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The Everest Mess

The following is a speech delivered by Doug Scott on 6 June 2019 to a tourism industry conference held in Kathmandu in the aftermath of headlines about overcrowding on Everest and its environmental impact.

I have been lured to the Himalaya many times, to be in the landscape and with mountain people. I suspect it's the mountain people more than any other factor that brings visitors back time and again. I was immediately struck by how warm and hospitable Himalayan people are when I started visiting, twice in 1972 and again in 1975. Between these visits, Nepal's first tourism master plan was drafted.

The first to visit the Himalaya were bands of nomads during the archaic period 40,000 years ago, but since I've only got half an hour I better move on. There is hardly a Himalayan valley that hasn't had in residence nomads but also sages, saints and holy men seeking peace and quiet from the madding crowds. The *mani* walls are evidence of the devotion practised in the Himalaya and also the holy caves, gompas and monasteries. Most of the caves seemed to have been inhabited by Padmasambhava and Milarepa. Did anyone know the Himalaya better? What great tour guides they would have been.

I'm sure these Buddhist saints would agree with William Blake, 'Great things are done when men and mountains meet; This is not done by jostling in the street.' The Himalaya is a magical place. Although now old and feeble and unable to climb peaks I still have an excuse to come out checking on Community Action Nepal's projects and still get above the treeline.

No wonder the Himalaya have been called the abode of the gods. Europeans were first lured here in the 17th century. They were also holy men but this time Jesuits and definitely not there to commune with nature as they found the Himalaya inhospitable places of desolation and horror: they were seeking the legendary patriarch Prester John and his lost Christian kingdom.

Then came the British from India to trade with Tibet and also China by the back door: Warren Hastings, Bogle and potatoes. The British arrived in ever-increasing numbers: explorers, cartographers, geologists, plant-hunters and the first Himalayan tourists. By 1856, as Ruskin put it, 'mountain gloom gave way to mountain glory.' The mountains after Wordsworth, Coleridge and Keats were now appreciated aesthetically.

Then came mountaineers. With the Alps worked out, they arrived in the Himalaya seeking new challenges and new routes. Why? Because new routes are where it's at. Why? Because there is more uncertainty as to the outcome

when setting off where no one has been before. There are still more peaks over 6,000m unclimbed than climbed. There is much to do everywhere for serious mountaineers except on Everest, which is now climbed out.

After the mountaineers came high-altitude tourism, the collectors and those who regard the Himalaya as an athletics track, racing up mountains. More about Everest later.

The problem of mass tourism destroying the very thing everyone signs up to experience is becoming familiar in the Himalaya. No one goes to the popular areas these days to find solitude. The Himalaya is no longer a place of peace, serenity and spiritual renewal due to the constant distraction of fellow trekkers. It's now hard to make your trek a walking meditation at the height of the season, when you're jostling on the trail. My personal experience recently in the Everest region was that there are so many trekkers they are backing up along the trails and causing delays. It's hard to take a photograph now without another trekker getting in the shot. A disappointed friend of mine visiting in April found the tea-houses and lodges to be like fast-food joints, where they want to get people in and out as fast as possible.

How to reverse this situation and return to the most beautiful and dramatic mountain landscape on the planet, to a place where mountain people are not overwhelmed by the sheer number of visitors, and the visitors are not so disappointed?

Quotas

Would it be wise to work out the carrying capacity of the Everest and other popular trails by gathering together a consortium of shrewd men and women from many disciplines with expertise in environmental impact, tourism, and with knowledge of local people? And then apply quotas. If so, how can this be achieved without causing offence to the visitor and not reduce the income to the local people?

