

the process of reviewing alternatives for new public-use regulations. Based on the language in the recent HNP Master Plan, there is concern among the climbing community that restrictions to access are likely to occur over the next three years throughout much of the park (see Jim Bartle's article in *American Alpine News*, Winter 2004, for details).

The proposed restrictions seem to be based on the premise that restricting recreational users to popular areas will both streamline park management and protect untrammelled ecosystems. Yet, while these changes would minimize the area managed for public use by HNP, my research indicated that cattle and other livestock had already degraded many of the park ecosystems to an extent that impacts from tourism were clearly secondary to those from agriculture-related grazing. This is not to say that impacts from tourism are inconsequential, but that they are occurring in environments with a long history of human and livestock use rather than in pristine ecosystems. I also found that the areas most degraded by tourism were, not surprisingly, those where use is already highly concentrated, and that, in general, less-visited areas (those frequented only by independent groups) showed few impacts from tourism. Undoubtedly, certain areas, particularly remaining *Polylepis* (Quenoa) cove forests, would benefit from restricted access, but in much of the park it seems that responsible adventure tourism will cause little additional impact. Whether these observations will help to inform future park planning and public-use regulations is impossible for me to say; but I am hopeful that they may, at least, illustrate the need for reliable field data.

Overall, the impacts from tourism in the popular valleys I studied were less severe than I expected from my observations in 1999 and from word-of-mouth accounts of previous conditions. Exceptions to this trend were the heavily used Pisco and Ishinca base camps where garbage and, especially, human waste accumulation was a significant problem by early August. The dearth of previously recorded data on both impacts and tourism levels made it impossible to make thorough comparisons to other years, but, according to numerous interviewees from the tourism sector, levels in both categories were significantly lower during the 2003 season than usual. As a result of these low levels, I am hesitant to draw too many conclusions regarding the severity of tourism impacts in HNP from my preliminary research, but I hope my observations will serve as a baseline record that can be used in conjunction with further monitoring efforts.

Two conclusions, however, are easily forthcoming: First, due to the lack of previous research on tourism impacts in HNP and because reliable data are essential for sound public-use planning, it is important to continue the monitoring I began in 2003 and to expand it to other parts of the park. Second, if we climbers are to maintain the freedom of use that has historically made the Cordillera Blanca so appealing, we must carefully minimize our impacts and work to show park managers and planners that we are a valuable and responsible constituency of Huascarán National Park.

ADAM FRENCH, AAC

MT. EVEREST ALPINE CONSERVATION AND RESTORATION PROJECT

On 30 May, 2003, the International Conservation Committee of the AAC announced that it will financially support a major new conservation initiative in Nepal's Sagarmatha National Park, home of Mt. Everest. "Community-Based Conservation and Restoration of the Mt. Everest Alpine Zone" will address the increasing impact of trekkers and climbers on the high altitude

alpine landscapes. The project will be implemented in partnership with local Sherpa communities, local non-government organizations (NGOs), Nepal's Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation, and The Mountain Institute's (TMI) Nepal Program.

The project's primary concern is the continued over-harvesting of slow-growing shrubs and high altitude plants for tourist lodge fuel, a process I believe has accelerated since I first identified the problem during my dissertation research in 1984. Local people say that many of the hill slopes in the region have become "growing glacial moraines" during the past 20 years because of the increased erosion and instability that has resulted from these trends. The alpine ecosystems surrounding Mt. Everest, both in Nepal and Tibet, simply cannot endure this kind of pressure much longer.

The project was officially launched on May 28, 2003, the fiftieth anniversary of the first ascent of Mt. Everest, and has received a substantial amount of international publicity since then. It will be one of the first projects of its kind that combines community driven management and action with the results of extensive scientific research. AAC and TMI expect the program to set a precedent for similar projects in affected alpine regions throughout the mountain world, including the Andes and East African Highlands, within the near future.

The five-year project will be based on recommendations proposed by local Sherpa communities to protect and restore the heavily impacted alpine ecosystems of the upper Imja Khola watershed, gateway to the Everest base camp and popular trekking peaks. It will be implemented and directed by these communities in partnership with government agencies, NGOs, international NGOs, and the trekking and climbing communities. Activities will include strengthening community planning and implementation skills through training; the restoration of high impact areas; and increased education of both local people and tourists. Other activities planned include forming local Alpine User Groups; building porter shelters on trekking routes and stocking them with alternative fuels; constructing enclosures that protect the hillsides from overgrazing while promoting native plant re-establishment; and establishing restrictions on the harvesting of juniper shrubs.

