

The Rolwaling Mountain Legacy Institute

Mountain Legacy, creator of The Hillary Medal, proposes a bold initiative in integrated research and development

Proposal from the Namche Conference

From May 24-26 this year, fifty-five delegates representing 15 different nations from as far away as New Zealand, Canada, South Africa, and Sweden, converged on Sagarmatha National Park for an international symposium conferred with members of the host community entitled "The Namche Conference: People, Park, and Mountain Ecotourism." (Namche Bazar, 3350 m) and other stakeholders at the "Namche Conference: People, Park, and Mountain Ecotourism." The event was organized by United Nations University (UNU), Bridges: Projects in Rational Tourism Development (Bridges-PRTD), and HMG's Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC), and scheduled as part of the closing festivities marking the Mount Everest Golden Jubilee Celebration.

The Hillary Medal

One of the acts of the Namche Conference was the initiation of the Sir Edmund Hillary Mountain Legacy Medal, to be presented every two years "for remarkable service in the conservation of culture and nature in remote mountainous regions." On May 29th 2003, fifty years after the first ascent of Mount Everest, the first Hillary Medal was presented by Peter Hillary on behalf of Sir Edmund to Michael Schmitz and Helen Cawley. For the past decade Schmitz and Cawley have been working on keystone cultural and ecological projects in Solu-Khumbu including the Tengboche Monastery Development Plan, the Thubten Choling Monastery Development Project, and the Sacred Lands Initiative.

Mountain Legacy

At the close of the Namche Conference, a set of resolutions was adopted by unanimous assent of the assembled participants, including local stakeholders and visitors. Point 12 was a recommendation to establish Mountain Legacy, a new association that will organize future Namche Conferences, continue to grant the "Sir Edmund Hillary Mountain Legacy Medal" on a regular basis, and undertake other projects in support of tourism and

volunteerism in remote mountainous destinations.

One of the first projects of this new organization, proposed by the *Himalayan Journal of Sciences* and Bridges-PRTD, is the Rolwaling Mountain Legacy Institute (RMLI), a center for research to be located in the upper Rolwaling Valley (Dolakha district, just west of Khumbu). RMLI would bring together researchers in a broad array of disciplines, assembling a database of integrated studies, monitoring development, and assisting in the preservation of Rolwaling's natural and cultural legacy. Research results would be published in the *Himalayan Journal of Sciences*.

Why Rolwaling?

This remote valley in north central Nepal presents an unusual combination of problems and opportunities linking biodiversity and tourism development (Sicroff and Alos 2000). Rolwaling's value as a biological sanctuary derives partly from its location and physical isolation. Running east-west for approximately 30 km, it is separated from Tibet by a stretch of the Himalayas that includes Gauri Shankar (7134 m), which for some time was thought to be the highest peak in the world. It can be reached by a 4 or 5 day trek from Barabise, which lies on the road to Tibet in the next valley to the west, or by a 2 or 3 day trek from Dolakha, the district administrative seat, located on a short branch off the Swiss road that connects Lamosangu with Jiri. To the east of Rolwaling is Khumbu district, home of Sagarmatha National Park. The wall of peaks between Rolwaling and Khumbu is breached by the formidable Tashi Lapsta pass; with good weather, one can make the crossing between Na in Rolwaling and the Thame in Khumbu in about four days. Altogether, access to Rolwaling is not quite impossible, but definitely more inconvenient than the most popular trekking routes, several of which can now be approached by air.

Cultural factors have contributed to the conservation of species in Rolwaling. According to Tibetan Buddhist tradition, about 1250 years ago Padmasambhava [aka Guru Urgyen Rinpoche] plowed the valley out of the

mountains in order to serve as one of eight beyul, refuges that were to remain hidden until, in a time of religious crisis, they would serve as sanctuaries, protecting dharma until the danger passed. The neighboring Khumbu was one such zone, but, unlike Khumbu, Rolwaling remained unvisited and unimpacted until the nineteenth century, and then by a very few wanderers and outcasts. Due to the limited amount of arable land and the unsuitability of this east-west valley as a trade route between Tibet and India, Rolwaling's inhabitants remained poor and few, but devoutly mindful of their spiritual heritage. The Buddhist bans on hunting and slaughter, elsewhere observed less scrupulously, have protected the fauna; even plants are considered living creatures which ought not to be harmed if possible.

A third general factor contributing to the relatively unimpacted state of Rolwaling Valley has been the government's limitation of tourist access. Until recently, visitors needed both a trekking peak permit and a regular trekking permit. The trekking peak permit involved costs and other factors that essentially excluded the possibility of independent trekking. All visitors arrived in self-contained tented caravans which contributed virtually nothing to the economy of Rolwaling villages. Therefore there has been very little development of infrastructure, and not much impact on the environment. The permits are no longer required, due primarily to the fact that Maoist activity makes enforcement impossible; however, this activity has itself deterred tourism.

In terms of biodiversity, Rolwaling is worthy of close attention. Janice Sacherer estimated that there are approximately 300 different plant species (Sacherer 1977, 1979). The atypical east-west orientation of the valley creates conditions unlike those in any other valley of the Himalayas. Partially shielded by its southern wall from the monsoon, Rolwaling has characteristics of the dry inner Himalaya; a good part of the flora derives from the Tibetan steppe and, in Nepal, is more typical of eastern valleys. As in other Himalayan valleys, Rolwaling's ecosystems vary dramatically from the broad glaciated valleys to the

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chiseled fluvial channel downstream; to a much greater extent than in other valleys, the sharp contrast between north- and south-exposed slopes affects the distribution of species. The east-west orientation of the valley also makes it a convenient corridor for mobile fauna. Rolwaling is visited by quite a few of the charismatic mammals, including wolves, fox, several species of goat, bear, jackal, langur, and several members of the cat family (including snow leopard). Every resident that we interviewed on the subject is convinced that yeti frequent the valley. In short, Rolwaling's biological assets are clearly worth studying; their conservation should also be accorded high priority as the valley's protective isolation breaks down. Furthermore, one cannot consider development scenarios in the high Rolwaling Valley without assessing the implications for the rich subtropical ecosystems of the Tamba Valley into which it feeds.

