

# Similarities Between Nepal and Alaska

by Amy Murphy, Alaska Village Electric Co-op

I recently fulfilled a life-long dream to hike in the Himalayas, the world's tallest mountains, when a friend and I completed the 200-mile Annapurna Circuit trek in Nepal. After traveling nearly half-way across the world, we realized many similarities existed between rural Alaska and Nepal that reinforced the cliché, "it's a small world."

The Annapurna Circuit circumnavigates 26,500'-high Annapurna Peak, the world's 10<sup>th</sup> highest-mountain. The trail partially follows ancient trade routes used for many centuries by people transporting goods between China, Tibet, Nepal and India. We spent 20 fascinating days up in the remote and stunning mountains, experiencing a life-changing journey.

The trek took us through an extreme diversity of climates and geographic environments, ranging from tropical rain forests to arid, high-altitude deserts to glaciers and snowfields. We saw a variety of ethnic groups and cultures, differentiated by religions and adaptations required to live in the environmental conditions at different elevations. Alaska is large and also has diverse climates and geographic characteristics with different cultures that adapted to their varied environments.



*A typical, small hydro-electric plant, sitting at the base of some big waterfalls.*

As we saw the simple, spartan, labor-intensive and sometimes-primitive lifestyle of the Nepalese people, we realized how fortunate Americans are. Most of us take many things for granted, like having running water, flush toilets and hot showers; reliable electric power for our appliances, computers and televisions; a variety of nearby stores for shopping; and motorized vehicles for transportation and recreation. Life encountered along the trail is very different from that.

For example, there are no water and sewer systems and most Nepalese use springs and creeks located alongside the trail for bathing and washing their dishes and laundry. Numerous Alaskan communities still don't have water and sewer systems either, but luckily some of those villages have community washeterias where people can shower and do laundry.

Residents in Nepal's rural villages share other similarities with folks living in the small, rural Alaskan communities AVEC provides power to. The major similarity is both groups still live (or try to live) a traditional, subsistence lifestyle, despite progress achieved in the "modern" world. It seems amazing that both groups have

survived for generations by living off the land in challenging conditions. However, the Nepalese people still necessarily depend almost entirely on their traditional, subsistence lifestyle, unlike many rural Alaskans.

Other similarities and shared issues include: slow-paced lifestyles; rampant poverty; lack of roads connecting villages; reliable electric power; environmental concerns; quality education; lack of jobs; increasing migration to cities; and reliable health care, especially in emergency situations.

Interestingly, the majority of Nepal's electric power is generated by hydro-electric plants. However, due to various factors, there is increasingly less water available to generate electricity. This results in load shedding and power outages because supply can't meet demand. Upon arrival in Kathmandu, Nepal's capital, we learned electric power was shut off throughout the whole city for five hours each day, and this is a busy city with millions of people!

Along the trail we saw small hydro-electric plants providing power, but outages frequently occurred and we depended on our headlamps at night. When there was power, lights were

shut off by 9:00 or 10:00 every night to conserve energy. People live go to bed early and get up early with the sun!

Many hotels and some homes use solar panels to generate limited power. Numerous tourist shower facilities were heated with solar power, which unfortunately didn't work well when skies were overcast. However, I applaud their efforts to use renewable energy instead of wood whenever possible! Deforestation and erosion are huge problems throughout Nepal. Luckily, more conservation-type efforts are being encouraged.

Large sections of the distribution systems needed lots of work, which could have prevented some outages. Countless power poles were leaning over and some poles nearly taken out by landslides perched precariously on steep slopes. Loose distribution lines along sections of the trail draped haphazardly over bushes, trees and rocks. Sometimes loose or still-connected lines were coiled in circles lying on the ground or stuffed in between rocks.

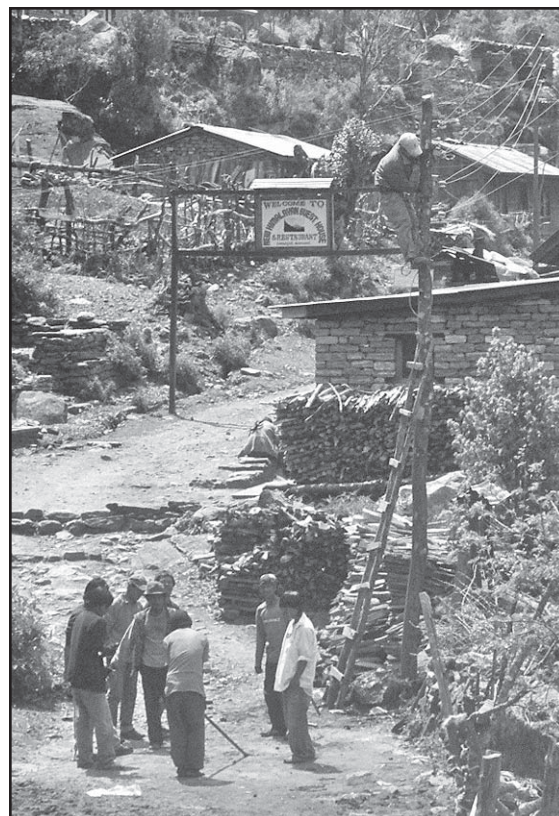
AVEC's linemen have a tough time working on distribution lines and power poles because they don't have any bucket trucks or other "fancy" equipment. Due to the remoteness of our villages and high cost to ship equipment out there, our linemen usu-

ally have to make do with basic equipment, which sometimes means digging holes with shovels.

The same thing applies to the few Nepalese we saw working on power lines. They didn't have much in the way of equipment, including gear to climb poles. Some men accessed the top of power poles by climbing ladders, with friends standing nearby to hold the ladder! Or they stood on roofs and tried working on various lines from there. We saw one man trying to crimp the end of a wire by biting it with his teeth. He didn't even have scissors or a knife to help cut or crimp wire.

This may be hard for some of AVEC's members to believe, but rural Nepal's living conditions are actually way more primitive than those that now exist in rural Alaska. Many Nepalese still live in small homes built out of rocks with no electric power, no running water, no indoor toilets and no appliances or modern conveniences.

They still cook and heat with wood, kerosene or animal dung and don't have reliable electric power or



*Pole top work done by climbing ladders.*

any form of motorized vehicles. All transportation is by foot and porters and donkeys are still used to transport heavy loads of various goods and personal items.

Our trek was grueling with living conditions more primitive than those in Anchorage. However, we blissfully immersed ourselves in the slower-paced, uncomplicated lifestyle we encountered and became relaxed and carefree, soaking up the tranquility of the mountains. We developed an inner peace hard to find (and retain) in the fast-paced lifestyle associated with crowded, noisy cities and pesky deadlines.

It was hard to leave the friendly, happy people we met in Nepal who generously and proudly shared the astounding beauty of their country and culture with us. But we enjoyed learning more about the "small world" we all live in and plan to return some day.

*This is a typical tourist toilet and shower facility. Numerous hotels offered "hot*



*showers" (on sunny days) with water heated by solar panels, seen in the lower left. The shower room is on the left of the door marked toilet, underneath the large water container.*