

The Slippery Slope of Mount Everest

Cassandra Smith

Dr. Meg Streiff

GEOG 308

May 7th, 2016

Sitting on the border of Nepal and Tibet and a part of the Himalayan mountain range is Mount Everest, the highest mountain on Earth. The 29,029 ft summit is also known as Sagarmāthā to the Nepali and Chomolungma to the Tibetan and is their epicenter of culture, history, and tourism. Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay were the first to successfully summit the mountain in 1953. Since then, nearly 4,000 people from all over the world have also summited its peak. Reaching the top of Everest as well as simply climbing any area of the Himalayan range is not an easy task, and it is considered a great feat for those who attempt the trip. However, there are negative as well as positive consequences to the mountainous region being swarmed with tourists and hopeful mountaineers. While increased tourism benefits the local country's economy, it is also a financial burden for climbers and an environmentally damaging endeavor for the region. Overall, it is important for people to understand that climbing expeditions on Mount Everest, while a momentous physical undertaking, leaves in its wake both positive and negative economic, financial, and environmental affects for those exploring and living around the Himalayas.

At first glance, Mount Everest tourism seems extremely beneficial to the country of Nepal. Roughly the size of the state of Tennessee and with a current population of nearly 28 million, Nepal is recored as the poorest country in South Asia. According to Trading Economics, in 2014 Nepal had a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita of 426 US dollars. (www.tradingeconomics.org) In comparison, its neighbor to the south, India had a GDP per capita of nearly 1,262 US dollars in 2014. One of Nepal's largest money and job-producing industries is tourism. Due to local weather patterns the tourism/job season is reduced to only four or five months of the year. However, all members of the surrounding local communities participate in

the trades. (www1.american.edu) Locals work as mountain and trail guides, tea house operators and run additional lodging services. A TED case study explained that, “During the expeditions the Nepali's hired to assist trekkers are fed, lodged, and provided with equipment so they return home with all of their earnings.” (www1.american.edu) This means that the locals who work as mountain guides are not required to pay for their climbing equipment and get to walk away with their earnings. Another added benefit to being a guide is the customary tipping provided by the climbers they helped service up the mountain. Although Nepal is a small and economically poor country, the tourist and research expeditions that Mount Everest and the surrounding landscape attract help to create job opportunities and provide a constantly growing local income.

Along with the revenue that Everest expeditions generate for the surrounding countries, they also highlight very unique and specific cultural traditions. An example of this are the Sherpas, or east mountain people of Nepal and Tibet. Brian Handwerk, a writer for Natural Geographic, states how Western climbers have documented Sherpas as, “A people ideally suited to the rigors of high-altitude climbing; unfailingly positive, stout at altitude, and seemingly resistant to cold.” (Handwerk, news.nationalgeographic.com) Decades of living by and in such



extreme weather at high altitudes has made the Sherpa people the most suitable and well conditioned mountain guides. As well as being one of the first men to summit Everest, Tenzing Norgay was also a Sherpa.

However, according to another Natural Geographic news article, the Sherpa culture was first documented and changed in the early 1900's as Western climbers hired local Sherpas to carry loads of equipment on their expeditions. (news.nationalgeographic.com) It was not until decades after Norgay's initial success that Sherpas began to prosper from the growing commercialization and professionalism of hiring Sherpas as actual *mountain guides*.

Unfortunately, as their business increased, so did their unpublicized deaths in Western media.

Very few Sherpa deaths have been publicly reported throughout the years despite the fact that they remain the ethnic group with the highest percentage of climber deaths. In 2014 an avalanche near the Khumbu Icefall brought that year's annual Sherpa death count to sixteen and into headline news. The event brought to the world's attention that, while climber deaths stay relatively low, the number of returning mountain guides steadily increase. A change in attitude must be considered if the Sherpa traditions and legacy is to continue in a more positive and favorable way.

Besides the hundreds of climbers per season, there is another foreign feature that can be seen riddled up and down the mountain side; trash and human waste. When climbing a mountain it is necessary to to maintain and keep up with normal bodily needs and functions, which include sleeping, breathing, eating and the depositing of waste. Part of the battle of the climb is carrying and taking care of all of these elements, and because there is no time for any unnecessary complications food trash, broken equipment, and feces are typically left on the mountain side. This is an ever growing problem for the environment and the people who live there. Natalie Paris, a travel writer from The Telegraph, wrote that Sherpas are concerned about the waste being a "Health hazard to people dependent on water from rivers fed by the region's melting

glaciers.” Climbers typically relieve themselves in holes dug in the snow which then join the movement of the glaciers as the freezing and melting processes inevitably become a part of the surrounding regions water supply. One system in particular is the Khumbu Glacier watershed. This glacier has already retreated due to increased global warming and now faces the ongoing problem of waste contamination. Informing climbers to carry out waste on their decent from the mountain is one of the ways that this problem is currently being addressed. In 2014, Nepal’s tourism authority declared that those climbing Mount Everest must return with an extra 18 pounds of garbage, in addition to their own. (Harris, www.nytimes.com) Those who don’t comply with the new rule will loose their \$4,000 trash deposit. It is important for climbers to stay humble while climbing the mountain and should remember that the Mountain and the environment came first and should be treated with the utmost respect. Keeping the slopes clean and safe should be a concern for all of those wishing to attempt the climb.

