

Yachay Wasi Sacred Sites Event - Submission 4 – NEPAL - Received April 19, 2006

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Homicho (Dhudkunda in Nepali official language) is a sacred lake for both the Buddhist and Hindu followers in Nepal. In Sherpa language, 'homa' means milk and 'cho' means lake. Homicho therefore stands for milky lake. Homicho in Solukhumbu district lies north of the district headquarters, Salleri, at an altitude of 4651 meters above mean sea level in eastern Nepal. The lake is spread over an area of approximately two kilometers' circumference and looks milky in color. The water in the lake itself is collected from the melted glacier of the sacred mountains, mount Numbur (6950 meter), mount Karyalung (6511 meter) and mount Khatang (6353 meter) of the Khumbu Himalayan range. All of these three mountains are considered sacred mountains by the Sherpa community in Nepal. Sherpa community worships these mountains daily as symbols of God and pray for peace, prosperity, happiness and success of all the living beings on the earth. The names of these mountains are chanted every morning during the pray and incense are offered to please the Gods.

The lake Homicho is formed from the glacier water system that drains from these sacred mountains. It may be the reason that the lake is considered as sacred and believed as a lake of Lord Guru Rinpoche in Buddhism and Lord Shiva in Hinduism. Those three sacred mountains with the lake Homicho look so impressive and appealing that everyone believes that there are deity and spiritual power hidden. Both the Buddhist and Hindu communities visit the lake at least once in a lifetime and get rid of their sins if they have committed any. The lake can be visited throughout the year, however, there is a particular festival called Janaipurnima, which generally falls on the full moon night of August every year. On this particular night, local people from neighboring districts and far places visit the lake and take dip in the lake to get rid of their sins and find a path for heaven. On this day, male Hindus change their protective thread from evil from Brahmins and shamans from all over Nepal gather there and perform their rituals for the whole night and day. The number of pilgrims in this festival goes more than five thousand. The pilgrims after feeling blessed by Lord Guru Rinpoche spend the night dancing and singing with full satisfaction and happiness.

The most interesting belief is that the childless parents, who visits the lake and collect a piece of stone from the lake as a symbol of child will get baby as bless of Lord Guru Rinpoche. The couple then has to visit the lake again and acknowledge the birth of the child. The number of visits made either by the parents only or with the child depend on the type of commitment the parents have made at the first visit. The belief holds strong, as many childless couples have been successful after visiting the Homicho. This practice is followed by both the Buddhists and Hindus with great faith.

The sacred Numbur mountain and the holy lake Homicho therefore in the religion and culture of the local indigenous Sherpa community are so important as they have been part of their daily trust and guardian. The river system that drains down from the Homicho plays vital role in maintaining the ecological balance of the Solu region (links Ramechap, Okhaldhunga and Dolkha districts and connects the Mt. Everest eco-region) where more than 100,000 people are residing.

The nearest Sherpa settlement from Homicho is Taksindu, which lies at an altitude of 3060 meter. Taksindu village is inhabited by Sherpa community. Sherpas from Taksindu and nearby settlements from the ancient time used to take their cattle particularly yak herds to Homicho and make their business during Janaipurnima festival. Taksindu has two monasteries of nuns and monks and they regularly worship the mountains and the holy lake Homicho. There are also monasteries at Chiwang, Chyalsa, Junbensi, Thukten Choeling, Phungmuche, Thumbuk and

Jhapre, which also follow the same practice. The distance between the Homicho and Taksindu is about 21 kilometers and the terrestrial ecosystem is rich, natural and intact due to the Homicho river system, environment and the watershed. The ecological process so far has been maintained by the local indigenous Sherpa people through their ancient transhumance grazing practices, sustainable use of natural resources and respect towards the God- Guru Rinpoche. The surrounding landscape with diverse flora and fauna for example, alpine grassland, rhododendron, blue pine, oak and many more unexplored medicinal herbs. Among faunal diversity, snow leopard, musk deer, red panda to name few. Therefore, the area is unique and spiritual in the world. Because of these natural, cultural and religious qualities, His Holiness Thulsuk Rinpoche the 33rd reincarnate monk of Tibet Rongbuk monastery after the Tibet revolution has settled in Sangiphuk, Phungmucho and Thukten Choeling near by Homicho over the last three decades. His Holiness Thulsuk Rinpoche is the senior most spiritual leader of Ngyingma sect of Buddhism.

Therefore, due to the combination of natural, cultural and religious values, people are attracted not only from Nepal, but also from the world over. There is a growing number of international tourists visiting the area for trekking and mountaineering activities. The destination is branded as a **Dudhkund Cultural Trail** by the UNDP funded Program called Tourism for Rural Poverty Alleviation Program (TRPAP). The tourism activities here are so important as they generate net income for the local people and support for the improvement of livelihood.

However, there are formidable challenges lying in the front to protect the Homicho from the glacier melting problem, deteriorating the forest ecosystem in the lower elevation from human encroachment and slash and burn practices by the yak herders due to lack of awareness and education. The size of the Homicho is gradually decreasing, there is a serious danger of outburst of the Homicho as the speed of icefall and glacier melting is accelerating. The landslide caused by the melting of the icefall from the western side of the lake is nearing the Homicho. If the current process continues for few more years, the lake will suffer from Glacier Lake Outburst Flood (GLOF) at any time. The incident will cause a drastic damage in the down valley, which may result into loss of life, property and forest ecosystem. The Sherpa people by religion and culture believe that the lake, the mountain and nature must always be kept intact, clean and sacred by respecting their values and spirituality. Moreover, Sherpas believe that felling trees, damaging the forest ecosystem, poaching wildlife, burning garbage and producing air pollution with bad odor, will upset the god and have to bear the consequence of natural disasters such as lake outburst, untimely rainfall, drought, landslide, etc. Therefore, maintaining the sacred values, every human activity should not be against the nature.

In order to retain the sacredness and spirituality of the Mount Numbur and Homicho and protect the whole of the Numbur mountain ecosystem and environment in the Solu region, there needs wider attention of the local people, government, private sectors who sell the area as a tourist destination, and international bilateral and multilateral donor communities. If any conservation measures with broader understanding of natural and cultural values of the Numbur mountain ecosystem and environment are not planned immediately, the consequence will be devastating. On the one side, it will create physical damage and on the other side, the spiritual value of indigenous Sherpa community including the Hindus will be lost forever.

Therefore to maintain this cultural values and biological diversity for the sustainable livelihood of the local people of the Everest region, the Numbur mountain/Homicho ecosystem and environment deserve to be declared as an indigenous people managed protected area through their belief and practices, rather than deploying rangers and soldiers with arms. This kind of initiation will show respect to the cultural and religious practices of the indigenous people and their rights safeguarded. Ultimately this kind of conservation practice will be much stronger and successful than any other alternative. This kind of protected area will become a sustainable place to live with due respect to people, nature, environment and can be termed as *Be-yul (Shangrila)* of the 21st century.