

PEOPLE / PEOPLE

Cleaning the Roof of the World: Dawa Steven Sherpa's Eco Everest Mission

Dawa Steven Sherpa combined expedition leadership at Asian Trekking with Eco Everest, climate advocacy, Great Himalayan Trail exploration and the effort to make Himalayan tourism responsible for its footprint.

SEPTEMBER 24, 2026



Cleaning the Roof of the World: Dawa Steven Sherpa's Eco Everest Mission

Dawa Steven Sherpa combined expedition leadership at Asian Trekking with Eco Everest, climate advocacy, Great Himalayan Trail exploration and the effort to make Himalayan tourism responsible for its footprint.

By Nepal Digest - September 24, 2026 - Nepal

Dawa Steven Sherpa inherited one of Nepal's best-known expedition businesses, but the more important inheritance was a contradiction. The Himalaya creates livelihoods precisely because people travel into fragile mountain environments, yet the same tourism that sustains guides, lodges and expedition companies can leave waste, carbon emissions and ecological pressure behind. Dawa Steven built his public career around that tension, combining expedition leadership with environmental work and arguing that the people who profit from the mountains also carry

responsibility for protecting them.

As chief executive of Asian Trekking, the company founded by his father Ang Tshering Sherpa in 1982, Dawa operates inside the commercial heart of Nepal's adventure economy. He has climbed Everest three times, summited several other 8,000-metre peaks and trekked the length of Nepal's Great Himalayan Trail. His environmental projects, especially Eco Everest Expeditions, have removed tonnes of waste from the mountain while testing cleaner expedition practices.

This dual identity matters. Environmental criticism is easier when one stands outside an industry. Dawa's position is more complicated because conservation decisions can affect the same clients, costs and operations that sustain his business. The challenge is not proving that tourism has an impact. It is redesigning the business so that environmental responsibility becomes part of normal expedition logistics rather than an optional gesture.

Growing Up Inside the Expedition Industry

Dawa Steven was born to a Sherpa father and Belgian mother into a family already deeply connected to Himalayan tourism. His father, Ang Tshering Sherpa, founded Asian Trekking and became one of Nepal's most influential figures in the expedition business.

Growing up around that world meant that mountaineering was not only an adventure story. It involved permits, staff, supplies, client expectations, weather windows, insurance, transport and the thousands of routine decisions required to move an expedition toward a mountain safely.

This practical exposure later shaped Dawa's approach. He inherited not only a company but an understanding that successful climbing depends on invisible systems.

Studying Business Abroad

Dawa studied business administration at Heriot-Watt University in Scotland before returning to Nepal. The education gave him a formal management framework for an industry he had already known informally.

This combination is useful because expedition companies sit between tourism, logistics and risk management. Financial discipline matters as much as technical climbing knowledge.

Returning to the family business also forced him to answer a familiar question for second-generation entrepreneurs: whether to preserve the company exactly as inherited or use it as a platform for a different vision.

Climbing His Own Mountains

Dawa did not remain only an executive organising other people's expeditions. He climbed Everest three times and summited four other 8,000-metre peaks, building his own high-altitude experience.

This matters because decisions made from an office look different after crossing the Khumbu Icefall or spending time above 8,000 metres. The body learns what logistical reports cannot fully communicate.

Experienced climbers understand that environmental rules have to work under conditions where oxygen is low, weather changes rapidly and survival decisions can override every plan.

The World's Highest Bakery

One of Dawa's more unusual projects was establishing a bakery at Everest Base Camp, described by Asian Trekking as the world's highest bakery. The initiative illustrates the blend of entrepreneurship and expedition culture that runs through his career.

A bakery at 5,300 metres sounds whimsical, but it also demonstrates how Base Camp has evolved from a temporary expedition staging area into a seasonal settlement with communication, food services and complex logistics.

The growth of this infrastructure creates comfort and efficiency while raising a larger question: how much urban-style service can the mountain environment absorb?