Before someone can even challenge the harsh climate and mountain terrain, a climber must first be prepared to take the financial plunge of the endeavor. A climber’s expenses virtually come down to the style and manner in which they wish to climb and will fall somewhere within the 30-80,000 dollar range. Katherine Tarbox, a writer for TIME magazine and successful Everest climber, broke down the individual costs for the trip from physical training to equipment purchased in a 2012 article. She targeted about \$8,000 would be spent on training because, “You don’t want to step foot on one of the world’s deadliest mountains without being in the best shape of your life.” (Tarbox, business.time.com) She continues to explain that even though she is a marathon runner, she hired a trainer to help her prepare by planning exercises in harsh and tiring conditions so that she could be at peak physical fitness. The next purchase that has to be made



before you even get to the mountain is the equipment, which often times entail buying the most expensive brand so that it ensures peak safety and durability. While the gear today will run upwards of over \$10,000, the hiking experience has indeed gone up with it. The rest of the expenditures will include airfare, a hiking permit, insurance and the paying and tipping of a Sherpa guide. These are all costly, but necessary expenses. Climbing blogger Alan Arnette broke down overall trip costs depending on the route taken, time of year, and with what team/company it's planned with. (www.alanarnette.com) These detailed lists and comparisons give an insight into the type of people that can actually attempt to scale the tallest mountain above sea level; the physically and financially stable mountain lovers form all over the world. This kind of experience is an option for the smallest minority of people, an exclusive undertaking both financially and physically.

Once a climber has secured the money, prepared, trained, arranged all fees and payments, and begun their ascent of the mountain, they quickly find themselves face-to-face with yet another hurdle, seeing the countless bodies of the climbers who have died. Because the mountain trails are at such high altitudes and the trip is already risky to those who are trying to stay alive while climbing, it becomes dangerous to try and save the bodies of those who are dead and

dying. In an article published for the BBC, writer Rachel Nuwer explains that while mountaineers view the deaths as understandable and tragic, everyone else, “Sees the idea that a corpse could remain in plain sight for nearly 20 years mind-boggling.” (Nuwer, www.bc.com) Despite the fact that the bodies continue to remain on the mountain, the crazy part is that due to below freezing temperatures, snow, wind, and high altitude the bodies are perfectly preserved. The preservations lay throughout the snow and ice with their colored suits and equipment serving as trail markers and a glimpse of both the past and the future for new climbers. One such human body landmark is known as “Green Boots,” or Tsewang Paljor, an Indian climber who died in 1996. (Nuwer, www.smithsonianmag.com) Having tried to seek shelter from the wind before reaching his unfortunate fate, Green Boots can now be found lying in a cave close to the peak. Out of the over 4,000 expeditioners that have ever attempted to climb Mount Everest, nearly 200 have met their fate on the mountainside. Despite the 20% odds of meeting an ill-time fate, hundreds of people flock to the region every year. Every climbing season traffic jams increase on the slopes as they become packed with eager travelers.

Before Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay reached the peak in 1953 there were dozens of other unsuccessful climbers who met a deadly fate on top of the mountain. One such climber was George Mallory, a British mountaineer. When asked why he would attempt to climb the mountain knowing that it is extremely dangerous, Mallory responded with, “Because it’s there.” It is this mentality that continues to draw hundreds of climbers to the slopes of the tallest mountain above sea level every year. While its captivating beauty and once in a life time experience are empowering, it is important for future climbers to fully grasp all of Everest’s positive and negative aspects. Mount Everest isn’t just for any man or woman to attempt and

conquer, it is a geographic site full of history and culture and is a viable economic source for an entire country. As well as being an extremely costly excursion, it is also a dangerous one, causing hundreds of deaths in just a few decades. Climbing Mount Everest is an extreme experience that only a select group of people can say they have completed.

Bibliography

- Arnette, Alan. "Everest 2016: How Much Does It Cost to Climb Mount Everest? - The Blog on Alanarnette.com." The Blog on Alanarnettecom. N.p., 21 Dec. 2015. Web. 7 June 2016.
- Handwerk, Brian. "The Sherpas of Mount Everest." National Geographic. National Geographic Society, 10 May 2002. Web. 7 June 2016.
- "Nepal GDP per Capita | 1960-2016 | Data | Chart | Calendar | Forecast." Nepal GDP per Capita | 1960-2016 | Data | Chart | Calendar | Forecast. N.p., n.d. Web. 7 June 2016.
- "Nepal Population (LIVE)." Nepal Population (2016). N.p., n.d. Web. 7 June 2016.
- Nuwer, Rachel. "Death in the Clouds: The Problem with Everest's 200+ Bodies." BBC. N.p., 9 Oct. 2015. Web. 7 June 2016.
- Nuwer, Rachel. "There Are Over 200 Bodies on Mount Everest, And They." Smithsonian. N.p., 28 Nov. 2012. Web. 7 June 2016.
- Paris, Natalie. "Mount Everest 'of Excrement'" The Telegraph. Telegraph Media Group, 4 Mar. 2015. Web. 7 June 2016.
- "Sherpas: The Invisible Men of Everest." National Geographic. National Geographic Society, n.d. Web. 17 June 2016.
- Tarbox, Katherine. "The Economics of Everest | TIME.com." Business Money The Economics of Everest Comments. N.p., 12 Jan. 2012. Web. 7 June 2016.
- "TED Case Studies." Everest Tourism. N.p., n.d. Web. 17th June 2016.