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## Tribute to the Great Conservationists of Nepal

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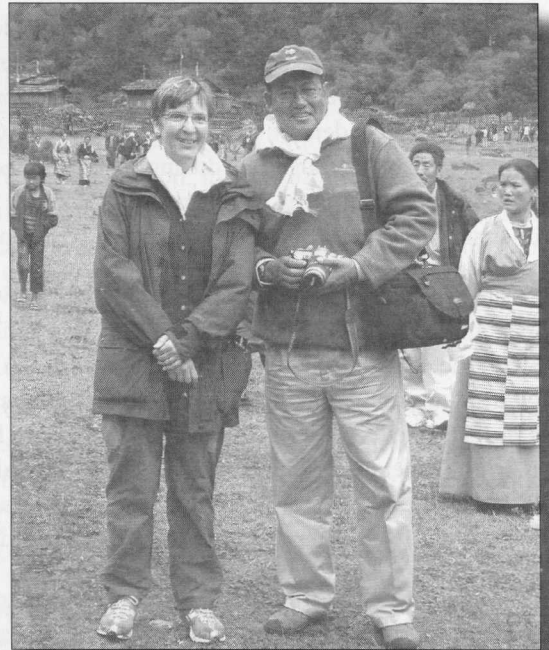
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Yeshe Lama, left, and Matthew Preece, right, dance with Gunsa residents on the evening of September 22, 2006



Jillian Bowling Schlaepfer and Chandra Gurung leaving Gunsa, September 23, 2006

#### CAUALTIES OF THE SEPTEMBER, 2006 HELICOPTOR CRASH

Dr. Bigyan Acharya, Program Development Specialist USAID, Nepal  
 Margaret Alexander, Deputy Director, USAID, Nepal  
 Hem Raj Bhandari, Reporter, Nepal Television  
 Dr. Chandra Prasad Gurung, Country Representative, WWF Nepal  
 Dr. Harka Gurung, Advisor, WWF Nepal  
 Jennifer Headley, Coordinator, Himalaya/South Asia Program  
 Klim Kim, Flight Crew  
 Yeshe Choden Lama, Senior Program Officer, WWF Nepal  
 Tirtha Man Maskey, Former Director General, Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation  
 Pauli Mustonen, Charge d'Affaires, Embassy of Finland, Nepal  
 Dr. Damodar Parajuli, Acting Secretary, Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation  
 Matthew Preece, Program Officer, Eastern Himalayas Program, WWF US  
 Narayan Poudel, Director General, Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation  
 The Honorable Gopal Rai, Minister of State, Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation, and his wife, Meena Rai  
 Sharad Rai, Director General, Department of Forests  
 Dr. Jillian Bowling Schlaepfer, Director of Conservation, WWF UK  
 Mingma Sherpa, Flight Crew  
 Mingma Norbu Sherpa, Managing Director, Eastern Himalayas Program, WWF US  
 Vijaya Shrestha, Central Committee Member, Federation of Nepalese Chamber of Commerce and Industry

Photographs illustrating this memorial were provided through the kindness of WWF unless otherwise noted

# TRIBUTE TO THE GREAT CONSERVATIONISTS OF NEPAL

Every day that those of us fortunate enough to live in Nepal wake up to the songs of Himalayan birds, smell the flowers blooming all year, and marvel at the beauty of the Himal, we recall those great people who were lost while continuing to help conserve all this beautiful natural and cultural heritage.

The helicopter tragedy of September 23, 2006 shocked us all. Storm clouds climbing up the mountains, obscuring the way forward at the last minute, resulted in the sudden death of 24 people returning from the high mountain village of Ghunsa where they had inaugurated Nepal's first community managed conservation area on the slopes of Mt. Kanchenjunga in eastern Nepal.

