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Alpina

A semi-annual review of mountaineering in the greater ranges

Nepal Himalaya

Pre-monsoon 2013. Marred early by the widely publicized and exaggerated squabble between Simon Moro, Ueli Steck, and Jon Griffith and a group of Sherpas, and by concerns over excessive crowding on Mount Everest and other routes, the pre-monsoon season appeared fated for major disaster. On the contrary, the 2013 season was typical of or better than average than recent seasons—except for one major measure. Total deaths in the Nepal Himalaya for the season numbered the highest in history at eighteen, surpassing the 1992 death toll of seventeen. (Only about a third as many attempts were made in that year, so the relative death toll was much higher in 1992.)

In 2013, 202 recorded expeditions set out on 25 mountains, and 118 of those, or 58.4 percent, succeeded. Twenty-five different mountains were tried. In recent years, first ascents have become rare—none in spring 2012 and only four in spring 2013. Total climbers—both team members and hired porters—who reached the summits numbered at least 809. Those climbers the Himalayan Database calls “hired” include Sherpas and Nepalese porters, and their numbers tend to be underestimated, particularly on Everest. Of those reaching the top, 90 were women.

First ascents in pre-monsoon 2013. **Jagdula** (5,764 m) lies south along a ridge of Kande Hiunchuli in the Jagdula Lekh. Frenchman Francois Damilano branched off from a larger unsuccessful expedition led by Paul Marc Grobel and made a solo ascent via the SW Ridge, starting from a base camp at 4,965 m at 4 P.M. on April 29. Damilano reached the summit at 11 A.M. on July 30 and returned to base camp via the NW Ridge that day. **Dragmorpa Ri** (6,185 m) lies in the Langtang Himal SW of Tilman’s Col on the Tibetan border. Solo climber Roman Gretzky of Russia reached the summit on May 30, 2013.

Gandharbha Chuli (6,248 m) is in the Annapurna Himal SSW of Annapurna III near Machhapuchhare. (The peak lies about five km along a ridge running NNE from Machhapuchhare and was once known

as the Gabelhorn.) The expedition, comprising Cosmin Andron and Christina Pogacean of Romania, was originally part of a trekking party to Machhapuchhare base camp. They then decided to try the ascent using as a guide Wilfrid Noyce's book *Climbing the Fish's Tail* (Heinemann, 1958). Noyce's 1957 expedition spotted Gandharbha Chuli, described it as "a most shapely peak," and christened it the "Ober Gabelhorn" after the Swiss peak. The 2013 expedition used porters from the trek to "reach a kind of plateau . . . around 4,000 m. . . . to get a clear view of the whole mountain and have a comfortable background without porters [or] anything." (Some of the porters guessed and condemned the couple's intent to ascend the point near the formally closed Machhapuchhare.) The Romanians suffered the same difficult weather pattern as the 1957 expedition, but after establishing their Camp I at 5,586 m, left for the summit at 3:30 A.M. on May 6, avoided a rock buttress to reach the W Ridge, then the summit after delays because of wind and spindrift. They descended the same day to Camp I. They claim that they stopped "one meter" below the summit of Gandharbha Chuli, in deference to the sacred summit status of Machhapuchhare. The attitude of the Nepalese authorities is described as between disbelief (the summit climb took so little time) and condemnation for ascending a forbidden peak (viewing it as a part of Machhapuchhare).

The first ascent of **Sisne Himal** (5,849 m) in the Kanjiroba Himal (W of Kande Hiunchuli in the Rukum district) carried a distinct whiff of local boosterism. The mountain was opened some years ago but was ignored by climbers. Man Bahadur Khatri, 28, of Rukum led a group comprising American Alonzo Lyons, a trekking guide resident in Kathmandu, and six high-altitude workers, including the experienced Mulal Gurung for the ascent. All reached the top on May 21, 2013. The expedition acknowledged the support of the Nepal Mountaineering Association and the far less well-known Rukum District Development Committee, and offered the pious hope that "The successful summit of Sisne Himal will attract more adventure seekers to the [Rukum] district in the coming days."

One of the more remarkable efforts in the season was the fast traverse of three peaks in the **Everest** (8,850 m) group by Briton Kenton Cool and his Sherpa, Dorje Gyalzen. Climbing without Gyalzen, Cool left Camp 3 on the usual S Col–SE Ridge route at about 2:15 A.M. on May 16, stopping at a point about 60 m below the summit of Nuptse (7,864 m) at 10:30 A.M. The press reported that he summited Nuptse, but technically one could say he did not quite summit; he avoided an unstable cornice. He then descended to Everest

Camp 2 by 5:45 P.M., where he met Gyalzen. The pair moved to Camp 3 and left there on May 17, reaching Camp 4 (the S Col) at noon on May 18. They left the S Col at 7:30 P.M. and topped out on Everest at 1:45 A.M. May 19, then raced back to reach the S Col at 4 A.M. for a brief rest. The two then continued the fast descent to reach Camp 4 on Lhotse at 11:30 A.M.

