



The Altitude Project's pitch to donors is that every dollar goes to Nepal. The Canadian directors of the society absorb all administration costs. Photo: David Swain

# Nelson project funds rural schools in Nepal

Mountain trekker David Swain runs the Altitude Project

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David Swain loves the mountains in Nepal, but what really gets to him is the people.

"My initial reason for going trekking was to experience the majesty of the Himalayas," the Nelson resident told the *Star*.

“But every time I have been there it has been the people — their openness, their kindness, their seeming joy for life even under impoverished conditions. It opened my heart.”

Swain noticed this during his first trek — 17 days long — in 2011.

“When we finished I felt like I had more time and space and room for everything and everybody in the world and in my life. I felt more relaxed and more open and I attribute that to having spent time with people in Nepal.”

Since then he has continued trekking in some of the most remote parts of the country, and he’s found a way to give back. In 2015, Swain started an international non-profit charity, called the Altitude Project, that supports four remote rural schools.

He says he was not consciously looking for a project. The project found him, in the Upper Dolpo region of Nepal, a remote, seldom-travelled area with no roads.

“We had been trekking seven days, crossed two passes over 5,000 metres. It is high desert — the landscape is hauntingly beautiful, no trees.”

They took a rest day in the town of Saldang. Swain visited the school because it had the only source of power to recharge his camera battery.

One of the teachers invited him for tea, and explained that a German group that had been supporting the school was no longer able to do so.

“I carried on with my trek, forgot about it, but got an email on New Year’s from that teacher, wishing me health and happiness and asking if I could help.

“That was the moment for me. I thought, maybe I should step off the sidelines here.”

He wrote a newsletter, sent it to everyone he knew, and quickly raised \$13,500 for the school.

“I was overwhelmed by the support of friends, and friends of friends.”

For 2019, the project has raised \$50,000.

It will be spent on supplies such as textbooks, pens, paper and other supplies as well as low-cost sports equipment like skipping ropes and soccer balls. The funds also pay for teacher salaries and food (they live at the schools) and for a hot meal every day for the students.

Everything will be taken to the unheated, simple school buildings in the spring, first by transport truck from Kathmandu, then by jeep, then by yak caravan.

Without this support, the 250 students in the project’s three schools might not get an education at all.

Swain says the benefits are immediately obvious.

“I see this time and time again, the way the locals use their education to come back to be teachers or nurses in their own communities. I can see the strength and importance of this.

Service to others is a very important part of their culture. Children start learning about it at a very young age. I wish we had something a little stronger like that over here.”

The project is also venturing into funding public health initiatives, as well as small-scale infrastructure such as greenhouses and solar energy, in collaboration with other organizations.

“Infant mortality is still as high as 50 per cent — children not reaching their fifth birthday. A lot of that has to do with unsafe drinking water. We lost one student to diarrhea last year at Saldang and almost lost one of the teachers.”

Swain says the project is still in its infancy.

“We are going into our fourth year, and it seems to be gaining momentum. I have a lot of interest and energy for it, supporting these schools, getting the public health side going, getting better quality composting toilets, and long term improvement of access to medical service.”

His pitch to donors is that every dollar donated goes to Nepal.

“The directors of the society absorb the costs. We have zero administration budget.”

The Altitude Project is sponsoring two events in Nelson this week: a talk by author Dorje Dolma about her book *Yak Girl* on Jan. 31 at the Nelson Library at 7:00 p.m., and the film *The Only Son* at the Civic Theatre on Feb. 4.

Information about the Altitude Project, a registered charity, can be found at [www.altitudeproject.ca](http://www.altitudeproject.ca).



David Swain. Photo submitted



School children in the Upper Dolpo region in Nepal. Photo: David Swain