulnerable to the whims of the park authorities and draw the Dolpopa more closely under the ever-tightening grip of the state. As Coulthard (2014) argues, it is precisely such seemingly benevolent colonial politics of recognition—rather than state violence alone—that ultimately threatens the pursuit of Indigenous self-determination.

Conclusion

In the aftermath of the 2014 violence recounted in the opening vignette, Dolpopa of Dho Tarap demanded justice and defended their right to govern caterpillar fungus on their own land through formal and informal negotiations at the park headquarters in Dolpo as well as collective organizing in Kathmandu including several press conferences, sit-in protests, rallies, and a delegation to the Home Ministry. After nearly a decade, there has been no state initiative to acknowledge, let alone redress, the violence. Nor has the park accommodated Dolpopa demands for self-determination regarding the management of caterpillar fungus. Instead, the violence and subsequent developments have reinforced the monopoly of the park over the management of caterpillar fungus and displaced Dolpopa self-governance over their territories.

Through this case study of SPNP and the top-down policy of participatory conservation, I have shown how state-led biodiversity conservation serve to advance territorialization by expanding state authority and territory in the Himalayan borderlands while dispossessing Indigenous peoples of their self-governance and sovereignty over their collective lands. Rather than an isolated event or crude expropriation of land per se, I approached dispossession as an underside or corollary of state-making and territorialization and conceptualized it as a piecemeal process of radically altering and disarticulating Indigenous relations with land and territory as they are enacted through Indigenous governance practices and struggles over access to and control over natural resources such as the caterpillar fungus. Yet I have also demonstrated that the entwined processes of state-making, territorialization, and dispossession are neither linear nor totalizing. Rather, they emerge within particular conjunctures and are often fragmented, contested, and even co-opted and subverted by a range of multiply positioned actors.

Protected areas—which constitute more than 80% of Nepal’s Himalayan region—have become central avenues for the Nepali government to (re)make its territory and expand its authority in the Himalayan borderlands amidst (geo)political uncertainties from the 1970s to the post-2006 state rebuilding processes. This case study of SPNP demonstrates the political role of national parks in the state’s efforts to securitize and territorialize an “out-of-the-way” borderland place where people have long exercised a level of political autonomy with regard to everyday resource use and governance. The creation of buffer zones—implemented as a form of participatory conservation—spatially extended state authority in places that were previously outside the jurisdiction of the park. The park’s demarcation and bounding of space and the regulation of access to and control over caterpillar fungus and other resources for the Dolpopa reveals not only contradictions between the rhetoric and practice of participatory conservation but also how “the acts of governing resources (re)produces
the socioenvironmental boundaries of the state” (Nightingale, 2018: 688). Although park staff and conservationists often laud participatory conservation as “progressive” and that marks a departure from fortress conservation, it has nevertheless functioned as an extractive structure and a foothold for the state to territorialize Dolpopa spaces. The park was established and continues to operate through the enclosure of collective lands and severe restrictions on and the criminalization of Dolpopa resource use and governance practices. The narrative and institution of participatory conservation has therefore allowed the park to advance state-making by systematizing Dolpopa spatial practices and rendering them governable to the state. At the same time, the contested governance of caterpillar fungus reveals that participatory conservation can turn coercive. Yet the Dolpopa continue to uphold their customary resource use and governance practices both within and despite state structures. Dolpopa strategies and actions of, for instance, collecting fees through a registered NGO, mobilizing Nepali police to enforce its governance, evoking Indigenous rights guaranteed by national legal provisions, and negotiating exclusive local access to certain pastures with the park simultaneously reinforce and challenge the state.

**Highlights**

- Explores caterpillar fungus as the central resource contention between Dolpopa and the Nepali state.
- Demonstrates participatory conservation as state-making and internal territorialization.
- Argues that national parks dispossess Dolpopa from their relationship to land and self-determining capacities.
- Shows the ways in which Dolpopa advance Indigenous environmental politics both within and beyond state structures.
- advocates for Indigenous environmental governance as an alternative to extractive and coercive state management of the caterpillar fungus.

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Notes
1. “Dolpopa” refers to the people of Dolpo in the Tibetan language. For the purpose of this paper, I use the term to refer specifically to the Dolpopa of Dho Tarap valley and Tsho village.
2. See Gurung (2017) and Dolpo (2016) for detailed analysis and chronology of the violent event.
3. My use of the term “Indigenous” draws on Stuart Hall’s (1986) concept and metaphor of “articulation” that critical scholars (Li, 2000; TallBear, 2013; Yeh and Bryan, 2015) employ to conceptualize indigeneity as neither essential nor constructed but as a contingent politics of positionings within particular political conjunctures, contexts, and discourses. For instance, despite their enrollment into the list of 59 Indigenous Nationalities of Nepal, Dolpopa of Dho Tarap have rarely taken up the term until 2014 when state violence and expropriation of caterpillar fungus motivated them to articulate their claims in reference to national laws and international human rights standards concerning Indigenous peoples.
4. Although the division of Dolpo into four units and ten and half settlement subunits (Tib. dol phyog gru bzhi msho phyed dang bcu gcig) was originally done for tax purposes and can be traced back to the 13th century Sakya rule (Bauer, 2004), it has been the normative geographical and socio-political organization of contemporary social life for Dolpopa despite recent demarcations of the region into districts, rural municipalities, and wards by the Nepali state.
5. Such systems of self-governance vary by place but they all constitute village monasteries as the central political (and religious) institution that defined bona fide residency used to determine resource access (Gurung, 2020). Local and regional leaders such as Drubpon, Chikyab, Drewo, Gepo, and Gowa were appointed either by show of hands or along hereditary lines who were at the same time recognized by external powers including the Nepali state.
6. Ken Bauer (2004: 23) notes that private agricultural lands were delineated and land titles (laal purja) granted after 1996 when the government sent a team of surveyors to measure, demarcate, and calculate taxable units of land under the national land registry (naapi). However, Tsho residents who lost their lakeshore agricultural lands beginning in 1986 claim that they still have land titles which they managed to obtain despite its enclosed status at the time.
7. Nepali Rupees (Rs) 500 (5 USD) between 2007 and 2009, Rs 1000 (10 USD) between 2010 and 2012, and Rs 1500 (15 USD) in 2013, and Rs 1000 in 2014 before it was upended by the park; and Rs 5000 (50 USD) for each tent hotel.

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