The Waste Problem on Everest

Everest's waste problem is structurally predictable. Expeditions carry enormous quantities of food, fuel, tents, oxygen cylinders, ropes and personal equipment upward. Bringing everything back down is harder because descent occurs under fatigue and high-altitude risk.

Abandoned material accumulates because the economics are asymmetric. Every kilogram carried upward is necessary for the expedition; a kilogram of old rubbish offers no immediate benefit to the person carrying it down.

Any serious cleanup strategy therefore has to change incentives and logistics rather than relying only on moral appeals.

Eco Everest Expeditions

In 2008, Dawa began organising Eco Everest Expeditions. The idea was to make environmental responsibility part of the expedition itself by reducing current waste and removing rubbish left by previous climbers.

Asian Trekking reports that Eco Everest initiatives have removed around 15,000 kilograms of garbage from Everest over the years. The material included old oxygen cylinders, abandoned equipment and other expedition debris.

The programme helped turn cleanup into something climbers and operators could plan for before leaving Base Camp rather than treating waste as someone else's problem afterward.

Why Cleanup Is Dangerous Work

Removing rubbish from high altitude is not comparable to collecting waste in a city. A climber carrying discarded material through the Khumbu Icefall or down from high camps is accepting additional weight in an environment where small delays can increase exposure to objective hazards.

This means cleanup has an ethical limit. No environmental target is worth asking workers to take unreasonable risk solely to retrieve old equipment.

Better policy therefore begins with preventing waste from being abandoned in the first place and ensuring that removal costs are built into expedition economics.

Deposits, Incentives and Responsibility

Nepal has experimented with waste deposits and rules requiring expeditions to bring specified quantities of rubbish back from Everest. Such policies recognise that environmental responsibility needs economic enforcement.

The difficulty lies in verification and implementation. A rule can exist on paper while weak monitoring allows behaviour to continue unchanged.

Expedition companies such as Asian Trekking are positioned to influence this culture because they control logistics before clients ever arrive at Base Camp.

Climate Change Beyond Rubbish

Dawa's environmental work extends beyond visible litter. Climate change is altering glaciers, snow conditions and mountain hazards across the Himalaya. These changes affect communities and expedition businesses simultaneously.

For climbers, warming can change route stability, expose rock and increase uncertainty around seasonal conditions. For downstream communities, glacier retreat and changing water systems create much larger long-term risks.

This makes conservation more than a corporate social-responsibility issue. The physical product on which Himalayan tourism depends is changing.

Seeing Climate Change from the Mountain

High-altitude professionals possess a form of observational knowledge built through repetition. A climber who returns to the same glacier over decades can see changes in ice, snow and route conditions directly.

Such observation is not a substitute for climate science, but it can make scientific trends tangible. Data becomes easier to communicate when guides can describe what has physically changed in their workplace.

Dawa has used his climbing profile to connect these local observations with broader international climate advocacy.

The Business Case for Conservation

Environmental arguments are sometimes framed as a conflict between conservation and economic development. Himalayan tourism reveals why the division can be artificial.

If mountain environments become more polluted, unstable or culturally degraded, the tourism industry eventually loses value. Protecting the landscape is therefore a long-term business interest

as well as an ethical responsibility.

Dawa's approach repeatedly emphasises this alignment.

Sustainable tourism is not charity performed after profit; it is part of preserving the conditions that make future profit possible.

The Great Himalayan Trail

Dawa travelled the full length of Nepal's Great Himalayan Trail, covering approximately 1,555 kilometres in 99 days. The journey expanded his perspective beyond Everest and the well-developed Khumbu tourism corridor.

Nepal's mountain economy stretches across hundreds of villages and landscapes that receive very different levels of visitors. Some areas face over-tourism while others struggle to attract enough income.

A national tourism strategy therefore cannot treat "the Himalaya" as one market. Different regions require different balances between access, conservation and economic opportunity.

