

EXPEDITION

EVEREST: Mission Himalayas

About the Expedition

Recently, sixteen scientists from around the globe visited Makalu-Barun National Park in a remote forest in the Everest region of Nepal. They came together to collect biological information on one of the most biologically diverse 'hotspots' in the world, and to explore some local legends as well. A habitat with biodiversity, that is many different types of plants and animals, is considered by scientists to be healthy. Scientists consider Makalu-Barun National Park to be a "hotspot" because many of the species of plants and animals living here are in danger of disappearing from that area.

The expert scientists on this expedition were part of a Rapid Assessment Program, organized by Conservation International with funding and support coming from Walt Disney Company and Discovery Communications, Inc. as part of the ongoing effort to examine and protect the biodiversity of little known areas of the world. They traveled by helicopter across the Himalayan Mountains. Most of the scientists were from Conservation International, but one came from Disney and one from Discovery. And although few of the scientists knew one another at the start of the expedition, after just a few days of camping and working together, they became the "hotspot team."

The scientific team worked every day for three straight weeks to record as many different species of plant and

animal as possible at Makalu-Barun National Park. They surveyed the forest habitat at three elevations: 7,000, 9,000 and 11,000 feet, which corresponded roughly to three different types of forest: river valley, broadleaf forest, and fir forest.

They found evidence of amazing creatures: red pandas, giant squirrels, cat eye snake, paa frogs, leopards, bears, tragopan pheasant and Himalayan tahr. And they encountered several different types of forest with a great variety of trees, bamboos, rhododendrons, ferns, mosses, lichens, and ground orchids.

They also looked for – but did not find - unusually large footprints. These strange tracks have been reported by people who believe in a mythical animal known as Yeti in Asia, and Bigfoot in America .



Ferns in a broadleaf forest; a habitat teeming with life.



The Hotspot team offloads the helicopter at the village of Saisima in Nepal.



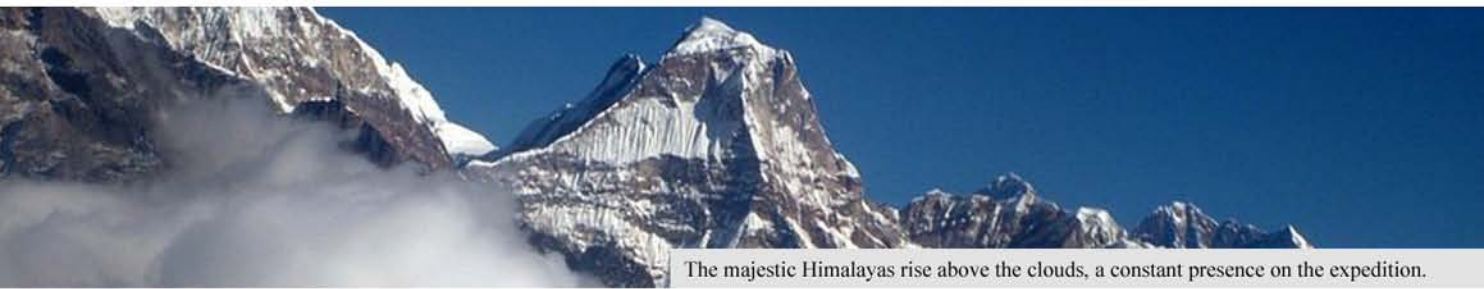
The team sets up its first camp in a terraced field.



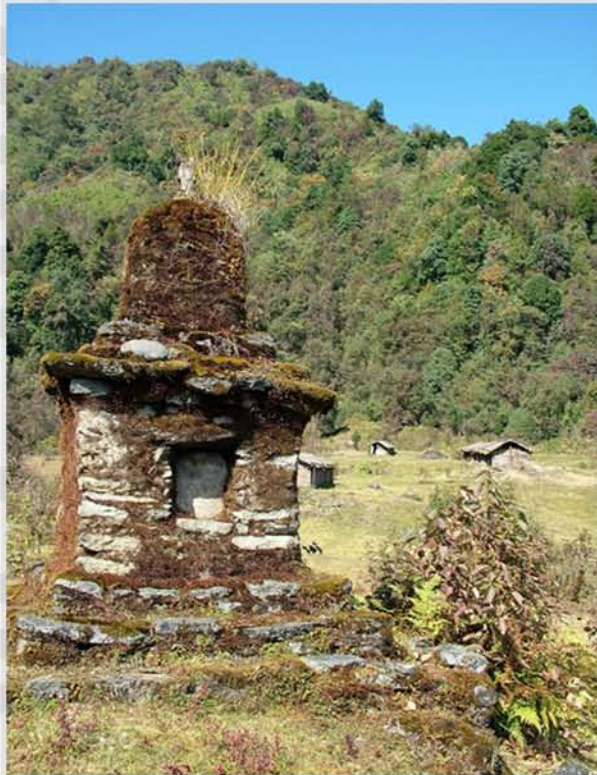
Dr. Dinesh Bhuju and Rebecca Prahdan survey the fir forest at Chauri Kharka.



The team found evidence of the rare red panda at higher elevations.



The majestic Himalayas rise above the clouds, a constant presence on the expedition.



Buddhist Chortens, like this one, dot the landscape.

The harsh conditions – cold, wind, ice, and snow – at high elevations make these mountains extremely dangerous to climb. Plants and animals cannot survive at this altitude either. The conditions change dramatically about half way down Everest and Makalu, however. Trees cover the mountain slopes and rivers rush through valleys. All kinds of plants and animals live in these forests. Tourists trek and camp in this region, enjoying the beautiful scenery and wildlife.

The information gathered by the scientists will be used by national park rangers and government officials to update the conservation plan for the area.

They will try to find a balance between the needs of the people and the wildlife living in Makalu-Barun. Park rules state that farmers in this region must pay a fee to use specially designated grazing lands for their yak, sheep, or goats. Outside these areas, people cannot cut down trees or farm. Hunting is not allowed. Fortunately, many of the Nepali people who live in the mountains believe in Buddhism. This religion discourages the killing of wildlife or the cutting down of trees. For now, the biodiversity of the forest remains largely intact. This situation may change in the future without a solid plan to manage the park.

Each member contributed a different type of expertise to the biodiversity survey. Overall, the team found more than 200 species of plant, 16 species of mammal, 21 species of ant, 120 species of bird, 5 species of amphibian and 3 species of reptile.

Makalu-Barun National Park is named after the world’s fifth tallest mountain, Mount Makalu (8,463 meters or 26,808 feet tall.) Most people have never heard of Makalu, but everyone knows the name of the mountain located 14 miles away: Mount Everest. Climbers try every year to reach the top of Everest, the world’s highest peak (8,848 meters or 28,028 feet tall).



Photographs|Lucy Spelman|DCI