



4-6-2011

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Recommended Citation

Rasley, Jeff, and Travelanthropist Staff. "Interview with *Bringing Progress to Paradise* Author Jeff Rasley." *Travelanthropist*, April 6, 2011. Available from: http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers/326

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This article was originally published in *Around the World Blog* at <http://aroundtheworldblog.blogspot.com/2011/04/is-nepal-safe-place-to-visit-guest-post.html>

Interview with *Bringing Progress to Paradise* Author Jeff Rasley

by Jeff Rasley and Travelanthropist Staff

April 6, 2011

Bringing Progress to Paradise is the story of climbing expedition leader and attorney Jeff Rasley's trek to a village in a remote valley in the Solu region of Nepal called Basa back in October 2008. What he found was a people thoroughly unaffected by Western consumer-culture values.

The book offers Rasley's critical reflection on the tangled relationship between tourists and locals in "exotic" locales and the effect of Western values on some of the most remote locations on earth. It is also simply a fascinating human-interest story about someone tirelessly working to help those in need.

Author Jeff Rasley shares with us about his Nepal encounter and provides his perspective on eco-travel.

What first brought you to Nepal?

I had turned 40 and was manifesting mid-life crisis symptoms. My wife slapped a brochure about trekking in the Himalayas down on the coffee table and said, "Why don't you go do this." So basically, Go climb a mountain! A few months later a friend and I joined a trekking group and hiked the Mt. Everest Base Camp trail.

When you arrived in Basa, your group was only the third group of Westerners that they'd seen. How did they respond to you and how was it different from your other encounters in Nepal?

The village musicians met us outside the village and then led us into the village while playing their crude handmade instruments. A wooden arch covered in flowers with a sign which read "Welcom" (sic) was at the edge of the village. 200 people met us on the other side of the arch. All of them had flower garlands to place around our necks. It was almost overwhelming. The village elders gave speeches of welcome and everyone wanted us to visit their homes. The village matriarchs all wanted us to sample their rakshi (distilled spirits).

At villages along tourist trekking trails no particular attention is paid to another group of trekkers or climbers. In other village off the tourist routes my groups are usually met with polite curiosity.

When the villagers started asking for help in modernization, were you at all hesitant?

When I was asked for help to finish the school, I didn't hesitate. I had not yet visited Basa. And my thinking was that education is unquestionably good for children. After visiting the village, I have been torn by the question of whether any outside influence will be helpful to a community that is so harmonious.

How has the village changed since you first visited?

The only changes I have noticed in my 3 visits in 3 years are physical. The school building is finished and there is a cleared area for a playground. There is a community well and hoses run from a common waterline to water the cultivated plots. Cell phone service now reaches Basa. I haven't noticed any particular change in the people or their relations with each other yet. But I expect the young people are becoming more curious about the outside world and will want to experience it.

Do you think that the quality of life there has improved?

The quality of life has improved through the greater convenience of a village water source rather than having to walk 20-30 minutes to the nearest stream. The materials used in the school are greatly improved. The greatest change may be coming through our hydroelectric project which will bring electricity to the village by this summer. But whether these "improvement" truly better life in Basa – I don't know. I just know that the village has asked me to help provide them. In the basic sense of living wholesome, balanced and satisfying lives, I'm not sure there could be much improvement. I very much hope that the physical improvements do not upset the community equilibrium.

How has the experience with village and villagers of Basa changed you?

It has made me more reflective about what makes life meaningful and the value of community. And it helped me to understand my own life would be better by leaving law behind and devoting more of my time to helping others, particularly Basa village.

What are your opinions on eco and adventure travel? Does it benefit the destination as much as the traveler?

Any tourism has an immediate positive impact on a local economy. The difficult issues then become whether the locale can continue attracting tourists to create sustaining businesses and business can be done without harm to the natural environment. If the local population is sensitive and cares about the environment, then the probability is high that they will find a way to protect nature as tourism develops. If the local culture and religion do not respect nature, then tourism will probably increase the rate of degradation of the environment.

As a traveler, any experience of difference and beauty outside my norm adds to my humanity. Testing the limits of physical, mental and emotional ability to handle situations is part of the purpose of adventure travel. To “know thyself,” as Socrates said, is the first order of gaining wisdom. Adventure travel combined with experiencing other cultures is one way to gain wisdom. On the other hand, simply engaging in some dangerous activity for the thrill of it is probably helpful to adolescent development but might best be left behind by responsible adults.