Commodification on Mount Everest: A dangerous Descent

Hannah O'Neil Thompson Rivers University GEOG 4230: Attitudes Towards the Environment Tom Waldichuck November 28, 2022

Table of Contents

Introduction	. 3
Figure 1. Map showing the world 14 peaks over 8,000 metres	.3
History	.4
Гhe Nationalistic Era	.4
The Individualistic Era	. 5
Гhe Consumer Era	. 5
Figure 2. Crowding at the top of Mount Everest.	.6
Purchasable Risk	.6
Sponsorships:	.7
Sherpas	.8
Symbolic and Sacred Places	. 8
Class	.9
Environmental Impacts	.9
Why Mountaineers Climb1	10
Conclusion1	10

Introduction:

Mount Everest is increasingly paradoxical in our modern society. It is respected as a metaphor for difficulty, and simultaneously viewed with disdain for its overcrowding. Since the 1800s, Everest has occupied the attention of daring mountaineers, longing to summit the world's tallest peak. This used to be achievable only for expert mountaineers. However, recent years have seen more and more amateurs reach the summit. There has also been a shift in the way people refer to Everest; no longer perceived as a pristine mountain, conversations around Everest centre on the overcrowding, garbage problems, and consumerism. How have attitudes towards Everest changed to result in the current derisive view of the mountain, and are these attitudes reflective of what is actually occurring on Mount Everest?

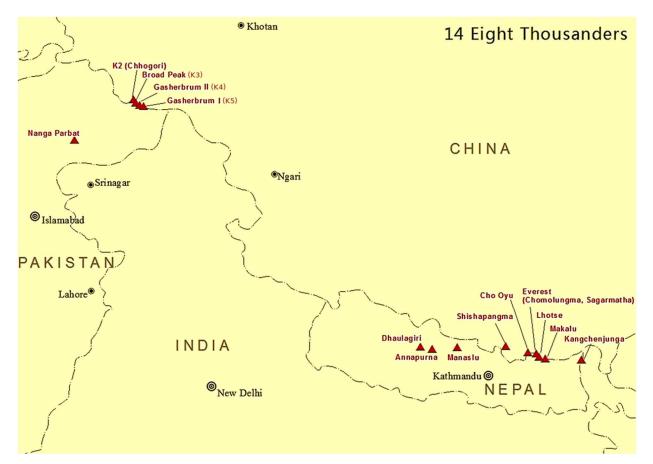


Figure 1. Map showing the world 14 peaks over 8,000 metres. From Eight thousanders map, by SY, 2018, <u>https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=67861515</u>

History:

Since the late 1800s mountaineers have been enchanted with the Himalayas, with Mount Everest featuring prominently in their climbing ambitions (Unsworth, 2001). This enchantment with the Himalayas aligns with a shift in the attitudes towards wilderness at the time (Tuan, 1990). Mountains no longer inspired awe and fear, but rather praise of their height and beauty. As more people ventured into the mountains, the fear and uncertainty surrounding them lessened. By the mid 1800s people viewed mountains as places for recreation (Tuan, 1990). Figure 1 shows the location of Everest, as well as the other 'eight thousanders' which are major climbing destinations. Everest was first summited in 1953 after many unsuccessful attempts, and since then, more and more climbers have attempted to scale it (Unsworth, 2001). The attitudes of those who climb Everest have changed drastically since the 1950s and can be divided into three eras: the nationalistic era, the individualistic era, and the consumer era (Mazzolini, 2016). The transitions between eras are accompanied by different 'firsts' on the mountain, and have been spurred along by technological advancements. The nationalistic era occurred in the early 1900s, lasting until climbers first reached the summited the mountain in 1953. The individualistic era lasted from 1953 until 1985. The consumer era began in 1985, and continues today. These different eras are characterized by different attitudes towards Mount Everest.

