

ProjectsAbroad



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THE HIMALAYAS

OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF PROJECTS ABROAD NEPAL



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The Search for the Mystical Red Panda

By Finn Boyle – New Zealand

Annapurna Conservation Area Project

Nepal Fact #1

There are over 180 species of mammals in Nepal, including the Nepalese snow leopard, Red panda, Indian rhinoceros, Tibetan fox and Asiatic elephant.

It's on the cover of the brochure for the Projects Abroad conservation project, and yet not a single Red panda sighting has been confirmed in the Himalayas for three years. Despite this fact, the volunteers in Ghandruk set out to find one! We may not have actually spotted one, but it did prove to be a great trip!

All thirteen volunteers and our two great leaders (Sophie and Raj) set out from Ghandruk for a three day field trip. The trip took us as high as 3600 metres, which is just short of New Zealand's (my home country) highest peak at 3800m. We stayed in the villages of Deurali and Dobato on our journey, which were tiny but very beautiful.

The trip itself was amazing and was really more of a reconnaissance mission than an actual Panda hunt. We needed to do some research on the actual area before going full bushman mode and doing some grass roots panda hunting. The real search will begin in about a month with a whole new set of volunteers and maybe then they will see something.

The closest we came to the Red Panda on this trip was seeing a reportedly mobile red splotch through a pair of binoculars. Elise (a French volunteer) and I went on a bush mission to track down this elusive red dot, but even finding the right tree that we had only seen from a kilometre away was practically impossible in the dense jungle. Though the girls back at the watch tower where it was first spotted still maintain that it moved, I thought it was most likely some colourful moss.

In addition to surveying the area, we also interviewed locals. Only one man had ever seen a Red Panda, in fact twice, in 23 years. However, plenty of people had seen Himalayan Black Bears and leopards. That was very encouraging while hiking blindly through the dense jungle of Nepal.

As our research showed, the Red Panda is an incredibly elusive creature. It tends to be active at night (though it is not strictly nocturnal) and lives in a habitat of dense bamboo undergrowth, which it also uses for food, and tall conifers for shelter. This makes finding one by outright search near impossible.

Our next course of action in the panda hunt is to do similar research in more places in the Ghandruk region. We will be interviewing locals and surveying habitats around Chomrong and Jinhu. As these areas have far more people in them than Deurali and Dobato we should have a better chance of finding people who have seen a Red Panda. Ironically, the increase in human population almost definitely would have an adverse effect on the Red Panda population as well, so we will just have to wait and see.



Life in a Nepali Host Family: No Worries, Same, Same

By Imke Asselbergs – The Netherlands

Alka Hospital

To be honest, I'm currently finding Nepal difficult. At this point there are no evenings filled with tea, cookies, "country-stereotype-jokes," or travel stories. The other volunteers at my host family are all leaving, and it's truly amazing how fast you get attached while living together for only a few weeks. Living with the volunteers felt like brothers and sisters hanging out. But the purpose of my trip is to really get to know the culture, so therefore I need to get over it and get ready for some alone time with the host family!

From the moment the last volunteer left the house, the family begins to treat me like the second daughter they always wanted. The father, clearly head of the family, is really putting an effort to make me feel comfortable from the start. He is a clever, cheerful, kind, and always interesting man.

Before this "alone-time-experience," I already thought of a back-up subject to talk about in case of an awkward silence. Since I am Dutch it is always easy to start a conversation about soccer. Even when we don't understand each other, we all understand Van Persie. But there is absolutely no need for back-up subjects. If I wasn't way too blonde, way too tall, and way too western, I would seriously doubt someone could tell if this was my host family or original family.

Nepal Fact #2

Eight of the top ten highest peaks in the world are located in Nepal, including the world's highest, Mount Everest.

At 8,850 metres, it is over 200 metres higher than K2 in Pakistan/China.

The dal bhaat we have for dinner is as tasty as it is well prepared, and served with love. Even when you're not really a "rice-person," like me, it is hard not to like it. I prepared myself for some very spicy food in Nepal, but so far so good. Even the noodles that the children made us try last week "blew our mind" (as the English volunteer who lived with me would say).

After dinner it's time for some necessary girl talk with my host family-mum. I love how some things are the same all over the world. She tries to convince me to get myself a sari, and grabs some magazines of hers to look for my perfect outfit. There is now no doubt in her mind on whether I can pull this off. She advises me to get a bright coloured, tight, shiny looking sari... I will think about it. Afterwards, she explains the meaning of some jewelry, a tika, and other accessories. We both agree on the fact that I need to return to Nepal when I want to get married. A wedding celebration in Nepal includes at least 500 people - Nepali people know how to throw a party!

When I get back from my placement, my host brother and host sister are usually also just returning from school. The children in Nepal are by far the most cheerful, waggish, smart, sweet, funny and cutest children I have ever met. And I have the luxury of living with two of them. These children are up for everything and enjoy every game, conversation, and joke - maybe even every part of life. They definitely have the most fun when you are trying something, and it turns out you are not very good at it. For instance, when I was trying to fold some Mo-Mo's, they made me feel like I was a better comedian.

In the evening, I practice my Nepali language with my host family sister, as she patiently teaches me some Bollywood dance steps. I also try to help her out a bit with her English school projects, which actually means I am laughing my head off at her creative ideas and once in a while correct her English. She needs to write something about "faith" and write an advertisement about "Mo-Mo Sneakers" ("buy one, get one free"). After her homework she wants to practice her henna-skills on my back. That's the least I can do, right? And guess what, she's already pretty good at it (after practicing on volunteers for a few years).