Helicopters

There have been many insurance frauds committed over the last ten years or more, centring on the demand for helicopters to evacuate trekkers for fraudulent reasons. Helicopter companies, agents and hospitals have grown rich at the expense of the insurance companies and ultimately, the trekker. Some French insurance companies have already started to refuse to insure their nationals for travel in Nepal. Other countries are planning to follow. We all remember how quiet Nepal was during the Maoist insurgency, when the foreign minstries in many countries recommended travellers avoid Nepal. No insurance equals no trekkers equals no problem. Continuing on this path will solve all problems of overcrowding and associated environmental issues.

Everest and Other 8,000m Summits

Before 1986, there was one expedition per season per route, which was wonderful, with time and space to be there, communing with the mountain as well as each other. In those days you just had to wait for an opening.

After 1972 we had to wait again until October 1975. But we didn't mind waiting. It was part of the experience. Now, people are impatient and want to rush to achieve their goals and move on. It's especially good when coming down; the best part of any climb is when you're just off the mountain, out of danger, before having to deal with porters and so forth: clear head, returning strength, internal dialogue slowed down, space between thoughts. All have seen Nirmal Purja Magar's recent images from Everest where now the climber may be one of a thousand people at the base of mountain. And with 500 people on the mountain there's no chance to commune with the divine in nature, nor with one's inner self.

Why should Everest be treated any differently to Mont Blanc or the Matterhorn? We must respect the fact it is the highest, a world heritage site, considered to be of outstanding universal value and to many, the abode of the gods, and in particular Miyolangsangma, the deity of the Sherpa communities.

We have to discuss not only how to protect this sacred mountain, and all mountains, but also protect what is sacred to mountaineering. Respecting the style of the first ascent. Given the large number of people now being attracted to the summit of Everest by the original route and the inevitable deaths, it seems necessary that the number of permits will have to be limited, once the carrying capacity of Everest has been calculated, as is done on Denali, the highest peak in North America. But how to protect the mountain from the tyranny of numbers and at the same time accommodate those who have come to rely on Everest and other popular mountains for their income?

Here are suggestions from Sherpas, western climbers and other interested parties. Our charity CAN only helps where help has been asked for and where it is really needed. We are not donor driven: telling the villagers what we think they need. Similarly, I make these suggestions on behalf of friends in Nepal who have asked me to do so, since the commercialisation of Everest and other Himalayan peaks is largely unplanned and uncontrolled.

Consider making it a stipulation that a permit for Everest will only be given to those who have climbed at least one, if not two other 7,000m peaks elsewhere in Nepal first. If not, at least return to checking client competence. We used to have a letter from the Alpine Club to verify our competence as climbers.

If no restrictions are put in place then will have to allocate teams to certain days: not all on the one most favourable. This will not go down well with those stuck with bad weather periods.

Refuse to allow agents to operate on Everest who have previously been shown to be incompetent and have cut costs by employing inexperienced staff, placed both staff and clients in danger, and have brought incompetent clients with little or no experience who rush on when they should turn back, driven by overwhelming ambition. We hear of fights breaking out at base camp, of teams stealing each other's oxygen.

Increase the permit fee for the general well being of the mountain and the people who live around it and work on it.

To counterbalance the above restrictions, use peak royalties to improve the working environment of the local guides by ensuring full insurance cover but also setting up a welfare and compensation board to cover accident and death to ensure financial help to bereaved wives and children.

Establish a fairly remunerated mountain rescue group from an elite core of Sherpa and other local mountain guides on stand-by to assist with rescues. This same group could be employed to fix ropes at the beginning of each season and to remove them at the end of each season. We should pay Sherpas and other guides well for collecting, sorting and recycling rubbish and waste from off the mountain and glaciers.

If Everest hopefuls have to climb elsewhere in Nepal before qualifying for an Everest permit, then this will enable others in Nepal to benefit from high-mountain tourism and not just those in the shadow of Everest.

Is the promotion of mountain tourism compatible with the enjoyment of high-altitude tourism? There is so much else to discuss on this including encouraging the dispersal of tourists to less visited areas. And possibly at less visited times of the year. There is work here for local mountain guides and sirdars to explore new trekking routes, especially now it becomes more difficult to find treks away from new roads and jeep tracks.

