

Some Environmental And Ecological Observations Made During
A Trek Round Annapurna in August 1982.

- Jimmy Roberts.

Trekking in the highlands of Nepal has come under attack for causing various forms of damage, pollution, etc, to the countryside. As one of the pioneers of trekking in Nepal I decided to examine the conditions prevailing along the popular trekking trail, "Round Annapurna", during the monsoon of 1982.

By environmental damage I understand buildings, encroachment etc by man which cause mainly visual damage. By ecological damage I understand the destruction of land, plants, pastures and the felling of trees. Trekkers themselves cause little permanent environmental damage, although they are the cause of such damage by others - the building of ugly lodges for instance. The scattering of rubbish constitutes temporary environmental damage.

Although an accusing finger may be pointed at Tourism, this is not the major culprit at all, causing environmental damage in the mountains. Development work is the major offender and often such work is, superficially at least, in the interest of the local people, and thus not to be denied. However if, and presumably we do, wish to promote mountain tourism then the mountain environment must be preserved and the planners and developers must go about their work in more enlightened and environmentally sensitive fashion.

Pokhara is a case in point. The tourism potentialities of the finest small town site in Asia have been sadly squandered. During my trek I encountered two examples of major environmental damage quite unconnected with trekking, one an accomplished fact, the other possibly still avoidable.

Khobang village in the mid Kali Gandaki valley has been wired for electricity and this antique, once beautiful, fragile village at the foot of Dhaulagiri ruined for posterity, a piece of Nepalese heritage destroyed, at least temporarily - until some friendly foreign agency provides funds for its restoration and concealed wiring. No one can deny the people of Thak the benefits of Electric light, but the work entailed could have been carried out in a far more imaginative and sympathetic fashion. I have watched the antics of the Nepal Electricity Corporation for years in Pokhara and while their engineers have no doubt many attributes, an environmental and aesthetic sense is not among them. The danger is that this blight will eventually spread through all the hill villages of Nepal and some positive action must now be taken at a high level to prevent this. No one can stop the wiring, but it can be properly and neatly and unobtrusively carried out, and to achieve this some research and study will be essential.

Having crossed the Thorong La and descending past Manang towards Chame, I found myself having to step off the narrow trail to make way for a string of porters carrying large and awkward loads of shiny, corrugated tin sheeting, of the type popular for exacerbating the environmental troubles of Pokhara town, and indeed, sadly, for roofing in many parts of the hills. There were

about 50 of these loads and the sheeting was intended, I learnt, for a school at Khangsar, a small village west of Manang. There seemed to be enough sheets to build not just a roof but a whole school and I wonder what madness has prompted this expensive operation in a land of flat, mud roofs which can be far more easily and economically waterproofed, if necessary, by using a suitable roofing felt under the top layer of mud. Is this Khangsar going "one up" on Manang? Do the educational authorities know of this disturbing development? This is not only a matter of creating eye sores, but of wasting public funds.

Returning now to my trek, I did the circuit walking from Pokhara to Dumre, and although there are several good reasons for taking an anti-clockwise course, starting from Dumre, I wished to get out of the hot lowlands without delay. Walking thus from Pokhara northwestwards over Sarangkot to Ghorapani and the Kali Gandaki, I was soon reminded of the excellent and cleansing effect of the monsoon. Rain fell in buckets: the gullies and drains gurgled with water, and the trail itself was often a small river. The effect was highly beneficial. Discarded students' copy books, miscellaneous rubbish, abandoned rubber sandals and the rest (mostly of indigenous and not tourist origin) flowed down the hill sides, part possibly en route to the distant Ganges. Camp sites used by trekkers in the cold season were mostly under crops or water logged, and no doubt the soluble rubbish etc. left or buried on the sites were providing valuable manure for the fields.

Even in the comparatively dry zone, in the upper Kali Gandaki or the Manang Valley, I did not find dirty fields and paths except in the immediate vicinity of such places as Jhomson, Muktinath and Chame, where the rubbish was mostly of local origin.

My conclusion is that trekkers are doing no permanent damage to the country traversed by the round Annapurna trail, apart from the consumption of fire wood, which I shall deal with later in this paper. This trail is very much a "tourist drain" and few people leave it. The trail itself is improved with use and there is little or no ecological damage being caused. (The effect of trekking on valley heads - such as the Annapurna Sanctuary - where people tend to leave the approach "drain" and fan out over the hill sides is another matter and is not being discussed here. Nor is the subject of damage done to base camp areas by mountaineering expeditions. These matters certainly need careful investigation).

