Brief Communication: An Ice-Debris Avalanche in the Nupchu Valley, Kanchenjunga Conservation Area, Eastern Nepal

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Abstract Beginning in December 2020, a series of small-to-medium, torrent-like pulses commenced upon a historic debris cone located within the Nupchu valley, Kanchenjunga Conservation Area (KCA), Nepal. Sometime between 16 and 21 August 2022 a comparatively large ice-debris avalanche event occurred, covering an area of 0.6 km^2 with a total estimated volume of order 10^6 m^3. The area of the debris cone left by the August 2022 event increased the historic debris cone area by 0.2 km^2 (total area: 0.6 km^2). Although no human or livestock deaths occurred, the increase in torrent-like pulses of debris upon this historic debris cone since 2020 exemplifies a style of mass movement that may become increasingly common as air temperatures rise in the region. Although the magnitude of this event was small compared to events like the 2021 Chamoli avalanche, the widespread distribution and frequency of comparable events presents a substantial, and potentially increasing, hazard across High Mountain Asia.

1 Introduction

Large magnitude but low frequency events in the high mountains can include a variety of familiar and poorly understood cryospheric processes, including glacial lake outburst floods (GLOFs) (Lamsal et al. 2014), snow/ice/rock avalanches (Shugar et al. 2021), landslide-induced avalanches and floods (Byers et al. 2019), englacial conduit floods (Rounce et al. 2017), and others (see: Byers et al. 2022). Today, enhanced communications and remote sensing technologies enable rapid identification and location of such events, often within hours of their occurrence. Many, however, remain unreported because of their remoteness, inaccessibility, poor communications, and/or absence of people (see: Byers et al. 2020). In this *Brief Communication,* we report on a large ice-debris avalanche that occurred sometime between 16 and 21 August 2022 in the Kanchenjunga Conservation Area (KCA), eastern Nepal. The event is noteworthy not only because of its probable linkages to climate change impacts in the region, but also because local residents were unaware of its occurrence, as were the Government of Nepal and climate change research entities in Kathmandu. Here we briefly document the event and describe its present and future implications for local communities, scientists, and governments.