There is also work to be done developing capacity in previously untrekked regions to enable local rural communities there to benefit from mountain tourism, inducting homestay and lodge owners, guides and so forth into the art of sustainable tourism and supporting them to tap into government funding.

There are many success stories here in Nepal: leading the world with animal conservation, and in particular the increase in rhino population; vast areas of afforestation, when at one time we all thought Nepal would end up a mountain desert; success in encouraging trekking lodges and expeditions to use other sources of fuel and not the last of the Himalayan juniper; vastly improved literacy; establishing and maintaining peace following ten years of Maoist insurgency; devolving power to the grassroots level; and how wonderful it is to start seeing some streets of Kathmandu free of litter and parts of Thamel free of traffic. Perhaps one day we will be able to drink water from the Bagmati.

Fixing Everest can be done, and with the resourcefulness and resilience of the Nepali people, it will be done.

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Why Is Fixing Everest So Hard?

The 2019 Everest season, *writes Ian Wall*, was one of the most controversial since the mountain was first climbed in 1953, on a par with the tragedy of 1996 and the deaths of 16 high-altitude workers, buried in a serac avalanche in 2014. Heavy media coverage has prompted questions and a demand for change. Under pressure from negative headlines and foreign expedition operators, several 'consultation' meetings have been held in Kathmandu to

try to gain an insight into the depth of anger and concern and to explore options for reform.

The Nepal Mountaineering Association held one such interaction on 1 July 2019. Its panel comprised the president of the Trekking Agencies' Association of Nepal (TAAN), the former government minister for environment and technology, the president of the Nepal Mountaineering Association (NMA), the director-general of tourism and the chair of the NMA Environment Conservation Committee. It was stated from the outset that this was an information sharing assembly and that the NMA would not comment on any suggestions that might be made at the meeting. Sadly many of those in positions of influence in Nepal are very often looking for financial or personal gain and not enough are there for the benefit of the people they are supposedly representing, although there are rare and wonderful exceptions. The majority attending this particular meeting all felt the exercise was simply a PR job for Everest and an opportunity for those with political aspirations to further their cause. Few believed these consultations would actually achieve any positive outcomes.

In 1990, as Nepal moved towards a return to democracy, the NMA broadened its membership not only to those people directly involved in mountaineering but also to commercial organisations that 'supported' mountaineering. There was a dramatic increase in the number of 'commercial members' operating outlets, food stores, equipment stores, manufacturing industries and agents as opposed to mountaineers. Imagine the BMC run by commercial interests. This commercial bias continues today and manifested itself at the meeting. Many of those commenting avoided the issue at hand, the problems on Everest, instead promoting their specific commercial enterprises. Suggestions were made concerning the improvement of the EBC trail, lodge hygiene, lodge costs, waste disposal along the trail and so forth. These are valid concerns, but not much to do with mountaineering as it is practised on Everest and an absence of relevant mountain experience among those attendees who spoke up. There was from many quarters a complete denial of the traffic jam that sparked international concern and other well-documented issues from the 2019 season. The meeting was a bust, and nothing will come of it.

So why is it so hard to fix Everest? You can see why at a glance from two images. One is a photograph from 1988 taken by Ed Webster of Robert Anderson heading up from the South Col towards the summit having climbed a new line on the east face. There are no fixed ropes, meaning no Sherpas to fix them, no support climbers carrying oxygen, because he is climbing without, no collection of tents at the South Col because this is the cusp of the great change that saw Everest developed as a commercial peak.