My little host brother, also known as the clown of the family, loves to talk and catch me up. He explains everything about the festivals and what they are celebrating. How many classes there are at his school, why it is smart to choose "swimming" for gym (because then you can switch to some other sport during the year). As well as informing me that the director of his school is so very rich and fat, he is not sure whether the man will fit in his car (luckily he has a driver, so he will be able to fit in the back). He challenges me at every game he can think of on the Nintendo, playing tennis with his school books, Carom board (a Nepali game), and so on. Yes, I lost to a little boy, but I am still improving!

One of the volunteers at a teaching project told me about a boy who told his teacher he did not bring his homework because a goat had eaten it. Excuses seem to be universal. It would not surprise me if that was one of his friends.

Of course there is way more to tell about staying at a host family than all of this. I hope this gives some idea about how great it can be, however, I think it is something everyone must experience at some point. For the ones who still hesitate; don't! Just go for it and you will see, cliché as it seems; this will be the time of your life. It is by far one of the most authentic experiences I had in Nepal.

The tea the family gave me while I was leaving certainly symbolizes the warmth I felt while staying with them. Nepal has definitely made me more family-minded, although a message from my "real-mum" asking whether I was okay made me think - maybe I will bring the tea back home with me.

Tika Day at J&K House and Bharatpur!



Volunteers in Kathmandu, as well as volunteers in Bharatpur, receive their Tikas on the tenth day of Deshain. A Tika, or a mix of rice, vermillion, and yogurt, is given by the elders of a community as a blessing and sign of good luck. On this day, the holiest in the festival, community members celebrate by sacrificing goats for a plentiful feast, as well as prayer and even a small gift of Nepali Rupees!



Literacy in Nepal

By Heather McDaid – Teaching & Care Coordinator

Nepal Fact #3

Of the total Nepalese population over 5 years old, the literacy rate for males stands at 75.1% and 57.4% for females in 2013.

From 1989 to 2013, the literacy rate grew from a staggering 2% to 65.9% in 2013, a 63.9% increase in just 24 years!

There is an odd occurrence that happens when you spend some time reading with kids in Nepal; they read perfectly. The Nepali children are able to read words that some who's native language is English wouldn't even be able to! So then why, you might ask, is Projects Abroad trying to start a reading campaign?

Once you get over the shock of ten year olds pronouncing massive words, you realise that the kids have no idea what they are actually saying. The schooling system in Nepal is based primarily on rote learning. This means that the children are taught to focus on memory and not understanding. The children believe reading is a success if they read as fast as possible and get to the end of the book. What we are trying to do with our new reading campaign is to ignite a passion for reading in the children. We want the kids to love reading and understand what the book means! Often during reading time in the children's home, we listen as the children race through books, not stopping at punctuation marks. If you ask a child what a word means you get a blank stare as an answer.

To combat this predicament, we are working with volunteers on how to better read to children. Such simple things as utilising a different voice for different characters in books, taking one's time on every page so all the children can see the pictures, quizzing the children on what the longer words mean, and generally making reading as interactive as possible, all contribute to better understanding. We also encourage the older children to read a book and then give a synopsis. This allows the children to read for understanding, not for speed, and allows the child to have ownership of the story when they explain it back.

The next question you should be asking yourself is why are we pushing reading? Many of the children we work with in our schools or care centres come from lower income families. This means that reading is simply non-existent, and many parents either can't read or don't have time to. This deprives the child of creative stimulation.

There are many reasons why reading to children of all ages is important. The first is **better communication skills**. When you spend time reading to toddlers and children, they'll be much more likely to express themselves and relate to others in a healthy way. By witnessing the interactions between the characters in the books you read, as well as listening to the teacher during story time, the child gains valuable communication skills.



As well, reading **creates logical thinking skills**. An illustration of the importance of reading to children is their ability to grasp abstract concepts, apply logic in various scenarios, recognize cause and effect, and utilize good judgment. As a child or pre-school student begins to relate to the scenarios in books, they can begin to find parallels in their own life, and become more excited about the stories.

Reading also **enhances concentration and discipline**. Children may initially squirm and become distracted during story time, but eventually they'll learn to stay put for the duration of the book. Along with reading comprehension comes a stronger self-discipline, longer attention span, and better memory retention.

Finally **reading is fun**, and we see this by the phenomena back home with books such as Harry Potter! To make this campaign a success we need volunteers who are willing to spend time reading and find ways to engage children. Just as important, we need books! Books for small children with lots of pictures and books of older children with fun stories that the children can get excited about! Any little thing helps, and the smallest efforts can bring about the most meaningful of changes.



Thank you from Projects Abroad Nepal!

It is an understatement to say that all our volunteers in Nepal do amazing work, and learn from their life-changing experiences in the process. While every volunteer gives an extraordinary amount of their time here, some go above and beyond the experience to make sure their contributions are felt for years to come.

Projects Abroad Nepal would like to acknowledge, and whole-heartedly thank, the actions of care volunteer Thomas Joubert. Before the beginning of his work at MSPN, a centre for children living with HIV/AIDS, Thomas raised over \$1,500 for the centre. This money will go a long way, providing medicine, food, and much needed resources for some truly amazing children.

From everyone at Projects Abroad Nepal,

Thank you!