

World Wildlife Fund plan luxury lodge at Kangchenjunga

World Wildlife Fund? Cuddly, saving the animals for us, caring, science-based?

Actually, our only contact with them has been utterly the opposite.

Trekking near Mt Kangchenjunga in northeast Nepal late in 2012 we met WWF officials from Washington, New York and Nepal, with their helicopter and 30 odd employees.

Some of the officials told us they were planning to build a \$US200 per night luxury resort in this area and also planned to use their influence to limit other forms of trekking, particularly tea-house or lodge trekking.

We asked: "where is your evidence that excluding tea-house trekkers is an advantage for wildlife conservation?" and were met with patronising acrimony.

Apparently WWF didn't want to see the Kangchenjunga region ending up like the Everest region which they regard as a disaster.

Some quotes from that conversation -

"Some of the Sherpas are millionaires and live overseas" (tch! tch!).

"The environment has been degraded by the crowds of trekkers that come from all over the world" (not true).

"There would be employment opportunities created for locals" (unlikely).

Our experience over 40 years of trekking in Nepal, plus scientific reports, confirm that the trekking industry has created a real value for improved wildlife presence and that one can see many more endangered Himalayan animals near Everest now than were there 40 years ago.

Respected researcher Dr Stanley Stevens from the University of Massachusetts:

"That Khumbu continues to be home to a rich diversity of high Himalayan species, including endangered snow leopards, leopards, red pandas, Himalayan black bear, musk deer, and ... the Himalayan tahr, is largely an achievement of Sherpa conservation stewardship"

It is clear that the Sherpas now have access to education, employment, transport, medical assistance, healthier housing and waste disposal as a direct result of money and people flowing into the area.

Their standard of living has improved out of sight, at their choice.

They now provide seasonal employment to neighbouring Rai people and food is carried from a wide area for sale during the trekking season. This is a healthy economy functioning at a high level of sustainability with excellent conservation values.

While there has been effective and strategic outside support in transport, education and medical dimensions, it has not been based on luxury resort development.

Employment opportunities in the Kangchenjunga area already exist at a level suitable for the local skills and resources in the progressive development of lodge trekking.

Local employment arising from luxury resort development as seen at the Khumbu Everest Hotel above Namche Bazaar is unrealistic.

In multiple visits there we have rarely seen any guests at all.

Instead we see decaying infrastructure used to provide snacks and drinks on the terrace to lodge trekkers who are doing an acclimatisation day walk from Namche Bazaar for their view of Mt Everest.

The same few non-local staff members have been employed there for years.

All the supplies are flown in and carried up, much of it from overseas and certainly from Kathmandu.

Where is the WWF evidence in provision of goods or services, to show that local employment is generated and sustainable in luxury development?

And what do WWF understand by locals?

The entire landscape around Kangchenjunga is agricultural, basically seasonal yak grazing, and the people, as transhumants, live for at least half the year several days walk down valley, where they have cropping enterprises and, often, lodges for trekkers.

At what times of the year is it intended that this putative luxury lodge remain open and who will staff it?

On our return home we spent some time looking for the public evidence upon which WWF's Kangchenjunga plans were based and could not find any.

What we found instead was a secretive, unresponsive, ideological organisation which is not accountable, with huge cash reserves from major corporations.

Where and how policy is developed and on what basis is not accessible and emails are not answered.

We will not be donors to WWF again after this experience.

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Dr Howard Dengate has worked as an international consultant in agricultural development in third world countries and Ms Sue Dengate is a best-selling author, teacher and researcher. We have trekked to many areas of Nepal on 14 separate visits over 40 years, have conducted research on the introduction of Western foods into Nepal for the last eight years and so have a useful understanding of the Nepal society and culture. We also document remote treks on the internet to encourage others to explore these regions with confidence and help bring extra income to local communities.

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Photos are available if required eg <http://fedup.com.au/information/nepal/nepal-information>

References to statements and WWF website links can be provided if wanted.