Compare this image to that taken by Nirmal 'Nims' Purja in May 2019 that was published around the world showing hordes of people approaching the South Summit standing in the now infamous 'traffic jam'. ('Yes,' ran the headline for *Outside Online*, 'this image is real.') Now put a price tag of $50,000 on the head of every climber seen in each of these two images

and the numbers soon stack up. The typical cost for climbing Everest with a foreign agency is $45,000 and up. With a local Nepali operator it ranges between $25,000 and $40,000. No one in Nepal wants to reduce the contribution Everest makes not only to government officials but also to every level of the Everest support mechanism within the tourism sector. This is why the suggestion to double the permit fee and so halve the numbers on Everest won't happen. It works for the government but operators won't want to take that course of action for fear of losing money.

Nepali law states that only Nepali agents can operate on Everest. So every climber and every foreign expedition outfitter has to work through a Nepali agent. It's a system that acts like a cartel and like most cartels lacks transparency. Every step towards the summit of Everest is managed for profit. Many responsible local agents and guides will tell you privately there are unscrupulous operators offering Everest at a price that doesn't stretch to providing properly qualified staff and infrastructure. The consequence of this is that clients are not necessarily provided appropriate support, especially in challenging weather conditions. It's no coincidence that the fatality rate on other 8,000m peaks was much higher this spring that it was on Everest: there isn't the same infrastructure to help out cheap outfitters who cut corners.

Lack of client experience featured highly in the NMA session. It was felt that many operators turn a blind eye for financial gain. Technical training sessions and the level of luxury provided at EBC contribute to the impression among inexperienced clients that the agent or guide will look after them, whatever happens. It was felt there should be a mandatory clause in all permit applications that require a potential client to have spent several nights camping above 7,500m, and be able to prove it.

Another concern is how Indian authorities offer financial incentives to climbers in government service for summiting Everest, encouraging false summit claims. This also plays into the hands of the low-cost operators, since many Indian clients use them. In June 2019 the Indian Mountaineering Foundation concluded its 2020 Everest Expedition selection and training program by stating it was the best-attended course the IMF had ever run. The numbers of Indian mountaineers on Everest will surely increase next season.

Of course the issue of helicopters came up. Today there are many companies offering sightseeing flights to EBC and these numbers are dramatically boosted with rescue and logistical flights. The fact you can no longer be in Khumbu's main valley without hearing a helicopter raised concern. Anger was also expressed concerning the lack of government reaction to the insurance scam that has also been highlighted in the world's media. Again, because of the immense investment in helicopters and the hidden links between operators and politicians, it's unlikely that anything will change soon. (See 'Nepal 2018-19' in Area Notes for more on this.)

The perennial questions of where and how the government uses peak fees raised the blood pressure of many participants. The total for Everest alone in 2019 was $4.39m, not much in a European context but a meaningful sum

in Kathmandu. It's a good question that never gets answered. Following rumours that Everest might be closed next season, the government has issued a strong denial, together with documents showing that discussions have taken place about Everest at the highest of ministerial levels.

Why is it so hard to fix Everest? The simple answer is that those with the power to implement solutions are the very people making the most from the greed and chaos that currently exists there. Some climbers on the mountain are dedicated amateurs, mountain lovers; some others see the opportunity for fame and financial gain, to the exclusion of all moral or environmental concerns. Some clients, once they have summited, return home set themselves up as 'motivational speakers' and cash in: greed isn't restricted to Nepalis. Many foreign guides working on the mountain, who return to Everest year after year and actually experience these problems, know exactly what needs to be done to resolve the situation. Yet they are largely powerless against vested interests, including a small group of powerful Sherpas who have political connections that stretch to the very top. Until these powerful chains of greed and corruption are broken, little will change.

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Treating the Dead with Respect

Climbing Mount Everest, *writes Jonathan Westaway*, has long been a metaphor for extreme achievement: something that is both hard and hazardous. And, over the years, the bodies of those seasoned Sherpas who perished in accidents or climbers who succumbed to the cold and altitude have testified to just how dangerous it is to attempt. But recent overcrowding has led to snaking queues of climbers above 8,000m have been forcing climbers to spend dangerously long periods at altitude, leading to a spate of 'blue sky' deaths.

