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Less is More

Myths, the Nepal environment and behaving responsibly

This article is based on a lecture given at the Alpine Club Symposium on 'Climbing into the Millennium – Where's it Going?' on 6 March 1999.

Most climbers would count themselves as environmentalists, and would like to climb in a way that helped improve things environmentally. But in order to do that in the Himalaya you need to know what the environmental problems *are*, and finding that out is not easy.

At the United Nations Stockholm Environment Conference in 1972, the problem was defined in terms of population growth. Eric Eckholm, who later wrote the influential book *Losing Ground*, put it like this:

Population growth ... is forcing farmers onto ever steeper slopes, slopes unfit for sustained farming even with the astonishingly elaborate terracing practised there. Meanwhile, villagers must roam further and further from their homes to gather fodder and firewood, thus surrounding most villages with a widening circle of denuded hillsides. Groundholding trees are disappearing fast among the geologically young, jagged foothills of the Himalaya, which are among the most easily erodable anywhere. Landslides that destroy lives, homes and crops occur more and more frequently throughout the Nepalese hills.

Here, in stark outline, is the problem: an increasing population that is having to support itself on a resource base that it is actually causing to decline. Nor is this the end of Nepal's problems. As the resource base slides away from under its farmers, it causes havoc in the downstream countries of India and Bangladesh.

Topsoil washing down into India and Bangladesh is now Nepal's most precious export, but one for which it receives no compensation. As fertile soil slips away, the productive capacity of the hills declines, even while the demand for food grows inexorably. Even more ominously, farmers [because of the firewood crisis] have seen no choice but to adopt the self-defeating practice of burning dung for fuel.

Eckholm

Nor is it just themselves that the Nepalis are defeating. As they propel ever more topsoil into their mountain torrents, Eckholm tells us, they render

the reservoirs and hydro-power stations in India useless with startling rapidity, they provoke worse flooding in both India and Bangladesh, and they raise the riverbeds to such an extent as to cause the river-courses to meander about, often destroying prime farmland as they go.

The Eckholm/Stockholm verdict was that, even with the opening up and settling of the Terai – the formerly malarial strip of flat land along the border with India – Nepal was headed for total ecological and economic collapse within ten years at the most.

David Attenborough, too, has visited Nepal in the course of making his acclaimed TV series *The Natural World*:

We walked across hillsides in Nepal that have been stripped of their trees for firewood. Rain had gouged deep ravines down them, carrying away the soil, and the people were going hungry. A thousand miles away, in the delta of the Ganges, that same soil is being deposited, clogging the river channels. During the rainy season, the water, no longer held back by the forests, rushes down the rivers and floods the delta. Hundreds of people drown and thousands lose their fields and their homes.

Attenborough

Similarly, Britain's Overseas Development Agency (now re-named the Department for International Development) identifies severe environmental degradation in the Middle Hills of Nepal: the area where most Nepalis live and that climbers trek through to get to their chosen peaks.

The growing population's requirement for more food leads to the clearing of forests to provide more land for crop production. Soil becomes exposed and is easily washed away by heavy monsoon rainfall. Land productivity quickly declines, leading to a demand for more land on which to produce crops ...

Overseas Development Agency

So, whether it be Stockholm/Eckholm, David Attenborough or the Overseas Development Agency, they all share the same definition of the environment problem: an ever worsening, population-driven situation that, unless something is done, will result in catastrophic collapse within 10 years at the most.

But now we come to the weak spot in this orthodox definition of the problem:

Stockholm/Eckholm	1972
David Attenborough	1984
Overseas Development Agency	1997

The orthodox definition has the ODA standing on the very edge of an environmental abyss that is the self-same abyss that David Attenborough was standing on the edge of 13 years earlier and which, in its turn, is the self-same abyss that Eric Eckholm was standing on the edge of 12 years before that! How fortunate for all of them that they should have been there, in Nepal, at just that climactic moment, and how strange that they should have been there 13 and 12 years apart, over a period of 25 years in all, when the collapse was due to happen within, at the most, 10 years!

Similarly authoritative predictions for Himalayan deforestation – ‘25 years to baldness’ – have been made over the past quarter century. Yet there are as many, if not more, trees now than there were then, an observation that the great Swiss geographer, Bruno Messerli, has wryly used to point to a new crisis: we now have only one or two years in which to get rid of all those trees!

Well, to cut a long and dismal story short, the orthodox definition of the problem – the one most climbers (and members of the public generally) have been sold – is sensationally wrong. Teasing out exactly *what* is wrong with the orthodox definition is inevitably a complex and technical business; but the gist of its wrongness, and the main implications of that wrongness, are quite easily summarised. The orthodox definition:

- is long past its sell-by date: apocalypse-postponement,
- blames the victim: by seeing the Himalayan farmer as an ‘ignorant and fecund peasant’ rather than as a vital part of the solution,
- exacerbates international tension by encouraging sabre-rattling and finger-pointing when there are, in fact, no trans-boundary risks,
- distorts the development process to the point where Nepal’s hard-won democracy (1990) is in danger of being destroyed (eg the Arun 3 dam).

This is not to say that there are no environmental problems in the Himalaya – of course there are. Only that the problems are demonstrably not what they have been asserted to be, and that millions and millions of pounds worth of aid have been directed at solving the wrong problems!

So where does all this leave the climber? I’ll conclude by suggesting a list of ‘dos’ and ‘don’ts’:

- Don’t believe the orthodox definition of the environmental problem in the Himalaya.
- Meet the Nepalis halfway: not as ‘ignorant and fecund peasants’ but as resourceful, thoughtful and practical folk who are doing amazingly well under severe economic, social, political and environmental difficulties.
- Respect and cherish Nepal’s democracy (especially human rights). One in eight adult Nepalis was a candidate in last year’s local elections. Beat that!

- Climb as aesthetically as possible. Do more with less, never less with more. If you climb well you will inevitably tread lightly. And the smaller your 'footprint' the less harm you will do, *whatever* the environmental problems turn out to be.
- Don't think all this will make no difference. Climbers set the tone for tourism generally in Nepal. And the elite climbers – the ones who insist on playing the Himalayan game by the rules of the next game down the hierarchy (the 'big alpine face' game) – set the tone for climbing in general.

And if all that is too much to remember, just try keeping these three points in mind:

- No excess baggage on the plane.
- Plenty of rice and dhal when you get there.
- A helicopter (or worse still a TV team!) is an admission of failure.