Profile: Friends of Dolpa
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FRIENDS OF DOLPA

Friends of Dolpa is a small non-profit organization working directly with Himalayan peoples to improve education and cultural preservation in the remote district of Dolpa, in northwestern Nepal. The organization supports locally managed projects in and near Shey-Phoksundo National Park. Until recently, Pockets of Ancient cultures and unique natural environments have survived intact in Nepal’s remote corners. This generation of Dolpali people, no longer isolated, are in a process of defining for themselves how to control and participate in development while maintaining their unique heritage and traditions.

CURRENT PROJECTS OF THE FRIENDS OF DOLPA:
Tapriza School

Tapriza School was established in 1998 to provide children with access to education in a culturally appropriate setting near their home. Phoksundo area people originated in Tibet, and still speak their own dialect and observe ancient Bon religion, which is similar to Buddhism. The school project is co-managed by TASHI-D local nonprofit in Dolpa, Tapriza Verein in Switzerland, and Friends of Dolpa in the USA. Nepal is supporting much of the project, mostly from village parents who have great pride in their achievement. The district and national governments also provide tremendous support.

The 1999 school year ended with 43 successful students. A highlight of the year was a weeklong cultural and environmental field trip to Rigmo village. Students participated in a Bonpo festival, learned about medicinal plants, observed wildlife, and visited an important pilgrimage site. Several community gatherings were hosted, and parents visit school often.

After a late start in April due to snowstorms, 60 students up to grade 2 were enrolled as of summer 2000. At the community’s request, the students stay overnight at school. The children focus well, complete lessons quickly, and show great interest in all studies. Official registration was finalized in June 2000, making the school governmentally recognized. This allows qualified teachers to be more easily employed. In addition to standardized Nepali and English curriculum, the school hires local experts to teach Tibetan language, Bon religion and heritage, and ancient arts like folk song, dance, and drama.

An adult literacy program in nearby villages has begun. The children’s progress has sparked great demand from adults who never attended a school. Tapriza facilitates community sessions in English, Tibetan, and Bonpo history from local experts.

While Tapriza’s progress has been amazing, many challenges remain, especially for space, health, and basic supplies. It has become increasingly difficult to fit everyone into the current two buildings, which are on loan from the National Park. In 1999, land was acquired nearby, and a first structure of five rooms completed. The long-term vision is to build a traditional-style facility, using local labor when possible. A goal for 2000 is to build 11 more rooms, improve the water supply, and make adequate toilets and bathing rooms.
Attracting qualified teachers is difficult, due to the remote and harsh living conditions. The current teachers have shown great dedication, and the school would like to offer further training as an incentive to staff members in accounting, health, and classroom techniques.

Sanitation is a constant challenge, especially in the hot months. Children suffer from diarrhea, coughs, and constant parasites. Two school Mothers are caring for them, and a Nurse was hired to look after illnesses. The goal is to get more health supplies, keep the Nurse on full time, and improve crowded sleeping conditions by making beds. The addition of warm Tibetan-style uniforms has helped the students stay warm, since there is no heat source outside the smoky kitchen fire. Efficient iron stoves are needed, as kerosene is not practical as a heat source.

Steady donors are needed to continue meeting basic requirements, and to guarantee long term planning. Sponsors’ support is spread among all children to help with direct costs such as food, books, warm clothing, health care, staff salaries, and special cultural activities. Special grants and general donations assist with the new building.

**Dunai Boarding school**

Dunai Boarding School was started several years ago by DESERT nonprofit to provide quality education to Dolpa children of all backgrounds. They have excelled in environmental education and English, and continue to inspire other area schools.

Over 100 students through grade 8 are attending in 2000. Most are from Dunai, but many children come from areas several days walk away, and must live at school. Last year, with support from Friends of Nepal and a private donor, they completed a hostel, a kitchen room and toilet for boarding students. Teachers are appointed as hostel parents.

The separate kitchen is a big improvement over cooking in the hostel building, which put smoke in the sleeping rooms. The new toilet has a large septic pit and clean cement floor. Another highlight of 1999 was starting the Children’s Forest, a plantation that conserves an eroding slope below the Hostel complex. Fruit trees and other species have survived very well, and the students are proud.