We were, and still are, overwhelmed by the enormity of the loss that occurred on that late monsoon day over a year ago. That so many beautiful souls, so many great minds, so many generous hearts, so many good friends could go at one time is still not possible to accept. Mingma Norbu Sherpa and Chandra Gurung of WWF had assembled with them on this fatal trip the most highly accomplished and dedicated fellow representatives of the government, NGO and donor conservation community of the Nepal Himalaya available. These were a truly extraordinary group of people. As noted conservationist Karna Shakya said, "They have left holes that will be very difficult to fill."

The outstanding contributions of these individuals stand as tall as the sacred Himalaya they worked so hard to document, conserve, and celebrate. Most of them were born of these mountains, sons and daughters of Himalayan soil. Others came from America, Australia, Canada, Finland, and the UK to join in helping mountain peoples' improve their lives and nurture

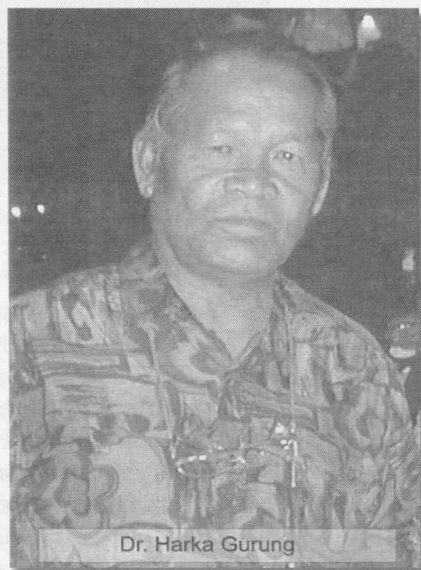
their magnificent landscapes, plants and animals. Many of them contributed far more than most of us could imagine to bringing new understandings, new approaches for empowering local peoples, new science, creative development models, and the financial and administrative support without which their ideas could not have been turned into reality.

They leave us a legacy that will live on far beyond our lives. They leave us a challenge: how can we carry on their mission of understanding and conserving the dynamic intricate ecosystems that make up the Himalaya and adjoining plains; of understanding and empowering local people and supporting them with appropriate policies and programs so that it is local people who stand as our guardians?

The pioneering paths taken by our lost colleagues had that ability to radically alter our ideas and change the way we think; and to translate these ideas into management systems that have made Nepal the locus of much of the innovation that has taken place in community based natural resource management over the last three decades.

Although I had the privilege of having met all the 20 passengers on this helicopter, there were far too many who were good friends and close colleagues. This tribute focuses primarily on them – and in each case fails to do them justice.

The doyen of this group, the native father of penetrating, honest, rigorous and provocative scholarship in Nepal; and the Guru for many of us in the Himalayan research community, was Dr. Harka Gurung. The scope of his scholarship was breathtaking. His approximately 76 books encompassed all dimensions of the geography of Nepal and the Himalaya: demographic,



Dr. Harka Gurung



physical, ethnographic, historical, developmental, educational and mountaineering.<sup>1</sup> His early cry for more inclusive and equitable treatment of excluded ethnic groups and dalits, and the scholarship he pioneered in demonstrating their fundamental importance to the history of Nepal was instrumental in shaping the present hot social and political debates in Nepal. Had his courageous and lonely voice been more heeded, might we have escaped some of the devastation and frustration of the last ten years of conflict and confusion?

Government Minister; student at Patna, Kirtipur and Edinburgh; lecturer and distinguished scholar; National Planning Commission planner and doer; mapper, photographer, and writer; explorer and trekker; voracious reader, raconteur and public speaker; drinker and dancer; father and husband; Dr. Harka Gurung defied definition and expectation. Inviting him to speak at your function was an exciting and dangerous act – he never said what anyone expected him to, it was inevitably provocative, and everyone learned something new regardless. My last opportunity to be a fellow speaker with Harka, as well as my last opportunity to share a bottle of rakshi with him, was in Chame village, Manang. He held the 5,000 assembled youths and villagers spell bound and roaring with laughter as he taught them some of their own history. As students of Himalayan research, we can but kneel with awe and gratitude before this extraordinary Gurung from Tarache village, Lamjung.

