



SECOND GENERATION EVEREST CLIMBER BRENT BISHOP BATTLES MOUNTAIN SLOBS AND AVALANCHES IN PAKISTAN'S KARAKORAM RANGE. HIS VISION: A NEW

EXPEDITION ETHIC

The frenzy of a half-dozen men crushing tin cans with small boulders drowns out the roaring Braldu River below our camp site. Others arrive with canvas bags full of more empty food tins and dump them on ever-growing piles. The labels read like a gastronomical atlas from the hundreds of mountaineering Excrement, unfortunately can't be recycled and sold for three rupees per kilo."



expeditions that have passed through this glacier-carved valley en route to peaks like K2, Broad Peak, Gasherbrum IV and Trango Towers: tins of Spanish sardines, French pâté and Austrian sausages, cans of Polish peas, American pineapples, Japanese tuna fish and Pakistani ghee.

In the middle of a group of dark-haired porters, 31-year-old Brent Bishop kneels in the dirt, flattening fruit cocktail cans with the Balti men he's hired to help him. Bishop, his short sandy hair the same color as the flowing Pakistani shirt and drawstring pants he's wearing, quickly learns that the porters are a lot more enthusiastic about picking up tin cans than they are in collecting the food wrappers, toilet paper and warman was strewn about the site. Excrement, unfortunately, can't be recycled and sold for three rupees per kilo.

At dusk, Brent walks around the smoke-filled camp surveying the relatively modest expedition he's put together to clean up some of this mess. He's come to the mountainous crossroads where Pakistan, India and China meet with two objectives: to start an environmental education and cleanup program with the local porters; and to attempt a first ascent of one of the towering peaks peering at us from farther up the valley.

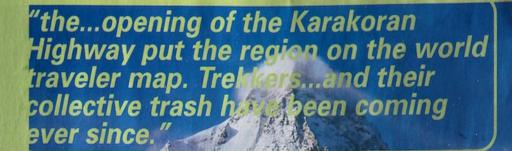
In the fading light, the camp reveals a sobering scene that illuminates how Brent's environmental goals are just as daunting as climbing the peaks looming four vertical miles above us. The porters, about 35 of them, are huddled around fires in groups of six or so, making tea and *courba*, a round, flat bread. To Brent's dismay, they're all cooking with wood scrounged from around the campsite rather than using the kerosene stoves that have been provided.

When answering the call of nature, the porters seek out a place by nearby streams where they can defecate then wash themselves with water, as is the custom in this toilet-paperless society. Brent shakes his head, realizing the enormity of what he has taken on. "Here we are, this supposedly environmentally friendly expedition, and our porters are stripping wood from all over and doing their business near a water source." He pauses, gives me one of his cocky, crevasse-wide grins. "Hey, nobody said this was going to be easy."

All around the world

He's right on that one. Brent, who lives in Bozeman, Montana, when he's not scaling peaks around the world, knows a harsh truth about his mountain-climbing brethren: a lot of them are Slobs. This unfortunate fact hit Brent like the pointy end of an ice ax when he summitted Everest in 1994. (He and his late father, Barry, who climbed Everest as part of the first successful American team









There's a lot of work that needs doing. Working with porters, tourism ministries and international alpine clubs, Brent is in the vanguard of a distinct movement in high-altitude climbing: to halt the slob ethic that leaves behind garbage pits and ravaged landscapes as mountaineers conquer summits.

After three years coordinating clean-up efforts on Everest, Brent set his sights on the Karakoram Range of northern Pakistan, a region with the planet's highest concentration of 8,000-meter peaks, including the world's second-highest, K2. The decision was prompted in part by the 1996 debacle on Everest, where six people were killed, including Brent's friends Rob Hall and Scott Fischer. Brent was near Everest attempting to solo Pumori that year and became disgusted with the Himalayan hype. It was time to take his climb-and-clean show to more remote

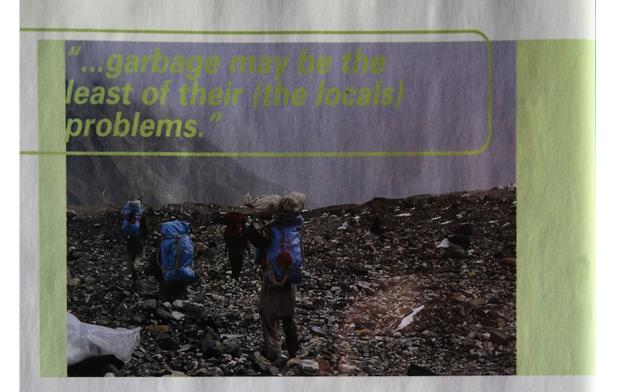
Because the Pakistani government banned climbing in 1959 due to its border war with India-and didn't reopen the region to outsiders until 1972—the Karakorams haven't yet been cursed with the cachet that turned Nepal into trekking Mecca. Still, the early 1980s opening of the Karakoram Highway