The adventure filmmaker Elia Saikaly described his recent experience on Everest, where at least 11 people died descending from the summit this season:

I cannot believe what I saw up there. Death. Carnage. Chaos. Lineups. Dead bodies on the route and in tents at camp four. People who I tried to turn back who ended up dying. People being dragged down. Walking over bodies. Everything you read in the sensational headlines all played out on our summit night.

What, if anything, can be done to ensure that these and past human remains on Everest are treated with dignity and respect, in ways that reflect the wishes of the deceased and their families? And how can we prevent a new wave of deaths during the next summit season?

Recovering bodies from Everest is extremely difficult and hugely expensive. High altitudes, strong winds and sub-zero temperatures make climbing Everest enough of a challenge, let alone freeing and carrying down a newly frozen body. Recovery expeditions risk the lives of Sherpas and other

high-altitude workers. Some corpses have remained in limbo for decades, becoming landmark features in the landscape. Their images circulate on social media and have been given nicknames by mountaineers, something that has caused significant distress to families and loved ones.

Sometimes religious sensitivities lead to action. After lobbying by families, in 2016 the government of West Bengal paid $90,000 to recover the bodies of two Bengali climbers, enabling them to be returned for cremation according to Hindu rites. Western states offer no such support. Expensive insurance plans that cover recovery are rarely purchased. Some grieving families request that their loved ones be left united with the mountain that they loved. For decades, climbers have made improvised disposals of their teammates' bodies down the steepest faces of Everest into the glacial basins below. Now, as climate change and melting glaciers reveal more and more bodies, new approaches are required.

The Chinese and Nepali authorities have different ways of managing the mountain. On the Tibetan side, the Chinese mountaineering authorities only allow experienced climbers to ascend. They have also been known to clear bodies from the north-east ridge in an effort to clean up the image of commercial mountaineering in Chinese-occupied Tibet.

Nepal is less tightly regulated, leading to cut-price expeditions and overcrowding. In the absence of proficiency checks, the country attracts inexperienced climbers seduced by the social status of reaching the summit of Everest. They risk not only their own lives, but those of others too. Inevitably, more people are currently dying on the Nepali side of Everest.

The Nepali authorities have begun to coordinate annual clean up expeditions to remove litter from the mountain, which frequently bring down human remains in the process. However, they often lack the means to identify them and there is no clear indication that they are disposed of in culturally appropriate ways.

The governing body of the world's mountaineering associations, the International Climbing and Mountaineering Federation (UIAA), urgently needs to bring together all stakeholders in Everest's future. Engaging in dialogue with Chinese state agencies on activities in occupied Tibet is complicated, but the UIAA could assist the Nepali state in tightening regulation and implementing proficiency tests for prospective climbers to tackle the overcrowding that will otherwise risk further deaths next season.

Agencies such as the International Committee of the Red Cross and the International Commission on Missing Persons should also be invited to share their experience with local NGOs and state agencies to improve methods of locating and identifying human remains as well as the recording of their removal and disposal, and the notification of next of kin.

Finally, the UIAA needs to develop a values-based code of ethics for the mountain that would bring together not only the above parties, but also the insurance industry, adventure travel companies and, most importantly, the Sherpa community. The aim must be to develop a shared understanding of how to look after the mountain and its climbers.

As the labour force on the front line of dealing with human remains on the mountain, the Sherpa community should be central to this process. Here, the UIAA should look to existing successful models that prioritise indigenous rights, such as the San Code of Ethics. After decades of invasive and exploitative research into their genes and culture, the hunter-gatherer San people of southern Africa developed this ethical framework with an NGO to ensure that research is mutually beneficial and conducted in line with San values.

There are no easy solutions to the bodies on Everest, nor the deaths that precede them. But anything other than urgent change will disfigure the mountain and seriously damage commercial mountaineering's reputation for good stewardship. Indifference is not an option.