

Changing Himalayas

Suzanne Goldenberg reports
from the roof of the world

The mission to clean up Mount Everest

Environmentalists in Nepal are pressing the government to keep the Himalayas free from litter



Mount Everest – more than 2,500 people have reached the summit since Edmund Hillary in 1953. Photograph: Desmond Boylan/REUTERS

The people who set out to climb Everest spend months dreaming about reaching the summit. They pay \$65,000 (£41,000) in fees to the Nepali government; they train, trek for days, endure extreme discomfort, even danger. So it should be a simple thing to get them to pick up after themselves.

Apparently not. Nearly 60 years after Edmund Hillary conquered Everest, and 30 years after climbing turned commercial, the region is still struggling to deal with mass tourism.

By the standards of the 70s, when the main climbing routes were littered with discarded tents and food packets, Everest is a lot cleaner, with just a smattering of plastic bottles and sweet wrappers on the rocky plateau that is base camp. But a Nepali environmental coalition is pressing the government in Kathmandu to adopt a new management plan to safeguard the Himalayas in the age of mass tourism – and to make amends for the environmental sins of the past.

"Everybody talks about waste in the mountains but nobody talks about proper solutions," says Phinjo Sherpa, director of Eco Himal. "Cleaning up Everest every once in a while does not help. The main thing is management, waste management." The group has lodged a plan with the government that calls for tougher penalties against litterbugs at Everest and the surrounding areas. They are also pushing for the installation of portable toilets at base camp and investment in waste treatment facilities – which currently do not exist in the region – with proposals for five incinerators and sewage treatment plants.

It's difficult to tread lightly in the high-altitude environment, especially in areas this remote. The first expeditions to Everest were monumental in scale. The 1953 attempt, which brought success to Hillary, set off from Kathmandu with 1,200 porters for their equipment, according to Kancha Sherpa, the last surviving member of the team that made it to base camp.

The 1953 expedition required 25 wooden crates just to carry the coins they would spend

along the way. A single oxygen bottle weighed 15kg. As for dealing with the detritus of such a huge human endeavour, Kancha looks blank. "You have to remember that was a long time ago. Things were very different then," he says. Even Hillary admitted to leaving equipment behind, and more than 2,500 people have made it to the summit since his day. The heavy traffic left its mark. "People were careless. They would take a rubbish bag but they would still leave stuff behind," said Tshering Tenzing Sherpa, an official of the Sagarmatha Pollution Control Committee, the NGO charged with overseeing the Everest cleanup.

Modern expeditions are much more conscious of their footprint. Groups must pay a \$4,000 (£2,500) deposit on their equipment – in the hope that they will carry down everything they brought. Repeat visitors to Everest see a difference. "It's visibly and spectacularly better," says Jan Morava, an electrical engineer from the Toronto area who was attempting the summit with his brother and a climber from the UAE. "There were piles of rubbish in base camp before."

But conservation groups say the deposit is small compared with the other expenses associated with an ascent on Everest. They also argue the Sagarmatha Pollution Control Committee lacks the resources to keep up with all the groups climbing Everest and to make sure that do indeed carry all their equipment back down to Kathmandu.

The committee says it brought back 25 tonnes of rubbish from Everest last spring – including 12,000kg of paper and plastic and 11,250kg of human waste. But conservationists argue that waste disposal is haphazard. There are rubbish dumps with heaps of tuna cans and plastic bottles only a few minutes' walk away from villages on the trekking trail.

On a trek near the village of Lobuche last May, Alton Byers of the Mountain Institute came across a 10 sq metre open pit of human waste, hauled down from Everest, close to a seasonal stream. The pit had been covered over by the time of a subsequent visit in May.

And, says Tshering, there is plenty more detritus of the past still out there – rubbish discarded by climbers years and even decades ago, preserved in ice and snow. "Just above the ice falls at crampon point you can see cans from 10, 20, 30 years ago or even older," Tshering says. "There's a lot of old rubbish out there."

Other high peaks less famous than Everest are even dirtier, notes Tshering. And with climate change, snow and ice on mountaintops is melting, exposing even more rubbish. "We are in a garbage race," he says.

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