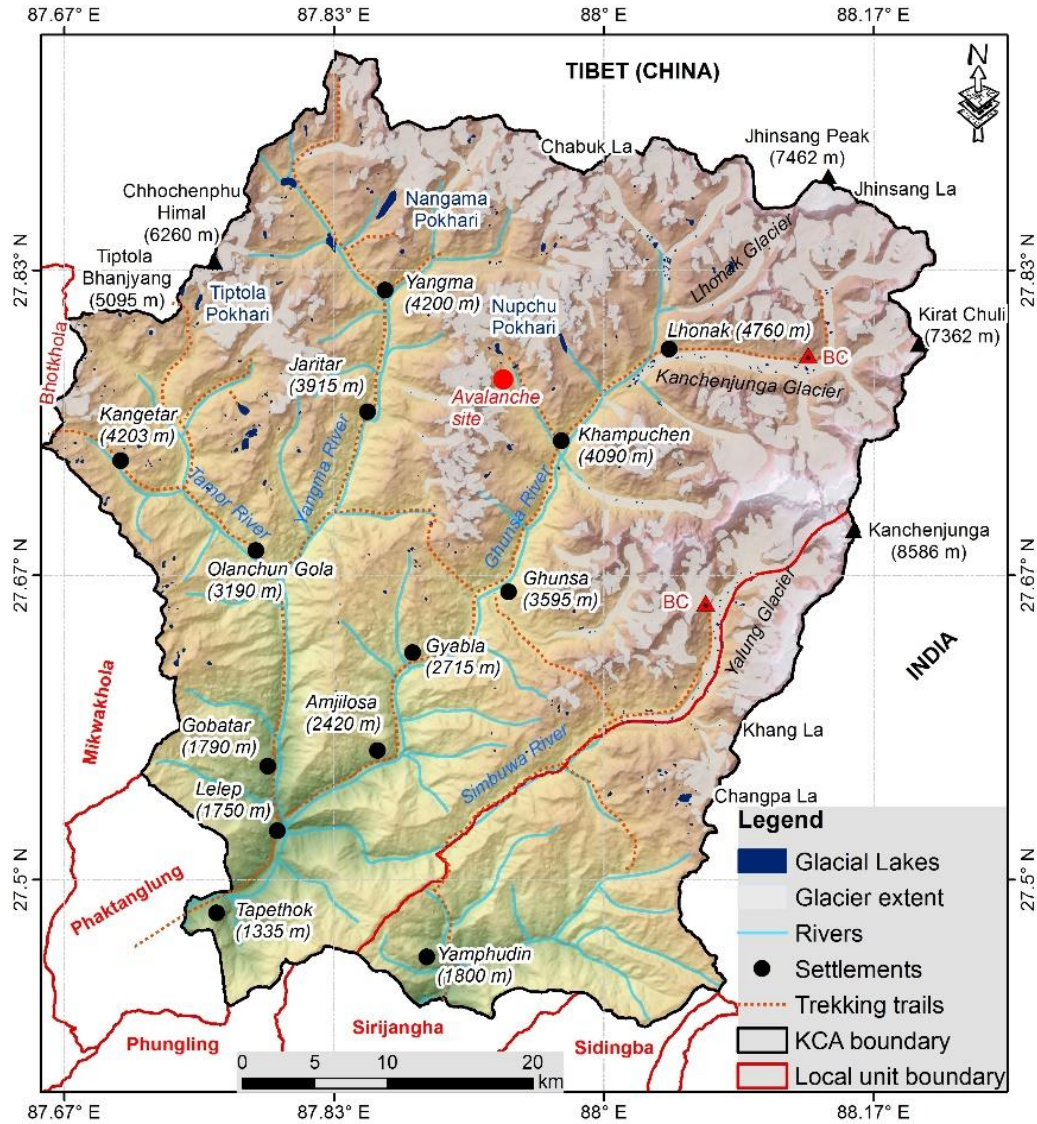



Figure 1. Kanchenjunga Conservation Area and location of the Nupchu ice-debris avalanche.

2 Setting

The KCA is a 2,035 km^2 protected area established in 1997 by the Nepalese Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation, with management responsibility handed over to local communities in 2006 (WWF Nepal 2018) (Figure 1). It is home to a range of ethnic groups of primarily Tibeto-Burman origin that include Limbu, Rai, Tamang, Gurung, Magar, Chhetri, and Sherpa (Thapa 2009). Livelihoods were traditionally based upon agriculture, livestock raising, and trade with Tibet, but globalization, outmigration, and new road construction over the past 15 years has rapidly changed the character of both the social and environmental landscape. The South Asian monsoon dominates weather patterns, with most rainfall falling between June and September (Kandel et al. 2019).

Based upon an analysis of 1962−2000 satellite imagery, valley and mountain glaciers in the KCA cover approximately 488 $\pm$ 29 km^2 and exhibit an overall negative glacier surface area loss of 0.5 $\pm$ 0.2% yr^{-1}

65   (Racoviteanu et al. 2015). Valley glaciers are largely debris-covered and have been receding since the
66   most recent maximum during the Little Ice Age. Hooker (1854), for example, wrote in 1849 of
67   observing glacial moraines that provided proof "…of glaciers having once descended to from 8,000 to
68   10,000 feet in every Sikkim and east Nepal valley…" (Hooker 1854: 166). The British alpinist Freshfield
69   (1903: 236) writes of the "glacial shrinkage" he encountered in the Lhonak region in 1899, as well as
70   throughout both the Nepal and Sikkim sides of the Kanchenjunga massif. Although the Kanchenjunga
71   region received some of the earliest study, exploration, and mountaineering expeditions in Nepal by
72   outsiders (Thapa 2009), relatively little glacier and cryospheric hazards research has been conducted
73   to date. For example, until 2019 only one GLOF event was on record for the region (Watanabe et al.
74   1998; ICIMOD 2011), although subsequent research revealed that at least seven others had occurred
75   since 1921 (Byers et al. 2020). The Nupchu valley, where the ice-debris avalanche of concern occurred,
76   is used seasonally for yak herding, potato farming, and tourism, with four operational tourist lodges in
77   the village of Kampuchen as of the fall of 2022 (Figure 1).

