

Nepalese Worry About Tourism's Adverse Impact

- Jan Sharma

KATHMANDU—To fund-starved Nepal, tourism represents the proverbial goose that lays golden egg worth about US \$10 million a year.

But tourism's adverse impact on the country's fragile environment and eroding traditional values has led many to ask: is it all worth it?

Pollution of Nepal's mountain environment came into sharp focus during the Third International Conference on Tourism and Heritage Conservation held here in early November. The conference was organised by the Pacific Area Travel Association (PATA).

Mountaineers and environmentalists alike were greatly alarmed by the "negative effects" that tourism has had in the country. Even Everest hero, Sir Edmund Hillary, admitted he was partly responsible for this.

"Our climb of Mt. Everest in 1953 with Sherpa guide Tenzing Norgay) brought mountaineers of many nations here, eager to reach the top of the world", he said.

But fuel for their expeditions rapidly exhausted supplies of the juniper and later the rest of the forest trees, particularly in the once green valley of Dugh Koshi. Increasing demand for fuelwood from inhabitants hastened the area's denudation.

Moreover, the influx of trekkers and mountaineers has caused the Everest trail to become "the world's highest garbage dump" as Sir Edmund himself described it.

"In our 1953 expedition, we just threw out empty tins and any trash into a heap on the rubble-covered ice at Base Camp (at the South Col), 26,000 feet above" he recalled. "We cut huge quantities of the beautiful juniper shrub for our fires; and on the South Col we left a scattered pile of empty oxygen bottles, torn tents and the like".

Sir Edmund added: "The expeditions of today are not much better in this respect—with only a few exceptions. As a result, Mt. Everest is littered with junk literally from the bottom all the way to the top".

His observations gain greater credence in the face of estimates that every year, Mt. Everest is visited yearly by 8,000 trekkers alone, accompanied

The influx of trekkers, mountaineers and tourists has caused the Everest trail to become the 'world's highest garbage dump, as Sir Edmund Hillary, the first man to scale Mt. Everest, himself put it. Worse still, it has hastened the denudation of Nepal's forests

by 15,000 porters.

Sir Edmund is currently involved in a number of assistance programmes in the Everest region—building schools and hospitals, bridges and water pipelines. "Success on a mountain was no longer the only thing that mattered" he said. "To help others to improve their way of life became a prime target".

To him, these projects have been more important and satisfying than the odd adventures like jet boats up the Ganges, through Tibet up to the east

as the demand for firewood and timber for building escalated.

The opening of a small airfield at Lukla didn't help the situation any. Sir Edmund helped build the airfield to ease the transportation of construction materials for his projects.

Perched high over the Dugh Koshi gorge with its sloping runway, the airfield has given much easier access to the Everest region.

Today, there is a maximum of 10 flights daily taking fresh loads of trekkers and tourists,

location for many of the inhabitants there.

In 1975, New Zealand extended help to save the Khumbu district from becoming a desert. The idea of having the region declared as a National Park was mooted by Sir Edmund—an idea to which the Sherpas had grave doubts.

There were fears that the park might restrict their firewood supplies and limit their yak grazing pastures. Rumours even had it that the Sherpas might be moved out of the park to leave the area to the trees, wild animals and tourists as had happened in the case of other parks in the kingdom.

Sir Edmund was the main target of the opposition. Said one of the political opponents: "He first brought sugar to the lips of the Sherpas. Now he is throwing chilli in their eyes".

