

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN MOUNTAIN GUIDING

A classic sunset vista from Kala Pattar. From left: Changtse (7,53m), Mt Everest (8850m) and Nuptse (7,861m).
PETER LAURENSEN

GUY COTTER is CEO of world-renowned mountain guiding company Adventure Consultants. Guy spoke on his views about the state of the global mountain tourism industry to the Sustainable Summits Conference. The following is a redaction of Guy's presentation.

I believe the challenges we experience at the coalface of the mountain tourism industry reflect shortfalls in sustainable practices in the mountain environments around the world.

I believe that regulators can only legislate for rational and sustainable practices in mountain environments through collaboration with the people who live and work in the mountains. I also believe that regulation alone is a blunt instrument.

We need to make changes to create disincentives for people to use the operators working at the bottom end of the mountain tourism market.

I gain a huge amount of satisfaction by leading an organisation of mountain people. We visit all corners of the globe, where we combine our skills to deliver amazing experiences to our clients, which happen as a result of the high standards we set for the company, and the dedication, creativity and commitment delivered by our entire team.

In the mountains, our working practices have to prioritise safety over everything else. I can only achieve that through ensuring I have very highly qualified staff at every level of the organisation.

But even with the best guides in the world, with the best planning, and the best strategies and support, things can still go wrong. We work in the mountains and there are always risks—as we have been reminded of over the last two years with the tragic losses of Sherpa staff on Mt Everest.

Our underlying objective is to deliver the best experiences we can given the limitations of financial outlay our clients are willing to pay.

Since the days of the inception of Adventure Consultants, the mountain tourism industry has expanded hugely, and it's not stopping anytime soon. It seems the internet has given people access to images, videos and stories that piques their interest in the mountains.

I think we have to prepare for the mountain-related industries to explode, with baby boomers looking for experiences that are meaningful, and a growing Asian market.

Mountain guiding in New Zealand is a fun business for a young, fit person who doesn't have commitments or a care in the world. But as we grow older things change. We succumb to injury, we find that somehow we've created families, and we have commitments that we simply cannot

afford to provide. Interestingly, I see the same pressures on people who work in the mountains wherever I go. A porter in the Khumbu valley has a limited working lifespan due to the hard work required of them. A climbing Sherpa working on Everest wants to build a nest-egg that they can use to run a lodge when their back begins to give out. But whether you are a guide working for my company, or a Sherpa working on Everest, the money never seems to be quite enough to enable people—who are arguably operating in one of the highest risk industries in the world—to eventually stop working and move onto another phase of life with savings that are commensurate with the hazards and hardship they have endured.

Adventure Consultants charges the same amount for a client to climb Mt Everest as they did in 1994. That's 22 years ago! How can that be? How can we run a trip for the same price now when costs in Nepal have sky-rocketed since 1994.

There was a good margin back then, but the entire Adventure Consultants machine relied mainly on that one expedition each year. After you finished one season, it took an entire year to plan for the next one. These days our margin on Everest expeditions is very tight. We manage by spreading our administration costs over the breadth of the company's operations rather than just one trip to Everest. Those operations include some 30-plus expeditions around the globe every year, journeys to both the poles, exotic trekking locations, climbing schools here in New Zealand and in Europe, film projects, guided ascents and more.

When Rob Hall and Gary Ball first started Adventure Consultants, there were a few other players in the game. Some were committed, others less so. At some point, one of the operators who just couldn't quite get the numbers to run trips in the same style as the Western guided expeditions came up with the idea of using Sherpas as 'guides'. That meant they didn't have to pay the higher costs for Western guides, thereby making their expeditions a lot cheaper. That was very successful, from a business sense, and they attracted a lot of clients because they could offer a trip that cost almost half of what we charged. But it came at a cost. They needed a much bigger group to achieve the threshold where they made money. And that meant there were more people on the mountain. It was a sensible busi-

ness structure from a financial perspective, but I personally felt it was putting more people at risk and placed a greater impact on the environment—physically and socially, for what probably amounted to the same margin overall.

And then those companies got bigger. They came with groups of 40 clients, and 40 or more Sherpas. Then others started to emulate that blueprint. Then some of the Sherpa guides split off, and they started up their own companies, offering expeditions that they ran with no Western partners. Their way to attract clients was to be cheaper than anyone else. Then more of those guys broke away and went even cheaper again. Many of them had no idea what the actual budget of an expedition required when they set themselves up, but, they figured, if the other guy can do it cheaply then surely they could still make some money they were a couple of grand cheaper again. But the bills begin to add up, and the only way to run their trips within their budgets was to cut back expenditure. This is the crux of the matter—cutbacks equate to less resources, less staff, lower qualified staff, less pay for staff, and less insurance for staff.