During October-November 2003, TMI's Ang Rita Sherpa (Project Field Manager and son of Sir Edmund Hillary's head sirdar in 1953), Dumba Thapa, and Vinod Aravind launched the project's Phase I activities by conducting a detailed survey of alpine lodges in the upper Imja Khola region. Project planning with Sherpa stakeholders, interested NGOs, and government partners was also initiated. At present, the Trekking Agents Association of Nepal (TAAN), Nepal Mountaineering Association (NMA), Sagarmatha Pollution Control Committee (SPCC), Sagarmatha National Park and Buffer Zone (SNPBZ), and local youth groups have all expressed interest in working with the project in the coming years.

As an indicator of the potential international interest for the project, Ang Rita Sherpa also walked out with \$11,000 in donations from two trekkers met during the course of the fieldwork. We would like to extend a special thanks to Mr. Marcel Bach, Switzerland, and Dr. Sandra Cook, U.S.A., for their generous contributions to the Khumbu alpine project! Building on this promising beginning, TMI and AAC must continue to work hard to reach the project goal of \$125,000 over the next five years, and AAC member contributions (as well as suggestions for other donors to approach) will be highly appreciated.

"This project will strengthen the capacities of local people to protect and restore their fragile landscape and will serve as a model for conservation in alpine zones throughout the world," said AAC International Conservation Chair Peter Ackroyd. "We are excited that this

action, taken by the membership and leadership of the AAC, will encourage others to invest in protecting these mountain environments that so many people enjoy". For further information regarding the Khumbu alpine conservation and restoration project, please contact Dr. Alton Byers at abyers@mountain.org and Ang Rita Sherpa at angrita@mountain.org. For more information on The Mountain Institute, visit www.mountain.org.

DR. ALTON BYERS, *Director of Research and Education, The Mountain Institute*

UPDATE ON THE HIMALAYAN CATARACT PROJECT

The past year and a half has marked an exciting period of growth for the Himalayan Cataract Project and has furthered our mission of eliminating preventable and treatable blindness in mountainous Asia. We are making the transition from being an organization focused primarily on cataract surgery to one that is working to eliminate all types of preventable and treatable blindness. To this end, we have begun to focus our efforts on reaching the most remote and poorest people in the region, establishing self-sustaining cataract surgery facilities in the surrounding countries, and training ophthalmic sub-specialists in Nepal to become the teachers for the next generation of Himalayan ophthalmologists.

As always, education of medical personnel at all levels is playing a vital role in this development. At the paramedical level, we have established a training program for ophthalmic assistants. We are bringing intelligent young men and women from remote villages, who have completed the equivalent of our high school education, to Kathmandu for a three-year course. They return to their villages where we are establishing primary eye care centers. The ophthalmic assistants provide glasses and preventive care, treat infections and minor injuries, screen for diseases and surgical problems, and refer more serious problems to the nearest eye surgeon or arrange for a cataract team to come to their village. At the surgical level, we continue to train teams of doctors, nurses, and technicians from Bhutan, Tibet, India, and Pakistan to deliver modern cataract surgery. At the specialty level, we are supporting some of the best young ophthalmologists in Nepal to pursue fellowships in America or Australia.

Establishing a world-class eye care infrastructure remains central to our mission and is crucial in supporting the education of local providers. In 2003, we established four new primary eye care facilities in Nepal and performed over 9,000 surgeries in remote villages, including a cataract camp that was filmed by National Geographic Television in the kingdom of Mustang. In early 2004, we opened a permanent primary eye care facility in Kalimpong, West Bengal, the first of its kind in the region, and have plans to open a similar center in the Tibetan Amdo region of the Qinghai Province in China during the summer of 2004.

The core of our eye care infrastructure in the region is the Tilganga Eye Centre in Kathmandu. In 2003, we started a campaign to expand the Centre into a full tertiary care eye hospital. This expansion will allow us to accommodate the hundreds of patients who line up before dawn every morning seeking care and will also provide space to begin a full, American standard, three-year ophthalmology residency program in July 2004. The residency program will train the teachers for the next generation of ophthalmologists in mountainous Asia. For further information about the Himalayan Cataract Project, please visit our website, www.cureblindness.org.

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