The Nationalistic Era:

The nationalistic era centered around British mountaineers aiming to conquer Everest for the glory of their country (Mazzolini, 2016). They were pressured to climb unaided, as their ability to reach the summit reflected the strength of the whole of Britain. According to Mazzolini, using something like supplemental oxygen to make the climb easier would cause doubt about the capabilities of British mountaineers, and in turn, Britain itself. Overcoming hardship made mountaineering worthwhile. Climbing was viewed as "more earned and meaningful... for having been accomplished in misery and exhaustion" (Mazzolini, 2016, p. 27). Even in the nationalistic era capitalism found its place on Everest. Climbing expeditions have always been expensive, and this expense attracted the media. The mountaineers disliked the media presence, claiming it made them disconnected from climbing. The nationalistic era ended in 1953, when Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay were the first people to reach Everest's summit (Mazzolini, 2016).

The Individualistic Era:

Hillary and Norgay began the individualistic era, where mountaineers climbed for themselves, instead of a nation (Mazzolini, 2016). Hillary was from New Zealand, and Norgay was a Sherpa. This made "the highest mountain seem like it could be anyone's, rather than exclusively the province of Britons" (Mazzolini, 2016, p. 65). Capitalism also played a role in the individualistic era. To fund expeditions, sponsors were needed. Previously, governments were the sponsors. The Hillary and Norgay expedition was sponsored by a London based newspaper, who sent a reporter on the expedition. The reporter went to great lengths to ensure that they had exclusive rights to reporting Hillary and Norgay's success to the public. Mazzolini states that this event was significant, as individual accomplishments on Everest, and communication about them could now be treated as property. Private companies had as much of a claim to mountaineers as countries. These changes tied mountaineers achievements only to themselves, and they could gain celebrity status. Mazzolini also comments on how this burgeoning commodification of Everest made people quickly perceive a decrease in the value of Everest ascents. This era ended in 1985, when Dick Bass summited Mount Everest (Mazzolini, 2016).

The Consumer Era:

Dick Bass was not an expert mountaineer (Mazzolini, 2016). Instead, he paid an expert mountaineer to guide him to Everest's summit. This sparked a change in how people viewed Everest and began the consumer era. Everest was no longer reserved for experts; anyone willing to pay the hefty price tag (about \$70,000), could attempt to reach the summit (Isserman et al., 2008). People began to believe that summiting was achievable for anyone (Mazzolini, 2016). The consumer era saw the commodification of Everest. Commodification is "the process by which objects and activities come to be evaluated in terms of their exchange value in the contest of trade, in addition to use value that such commodities might have" (Cohen, as cited in Nepal & Mu, 2015). This commodification has increased people's access to Everest, which has had numerous impacts on Everest, and people's attitudes towards it (Mazzolini, 2016).



Figure 2. Crowding at the top of Mount Everest. From "The Everest Climber Whose Traffic Jam Photo Went Viral" by Purja, N, 2021. <u>https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/18/sports/the-everest-climber-whose-traffic-jam-photo-went-viral.html</u>

Purchasable Risk:

Everest's commodification accompanies a similar trend seen in extreme sport tourism (Palmer, 2002). Extreme sports are "high-risk, high-adrenaline activities... [that] provide their practitioners with a substantial chance of injury or even death" (Palmer, 202, p. 323). Mountaineering is an extreme sport that Ortner (1999) calls "one of the most dangerous sports on earth" (p. 6). Despite the obvious danger, mountain guiding businesses have flourished on Everest (Palmer, 2002; Coffey, 2003). Palmer criticizes commercial expeditions for enabling inexperienced climbers to participate. Extreme sports, especially mountaineering, rely heavily on specific expertise. Casual mountaineers often lack this expertise, believing that purchasing a ticket endows them with the necessary skills, and "the right to risk not only their own lives, but those of their Western and Sherpa guides too" (Palmer, 2002, p. 331). Commodification has led to large numbers of inexperienced climbers on Everest, which causes dangerous

problems. Speed is crucial when attempting the final push to the summit, and large groups of inexperienced climbers can bring things down to dangerously slow speeds, and "wast[e] precious oxygen" (Nepal & Mu, 2015). Figure 2 shows the crowding that now occurs on Everest. The success of inexperienced climbers only serves as further encouragement for others (Unsworth, 2000). The consumer era has seen guiding companies aiming to make mountains like Everest seem accessible to everyone (Palmer, 2002; Mazzolini, 2016). Mazzolini questions this accessibility, because attempting to scale Everest has physical and financial barriers. Even if someone meets the physical and financial qualifications, getting to the summit is not guaranteed. Getting off the mountain alive isn't a given either, despite how probable guiding companies like to make it seem. The consumer era has seen the creation of a more purchasable Everest experience, not an accessible one (Mazzolini, 2016).