78   **3 Methods**
79
80   Field-based observations and assessments of Nupchu Pokhari (glacial lake), other nearby lakes, and
81   the ice-debris avalanche were conducted between 1–20 September 2022. Methods included GPS-
82   based route mapping, photography of avalanche features, oral testimony, and literature reviews.
83   Historic (declassified KH-9 Hexagon satellite imagery; see: Maurer et al. 2019; Dehecq et al. 2020) and
84   recent (Planet Dove and SuperDove) satellite imagery revealed the sequence of avalanche/debris flow
85   events between 1975 and 2023 (Figure 2). Numerical simulations of the avalanche were conducted
86   using R.Avaflow version 3 (Mergili and Pudasaini 2014–2023; Mergili et al. 2017), a state of the art
87   software that has been used globally to study ice/rock avalanches events (Zhang 2022). Numerical
88   simulations were used to provide upper limit volume estimation of the avalanche, which were
89   constrained by field observations. We used the parameters from Zhang et al. (2022) to produce a
90   single-phase model scenario for three different volumes: 1, 2.5, and 5 million m^3. For calibration, we
91   modified the internal friction angle of the mixture to match the extension of the debris left by event.
92   For the terrain elevation, an ALOS PALSAR 12.5 m DEM was used (AP_13152_FBD_F0540_RT1) (ASF
93   DAAC 2014).

94   **4 The Event**

95   The investigation of the Nupchu valley was initiated by local concerns about Nupchu Pokhari
96   (27.790708° N, 87.934275° E) as being one of the most dangerous glacial lakes in terms of a potential
97   GLOF (Figure 1). Periodic, smaller floods from the upper Nupchu valley were reported, and assumed
98   locally to have originated in the Nupchu Pokhari, although no supporting evidence was available. Our
99   field reconnaissance results of Nupchu Pokhari on 12 September 2022, however, suggested that the
100   lake posed a moderate risk of flooding, largely based on the absence of overhanging ice and other
101   potential flood triggers. This assessment corroborates the findings of Rounce et al. (2017) which
102   concluded that the 0.129 km^2 Nupchu Pokhari presented only a moderate risk of flooding because of
103   (a) no apparent growth between 2000 and 2015, (b) absence of avalanche pathways into the lake (i.e.,
104   in line with the direction of the lake and its outflow), and (c) absence of landslide pathways entering
105   the lake.

106   The August 2022 ice/debris avalanche event was unexpected. Field staff had conducted a
107   reconnaissance of the valley below Nupchu Pokhari in early August 2022 to check out potential

108 camping sites, at which time the upper valley was primarily pastureland. When the field team and A.C.
109 Byers returned in early September, the original path was blocked by massive ice-debris avalanche
110 material (27.774328° N, 87.941064° E) that had clearly occurred at some point in the interim (Figure
111 2). Our team and *dzopkio* (yak-cattle crossbreeds used as pack animals) were nevertheless able to
112 climb up and over the avalanche debris to the upper Nupchu valley, but at the time the source and
113 triggers related to the event remained unknown.

114 The original historic debris cone was found to have covered an area 0.402 km^2 that had been relatively
115 stable for at least 45 years, based upon the oldest satellite imagery available (i.e., 1975) (Dehecq et al.
116 2020) (Panel A, Figure 2). Time series satellite images revealed the periodic occurrence of surficial
117 debris flows upon this original deposition. That is, beginning in 2020, a series of small-to-medium,
118 torrent-like pulses commenced (Panel C through G, Figure 2), culminating in the relatively large event
119 that occurred sometime between 16 and 21 August 2022 (Panel H, Figure 2). The area of the debris
120 cone left by the August 2022 event increased the original area covered by 0.2 km^2 (total area: 0.6
121 km^2). Of the three different volume estimates tested (1, 2.5, and 5 million m^3) using R.Avaflow, an
122 avalanche volume of 1 x 10^6 m^3 most consistently matched the extent (red line) and depth of the new
123 debris cone deposited as determined by our field observations (Figure 3).

125 Our team was unable to locate the event on any seismographs, most likely related to the absence of
126 instrumentation in this part of the eastern Himalayas. Based upon direct field observations as well as
127 satellite imagery, the avalanche had clearly blocked and temporarily dammed the water from the
128 Nupchu Khola (river) at its onset, which was nevertheless able to cut down through the ice and
129 sediment deposited to form a steep canyon estimated at >10 m depth. The presence of shrubs (e.g., *J.
130 indica*) fully stripped of their bark was testimony to the high velocities of the flood- and meltwater
131 produced by frictional forces during the event, a phenomenon reported for other rockfall-induced
132 landslides in Nepal (Byers et al. 2019).

