

Supreme Court overturns Nepal Government's bid to administer trekking peaks

I hadn't expected Ang Tsering to look so happy. The three-term president of the Nepal Mountaineering Association (NMA) has been under pressure lately, following the government's decision in July to strip the NMA of its crown jewels: Nepal's 33 so-called trekking peaks. These peaks – essentially a national resource – have been a banker for the NMA for more than 40 years. In the fiscal year ending 2013, the NMA sold permits to more than 3,000 climbers for Island Peak alone, costing each of them \$250 in high season. Estimates vary, but from the NMA's own figures, selling trekking peaks earns the organisation around half a million pounds a year.

Losing its main source of income was a devastating blow for the NMA but sitting outside his son's restaurant in the smart shopping arcade of Babar Mahal, Ang Tsering was beaming. Three days earlier, Nepal's supreme court had overturned the government's bid to take back the trekking peaks, restoring the status quo. The NMA might not have won the war – the government's next move is awaited – but they had certainly won a significant victory.

Recovering its revenue stream was vital for the NMA's work. It underpins welfare payments for the families of dead mountain tourism workers and subsidises the NMA's extensive training programme. There are now 33 international mountain guides and 52 aspirants who have relied on this support for half their course costs.

Ang Tsering said: "The income generated from those mountains is negligible for the nation's budget, but the NMA has become successful in managing funds for the promotion and development of mountain tourism of Nepal globally."

The government's intervention was just one more piece of bad news for Nepali tourism. The world has heard a great deal about last year's earthquake and about the bitter political crisis that deprived ordinary Nepalis of fuel, cooking gas and even basic medicines throughout autumn and into winter. Activists from the southern plains of Nepal, angry at the new constitution rushed through in the wake of April's earthquake, have been blockading Nepal's border with India for months. The shortage of gas cylinders and aviation fuel hit tourism operators just as hard.

Privately, climbing agencies acknowledge trekking peak sales are down by two thirds, to around a thousand climbers for the post-monsoon season. The government's decision had further impact on the already dismal numbers. The NMA can issue permits in a day; the tourism ministry can take up to two weeks, discouraging those who decide to climb at short notice. And the majority of those who climb in Nepal do so on an NMA permit. There are hundreds of government peaks, but the NMA has proved far more successful at marketing Nepal as a climbing destination than the tourism ministry.

Ed Douglas, AC International Panel, January 2016

For more on Nepal's mountain tourism see <https://www.thebmc.co.uk/nepal-climbing-out-of-disaster>