Brent and his brother-in-law Greg Mortenson-who has

worked in this area for five years building schools and vocational

in 1963, are the only US father-son legacy to have seen the top of the world). That year, Brent and his team managed the successful climb and still pulled two and a half tons of oxygen bottles, batteries and trash off the Everest high camps, including some from the 7,980-meter-high Camp IV. He returned in 1995 (when he became only the fourth American to climb the adjacent 8,501-meter Lhotse) and 1996, coordinating a "cash-for-trash" program with Nepalese Sherpas by paying them to ferry rubbish down the mountain when they descended from expedi-

"I feel like we sorta rewrote the paradigm of how expedition behavior should be," says Brent. "You don't have to be a tree-hugger. You can be a hard-



training centers with his organization, the Central Asia Institute—think the key to heading off some of the intense environmental pressures in the years to come is to educate the porters in these high-mountain valleys. To do this they devised an ambitious plan: instead of merely setting up another "cash-for-trash" incentive program, why not set up a porter training institute that would teach porters Pakistani trekking regulations, wilderness hygiene, crevasse rescue and environmental stewardship? In a region where porters can earn \$200 in a few months while the per capita income is about half that, Brent and Greg think the long-term effects of their program could be substantial.

Compared to the prospect of thousands of porters ripping up shrubs and cutting trees to build fires, or recycling their diseases into village water supplies by defecating near the glacier-fed rivers that are the lifeblood of this arid region, garbage may be the least of the problems. Much of the 30 percent infant mortality rate can be blamed on diarrhea (and subsequent dehydration) brought on by contaminated water.

Nike, which funded Brent for three successive years on clean-up projects in Everest, is also bankrolling this expedition. He may be the only Nike athlete who doesn't sport a jersey, and the stocky climber doesn't seem troubled by any of the heat that his benefactor has been getting over alleged child labor violations around the developing world. "Hey, if you want

to go climb interesting places, it costs a lot of money—for airfare, permits, porters, and logistics," he says. "Unless you're independently wealthy, you've got to get corporate sponsorship." If Nike derives some PR benefit from supporting Brent's work, that's fine with him. It allows him to climb and do some good at the same time.

The AK brigade

After whisking my wife, Liesbeth Gerritsen, and I past the thronging mass of screaming taxi drivers and officious police to the White Palace Guest House, Brent tells tales of the previous day's expedition...to shoot off AK-47 assault rifles in the outlaw town of Darra, near the Afghani border. Brent, Greg, Brent's climbing partner and photographer Kris Erickson, and a couple Pakistani friends thought it might be fun to kill some time playing with small arms. It seems that Apo Razak, a legendary expedition cook who would later accompany us, decided to take a crack at an AK. He ended up accidentally spraying the village with small-arms fire, nothing terribly unusual in a region where AKs are more plentiful than BB guns in Kentucky.

We dally for a couple days in the capital, bargaining for the services of a garishly-painted "Road-Liner" bus complete with pin-



"Dancing by the light of the toxic fumes."

Western visitors—northern Pakistan is 30 years behind Nepal as a trekking and climbing paradise. Still, there are already warning signs that industrial tourism has begun to forever alter the ecological and cultural landscape. Several years ago, the Pakistani government banned woodcutting for expeditions and trekking at Paiyu (our campsite) in an attempt to slow the deforestation that is the inevitable byproduct of 8,000 porters per year cooking courba on wood fires. Two shepherds, whose ancestors had been tending yaks for some six centuries in the valley and were unaware of the new rule, gathered some wood for their fire. They were arrested.

We arrive at Paiyu with two goats we've been herding. It's the Shiite porters' on-the-hoof protein ration. They sharpen knives on rocks, turn the goats' heads towards Mecca, cut their throats and drain all the blood out according to Islamic tradition—in the name of Allah, the merciful, the beneficent. With amazing dispatch, they take the animals from bleat to meat in a half hour. After eating we gather more cans and paper, igniting them in a garbage-fueled bonfire using kerosene. Another irony for our environmentally friendly group: along with paper wrappers, we burn plastic and all manner of unmentionables that wouldn't pass EPA regulations. The porters begin drumming and dancing around the fire, spurring it on with spurts of kerosene, and Brent just smiles. "Dancing by the light of the

toxic fumes," he grins

The next day, Brent and Greg tackle, the bathroom problem. The first couple of camps have government-built concrete latrines but none of the porters use them. It turns out that they believe the latrines are only for the Angresi, the foreigners. The porters complain that they spend hours building rock walls for protection against the wind on the glacier only to find the next group using the space as a toilet. They also repeat that they need water to wash themselves, but agree in principle that they could carry water to a latrine rather than going near a stream. Greg says he'll look into funding for porter toilets.