Later that afternoon they learned that Taiwanese Lee Hsaio-Shih, who had just climbed Lhotse with two Sherpas, was desperately ill at lower Camp 4, and they moved down to nurse and medicate him through the night of May 19–20. He died at 7 A.M. May 20. At 9:15 A.M., Cool and Gyalzen left Camp 4 for the summit of Lhotse, arriving there at 1 P.M. They then descended to Everest Camp 2 by 5 P.M. for a well-deserved rest. They squeezed three high summits and a twelve-hour rescue mission into a bit less than four days and fifteen hours.

The deaths in the 2013 pre-monsoon season. The record number of deaths in the season were not the result of major catastrophes caused by any of the concerns recently expressed about mountaineering practices in Nepal and their consequences. Rather, they occurred in a variety of accidents with a variety of causes. It is true that all of the deaths occurred on five 8,000-m peaks, even though eighteen non-8,000ers were also attempted in the season. This is primarily because the 8,000ers (particularly Everest) attract more climbers, but also reminds one of the severe risks of very-high-altitude mountaineering.

The non-Everest deaths began on **Makalu** (8,485 m). A mixed group of members and Sherpas from several small expeditions left the Makalu La for the Normal Route on the afternoon of April 22. Finding that ropes had not yet been fixed on the upper portion of the route, most abandoned the attempt, but leader Yang Chun-Feng and Liu Xiang-Yang of a Chinese group, the Iranian Azim Gheichisaz, and their Sherpas decided to continue. During the summit push, Liu became exhausted and stopped to rest at the false summit. The rest of the party reached the summit, then picked up Liu and descended together but unroped. At about 7,600 m, Liu slipped on ice and fell out of sight. At the time of the slip, Liu, 45, had been out for 30 hours, and he carried only ski poles. He had no chance to self-arrest.

On **Kangchenjunga** (8,586 m) all of the spring season action was focused on the single day of May 20, 2013, and the normal SW Face route up the mountain. Of the ten expeditions to the mountain, seven were successful, placing a total of fifteen climbers on the summit that day. Five deaths occurred as the successful summiters tried to descend from their victories. All but one of the deaths resulted from the fall of an unroped climber.

Bibas Gurung, 24, with the Italian expedition leader Mario Vielmo, reached the summit on May 20. They found no fixed ropes and used no supplementary oxygen. Vielmo led down, the pair was unroped, and Bibas apparently slipped at 8,300 m and fell 700 to 800 m. His body was found later. Hungarians Zsolt Eross, 45, and Peter Kiss, 26, climbed slowly because they used no supplementary oxygen and because of Eross's handicap. (He had lost part of his right leg and wore a prosthesis; nevertheless he had previously made several ascents in Nepal including Everest and other 8,000ers.) They reached the summit at 6 P.M. on May 20 and tried to descend almost at once. Eross phoned base camp at 8 P.M. to say that he was exhausted and alone a little below the summit. He called again later to report that he had rested for three hours and was trying to descend. Kiss apparently climbed back up the night of May 20–21 to look for Eross. He fell and died at 8,200 m sometime that night. The last call from Eross was on May 21. He was at 8,300 m and died of exhaustion that day. Park Nam-soo, 46, climbing with Kim Hong-bin, the leader of a Korean expedition, reached the summit at 3:35 P.M. on May 20 and descended immediately, unroped with Kim in the lead. Park ran out of oxygen at 8,400 m and became very tired. He must have fallen on ice at about 7,600 m. Kim claimed that he had not noticed Park's disappearance. Phu Dorchi Sherpa, 31, was serving a Chinese expedition led by Zhang Liang. Liang, Liu Yong-Zhong, Mingma Sherpa, and Phu Dorchi reached the summit at 3:45 P.M. on May 20. On the descent, everyone was roped except Phu Dorchi, who started down alone. When the summit team reached a 7,500 m camp at 2 A.M. on May 21, Phu Dorchi was not there. It is thought that he fell at about 8,000 m. His body has not been found.

