**Damodar Saribung Traverse**

**April-May 2013**

**Feedback to World Expeditions (WE) from Gerard McPhee**

The description of the trek that took place can be obtained from the diaries, photos and recollections of the participants and is not repeated here. This feedback note focusses on action required by WE.

Two key observations and recommendations.

These two observations are in the context of a magnificent landscape and fascinating cultural trek.

1. Overall the trek was successful due to the **skilled and caring on the ground Nepali crew** led in an exemplary manner by Haka Bahadur Rai.
2. **The trip schedule is unsafe in its current form** and it would be dangerous and negligent of World Expeditions to re-offer the trip in the current schedule. This danger is exacerbated by the complete failure of WE to have a working escalation or warning system available to trek members.

BACKGROUND TO KEY OBSERVATIONS

One participant (G) developed HACE at Damodar Kund at approx. 5000m. This was highly likely to be due to the schedule having insufficient acclimatization time, no rest days and no schedule contingency days.

Another participant (B) developed hypothermia the on the High Camp day. This required major support. This was highly likely to be due to the schedule having insufficient acclimatization time, no rest days and no schedule contingency days.

A third participant (S) developed HAPE on the same day. She was carried into camp. This was highly likely to be due to the schedule having insufficient acclimatization time, no rest days and no schedule contingency days.

On the the Saribung pass day, S was evacuated by Helicopter. On the same day B developed exhaustion. She was carried into camp in a magnificent effort by both Team Members and Trekkers. During this day the leader Haka Bahadur Rai delivered exemplary care to S during a protracted evacuation process. Kapur delivered leadership and consistent care to B, assisted by the trekkers.

When Kapur realized at approximately 5 pm that B would require a carry, he asked trekker G (me) to carry B’s pack as well as my own and proceed ahead to camp. I did so. I was thus ahead of Kapur, B and D when the climbing Sherpa arrived heading up the glacier having failed to locate the camp. He explained that he could not find the camp and that I should stay put and not continue down the glacier as I would not be able to find the camp. He gave me the advice that I and the other two trekkers still on the glacier (including the exhausted B) prepare to spend the night on the glacier (approx. 5800m) without food or shelter. This meeting prompted me to make a phone call to escalate the situation. This call was made at about 5.30 pm local time and occurred during the interval where the Sherpa continued on to B and D with the same message. (No camp etc) In the case of trekker D who was at the back of the party assisting the exhausted B case he was incorrectly advised by the climbing Sherpa that the camp (i) had not been established and (ii) was an unknown and significant distance further down the glacier, it was highly likely we would be required to spend the night on the glacier (in the case of D with limited/little food and shelter).

One of the trekkers (G-myself) escalated the situation to the two emergency phone numbers provided by WE. These phone numbers were obtained by my Melbourne based partner from the answering machine of WE in Melbourne. The calls were made at approximately 5.30 Nepal time which would be around midnight Melbourne time. As at 18 May 2013, these are 61437463995 and 61 419267788. No reply of any kind was received that night. Following the failure of the Australian operation of WE to respond in any form, I again rang Melbourne and asked my partner to contact the Australian Embassy in Nepal. This was approximately 6pm local Nepal time. The Embassy escalated the matter to WE locally. The embassy contacted me by SMS and voicemail.

Faced with a completely exhausted B, and no camp, I expected the situation for B would be grim in the morning and that escalation would allow early action to be initiated by WE to address the situation in the morning. It was advance warning. No one at WE responded until approximately 9 or 10 am Melbourne time the next day with a call to my partner to advise

* WE was Sorry” that it took 9 or 10 hours to respond to the calls, and.
* Words to the effect that nothing could have been done anyway until the next morning.

The second statement reporting inability to act surprises me (given my last 40 years in rock, snow and ice) to say the least.

The situation was resolved by Kapur. He first tried to carry B in soft snow conditions. This proved too difficult. Then he left B in the care of another trekker (D), ran to locate the camp and organize a human carry team to return for B. On his run to camp he reached me and advised me to continue to camp. I did so. Camp was easy for me to find. Shortly after B was carried into camp, just before dark. Shortly after this in failing light, Trek Leader Haka arrived from managing the evacuation by helicopter of S, after a very fast trip to reach the team.

In the following hour Haka was in contact with the local WE HQ and I advised the embassy that all was well.

Full phone logs are available if required from my sat phone..

OTHER FEEDBACK

1. WE should either discontinue or fix its broken emergency contact system. Emergency contact arrangement should actually work. Action can be taken to respond to such circumstances.
2. Each serious trip or expedition should have more than one means of contact with the relevant base support systems. In this case the only back up to the WE sat phone was a trekker supplied sat phone. This became an issue when the sole WE phone was dedicated to the rescue of S and was thus separated from the rest of the team. It also puts the responsibility for the decision to initiate the call on the trekker with the phone rather than with a senior member of the trek crew.
3. The tents are in poor condition with respect to many broken zippers and perished fabric. The fabric is such that a decent wind would tear many of them beyond use. On this trip the only effective zipper repair tool was trekker supplied.
4. Every serious trip or expedition should have a space blanket to treat hypothermia. A thermos would be helpful as well.
5. The dusty trudge down the crowded Marsyandi should be replaced by a jeep. The road is now open to CHAME and competing with jeeps is a poor finish to a great route.
6. Changes to local air luggage regulations should be communicated within WE. The Melbourne office is clearly not updated on highly relevant local changes to Nepal that significantly impact on the feasibility of taking the items on the recommended equipment list.
7. All trekkers should receive the same written information about the trek. In the case of the Saribung trip, most seemed to have different information and some had not received significant documentation.
8. The trip description is wrong and should be rewritten to correctly describe the trip. This includes basic items like route, campsites and passes used.
9. The equipment list should be reviewed to correctly prepare participants for this trip. The lists (various) need to be specific to the trip. For example, the requirement for a 60 litre pack was unnecessary and resulted in some trekkers buying and carrying unnecessary gear.
10. Porters and other staff should receive the same safety equipment as trekkers.