The rural Gurung community gave up another outstanding son on this helicopter: Dr. Chandra Prasad Gurung. From Siklis village in Kaski, a fact Chandra would frequently remind his friends with pride, he had also charted a remarkably accomplished career as a geographer and conservationist.

Chandra was a scholar with splendid networking and leadership skills. Following his post graduate degrees from Asian Institute of Technology, Tribhuvan University and University of Hawaii, Chandra pioneered the development of the Annapurna Conservation Area together with Mingma Sherpa. The resultant model of community driven and managed tourism, village development and conservation has shaped and inspired conservation efforts throughout the Himalaya and the globe – as well as much of the scholarly literature on community based conservation. It still stands as one of the most successful and resilient testaments to both of these extraordinary Nepalis' work – while they were with the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation and over the last decade with WWF Nepal and WWF US.<sup>2</sup>

Mingma Norbu Sherpa had come to his profound understanding of community based conservation through his early childhood experiences in the Sherpa village of Kunde, his education in parks and recreation at Lincoln College in New Zealand and University of Manitoba, and his service as a Ranger and Warden of Sagarmatha National Park. I know it was very sad for Sir Edmond Hillary, whose passing was recently commemorated by New Zealand, Nepal and the world, that one of the first graduates of the school he established in Khumjung, in whom he had taken great pride, had gone before him.

The third member of the Himalayan contingent of the



Mingma Norbu Sherpa, Managing Director, Eastern Himalayas Program, WWF US



Yeshe Choden Lama, Senior Program Officer, WWF Nepal

WWF party on the helicopter was the talented Yeshe Choden Lama. With a Bachelors from Middlebury College in Vermont and a Masters in Sociology and Anthropology from the School of Oriental and African Studies at London University, she had been working for the last decade on conservation programs in Nepal and Bhutan – and had joined me in an ICIMOD workshop in Lhasa on yaks and rangelands.

This WWF team of Mingma, Chandra and Yeshe, supported and backstopped by Dr. Jillian Bowling Schlaepfer, Jennifer Headley and Matthew Preece from WWF offices in the UK and Washington, had orchestrated a number of innovative conservation efforts in Nepal, Bhutan and the Himalaya of which the Kanchenjunga Conservation Area was the most recent. It was also the most radical – giving the management of large areas of natural landscapes into community hands – a model that could only have been shepherded through government by the wise and persuasive hands of Mingma and Chandra.

It is ultimately to the Government of Nepal, however, that the credit for establishing and implementing new models of

people and science based conservation of natural resources must go. And some of the key people who led this effort with amazing dedication, personal sacrifice, hard work, and persuasive skills were the ones lost on this helicopter.

Dr. Tirtha Man Maskey, Mr. Narayan Poudel, Dr. Damodar Parajuli, and Mr. Sarad Rai were all exemplary foresters who combined a continued interest in learning with a commitment to making it happen. While I knew and had worked with Damodar Parajuli (Acting Secretary) while he was head of Monitoring in the Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation and with Sharad Rai over the years before he became DG of the Department of Forests; it was Tirtha Maskey and Narayan Poudel with whom I had worked most closely over twenty years – in the field and in Kathmandu.

In the last week of February, 2008, two books on Tirtha Man Maskey were released by the new Secretary of Forest. The audience was packed with all the conservationists of Nepal that were left behind – each of them acknowledging



Tirtha Man Maskey (right), Former Director General, Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (with Chandra Gurung)

the debt the country and each of them owed to Dr. Maskey for all he did for Chitwan National Park and conservation in Nepal. His Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Florida had been edited and published to demonstrate his almost life long devotion to the conservation of the gharial crocodile. His many outstanding achievements as Warden and Director General were recognized by prestigious awards from the King of Nepal and the Duke of Edinburgh, as well as a more personal account of his life and career was written by his



Jennifer Headley, Coordinator, Himalaya/South Asia Program devoted wife, Laksmi Maskey.<sup>3</sup>

As Karna Shakya said at the book launching event, “Dr. Tirtha Man Maskey was a true conservationist. He did not look for excuses for not doing what was needed – and he did not have a great tolerance for those who did. We cannot forget him or his great contributions to conservation in Nepal.”

