

8000-m Peaks

words and pics Arian Lemal

Arian Lemal reports on his expedition to Pakistan where he interviewed high-altitude climbers attempting Gasherbrum I and II. He questioned them about their attitudes to leaving expedition rubbish on the mountains and reveals some startling facts and statistics.

We carried the 15 kg bag of rubbish down to Gasherbrum I's Base Camp and emptied it in front of the Iranians' mess tent. They stared at me in wide-eyed silence, unable to believe what was happening.

The previous day, I had watched their team leader dump the bag of expedition rubbish into a crevasse and even though I confronted him at the time, suggesting he pack it out, I was told in no uncertain terms: 'It's not your business.'

But the reaction, among other climbers at Base Camp, to what we did was more vocal and supportive, and word soon spread around the climbing fraternity. When I bumped into Austrian alpinist Gerlinde Kaltenbrunner in Islamabad, she congratulated me on our action which she had heard about while attempting K2, a full day's hike from the Gasherbrums.

During July and August, I climbed on Gasherbrum I and II in Pakistan. The enormity of these amazing mountains made me feel vulnerable and overwhelmed and although I didn't stand on the summit - I had to turn back at 7300 m due to strong winds on my fourth attempt - I loved my time there.

My drive to climb mountains comes from my passion for the environment and the challenge of the climb. This is true for the majority of people I spoke to while on the Gasherbrums. Rather than passing the time by playing cards and drinking tea with fellow climbers at camp, I gathered research for my dissertation on waste management

Places of Beauty or Glorified High-Altitude Rubbish Dumps



Arian Lemal with recovered oxygen bottles.



Iranian rubbish collected on Gasherbrum I.

on 8000-m peaks by interviewing the people responsible for the waste.

Unfortunately the attitude of the Iranians is not uncommon. The first observation I made is that 8000-m peaks are plagued by abandoned materials of all sorts including old ropes, anchors, shredded tents and oxygen bottles. While walking on the glacier on two separate occasions, I found an oxygen bottle dated 1980 and then, later, in the middle of an old pile of rubbish left by a recent Korean expedition, I found

another one dated 1962. Are these items part of history, archaeological artefacts or simply rubbish? In the 1960s and 1980s there wasn't much environmental talk among climbers and it was the accepted practice to leave rubbish behind.

Sadly, it seems times have not changed, as demonstrated by the comments of one American climber I interviewed. 'I don't expect any 8000-m peak to be clean anymore,' he said. Another added: 'Step by step, you get used to seeing rubbish. It

becomes part of the experience.'

When I asked about their waste disposal habits while climbing, one Czech climber responded that he had 'bought a cheap supermarket tent to leave it up there,' while a Canadian confessed, 'I crevasse my rubbish.'

Some climbers made reference to accepted behaviour in their home country. 'Back home, we just don't care, so why would I behave any differently here?' said one of the Iranians. A climber from Argentina made this rationalisation, 'Last year I threw away my rubbish at Camp 4 because I had a heavy pack.'

Surprised? Probably not. After all, there has been much publicity over the years about the accumulating piles of rubbish on Mt Everest. Fortunately, it appears that only a minority of climbers behave in this manner on the mountains. It was heartening to hear that the majority of climbers were adamant about taking down their rubbish and keeping the mountain as clean as possible. However, circumstances could influence the behaviour of any climber.

Every interviewee referred to these circumstances as omnipresent in mountaineering on 8000-m peaks: life or death situations.

An English climber told me simply, 'When it comes to security, the environment comes second.'

Finnish Himalayan alpinist Veikka Gustafsson, who recently finished climbing all 14 of the world's 8000-m peaks said, 'A clean place is important, but life is more important.' He admitted once having to leave everything behind to escape a storm. He didn't even take his camera with him, only the film.

Another Scottish climber explained to me that his team had to abandon tents and equipment high up on K2 in order to rescue a climber.

Other accepted, or tolerated circumstances to abandon gear and rubbish on a mountain include conditions and weather-related events such as equipment buried by avalanches, or swept away by the wind. A German climber regretted seeing his 'pee bottle' roll down the mountain and his down jacket 'flying away like a crow stealing stuff.'