134 **5 Discussion**

136 Interestingly, individuals in the community of Kampuchen, only 5 km downstream of the event, were
137 unaware of the avalanche. Yak herds had already returned from the high pastures to the village by
138 early August, the community was busy harvesting potatoes and preparing for the fall tourist season,
139 and no obvious changes in the Nupchu Khola had been observed (e.g., Kargel 2014 for a description of
140 changes in the Seti Kosi prior to the catastrophic flooding of 5 May 2012). Thus, authorities in
141 Taplejung and Kathmandu were also unaware of the event as of September 2022, which is typical of
142 many large-scale cryospheric events in remote regions of the Himalayas (e.g., Byers et al. 2022).

144 Still, the acceleration of torrent-like pulses of debris upon the historic debris cone since 2020 suggests
145 that they could have been linked to contemporary warming trends, similar to larger-scale mass
146 wasting events found elsewhere in the Himalaya (e.g., Shugar et al. 2021; Kääb et al. 2021; Taylor et
147 al. 2023). If these increase in frequency as well as magnitude in the coming decades within the
148 Kanchenjunga region, they could include such events as new GLOFs, englacial conduit floods, rockfall-
149 induced rock avalanches, and other phenomena (e.g., Byers et al. 2017, 2022).Vulnerable villages,
150 such as Kampuchen, may wish to consider the installation of preventative floodwater diversion
151 mechanisms, such as the rock-filled gabion walls currently protecting tourist lodges in the Mt. Everest
152 region (e.g., Rounce et al. 2017; Byers et al. 2022) using participatory processes as outlined in
153 Watanabe et al. (2016).

