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REVIEW

Claiming the High Ground: Sherpas, Subsistence, and Environmental Change in the Highest Himalaya.

Stanley F. Stevens.

Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. xx and 537 pp., maps, figs.,
b/w photos, tables, index, and biblio. \$55.00 cloth (ISBN 0-520-07699-0).

If we were to believe everything proclaimed in the popular press, we would conclude that most of the vegetation and soil on the slopes of the Himalayas is being destroyed by humans – by either the local inhabitants or foreign tourists. To place these shrill proclamations in perspective, it is essential to have scholars carefully investigate the myriad of interrelationships among natural and human phenomena and to report their findings in a manner that recognizes the complexity of environmental changes. Such a service has been provided by Ives and Messerli in their book, *The Himalayan Dilemma: Reconciling Development and Conservation* (London, New York: Routledge, 1989), which reports on analyses of erosional rates in these mountains. Stevens has performed a similar explanatory task by examining the effects of tourism, both on deforestation and on Sherpa culture, in the Khumbu region of the Himalayas.

Stevens examines the extent of environmental change in the Khumbu by utilizing the approach of cultural ecology, which documents “the adaptiveness, ingenuity, and creativity with which indigenous people have developed ways of life that are based on profound knowledge of the local environment and ecosystematic relationships and processes. This perspective on indigenous peoples contrasts sharply with older views that denigrated the land management of ‘traditional’ peoples in many parts of the world as unscientific, superstitious, ignorant, and even destructive. At the same time, cultural ecology research has cautioned against a counter tendency to overromanticize indigenous ways of life and resource management” (p. 268). He concludes that “observers without a sense of history or local land-use practices have drawn incorrect conclusions from landscapes about the extent, pace, and severity of the impacts of the new demands on forests that tourism brought and have proclaimed a crisis that does not yet exist” (p. 422).

The author supports his conclusions thoroughly and in great detail. Readers who are primarily interested in this study only as a part of a global perspective on human ecology may find the details of cropping practices, pasturing patterns, and forest usage somewhat tedious because they are described for the many small areas, each of which differs in altitude, slope, seasonal occupation, and village jurisdiction. However, scholars of Nepal, the Himalayas, or Sherpa culture who are eager to gain from his several years of field work and those who want to know the specific bases for his conclusions will appreciate his comprehensive

documentation, including 73 pages of end notes and 14 pages of bibliography, and careful exploration of a multitude of subtopics. This careful scholarship can be illustrated by his discussions about the past and current role of the potato. To answer the question about when the potato was introduced into this region, Stevens utilized oral histories, pursued numerous obscure published references, and employed the concepts of diffusion theory. To evaluate the existing function of the potato within the Sherpa economy, he collected voluminous data on planting and harvesting, associated diseases, yields, and tastes of all varieties at various locations in this highly diverse environment.

The lack of commas for nonrestrictive phrases and clauses slows the reader slightly; but generally the text, with numerous supportive maps, reads well and is appropriately edited.

Keywords: environmental change, cultural ecology, Khumbu (Nepal), Sherpas, resource management, tourist impact.

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