Nepal names four high altitude Ramsar sites

As reported here in October 2007, as part of commemorations in Kathmandu on 23 September, the first anniversary of the Ghunsa tragedy, in which the lives of 24 noted conservationists from the Nepalese government and WWF were lost in a helicopter crash, the government announced the designation of four new high altitude Wetlands of International Importance. Ramsar's Assistant Advisor for the Asia-Pacific, Ms Pragati Tuladhar, was on hand to deliver an address on behalf of the Secretary General and present Ramsar site certificates for those four new sites.

The paperwork has now been completed and the sites have been added to the Ramsar List. Together they are an extraordinary group of Himalayan lakes -- Gokyo and Associated Lakes (4,710m-4,950m asl), Gosaikunda and Associated Lakes (4,054m-4,620m asl), Phoksundo Lake (3,611m), and Rara Lake (2,900m) -- all within National Parks and the first of these already a UNESCO World Heritage site (Sagarmatha National Park).

The government of Nepal is to be commended for this initiative, and WWF Nepal is to be acknowledged for its considerable assistance in preparing the groundwork for these designations. WWF Nepal is also our source for the extraordinary photographs that follow the brief site descriptions below.
Gokyo and Associated Lakes. 23/09/07; Sagarmatha; 7,770 ha; 27°52’N 080°42’E. Within Sagarmatha National Park, UNESCO World Heritage site. A system of glacial lakes at 4,710m-4,950m altitude in the high Himalayan region at the base of Cho Oyo (the world's 6th highest mountain), not far from Mt Everest, at the headwaters of the Dudh Koshi River which is part of the Ganges river system. The alpine pasture meadow and sloping mountain terrain support a number of IUCN Redlisted rare and vulnerable species, such as the kutki plant (*Neopicrorhiza scrophulariifolia*), the Himalayan tahr or goat (*Hemitragus jemlahicus*), the Snow Leopard (*Uncia uncia*), Wood snipe (*Gallinago nemoricola*), endemic species like the flowering plant *Kobresia fissiligumis*, and many important birds like *Aythya nyroca* and *Grus vigor*. The system is a vital source of water for downstream communities. There is a small amount of seasonal grazing, by traditional right, and eight hotels with campgrounds serve ecotourists and religious visitors. Garbage and sewage left by visitors is difficult to dispose of and such pollution pressures represent a potential threat, as does overgrazing and deforestation caused by mountaineering expeditions seeking firewood. The site is two days' walk from Namche, the nearest town. Ramsar site no. 1692. Most recent RIS information: 2007.
Gosaikunda and Associated Lakes. 23/09/07; Bagamti; 1,030 ha; 28°05′N 085°25′E. Within Langtang National Park. A treeless region with shrub land interspersed by rocky slopes and alpine pasture, with a complex of at least 15 lakes and ponds at 4,054m-4,620m altitude that provide water for the Trishuli tributary of the Narayani River system. A considerable number of IUCN Redlisted endangered and vulnerable species of fauna and flora are present. The site has religious associations for Hindus and Buddhists and is the locus of the important Gangadashahara and Janaipurnima festivals. Human uses include grazing during summers, and there are four hotels with campgrounds for trekking groups and pilgrims. Threats to the site include pollution from the huge gathering during the festivals. There is a religious ban on the killing of animals within much of the site. Ramsar site no. 1693. Most recent RIS information: 2007.
Phoksundo Lake. 23/09/07; Karnali; 494 ha; 29°12’N 082°57’E. Within Shey-Phoksundo National Park. A glacial lake near Ringmo in the Dolpo region, the deepest lake in the country, that is the centre of endemism in the eastern Himalayan region and a vital source of freshwater for downstream, with the highest waterfall (167m) in Nepal 500m from the lake. The lake, alpine meadows, and bogs provide habitat for a number of rare and vulnerable plants and animals, including the Snow Leopard (*Uncia uncia*), Musk deer (*Moschus chrysogaster*) and Grey or Tibetan Wolf (*Canis lupus*). The site has great cultural and religious importance, with traditional Tibetan culture of the upper Dolpo and both Buddhism and the ancient Tibetan Bon-Po religion of the lower Dolpo both observed in Ringmo village. There is some grazing and cultivation, but tourism, dependent upon the wetland, is the base of the economy. Overgrazing and pollution from the 42 households of Ringmo village are seen as potential threats to the site. Ramsar site no. 1694. Most recent RIS information: 2007.
Ringmo village
Rara Lake. 23/09/07; Karnali; 1,583 ha; 29°30'N 082°05'E. National Park. The largest lake in Nepal, lying at about 2,900m altitude and providing water to the important Kamali River. The area has developed unique floral and faunal assemblages with a number of rare and vulnerable fauna and flora species, and the wet alpine pasture, moraines, and damp stream banks along the lake area are the natural habitats for endemic species of plants. The endemic frog Rara paha (*Paararica*) is found at only one other location in the Central region, and three endemic species of snow trout, *Asala macha* (*Schizothorax macrophthalmus*, *S. nepalensis*, and *S. raraensis*), are found only here. Two temples in the area are the venue for a number of religious festivals. The people of the area speak a dialect that is considered the former or original form of the Nepali language. Principal threats come from pollution caused by army personnel and tourists and unregulated fuelwood collection, especially during festivals. Ramsar site no. 1695. Most recent RIS information: 2007.