

The Mountains, My Perspective

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I HAVE BEEN ASKED TO REFLECT about where we stand on protecting the mountains we love so much. The first thought that comes to mind is that we have turned an important corner in this effort. Alpinists today are increasingly aware of how fragile mountain environments are and how great an impact our adventures can have if we are not careful. The stories of trashed-out approaches and the photos of tents pitched on piles of garbage in base camps have caused many to reconsider the role they have played in creating these problems. The growing trend to close climbing areas in many countries and to close entire mountain ranges in others has brought home the need to address the problem now.

Today we face another challenge. Awareness is not enough. Awareness must be translated into action. We must each adopt a personal commitment to leave as little trace as possible of our passing through the mountains. That personal commitment should be part of our planning for every trip. A plan to deal with packaging, food scraps and human waste as it is generated at each stage of the trip from approach to return is essential. In order for the plan to work, it should be shared with and agreed to by the entire team and your support staff before departure.

Human waste is probably the toughest issue to address and so I'll start with it. There are those among us who seem to romanticize stepping behind a bush or digging a cat hole when they squat to contemplate the meaning of life. Anything else seems to get in the way of their enjoyment of the great outdoors to hear them tell it. Well, they are living in a fantasy world, as least as far as popular climbs are concerned. The fact is that in too many places, there aren't any more bushes to step behind without stepping in someone else's previous deposit. All too often there isn't anywhere to dig without digging into what someone else left behind.

So what is the answer? Over the long term, solar or composting toilets should be purchased, installed and maintained on approaches and in base camps. We

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Tibetans rummaging through food left by a Spanish expedition at the Everest Base Camp.



who use these areas are going to have to pay for this. Near term, plan to bring along five-gallon plastic buckets with sealing lids for use as "porta-potties" while on the approach and in base camps. The buckets fit neatly in a duffel bag and make great packing places (before use) for things you don't want to get wet or broken. One bucket per person is enough. On the way in, find farmers who want your manure for their fields. Often they will want the bucket even more. As long as the buckets are sealed, for a bit of extra pay, porters, yak herders and others you rely on will carry it to where it can be used. Not as romantic as a bush, but then, there are other ways to work out romantic fantasies. Try it. The bucket approach will work and make base camps much pleasanter.

By thinking before you leave, you can minimize the amount of packaging you bring. You can rely as much as possible on buying food in local centers when you travel in developing countries. This eliminates even more packaging and stimulates the local economy. One way to do this is to send your support staff a shopping list. Have them confirm what they have bought before you leave so you can fill in around the edges. This thought process is critical because most packaging becomes garbage during a trip.

In nearly all mountainous areas, wood is a precious commodity. Climbing expeditions and trekking groups should *never* burn wood, which takes years to regenerate and in many places rarely grows back. This also causes devastating erosion. Campfires, for all their romantic appeal, are *taboo*. Wood must not be used for cooking. It is easy enough to insist that visitors to the mountains use portable cooking stoves to prepare their food. It is more difficult to enforce this prohibition of cooking and heating fires on the porters. They must be given stoves and instructions in their use. Fuel has to be rationed to them so that they don't burn it all up in a short time. This prohibition can be enforced if there is a clear understanding with the sirdar that absolutely no wood may be burned.

Another issue that needs advance planning is "toxic" waste. I use the term to mean anything that cannot be safely disposed of in remote areas. Again, minimizing the amount you bring is an important first step. Solar rechargers can reduce the number of batteries you need for extended trips. The batteries you do use and any medical waste you generate should be brought out of the mountains. Your plan should include how you will pack out with you anything that won't burn or decompose.

When planning is finally done and the trip is underway, the personal commitment to leaving as little trace as possible of your passing should be part of your thought process every day. The higher you go, the tougher this becomes. But no one can justify leaving a mess behind with the argument that a climb is too far out on the edge to do it right. Doing it right means doing it in such a way as to leave no trace of your passing.

Fortunately, the greater number of people and therefore the biggest problems are at the base camps and on the approaches. Anywhere you are supported by local transportation, whether it is porters, yaks, camels or trucks, the answer is easy. You pay for the round trip use of the transportation, you bring enough burlap or woven plastic bags for all the garbage you will generate and you bring

out whatever won't burn or decompose. And take care of what other thoughtless people have left. Anything less is no longer acceptable. Those who object to the extra cost, to supervising those you hire and the time it takes should look to other sources of personal challenge, spiritual growth and enjoyment rather than climbing.

The last issue I want to address is what happens when someone else screws up. Some of what I have said will be unacceptable to some climbers. I welcome their thoughts and the opportunity to debate these issues. However, all of us realize a base level of unacceptable behavior. You may not be able to define it, but you know it when you see it. Here is an example. This photo was taken near Annapurna in 1991. The day is fast approaching when this type of behavior will result in those responsible being banned from the mountains, forever. And well it should.

PLATE 44

Photo by Robert McConnell

KOREAN GRAFFITI.

