

BATTLING THE PLASTIC MENACE ON EVEREST: A CALL FOR RESPONSIBLE CLIMBING

Mansi Tiwari
USEM, Guru Govind Singh
Indraprastha University, New Delhi

Perched majestically in the heart of the Himalayas, Mount Everest, the crown jewel of Earth's mountain ranges, stands as the embodiment of human determination and exploration. Towering at an awe-inspiring height of 29,032 feet (8,848 meters) above sea level, this iconic peak has long captured the imagination of adventurers and mountaineers alike.

THE RISE OF EVEREST TOURISM:

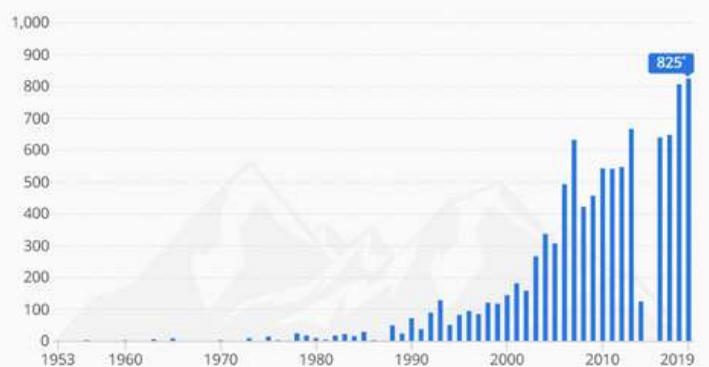
In 1953, 29th of May, Tenzing Norgay and Edmund Hillary made history by climbing the peak. During these early expeditions, climbers used basic equipment and primarily relied on natural materials like cloth, leather, and metal. The environmental impact was relatively minimal as lesser attempts were made, and the numbers were easily managed. Before this historic climb, there were few attempts to summit the peak due to which the environmental impact was relatively minimal.

In the following decades, Everest climbing evolved from a daring adventure into a booming commercial enterprise. The stunning achievements of early climbers captured the public's imagination, driving an increasing

number of adventure seekers to attempt the climb. As Everest tourism flourished, so did the associated waste generation, including plastics. As the snow-capped slopes of Mount Everest beckon intrepid climbers, they now also bear witness to the tragic consequences of human neglect.

Everest's Summit Is Getting Dangerously Crowded

Estimated number of successful Everest ascents per year from 1953 to 2019



* Estimated number up to May 25, 2019.
Sources: E. Jurgalski | 8000ers.com, Washington Post, Daily Telegraph, alanarquette.com

WHAT IS CAUSING IT?

The mountaineers discard so much junk along their treks that the mountain has been called “the highest peak of trash dump in the world.” Most of the microplastics found were fibres made of a plastic called polyester which is mostly used in the camping and climbing gears.

The once unblemished landscape now reveals a haunting tapestry of discarded plastic bottles, wrappers, and other non-biodegradable materials, left behind by trekkers and climbers who seek to conquer the peak.

The accumulation of plastic waste on Everest is not only a result of recent expeditions but also a consequence of historical climbing activity. Items left behind by early expeditions have endured for years, creating legacy waste that persists on the mountains.

The presence of plastic waste on Mount Everest has sparked a pressing concern among environmentalists and local communities who hold a deep reverence for these sacred mountains. Beyond the visible eyesore, plastic pollution poses a severe threat to the fragile ecosystem and the lives that depend on it. As glaciers recede and snow melts, these discarded plastics find their way into rivers and streams, eventually reaching the lowlands and impacting downstream communities. The total waste across the expedition groups from in a season included the following:

1. Burnable garbage - 25,866 kg (approx. 57,024 pounds)
2. Human waste - 22,803 kg (approx. 50,272 pounds)
3. Kitchen waste - 6,079 kg (approx. 13,401 pounds)
4. Non-burnable garbage - 5,291 kg (approx. 11,664 pounds)

The warming global climate has melted frozen garbage left by climbers over so many years, environmental concern in Nepal, India, and China is taking tough measures to clean up air, water and soil contaminated after decades of breakneck growth.

INITIATIVES TOWARDS THE CHANGE

Both the Nepalese and Chinese governments, who oversee climbing expeditions to Mount Everest from their respective sides, have implemented rules and regulations to address the plastic waste accumulation on the mountain.

These regulations are primarily aimed at minimizing the environmental impact of climbing activities and promoting responsible waste management. Here are some of the rules and regulations that were in place.

Nepal's Initiatives:

Mandatory Waste Deposit: Nepal's government required all climbers to make a refundable deposit before their ascent. Climbers would get their deposit back only if they brought back a certain amount of their waste, including plastic, from the mountain.

In 2022, the Nepal Army collected around 34 metric tons (around 74,957 pounds) of waste from Everest and other mountains as part of the Clean Mountain campaign. The total collected waste increased from 10 metric tons (around 22,046 pounds) in 2019 and 27.6 metric tons (around 60,847 pounds) in 2021, according to the reports.

The Mountain Clean-up Campaign 2023, an initiative led by Nepali Army jointly in collaboration with Unilever Nepal to clean up and remove waste and plastics from peaks like Mt. Everest, Mt. Lhotse, Mt. Annapurna, and Mt. Baruntse has concluded for this year. The campaign with a goal of removing 35,000 Kg of waste and plastics from the peaks this year as "An Endeavor to Save the Himalayas."

Through this campaign, a total of 35,708 Kg of waste was collected from the peaks this year.

China's Regulations:

China has been making efforts to address the plastic waste issue on the northern side of Mount Everest as well. In the upcoming future, China also plans to build environmentally friendly toilet and waste collection sites at Mount Everest which is a great initiative.