Lee Hsiao-Shih, 57, ascended **Lhotse** (8,516 m) via the usual W Face route, reaching the top with two Sherpas on May 18. He then descended to Camp 4, where he became very ill. Briton Kenton Cool and his Sherpa Dorje Gyalzen, though involved in their multipeak ascent program described earlier, learned of his difficulty, moved down and nursed and medicated him through the night of May 19–20, but Lee died of acute mountain sickness (AMS) at 7 A.M. on May 20.

Only seven expeditions tried **Dhaulagiri I** (8,167 m), all by the usual NE Ridge route. The weather was poor, and no one reached the top. Spaniard Manuel Gonzalez Diaz led Juan Jose Garra Lorenzo, 49, and Keshab Gurung (the latter two roped together) on their summit attempt. They lost footing and fell about 100 m—Garra breaking his leg and Keshab suffering bruises and scrapes. Keshab stayed with Garra, while Gonzalez descended to obtain

help. Keshab exhausted himself trying to move Garra further. They were in desperate straits with no sleeping bags and no way to melt snow for water. Rescuers mobilized slowly and did not reach Garra until May 26. He was alive on their arrival but died of exhaustion that evening. Keshab, in desperation, descended to Camp 3 the same day and was eventually evacuated by helicopter to a hospital in Kathmandu, where he recovered. Chizuko Kono, 66, the only female to die in the season, led an expedition of herself and two Sherpas both named Dawa, reaching a high point of 8,060 m. They all turned back in deteriorating weather. Kono weakened and the Sherpas got her down to 7,700 m, where she died at 10 P.M. on May 23. The Sherpas bivouacked there for the night. On May 24 they started down, but the Dawa from Damdi in the Khumbu, 41, fell to his death at 7,500 m.

The eight deaths on **Everest** (8,850 m) were again scattered in cause, time, and subject: four were of members, four were Sherpas, three occurred on descent from the summit, six were on the Normal Route from the south, and two on the Normal Route from the north.

Four Sherpas died on the mountain—three during route preparation and the fourth descending from the summit. Mingma Sherpa, 44, a so-called “Icefall doctor,” fell into a crevasse at 5,800 m, and died, on April 7 while working with the Sherpa Rope-Fixing and Icefall Team. Da Rita Sherpa, 36, was working for a large American-led expedition on the same route, when he suffered a heart attack at 7,300 m on May 5. Lobsang Sherpa, working for a Chinese expedition again on that route, had a fatal fall from 7,500 m on May 7. Namgyal Sherpa, 35, reached the summit on May 15 from the north with William McFatter of Great Britain and another Sherpa. They descended to 8,300 m and rested overnight in a tent; McFatter continued down at 6 A.M., and the Sherpas followed a little later. Namgyal soon complained of heart pain at 8,200 m, sat down, and died at 8 A.M.

Mohammed Khalid Hussain, 36, relatively inexperienced and climbing alone without supplemental oxygen, nevertheless reached the summit on May 20. He died on the descent at about 8,000 m apparently from AMS. Sergey Ponomarev, 43, of a large Russian expedition on the N Col–NE Ridge route, had difficulty in completing acclimatization and returned to Advanced Base Camp (6,400 m) to rest on May 4. The next day, he started up accompanied by a Sherpa and died of a heart attack at 6,500 m. Seo Sung-ho, 33, of South Korea reached the summit with the Korean expedition led by Kim Chang-ho at 10 P.M. on May 20. He died on the descent at 8,000 m at 5 A.M. The death was categorized as AMS. Seo’s death seriously marred the



The Khumbu Icefall. The fatal avalanche of April 18, 2014 was triggered by a serac falling from the ice bulge, at center left. WIKIMEDIA COMMONS, UWE GILLE

triumph of Kim, who became the first South Korean to climb all fourteen 8,000ers without supplementary oxygen. Seo himself had climbed twelve 8,000ers.

The most famous climber to die on Everest was Russian Alexei Bolotov, 50, widely known for his many Himalayan climbs and attempts, starting in 1996. He teamed up with the even more famous Kazakh/Russian Denis Urubko. They originally planned a joint effort with Moro, Steck, and Griffith, but the projects were abandoned when the latter group became persona non grata after their squabble with the Icefall Sherpa team. Bolotov and Urubko then decided to attempt a new route up the SW Face of Everest. On May 15, Bolotov left Everest Base Camp at 3:30 A.M., intending to photograph a reconnaissance panorama of the SW Face at sunrise from low on Nuptse. Urubko followed later that morning and found Bolotov's body entangled in old ropes. He had obviously died immediately from massive head damage resulting from falling some distance—the accident probably caused by relying too heavily on old fixed ropes. The high regard of the Russian mountaineering community for Bolotov was demonstrated by the unusual care of his remains. Urubko and others got Bolotov's body to a helicopter pickup point. It was flown to Base Camp, then to a hospital freezer in Kathmandu on May 16. His Russian friends made the arrangements (and raised the money) to pay all costs in Nepal and to repatriate his remains to Russia. Urubko, Bolotov's

friend for eighteen years, accompanied his body for its flight to Moscow on May 18.