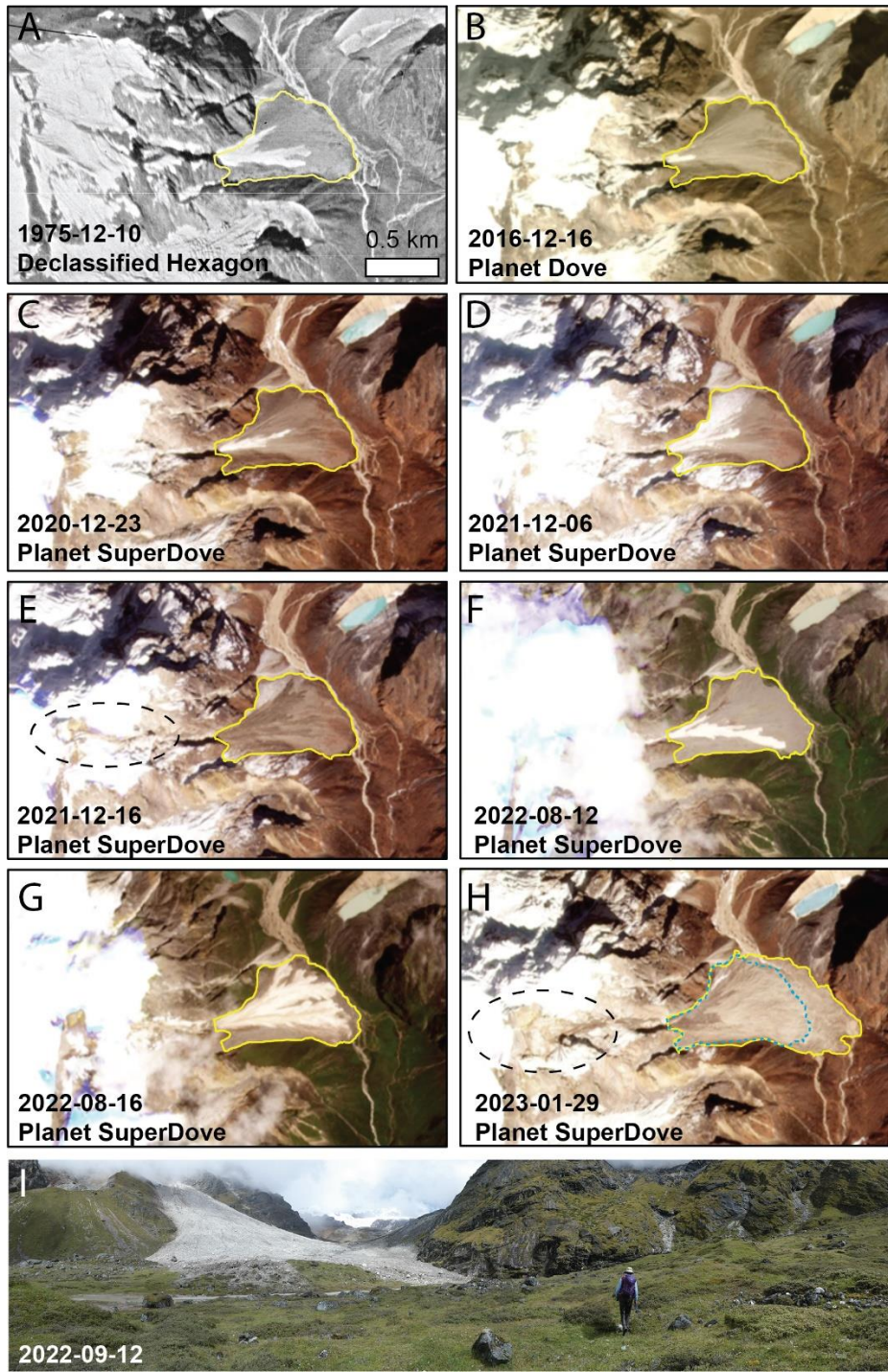
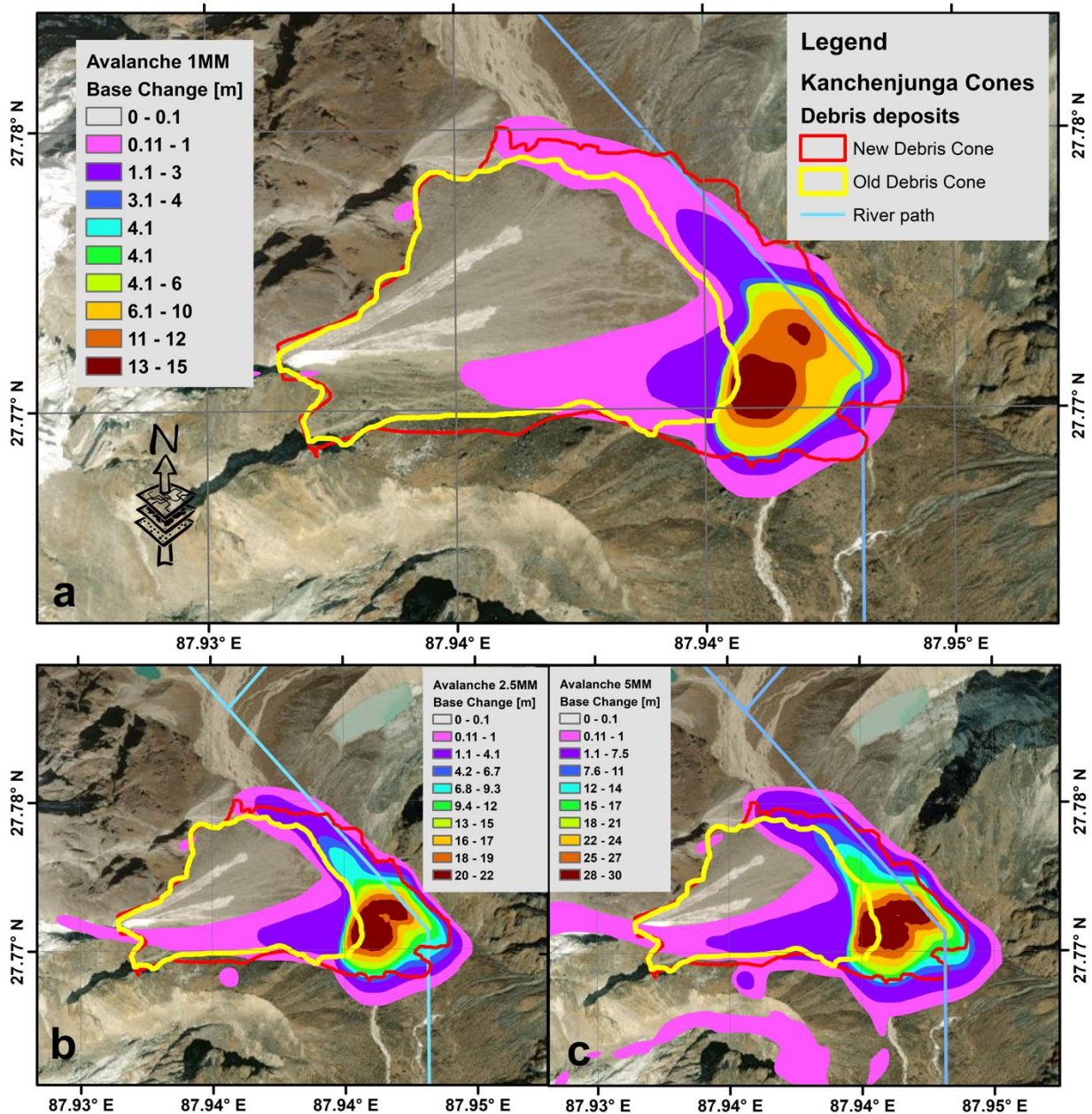