Some climbers are genuine with regard to their circumstances, but others aren't and it does not go unnoticed by their peers. Don Bowie, an experienced Canadian climber testified that 'A Polish expedition on Broad Peak [Pakistan] left everything behind.

When I say everything, I mean everything: tents, sleeping bags, solar panels, food, you name it. The guy was a millionaire, he didn't care. I was disgusted! I had to crevasse a 100 kg duffle bag of their gear to reduce the mess.'

This year on Gasherbrum I, I witnessed a Korean climber abandon oxygen bottles and the equivalent of three carrying loads at Camp 3 and above. It was hardly a circumstantial situation because the weather was perfect.

The lack of regulation and control on 8000-m peaks also contributes to the accumulation of abandoned material. 'We are left by ourselves up here,' said Gustafsson. 'We are our only witness.'

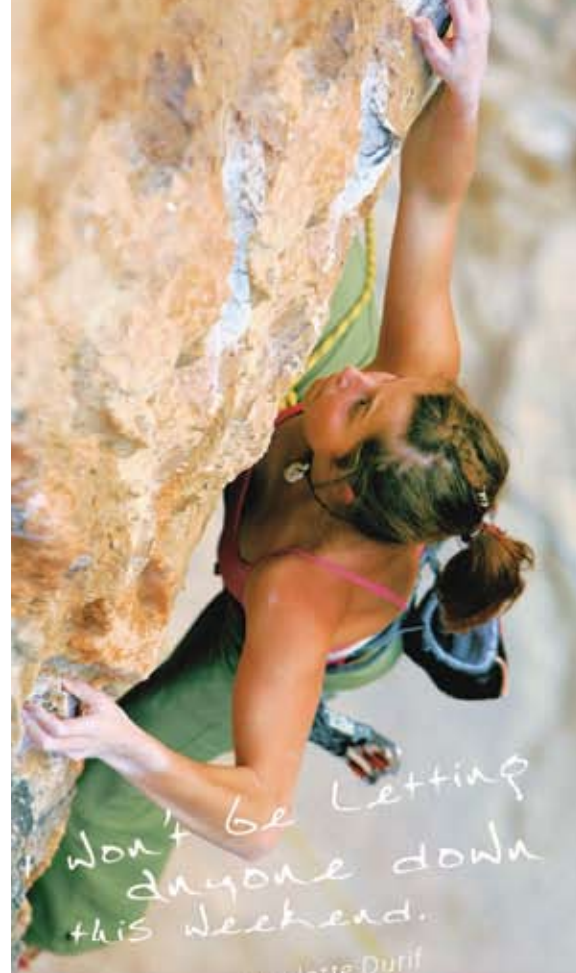
All climbers agreed that it was their responsibility to keep the mountain clean. Said one guide from the UK, 'It would be nice if the people who put so much effort to get things up the mountain would put that much effort in getting it down.' A fellow climber supported this, 'It would be ideal to rely on people's responsibility, but it will never happen, especially at high altitude. Somehow, people's values change up there.'

With so many people with different value systems and cultural norms, the unexpected and often uncontrollable circumstances, and the lack of regulation, it's easy to understand why 8000-m peaks are often referred to as the highest junkyards in the world. It is sad to imagine that these mighty mountains are slowly becoming mountains of rubbish, as one climber joked: 'In the future, we'll have avalanches of rubbish instead of snow.'

Rubbish is not only unsightly on the high peaks, but it can pose a hazard to other climbers. One climber recalled a dropped oxygen bottle flying down the mountain, missing him by just a few meters and another had frozen human waste pierce his tent fabric.

There is hope, though. Climbers' attitudes are slowly changing and the sight of abandoned material is affecting climbing behaviour. 'The sight of the graveyard of tents at Camp 4 made me take down the tent and the rubbish I intended to leave behind,' commented one of the Spanish climbers I interviewed.

Nevertheless, are high altitude patrols necessary to regulate mountaineering on 8000-m peaks or can climbers be responsible to maintain them as pristine and mighty? ■



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Charlotte Durif



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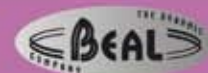
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