

We propose to bring a humanistic and qualitative dimension to W&M's Nepal Water Initiative by studying indigenous ecological knowledge,¹ attitudes, values, beliefs, and practices regarding water (and related aspects of the natural environment), as reflected in local religious and cultural traditions. The Nepal Water Initiative (NWI), a collaborative multidisciplinary effort of GRI, IIC, VIMS, and Nepalese academic institutions, seeks to assess environmental threats to the water resources of Nepal under a changing climate and to empower conservation leaders to champion community-based conservation efforts to protect aquatic biodiversity and promote sustainable livelihoods. In the research proposed here, we aim to document and understand the cultural and spiritual significance of water (and the natural environment, more broadly) in specific contexts to facilitate effective natural and cultural resource management by communities in Nepal in their own terms.

Nepal regularly experiences either too much water or too little water due to the emerging dynamics of climate change in the region. While Nepal has a strong conservation ethic, protecting about 23% of its land area, conservation of water resources has not been a primary goal, and this is therefore the focus of NWI. Under a changing climate, water resources will be critical to sustaining livelihoods such as fishing and farming. The Initiative explores the complex interactions among natural resources, livelihood systems, cultural values and traditions, and climate scenarios to develop strategies for mitigating the impacts of climate change on Nepal's human communities and natural environment. We contend that for these strategies to be effective and sustainable in the long term, they must be integrated and holistic. Therefore, our proposal addresses the imperative of understanding indigenous ecological knowledge and the cultural-religious significance of water and other resources among Nepali peoples. The better we understand this, the more successful the NWI will be in our interactions with local communities, conservation leaders, and policy makers in Nepal.