Figure 2. Time series satellite images showing the periodic occurrence of surficial debris flows upon the original deposition. These appear to have accelerated in both frequency in magnitude beginning several years ago, leading up to the main event that occurred between 16 and 21 August 2022. Blue dashed outline in panel H is the 1975 outline of the debris cone, while the dashed black circle identifies the failure zone. The photograph at the bottom provides an oblique view of the ice/debris avalanche about three weeks after it occurred (photograph by A. Byers). Panel H shows an image from early 2023, as imagery from immediately after the ice-avalanche in mid-August 2022 were partially obscured by clouds (KH-9 imagery courtesy of USGS; Planet Dove and SuperDove imagery courtesy of Planet Lab PBC).

Figure 3. Base change modeled with R.Avaflow for three different avalanche volumes: 1 x10^6 m^3 (top), 2.5 x10^6 m^3 (bottom left) and 5 x10^6 m^3 (bottom right). Of the three estimates, 1 x 10^6 m^3 most consistently matched the extent and depth of the new debris cone deposited in August 2022 (red line; the yellow line represents the extent of the historic debris cone).

5 Conclusion

Beginning in 2020, a series of small-to-medium, torrent-like pulses commenced upon a historic debris cone located approximately 2 km down valley from the lake, culminating in a relatively large avalanche event that occurred sometime between 16 and 21 August 2022. The August 2022 event deposited debris with an area of 0.6 km^2 and estimated volume in the order of 10^6 m^3. No fatalities from the event occurred because of the absence of humans and livestock in the vicinity when the

177   event occurred. Likewise, no impoundment of the Nupchu Khola, and formation of a potentially
178   dangerous backwater lake, occurred as a result of debris blockage, although such scenarios happen
179   routinely in high mountain environments.
180
181   The improvement of remote area event reporting mechanisms, especially to authorities in the capital,
182   Kathmandu, could help with the development of hazard mitigation technologies and response.
183   Likewise, more systematic monitoring of cryospheric events by scientists, using remote sensing
184   platforms and hazard mapping tools, could help with the development of more effective early warning
185   systems for vulnerable communities, livestock, and adventure tourists. Ultimately, this could lead to a
186   minimization of losses and damage due to multi-hazard events.
187

188   *Data availability.* Declassified KH-9 Hexagon satellite imagery is available at
189   https://earthexplorer.usgs.gov/. Planet Dove and SuperDove satellite imagery is available
190   at https://www.planet.com/explorer/. The ALOS PALSAR DEM "AP_13152_FBD_F0540_RT1" used for
191   the R.Avaflow is available at https://asf.alaska.edu.
192

193   *Author contributions*. ACB conceived the study and wrote the original narrative, with contributions
194   from MS-V, DS, DM, MBC, and RA. MBC created Figure 1, DS and RA created Figure 2, and MS-V
195   created Figure 3. MS-V conducted the numerical simulations of avalanche volumes shown in Figure 3.
196   All authors revised and contributed to the final manuscript.
197

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