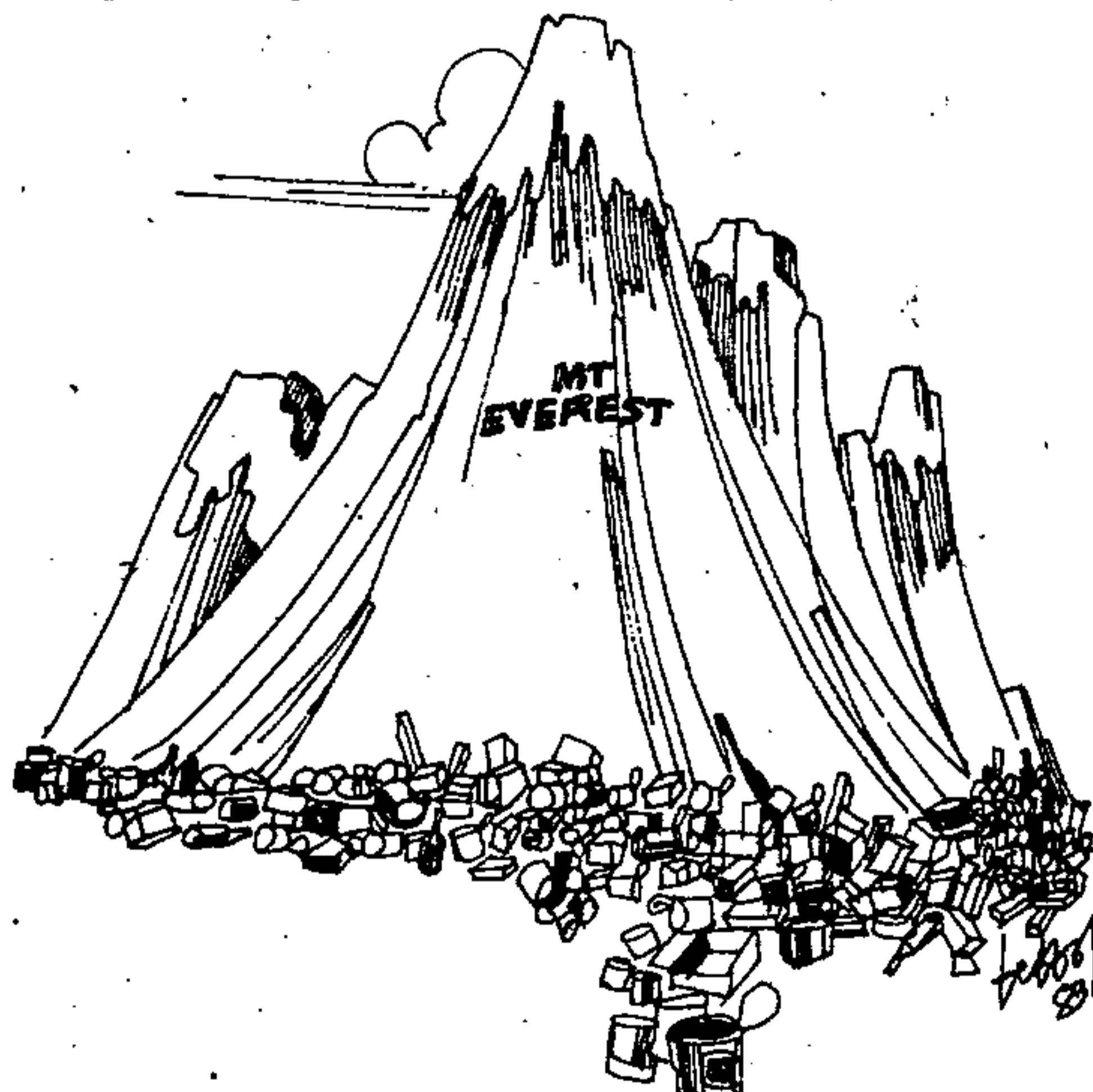
Later, the Sherpas came to appreciate Sir Edmund's good work only after New Zealand's five-year assistance expired. But the withdrawal brought huge financial problems to the forestry project. Sir Edmund's Himalayan Trust agreed to contribute a paltry sum of US \$15,000 annually.

Even that amount brought miracles in the area which rises from 15,000 feet to the height of the Everest. The number of birds and animals has increased considerably; and there are many more forest nurseries. Critics argue that Khumbu still will not be the same as it was 30 years ago.

"Environment problems are really social problems anyway. They begin with people as the cause, and end with people as victims. They are usually born of ignorance or apathy. It is people who create a bad environment, and a bad environment brings out the worst in the people" said Sir Edmund.

He added: "Despite all devastations, Nepal remains a beautiful country, a superb place for mountaineering and mountain walking, a place of friendly and cheerful people and colourful customs.

But how long? That is the question that seems to disturb the Nepalese. As the population increases and the forest resources disappear, the concern seems to be unpleasantly genuine.



face of Everest, or backpacking on Baffin Island in the Canadian Arctic. He has become more and more involved with people and their problems.

But the damage to the environment has been tremendous. More and more trekkers and tourists along with their porters annually visit the Khumbu region where the Sherpas live along the border with Tibet in the north.

The visitors have posed considerable burden on the valley which has been supporting a population of just 3,000. The forests had to suffer

It all accelerated the demand for firewood. And forests had absolutely no chance. A recent survey said only 7 per cent of the foreign trekkers in Khumbu use fuel other than firewood.

"Forests have no chance unless the trekkers bring their own fuel" said an official of the National Parks Department in Kathmandu.

The Nepalese speakers at the conference stressed that ecological damage in the country's trekking areas was permanent and irreversible. It has also resulted in severe economic dis-