The Loss of Sixteen Nepalese in the Khumbu Icefall in April 2014

The deaths of sixteen Nepalese in the Icefall on the morning of April 18, 2014, has rightly been called the “the deadliest single disaster on Everest.” Twenty-five Nepalese working on preparation of the normal south-side route were swept up in the avalanche, sixteen died—three of them remain buried below the ice—and nine were injured. Less rightly, all the dead have been called Sherpas. Only thirteen were ethnic Sherpas, the other three were a Gurung, a Tamang, and a Hindu of the Khatri caste. Still, all were working as Sherpas. It is asserted that the catastrophic avalanche was a new phenomenon, not at all similar to the incidents categorized as “Icefall Collapse” in the *Himalayan Database*. It certainly looked different. Videos from digital cameras recorded during the April 18 event clearly show a wave of avalanche snow and debris sweeping down the Icefall following a massive fall of ice from the west shoulder.

The assertion that the avalanche was the consequence of a recent fundamental change in the Icefall and its surroundings largely depends on anecdotal evidence but seems to be essentially correct. Pretty much everyone who has looked at the Icefall, from George Leigh Mallory’s first fleeting glimpse in 1921 onward, thought it to be dangerous. Nevertheless, the first death there occurred only in 1963, twelve years after climbers began to attempt it. The first victim was John Edgar (Jake) Breitenbach of the first American Everest expedition, who died while “preparing the route.” The long wait for the first death reflects the limited number of visits to the Icefall in the early years. As an anonymous sage has said, “In a mountaineering accident absence of body is far better than presence of mind.”

The worst previous death event—six Sherpas from Yuichiro Muiira’s ski expedition April 5, 1970, and a Sherpa from another Japanese expedition on April 9, 1970—was probably not a consequence of local climate change. My photographs of the Khumbu Glacier and the surrounding mountains taken in 1972 look much like the extensive set taken by the Swiss in 1952. From that, I conclude that snow and glacier conditions in 1970 were similar to

those when the Icefall was first visited and probably earlier—nothing to be attributed to recent climate change.

Anecdotal evidence of significant recent adverse climate effects is widely available. These are described as a general drying, certainly not an increased snow or ice depth. Apa Sherpa describes “stony” conditions not seen in the 1990s (Apa Sherpa climbed through the Icefall frequently from 1989 through 2011). Melting of the hanging glaciers on nearby Ama Dablam has made routes there more dangerous. The most germane evidence, of course, is the recent much increased concern of the Sherpas and the commercial expedition operators about Icefall conditions during route preparation in the pre-monsoon season.

The effects of the catastrophe on the 2014 Everest pre-monsoon season are not yet fully reported. The Sherpas declared a highly effective “work action,” in effect a strike, shortly after the avalanche. Negotiations among Sherpas, the commercial operators, and the Nepalese government failed, and on April 22, the Sherpas announced a refusal to work for the balance of the season. By the end of April, most climbers, perhaps 90 percent, had left Everest Base Camp. As has been demonstrated previously in Alpina, more than half of the total mountaineering income for the pre-monsoon season in all of Nepal is typically expended by climbers on Everest. How the enormous monetary loss will be distributed among the commercial operators, the Sherpas, the insurance companies, the climbers who did not get the expedition they paid for, and the Nepalese government remains to be fought out. The operators have criticized the unwise destruction of the golden goose by the Sherpas, who can earn \$4,000 in a season and thus become “like a multimillionaire in their own country.” This talk ignores the fact that Western guides make five or six times as much as the Sherpas in the season and the commercial operators far more.

There probably are multimillionaire Sherpas in Nepal, but I think few are in Khumjung, the longtime center for the Sherpas who work on Everest. *The Wall Street Journal* (May 23, 2014) has an interesting article about the people of Khumjung and the effect of the catastrophe on them. The WSJ shows a photo, taken at dusk, of the “village of 500 households that has been sending its sons to work on the world’s highest peak for decades.” The one- or two-story houses are not large—some look like barracks. They are obviously lighted by electricity, probably have piped-in water, are generously provided with windows, and have chimneys and metal roofs. Some show satellite dishes. All much like a modest American subdivision, except that there are no visible paved roads.