During the peak of the season "human pollution" certainly constitutes a problem on this Annapurna trail. But this is really a problem for the trekking agencies. Some trekkers enjoy company, others do not. According to official statistics, 14,435 trek permits were issued to visit "Jhomson" in 1981, but only 438 for "Manang". I feel that many of the Jhomson permits also covered the Round Annapurna trek. The peak was reached in October, with nearly 3000 permits issued for Jhomson. Taking Jhomson and Manang together, the permits total nearly 15,000, or more than half the total number of permits for all areas in

Nepal - 29,500. Thus this Annapurna trail carries a major load of the trekking pressure on the Nepalese mountains - Everest permits totalled only 5,800.

Not having travelled over some of the trail for a number of years, I was struck by the proliferation of "lodges", although many are little more than the tea shops and "bhattis" of old, now decorated with pretentious notice boards bearing fancy names. Most are clean and being local houses, blend in with the countryside well enough. Lodges built in high forested areas are however another problem, and the third major shock of my trek (I have mentioned the other two already) was the devastation caused by the uncontrolled building of shanty like "lodges" and the felling of the virgin rhododendron forests on the top of the Ghorapani pass. Ghorapani is a camp site which at least my own trekking company will in future try and avoid, so the whole development becomes self-defeating. Similar damage being done in the forests leading upto the Annapurna Sanctuary also requires investigation and appropriate action by the authorities concerned. Trekking companies can check the use of fuel wood by their clients and porters, and keep camp sites clean. But they can do little about the sort of ecological damage mentioned above, although this gives "trekking" a bad name among conservationists.

The use of kerosene or gas or other cooking fuel other than firewood has now become compulsory for trekkers visiting the Sagarmatha and Langtang National Parks and one of the aims of my trek was to find out if any similar restriction on the use of fire wood should be placed on trekkers in the vicinity of the Thorong La - between Jhomson and Manangbhot. In fact, although this is an arid area, quite good stands of forest and timber do occur on the east side of the Kali Gandaki valley, above Jhomson, and similar forests are found in the upper part of the Panda khola (in which the village of Lupra is situated) east of Jhomson and south west of Muktinath. I particularly commend the qualities of the Blue Pine - Pinus exelsa (also called Pinus wallichiana, the Himalayan white pine and the Bhutan pine). I understand that the regeneration period of this pine is 50 years, however up to a height of about 50 feet it grows very quickly and it is a great coloniser of open slopes, springing up wild in plantation like stands which look as if they have been planted by hand. Probably harvested from the forests east of Khobang, mature trunks of this tree have been used for the poles carrying the electricity wires between Khobang and Jhomson and also for the quite extensive building in progress in the District H.Q. town of Jhomson.

Pinus exelsa is a high altitude species growing up to the limits of the tree line together with the Silver Birch (Betula utilis)- Similar thick forests occur east of the Thorong, in the vicinity of Manangbhot. In my opinion, provided the harvest is properly controlled, ample stocks of wood to meet both the needs of development works and fuel for the local inhabitants and visiting trekkers can be taken from these forests without causing ecological damage. However the cutting must be conducted on scientific lines, and that is not happening just now.

Trekking groups, including their porters, must buy (and not pick up or cut) fire wood at Muktinath and/or Manang and a complete ban should be placed on the cutting of the scrub juniper bushes (*Juniper wallichiana*) growing on either side of the Thorong, east of Muktinath and north west of Manang. Fuel depots for trekkers should be established at Muktinath and Manangbhot. In August 1982 I bought fire wood at Muktinath for Rs. 1 per Kg or Rs. 30/- for a good sized load of wood, and that is not an unfair price to pay.

Considering the immense area of Nepal covered by sub Himalayan forests the comparatively speaking sparse human population and the fact that there is no commercial extraction of timber other than for local development works and fuel, I feel it is rather surprising that the supply of fuel wood should be a problem in the mountains. That it is a problem shows there is something wrong somewhere with our methods of mountain forest husbandry. This is a subject in which I personally believe strongly that Nepal has been ill served by foreign aid agencies and their advisors during the last 25 years or so.