If isolation has had a benign effect on the natural ecosystem, the human residents of Rolwaling have observed the tourism boom with envy. In next door valleys, every family could throw open its doors to backpackers and cash in on the amenity values of their homeland; in Rolwaling, the stakeholders stare wistfully as organized trekking caravans deploy their tents by the river, cook up their burrito and quiche feasts, and buy nothing from the local residents. In Khumbu, their relatives enjoy the benefits of prosperity: schools, upscale monasteries, telephone, electricity, numerous clinics, a hospital, post office – even Internet, saunas, pool halls and chocolate croissants: none are available in Rolwaling. Many young men have found employment with trekking and climbing services. Such work entails extended absence from Rolwaling, and even emigration to Kathmandu or Khumbu. The result is a brain and manpower drain that leaves the villages of Rolwaling populated by women, children, and those no longer capable of strenuous labor. Agricultural fields have been abandoned, livestock ineffectively tended, trails poorly maintained. Alcohol, the only recreational option, is a serious health problem.

This disparity between the neighboring districts has created in Rolwaling (as in the access routes) an intense demand for free access to backpackers and economic opportunity. A couple of years ago, due to the threat of Maoist attacks, the police checkpoint in Simigaon was removed. At this point, Rolwaling is officially open to general trekking, and, as the prospects for peace improve, the valley will become an important trekking destination.

Research opportunities

At the western end of Rolwaling Valley, Tsho Rolpa, one of the highest and largest lakes in the Himalayas, has been growing over the past decades due primarily to the recession of Trakarding Glacier. Attempts to mitigate the danger of a glacial lake outburst flood (GLOF) have included siphoning, installation of a warning system, and reduction of the lake level by 3 meters through an artificial drainage channel. Due to depletion of project funding, the drainage efforts have stopped far short of the recommended objective. Particularly as there is a real threat of a catastrophic GLOF, Tsho Rolpa is an appropriate place to begin long-term study of glacial melting, runoff hydrology, and moraine stability.

Rolwaling is also a good location for ecological research. Zonation is extremely compressed. The east-west orientation results in unusually sharp differences on the northward and southward facing slopes; it also means that the valley is probably an important wildlife corridor. Numerous ethnobotanical resources have been identified; now would be a good time to study them in the wild, and also to begin efforts to cultivate them as cash crops.

Serious anthropological studies by Sacherer and Baumgartner in the 1970s provide useful baseline data against which the current changes, especially the impact of tourism, can be measured and monitored. Specific studies that are urgently needed: the Rolwaling dialect of Sherpa, and Rolwaling traditions of song and dance.

Rolwaling Mountain Legacy Institute

In the initial phase, we would propose an institute of opportunity rather than infrastructure. That is, researchers would use existing facilities (lodges and homes) rather than constructing new infrastructures. This would permit

- rapid initiation of programs
- significant ongoing economic contribution to the village economy
- minimization of impact on the object(s) of study

We would also propose to assist researchers in recruiting volunteers. We envisage this as an opportunity for tourists to stay for prolonged periods, making contributions to research and practical projects, and also injecting expenditures for living expenses into the local economy. International students could be recruited either as study-abroad program participants or as interns. These students could either assist established

researchers or design and implement their own programs consistent with the aims of the RMLI.

A parallel objective of this research institute would be to develop a special type of community-base ecotourism in Rolwaling. RMLI would encourage long-term stays at very low per-diem rates, as opposed to so-called "quality tourism," which aims to extract the maximum profit over the course of short stays. We think that such an institute, well-publicized, would be a magnet not only for prospective participants but also for other tourists. Just as tourists go out of their way to visit cheese-making factories, they will visit Rolwaling to see the world-famous research center and to contribute to whatever on-going projects might need their help.

Implementation

The first step is to form an ad hoc committee that will establish a Mountain Legacy NGO in Nepal. This committee will locate researchers who are interested in initiating projects in Rolwaling. Parallel Mountain Legacy groups would be organized around the world, and these would take the lead in sponsoring Namche Mountain Legacy Conferences and Mountain Legacy Institutes in remote mountainous destinations in their own countries. All those who are interested in participating in the Mountain Legacy agenda should contact the editors of this journal (email: editors@himjsci.com). ■

Related websites

- 1) www.namche.info for Namche Conference
- 2) www.mountainlegacy.org for Mountain Legacy, Hillary Medal
- 3) www.tengboche.org for Tengboche Monastery Development Project
- 4) www.sacredland.net for The Sacred Land Initiative
- 5) www.rolwaling.com for Rolwaling, The Sacred Valley

References

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- J Sacherer. 1979. The high altitude ethnobotany of the Rolwaling Sherpas. Contributions to Nepalese Studies, Vol. VI, No. 2. Kathmandu: CNAS, Tribhuvan University
- S Sicoff and EA Alabajos. 2000. Biodiversity and Tourism in the Sacred Valley. In: Watanabe T, S Sicoff, NR Khanal and MP Gautam (eds), *Proceedings of the International Symposium on the Himalayan Environments: Mountain Sciences and Ecotourism/Biodiversity*, 2000 Nov 24-26; Kathmandu, Nepal. p 52-63