Even before the consumerist era, Everest had become a source of contempt among 'serious climbers,' because it needed less technical ability to climb (Krakauer, 1997). According to Krakauer (1997), much of this contempt came from the fact that "by the early 1980s, Everest's easiest line…had been climbed more than a hundred times" (p. 24). This, coupled with the ascent of Dick Bass in 1985, profoundly changed Everest. No longer were invitations on expeditions only available to those who had "served a long apprenticeship on lower peaks" (Krakauer, 1997, p. 24). This increased 'accessibility' of the mountain has led to profoundly different attitudes towards Everest, both in the eyes of mountaineers, and the general public (Mazzolini, 2016).

Sponsorships:

In each era, the money to climb came from different sources, for different reasons. In the nationalistic era the main funding came from countries, usually Britain, hoping to cement their influence on the world's tallest mountain. Money has come increasingly from private companies who sponsor mountaineers to advertise their brand (Mazzolini, 2016). Sponsorships are a key way mountaineers make a living climbing (Krakauer, 1997). One climber interviewed by Krakauer (1997) says that "to continue receiving sponsorship from companies... a climber has to keep upping the ante. The next climb has to be harder and even more spectacular than the last" (p. 41). This change in motivation behind expedition funding transformed mountaineers

into commodities, as they attempt to sell aspects of their identities to attract corporate sponsorship. In other words, the consumer era on Mount Everest does not mean only that the mountain itself is for sale, it also means that a trade has developed in the individual traits of aspiring mountaineers (Mazzolini, 2016, p. 115).

The consumer era saw many mountaineers turn to guiding for a more sustainable career (Krakauer, 1997). Unsworth states that commercial climbing expeditions are "money-making enterprises" (p.536). Unlike the clients, the guides and Sherpas are motivated by money (Unsworth, 2000; Mazzolini, 2016).

Sherpas:

Sherpas are an "ethnic group who live in northeast Nepal, in the mountains and valleys surrounding Everest" (Ortner, 1999, p. 12). Sherpas got their start in high altitude work during surveys of the Himalayas, and as mountaineering became its own distinct activity, they did it as well. Sherpas were viewed as "particularly well suited for the support work involved in mountain exploring and climbing" (Ortner, 1999, p. 13). In the nationalistic era mountaineers admired Sherpa's physical abilities at high altitudes Many mountaineers of this time held orientalist views of Sherpas, believing them childlike, and "lack[ing] the requisite "spirit" for mountaineering" (Ortner, 1999, p. 42). Mountaineers also believed that the Sherpas did not climb for money during this era. However, Sherpas have always climbed in order to make a living (Nyaupane, 2015). In the consumer era of mountaineering, Sherpas face more danger than anyone else (Nepal & Mu, 2015). The influx of inexperienced climbers has caused Sherpas to be in higher altitudes for longer periods (Nepal & Mu, 2015). The Sherpa are often given the most dangerous jobs to do (Nyaupane, 2015). There is a dramatic difference in the attitudes of mountaineers and Sherpas to risk, and climbing. Mountaineers climb to obtain fame and or fulfil themselves, and see risk as necessary. Sherpas climb for money, and see risk as something to eliminate whenever possible (Nyaupane, 2015).