Narayan Poudel, also a graduate of the Dehra Dun Forestry Academy that produces the Indian Forest Service officers, was a forester of high energy and deep commitment. From the days in which I worked for many years with him and his identical twin brother, Ram Poudel, in establishing the community forestry program in Nepal, I was always overwhelmed by their ability to walk three times as far as any other officer and help three times as many communities to establish their own forests. Later, when Narayan became the first Chief Warden of the Makalu-Barun National Park in cooperation with The Mountain Institute (TMI), Narayan continued to demonstrate this remarkable commitment to working with local communities to establish a new model of a national park without the army, and placing communities in the driving role.

As an ecologist, Narayan was, like Tirtha Maskey, a thorough scientist. As he also progressed to taking over the Department of National Parks and Wildlife, Narayan also demonstrated the commitment to good and hard work so often found in Nepal’s forest officers – yet so little recognized and rewarded.

Sadly, this tragedy also took the lives of the Minister of State for Forests and Soil Conservation, Mr. Gopal Rai and his wife Mrs Rai, who had inaugurated the new conservation area the day before.

Had any of the people eulogized above been able to review this tribute so far, they would have complained that I have neglected some of the most important actors: the local people and the donors. Both had representatives on the helicopter that I had met; but none of them did I know well, and am thus



Margaret Alexander, Deputy Director, USAID, Nepal

unable to provide the tribute they deserve.

Mr. Dawa Tsering Sherpa, a native of the area, was the charismatic first Chairperson of the Kangchenjunga Conservation Area Management Committee. It was he who helped to develop the management plan, orchestrate local understanding and support, and inspire the confidence that allowed the Government of Nepal to experiment with this new form of conservation. Along with Mr. Vijaya Shrestha, a representative of the Federation of Nepal Chamber of Commerce and Industry from this area, these people are emblematic of all that makes Nepal's pioneering models of community management so successful.

I had met Margaret Alexander, Deputy Director of USAID and Pauli Mustonen, Charge d'Affaires of the Embassy of Finland and Dr. Bignan Acharya, Program Development Specialist of USAID on and off in Kathmandu settings. Their excitement at being involved in supporting development at the community level and their personal commitment to conservation in Nepal was contagious to colleagues. Margaret, Bignan and Pauli had both come from distinguished careers in their own government services and were appointed for promotions at the time of their death. Personally, they were also – like all those I knew on this helicopter – a pleasure to know.

Tribute also goes to Mr. Hem Raj Bhandari, Reporter at Nepal Television; Mr. Sunil Kumar Singh, Cameraman for Nepal Television; and flight crew members Klim Kim, Mingma Sherpa, Guruwar Tandual, and Valery Slafronov who gave their lives in the cause of their professions. Their loss is every bit as tragic and difficult for their families and friends as those I have chronicled in a little more detail above.

I had met all of these people. Some have been my Gurus, my colleagues and my close friends for 10, 20, and



Pauli Mustonen, Charge d'Affaires, Embassy of Finland, Nepal (with Chandra Gurung)

even 34 years. As with many in the Himalayan community, I ate *dal bhat* with them. I even ate *dhiro* and *sisnu ko sag* with them, washed down with local moi, sucha, or rakshi. I shared their tents and their camp fires, their stories, their jokes. I now share their loss with family members and friends for whom their deaths have been devastating.