I found the Khumjung article fascinating because I spent a few days there in 1972. The hamlet was already a center for working Everest Sherpas with then perhaps 100 households. The better houses were two-story houses; the ground level was a stable for the family animals and storage of fodder, and up a narrow, steep stairway lay two or three rooms. The walls were of sun-dried brick or stone covered with a stucco wash, the roofs of rough boards. The houses had no chimneys; smoke from the tiny heating and cooking fires had to find its way out through an opening in the roof boards. Electricity was not to be thought of, water was carried from a spring a half-mile away. Windows were few and small, provided with glass in only the homes of the most prosperous.

One's initial reaction is, "They *have* come a long way," but then, it has been 42 years. The working Sherpas had a comfortable living standard relative to others in Nepal in 1972 as they have now, not because they are the equivalent of multimillionaires, but because they are people of substance with a strong tie to their society.

If it is accepted that the route through the Icefall is significantly more dangerous than it used to be, what can be done? Continuing the present system—perhaps with a small upward adjustment in the economic benefits to the Sherpas—may not work because prospective clients fear that the risk of another season shutdown is too high. The Sherpas and commercial operators have already searched for safer paths up the Icefall—with demonstrated negative results this spring. Unfortunately, the other ways up Everest from Nepal are far more difficult. Any attempt to get the large numbers of "ordinarily competent" mountaineers who try to climb Everest up these routes will lead to severe loss of life. The obvious solution for the ordinarily competent class of Everest aspirants is to go to the Chinese-side Normal Route—the drawback for them being the whimsical unreliability of the Chinese permitting system. Of course, no one in Nepal wants the business to go to the Chinese side.

There are technological options. The Sherpas have suggested the provision of avalanche barrier structures for the critical length of the Icefall. Nothing like this has been done for avalanches of Himalayan scale on glacier and mountain walls like those at the Icefall. Any attempt will take too long, cost too much, and probably not work. Another technological fix has already been demonstrated. A wealthy Chinese businesswoman named Wang Jing hired a helicopter to fly her, five experienced Sherpas, and all their gear to 6,474 m Camp 2 in the West Cwm well above the Icefall on May 10. They climbed to

the summit on May 23—the first ascent after the avalanche and one of the few in the season. They then descended to meet the helicopter at Camp 2 and flew out over the Icefall. This was a hugely costly climb for Wang Jing, who is not a typical Everest client. She is a highly skilled mountaineer (this was her third Everest ascent) and an extreme-adventure-travel addict. Developing and supporting a fleet of helicopters large enough to handle hundreds of prospective climbers with their Sherpas and gear would have major financial and environmental costs. Nevertheless, it might be economically viable, and the Sherpas could keep the business of dragging the clients the rest of the way up the mountain.

None of the solutions to the problem of a highly dangerous Icefall are appealing. But then, nowhere is it written that the long-term progress of mountaineering, of the Sherpa community, or of Nepal must depend on the transport of many hundreds of mediocre climbers to the summit of Everest every year.

Acknowledgments. These notes are based partly on accounts in the American Alpine Journal, the Himalayan Journal, and their electronic supplements. The use of the valuable reference source the Himalayan Database is also gratefully acknowledged.

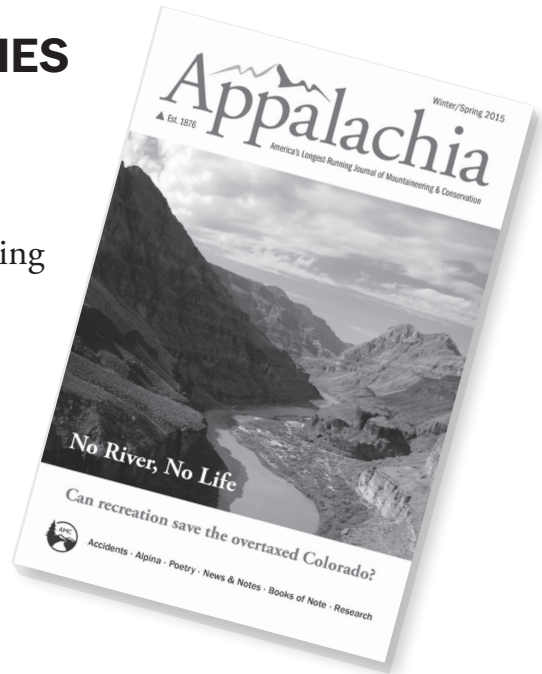
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