The moment you talk of the Himalayas the first thing that comes to your mind is a picture of Mt Everest. And that’s it. But the Himalayas are much more than just a few of the tallest peaks. Spread over Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, China, Nepal and Bhutan, the Himalayas stretch to about 2,400 kms, carrying about 15,000 glaciers in its lap and is considered to be the third largest deposit of ice outside Arctic and Antarctica. It is in reality the Third Pole.

The Himalayas are a unique repository of biodiversity, ecology and culture. It is one of the world’s biggest resource of fresh water. Estimates show that more than 1.4 billion people depend on water from the rivers emerging from the Himalayas. But at the same time, as a 2011 report showed, “the region is one of the world’s hotspots in terms of warming trends.” While most community water sources are drying up in the mid-hills and the foothills, the snowline too has been receding. According to the Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) there has been a rise in the maximum temperature in the hills, and this has pushed apple cultivation, for instance, into upper hills. Sweet peas, a major crop in the upper hills, are now being increasingly replaced by apples. Not only crop cultivation, but the changes happening in biodiversity too will have long lasting impacts.

The impact of climate change is more visible through the melting of glaciers. The Kathmandu-based International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) had in an exhaustive study of the Himalayan glaciers pointed out to an emerging threat of melting of glaciers and formation of new lakes. It had documented 3,252 glaciers in Nepal spread over 5,324 square kms. It put the number of glacial lakes at 2,323. Most of these, it is believed, were formed in the past 50 years or so. It is in Himachal Pradesh, 249 glacial lakes have been identified, of which 11 are considered to be ‘potentially dangerous’. The Himalayas have the largest concentration of glaciers outside polar caps with a staggering number of 9575 glaciers within India territory and of it 1239 lies in Himachal Pradesh alone. Glaciers and ice-bodies cover a total of 2472.49 sq km (4.44%) of the total area of 55673 sq km in the State. One particularly risky lake in Himachal Pradesh, namely, the Gepang Gath, which threatens threatens the Manali-Leh National Highway and the downstream villages.

While the issue of melting of snow in the hills has been a focus for long, not much concern is being expressed about the reckless development policies which are posing a serious threat to the mountain ecosystem. The hills are being shorn of the green cover, large chunks of forests have been gobbled by hydroelectric plants, mining projects, cement plants, roads and real estate projects. It’s not only climate change but also reckless ‘development’ that is not only bringing about a lifestyle change in the hilly region but also leading to devastation. This has serious implications for the future generations. Although extensive studies have been made on various aspects of the change but still not much is in the policy discourse. Dialogue Highway, which collaborates with Dialogue-en-Humanite, is therefore making a humble effort to contribute to the wider debate on the Himalayan Ecology by bringing the focus onto the mighty Himalayas. A two day dialogue is being held at Solan (in northwest Himalayas) from Jan 31-Feb 1, 2016. This brings together a large number of experts, judges, policy makers, scientists, activists, and civil society. #