Symbolic and Sacred Places:

The mountains of the Himalayas were very important sacred places to many in Nepal, including the Sherpas (Ortner, 1997). Tuan (1990) defines sacred places as "the locations of hierophany" (p. 146). Because these mountains were sacred places, going mountaineering risked angering the gods. There are religious practices that Sherpas did, and still do, in order to mitigate this risk. Since the 1970s, Sherpas have been encouraging mountaineers to participate in these rituals

(Ortner, 1997). Although many mountaineers do not have religious ideals around Mount Everest, it is a symbol for them (Mazzolini, 2016). Tuan (defines a symbol as "a part that has the power to suggest a whole". Mountains have historically been important symbolic landscapes for different cultures, symbolizing things like spirituality (Tuan, 1990). Mount Everest in western society symbolizes overcoming difficulty (Mazzolini, 2016). As Mount Everest has become an increasingly universal metaphor, it has become distanced from the actual physical location. People refer to it, while simultaneously forgetting it is an actual place (Mazzolini, 2016).

Class:

There have been changes from the previously all male, "predominantly white and Western" expeditions of the past (Ortner, 1999). Despite this, mountaineers are still mostly middle class, and upper middle class people. In the nationalistic era, many mountaineers joined mountaineering clubs. Ortner (1999) states that "the membership was not only middle class, but professional middle class, highly educated, and no doubt with some financial resources" (p.34). The current class of mountaineers is similar, targeting what Palmer (2002) calls "Executive adventurers, predominantly men with high-profile, white collar professions, who spend their weekends and holidays mountaineering" (p.330).

Environmental Impacts:

Waste management is one of the most well known issues related to Everest today (Mazzolini, 2016). Mountaineering uses lots of equipment, which is usually discarded on the mountain after use (Nepal & Mu, 2015). As Everest has become commodified, more people have been drawn to it, so more climbers generating trash. Climbers must now bring a certain amount of trash off the mountain with them, or they will be fined. There are many different programs and innovations aiming to solve Everest's trash problem (Mount Everest Biogas Project, 2019; Nepal & Mu, 2015). Mazzolini (2016) is critical of the current perceptions of Everest's trash. The revenue of guiding companies depends on clients having an enjoyable experience, which large amounts of garbage would detract from. Many guiding companies have a personal stake in keeping Everest looking clean (Mazzolni, 2016). Other ecological issues caused by Everest's commodification of Everest are increased trampling of vegetation, deforestation, and increased soil erosion (Nyaupane, 2015; Doytchev, 2021).

Why Mountaineers Climb:

The reasons mountaineers try to scale Everest are the same reasons why they attempt to scale any mountain, with the extra allure of reaching the world's tallest peak (Mazzolini, 2016). According to Coffey (2003), risk is "a necessary component of what makes mountaineering worthwhile" (p. 138). Mountain climbing gives participants the opportunity to tangle with real danger, at a level of stakes hard to find in modern society. Often, it is a search to create meaning, in a world increasingly removed from it (Coffey, 2003). Ortner (1999) states that mountaineers often climb because of a dissatisfaction with modern life; they hope to find something missing in their lives, or they seek to escape something. In the early eras of mountaineering, mountaineers sought an escape from busy cities, looking for peace in the modern struggles of daily life (Ortner, 1999). Mountains featured heavily in religion and spirituality, so in ancient times, they were places of awe and fear (Tuan, 1990). Tuan (1990) discusses the aesthetic value of nature as a reason for loving a place. One of the reasons that climbers climb is the aesthetic value they perceive in the mountainous landscapes they love, as stated by many of the climbers that Coffey (2016) interviews.

Conclusion:

The attitudes towards Mount Everest have changed drastically from the time that it was first submitted until now. It has gone through three definitive eras of attitudes: the nationalistic era, the individualistic era, and the consumer era. Capitalism has played an important role in each era, with the most obvious impacts occurring in the consumer era. These impacts include sponsorships commodifying mountaineers, and commercial guiding expeditions commodifying the Everest experience. Class has always had an impact on people's attitudes towards Everest, as exemplified by the contrasts between Sherpas and mountaineers' motivation for climbing. Everest has been a sacred landscape to people in Nepal since before it was known by the Western world. Everest has become an ever-present symbolic landscape, but this metaphor disconnected people from the reality of the mountain. The changing attitudes towards Everest because of its commodification have had many negative environmental impacts on the mountain, and its surrounding ecosystem. The commodification of Everest has profoundly changed people's attitudes towards the mountain, creating a contradictory view of both awe and derision.