These dedicated people were amazing – out of the ordinary. They spoke truth even when it was uncomfortable. They dedicated their lives to hard work even if it was not always recognized. They loved life – and loved to enjoy it. They inspire us to combine compassion with trust and love of nature with love of people. They taught us how to keep learning and how to value what we have.

We salute them, each and every one. We wish them peace in the lap of the sacred Himalaya they loved so deeply.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>For a complete list of Harka Gurung's publications, positions, and a gallery of photographs lovingly compiled by his children, see [www.harkagurung.org](http://www.harkagurung.org).

<sup>2</sup>More detailed biographies and references for all 6 WWF personnel lost on this helicopter, including Chandra Prasad Gurung, Mingma Norbu Sherpa, Yeshi Choden Lama, Jillian Bowling Schlaepfer, Jennifer Headley, and Matthew Preece are available at [www.worldwildlife.org/wildplaces/him/updates/](http://www.worldwildlife.org/wildplaces/him/updates/).

<sup>3</sup>Maskey, Tirtha Man. 2008. Gharial Conservation in Nepal. Lalitpur: Wildlife Watch Group. Maskey, Laxmi Badan. 2008. Tiger Warden. Lalitpur: Wildlife Watch Group. (in Nepali).

<sup>4</sup>[www.wwfnepal.org](http://www.wwfnepal.org) WWF Programme Office, Baluwatar, PO Box 7660, Kathmandu Nepal

<sup>5</sup>[www.chandragurungtrust.org](http://www.chandragurungtrust.org)

<sup>6</sup>[www.fundraiseonline.co.nz/MingmaNorbuSherpa/](http://www.fundraiseonline.co.nz/MingmaNorbuSherpa/) p

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## MEMORIAL SCHOLARSHIPS/MENTORSHIPS

A number of memorial scholarships and funds are being established to remember the great people and help perpetuate their mission. Listed below are some that have come to my attention – I apologize for those I have inadvertently missed. *J.G.C.*

### WWF MEMORIAL SCHOLARSHIPS: AVAILABLE THROUGH WWF OFFICE NEPAL<sup>4</sup>

#### CHANDRA GURUNG MEMORIAL SCHOLARSHIPS

for Nepalese students for the study of Masters Degree in conservation at a University in Nepal.

#### JILLIAN BOWLING SCHLAEPFER AND JENNIFER HEADLEY MEMORIAL SCHOLARSHIPS

for two women or minority/ethnic groups students to obtain BSc. in forestry at the Institute of Forestry, Tribhuvan University, Nepal.

#### MINGMA SHERPA MEMORIAL SCHOLARSHIPS

for students from the protected areas of Sagarmatha, Dolpo, Langtang and Kanchenjunga to study at the Certificate and Bachelors level at the Institute of Forestry, Pokhara.

#### NEPAL CONSERVATION MEMORIAL SCHOLARSHIPS

for Nepalese students to pursue Certificate level degree in forestry from Hetauda Campus of Institute of Forestry, Tribhuvan University.

#### MATTHEW PREECE AND YESHE LAMA

Young Conservation Leader Awards for contributions to conservation.

#### CHANDRA GURUNG CONSERVATION TRUST & CHANDRA GURUNG CONSERVATION FOUNDATION

The Chandra Gurung Conservation Foundation (CGCF) is a registered social service organization in Nepal founded by Dr. Gurung's extensive network of former staff, protégés, friends and colleagues. It works in tandem with its sister organization in the US, the Chandra Gurung Conservation Trust. Together, their mission is to mentor and support the next generation of Nepalese sustainable development practitioners, and to keep the legacy of Dr. Gurung alive--especially his people-centered approach to nature conservation.<sup>5</sup>

#### MINGMA NORBU SHERPA MEMORIAL FUND

This fund has been established in New Zealand as a "living memorial to Mingma Sherpa." It aims to establish an endowment fund to support students from the Himalaya to conduct post-graduate studies at Lincoln University, New Zealand where Mingma also studied.<sup>6</sup>