This year construction began on a library, with cooperation from Where There Be Dragons group. This is the first library in Dolpa! There are also plans to hire a Tibetan teacher. Dunai is mainly a Nepali-speaking town, and school founders eagerly welcome more exchange between the diverse language groups in the region.

Dunai School struggles to maintain quality education and keep staff motivated on a tight budget. Sponsors from abroad are sought to support individual children until their graduation in 5 - 10 years.

**Native American Cultural Exchange**

One of the most fascinating connections made by Dolpa friends while traveling in the States was with American Indian counterparts in the Southwest. They discovered much common ground, especially with the Tibetan-origin mountain peoples. Most striking were the similarities in their experiences as indigenous people struggling to benefit from the mainstream world, while at the same time preserving their ancient heritage.
In fall 2000, Ann Toledo traveled to Dolpa to share her perspectives and background. She is a representative of Hamus Pueblo, Walatowa ("the Place"), from the Fire Clan. Currently she works in Washington D.C., with the US Department of the Interior. She hopes to encourage Dolpa friends in their cultural preservation and development work, and communicate the importance her heritage holds for her. This is a wonderful opportunity to bring traditional peoples together to share ideas across continents.

Cultural Preservation

In winter 1999, Friends of Dolpa worked with elderly painter Yungdrung Yeshe Lama to share his exceptional skills with eight young adult students. Thangkas are religious paintings used to bless Monasteries (Gompas) and Chorten shrines. Friends of Dolpa provided paints, materials, and a small stipend for a 100-day thangka training.

As a community contribution, the students donated a month’s free labor to repair crumbling paintings made by their teacher 50 years ago at a respected Chorten in Pubmo village, under his supervision.

This winter, the program continued with several more students, supported by Tapriza Verein in Switzerland. Similar local contributions for other painting repairs from eager students is expected. Friends of Dolpa is currently exploring ways in which these young artists can find work and experience, perhaps by finding employment at Monastery renovations, or by marketing their art abroad.

Sadly, Yungdrung Yeti’s sight is no longer very good. Many people have benefited from his efforts in transferring his artistic skills to interested young people.

Rigmo Monastery

A beautiful bookshelf/altar at the main hall at Rigmo Monastery has been completed. Three woodcarvers worked for two months to assemble it. Now Phoksumdo Lake’s important 800-year old monastery, originally established to protect wildlife, has a place to preserve and display statues and rare ancient texts. Many plans are still being made for flooring, paintings, and other finishing work, with the National Park contributing.

Hurikot Monastery

Hurikot Monastery carries on centuries of Bon tradition in the area. Twenty years ago, villagers requested a monk to re-establish a Monastery near their homes. The small structure made then is insufficient for festivals and meetings. Geshe Nyima Wozer Lama has worked hard with village craftsmen in constructing a large community hall. The main structure, including a basic earthen roof and window fittings, was finished summer, 1999.

In the summer of 2000, with a grant from the American Himalayan Foundation, they have already repaired the roof, added a clever skylight, and installed wood floors and a ceiling. An artist from Upper Dolpa has been commissioned to begin a large clay statue of Buddha, in traditional style. Next year, Friends of Dolpa hopes to continue supporting local artists in creating paintings, woodcarvings, and other conventional decorations.
Junior Rangers

A new Environmental Education program is beginning in Dolpa. Nagendra Budhathoki recently returned to Nepal after volunteering as an educator with the Audubon Center in Minnesota, and US National Park Service in California. Originally from the area, he is working to create hands-on school programs with Shey-Phoksundo National Park through the US Department of the Interior. Yosemite Institute representative Edric Lysne will be assisting program set-up this fall. This is the first project of its kind in Nepal, modeled on “Junior Rangers” Park-student outreach, and adapted for local conditions and resource issues.

Several pilot schools are participating in 2000, and students will have new opportunities for learning natural sciences and stewardship through special activities and field trips. There is hope of establishing a permanent Environmental Education Institute in Dunai, to provide resources and programs to schools in the future. Friends of Dolpa is a cooperating partner, although it does not provide direct funds.

For more information on Friends of Dolpa, or to make a tax-deductible contribution:
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