Avalanche land

We start up the Baltoro Glacier, the longest glacier system in the world. After a short day, Brent and Kris head up the Younghusband Glacier, where the wild-eyed Brit, Sir Francis Younghusband, came over from China a hundred years ago wearing sheepskin boots. Brent and Kris scout for an unclimbed peak. They return, reporting a hazardous icefall en route, and decide to head over the Ghondogoro Pass to look for peaks on the other side in the Hushe Valley.

The Ghondogoro Pass is about 19,000 feet high and the next day Liesbeth, Greg and I leave the two climbers with their guide Zakhir and two porters in a snowstorm at 14,500 feet. As it turns out, we are lucky to see them again.

The storm kept up intermittently, and Brent's small group slogged several days towards the high camp before the pass. The day broke reasonably clear, but they had to wade through waist-deep snow. With Brent leading the way, they heard the sound of a rumble that



climbers and skiers dread. Brent stood just below a knoll when the crash of an avalanche hit. He had just enough time to plant his two ice axes, take three deep breaths, and say to himself, "Here it goes. I'm going down," A plume of white exploded around him.

Moments later, he realized that the knoll had acted like a boulder does in the middle of a river, creating a small snow eddy that broke the force of the avalanche. Brent and the rest of the party were buried, but none of them completely. Digging themselves out, they realized how perilous their situation had become. While Brent's altimeter told them they were near the pass, near white-out conditions made it tought to see exactly where it was. The temperature was ten below. He and Kris had realized that their guide and porters—having finished their supplies waiting out the storm—had become liabilities rather than support. They were living on tea and crackers. "We just about bonked there," recalls Brent. "I thought we were goners for sure." They finally decided that heading down would put them in the path of more avalanches and chose to head up, following the slide that had hit them.

Like all good mountaineering stories, they made it, with fingers and toes intact. The close call with a premature burial spooked Brent and Kris, however, and they realized that they'd have to be very lucky to attain their climbing goals if the iffy weather continued. They spent another couple days scouting routes, only to be dissuaded by more avalanches, "grim-looking approaches," and blizzards engulfing the peaks. Brent cut bait. He didn't have time to wait out the weather and conduct the porter training seminar that Greg had been preparing. So Brent and Kris headed to Khane, met Greg and put out the word that a half-day's wages (100 rupees, or about \$2.50) and a hot meal of goat and rice awaited any porter who attended the inaugural Central Asia Institute/Nike Environmental Training Program. They wondered if anyone would show.

They got 112 porters. Three were literate. Four knew about the government regulations that spelled out their food rations, pay, and working conditions. Brent, Greg, and a local social worker named GM Parvi took the porters through a crash course in hygiene, knot-tying, first-aid, and environmental awareness. Greg explained to the men that they need to give their wives some protein—an egg, a shred of meat—"so they can work harder in the

fields." The anemia rate in women, he later tells me, is appalling. This is holistic porter training—something worthwhile to take back to the villages as well as into the mountains.

At the end of the day, Brent and Greg are ecstatic. "They were totally into it," Brent says. "They took it very seriously." They plan another all-day session in the village of Kuardu, in the Skardu valley, and get 105 porters. Things go even better, and Brent confides in me that he had been really despondent after his first attempt with the porters at the beginning of our trip-in Paiyu. "I wondered, 'Are we going to accomplish anything?"

It's probably too soon to tell exactly what he did accomplish. For now, all the porters who attended the seminars received a certificate, and some are now wandering around Baltistan with Nike T-shirts and caps. The next trekking and climbing season is just around the corner and Brent is planning his return to conduct more training sessions. He's not so wide-eyed that he thinks he can single-handedly change the behavior of trekkers and climbers, and is particularly foriorn that most international climbing organizations tend to ignore the unintended consequences of their members' quests.

Attitudes are definitely shifting in some climbing circles, but focusing climbing organizations made up of independent-minded iconoclasts to change their ways is like trying to herd cats. "Basically, they don't do shit," says Brent. At the same time, he's convinced that climbers are becoming more aware, and that he going to continue doing what he can do to change some bad climbing habits. "Hey," he says, flashing another one of his cocky grins. "You've got to start somewhere."