The situation has become ridiculous. Sherpas from other regions turn up in the Khumbu to work for one of the cheap operators, and ask the locals, 'Which way to Everest Basecamp?' Then when they get there they ask, 'How do I put crampons on?' Inexperienced people are being thrown onto Everest with absolutely no training whatsoever.

There is a big difference between the majority of the established Nepalese operators, who are capable and professional yet find themselves being marginalised by the new order, and the 'new' style of operator, that is effectively claiming they are offering the same 'guided' trip as the Western operators.

Many of the local operators who have been in business for a long time and are good operators are being undermined by this new wave, who are fighting for the bottom of the market, and dragging everyone else down with them.

It distresses me that inexperienced people shop on the internet for an expedition to Everest and think that a cheap price represents good value. I have had so many of these people come to me on the mountain looking for resources that they don't have because, when things get difficult, their operator is nowhere to be found.

Where previously we had self-regulating teams on the mountain, that changed to a scenario where we found ourselves surrounded by groups of completely inexperienced climbers with virtually no guidance and no resources.

I know of one operator who I estimate has lost 25 people in the first three years of being in business. They are not subject to any scrutiny or standards and they assume no sense of responsibility. In their minds, their relationship with their clients and their obligations to their

THE SITUATION HAS BECOME RIDICULOUS. SHERPAS FROM OTHER REGIONS TURN UP IN THE KHUMBU TO WORK FOR ONE OF THE CHEAP OPERATORS, AND ASK THE LOCALS, 'WHICH WAY TO EVEREST BASECAMP?' THEN WHEN THEY GET THERE THEY ASK, 'HOW DO I PUT CRAMPONS ON?'

clients, didn't change when they started selling 'tickets' to Everest as opposed to providing services for self-contained teams. But, in fact, it is a very different relationship. This situation hasn't been helped by the Western media, who are reluctant to report on the misgivings of poorly operated local operators.

As an IFMGA guide, if we have an accident or fatality on Everest we have to go through an accident investigation that involves an inquiry and potentially a court case. The same applies for Nepalese trained IFMGA guides. But that is not the case for the budget local operators.

Everest should not be your stock standard commercial environment, it is the world's highest mountain. Everest has the potential to provide a sustainable income for the people who live in her shadow, and who expose themselves to hazard and hardship on her slopes.

I've met many Nepalese and Sherpa people who are concerned about the reputation of Everest. It is comforting to think there are Nepalese who are motivated to repair the reputation of Everest and who have a willingness to make change to improve the situation.

I think it wouldn't be too hard to effect positive change that would turn the situation around dramatically where everybody gains benefits. If we had a set of minimum standards for all operators, Nepalese or otherwise, that includes having criteria for acceptance of clients onto expeditions based on their previous experience, and matched with the services offered by the operator, we'd be a long way to having things under control.

Crowding could be overcome by having the icefall-fixing and rope-fixing higher on the mountain run by professionals, such as guides from the Nepalese Mountain Guides Association. It would also help if they fixed the route further in advance so climbers on the mountain could summit from late April until the end of May.

Mountain guides live in the mountains for up to six to nine months per year, so it has always been very important to me that we, as operators, do what we can to minimise our impacts, both environmental and social. We don't want to destroy the very thing that we have committed our careers and our lives to.

It is widely accepted that people who visit

our wild places become advocates for the environment and many of these people go on to become the influencers and policy-makers of the future. This is one of the reasons why mountain tourism is an important component of any discussion around robust sustainability in mountain regions.

I believe the defining factor that determines the quality of sustainable practices in any mountain region is the governance in place, and the motivation of the local populace to uphold sustainable practices.

I once watched a British expedition pack up their basecamp on Gasherbrum II in Pakistan. They left behind a pile of rubbish. When I later confronted the leader he told me they'd gone over budget and the costs of having it carried out were very high, so they just left it.

In Nepal there is a considerable amount of regulation that clearly outlines the risks of punishment for anyone who leaves rubbish on the mountain. Every expedition has to bear the costs of an expensive liaison officer, who is there to stop this happening and there is a bond that you lose if you leave rubbish behind.

But even with all these rules, there are still problems. In the Himalaya, there is a disincentive to address the human waste and rubbish issue due to the costs involved, and how easy it is for operators to abuse their obligations. My feeling is that regulation alone is not the answer as it is ineffective when you don't have the buy-in and collaboration of the user groups who operate in the environment. Therefore, it stands to reason that education is the key. We need to develop an awareness that looking after the environment will lead to ongoing sustainable income from tourism.

We also need to educate prospective clients who are going to join commercial trips that they need to demand high standards from their operator. That will encourage compliance. They should also be prepared to pay a little more to ensure that their operator is performing responsibly.

Instead of sticking their heads in the sand and pretending commercial operators don't exist, influencers such as the climbing media and alpine clubs should encourage people to carefully select operators for their outdoor adventures who employ sustainable practices and practise good environmental stewardship. **E**