Beyond Everest

Everest dominates global attention because it is the highest mountain, but concentrating tourism too heavily around one region creates environmental and economic imbalance. Dawa's Great Himalayan Trail work highlighted routes that can distribute

visitors more widely.

Spreading tourism can create income in communities that receive fewer trekkers while reducing some pressure on established corridors. But new tourism also brings waste and cultural disruption if infrastructure develops without planning.

The challenge is repeating lessons from Everest before other regions experience the same problems at scale.

Community Tourism

Sustainable mountain tourism depends on whether local communities retain meaningful economic value rather than simply hosting outside businesses. Lodges, guiding, transport and food services can create broad local income when ownership remains distributed.

This matters because conservation is easier to sustain when communities can see direct livelihood benefits from protecting the landscape.

Tourism policy that removes local agency in the name of environmental protection is unlikely to remain politically durable.

Building Climbing Culture in Kathmandu

Dawa also helped establish Astrek Climbing Wall in Kathmandu, contributing to the growth of sport climbing in Nepal. This reflects

another evolution in the country's relationship with mountains.

For generations, Nepali climbing expertise was largely developed through expedition work serving foreign mountaineers. Indoor and competitive climbing create another pathway—one in which young Nepalis can become athletes as well as guides.

Astrek has been connected to training for Nepal's national climbing team, helping separate the idea of climbing from expedition labour alone.

From Mountain Labour to Mountain Sport

This shift has cultural importance. Sherpa and other mountain communities possess extraordinary climbing knowledge, but global narratives often framed that expertise primarily as support for foreign achievements.

Sport climbing gives Nepali athletes a context in which they are unambiguously the competitors themselves. The objective is not to carry someone else toward a summit.

Dawa's investment in climbing infrastructure therefore complements his expedition business while pointing toward a different future for mountain skills.

Inheriting a Family Company

Family businesses create opportunities and burdens. Dawa benefited from networks, reputation and infrastructure built by his father, but inheritance also creates expectations. Every decision is measured against a legacy already established.

His public work suggests that he tried to differentiate the next generation through environmental leadership. Rather than simply expanding expedition volume, he made sustainability part of the company's identity.

This is one way second-generation leadership can justify itself: not by denying inherited advantage, but by changing what the inherited platform is used to accomplish.

After Ang Tshering Sherpa

The death of Ang Tshering Sherpa left Dawa with greater responsibility for Asian Trekking and for carrying forward a major name in Nepal's tourism industry. Succession in founder-led businesses can be difficult because much institutional knowledge may be held personally rather than formally.

Dawa's education and long involvement in operations provided continuity, but the transition also placed environmental commitments under a new test. Values expressed by a next-generation leader have to survive commercial pressures.

The true measure of sustainability is whether it remains policy when business conditions become difficult.

The Carbon Question

Cleaning rubbish from Everest is highly visible, but the larger environmental footprint of international mountaineering includes flights, helicopters, imported equipment and energy use. A perfectly clean mountain can still be connected to a carbon-intensive tourism system.

This creates a harder problem because Nepal cannot control all emissions generated by visitors travelling from across the world. It can, however, improve local operations and encourage more responsible practices.

Sustainability becomes a spectrum of better decisions rather than an illusion of zero impact.

Green Branding Versus Real Change

Environmental language has commercial value, which creates the risk of greenwashing. An expedition company can advertise eco-friendly principles without substantially changing operations.

The credibility of Dawa's work depends on measurable actions such as waste removed, systems changed and cleaner practices maintained across years. Long-running programmes like Eco

Everest matter because they can be evaluated beyond one marketing campaign.

Environmental leadership requires evidence.

The Role of Clients

Expedition companies cannot create sustainable tourism alone. Clients also make decisions about equipment, consumption and expectations. Luxury at Base Camp has environmental costs.

Operators can influence those choices by setting standards rather than simply providing every service clients request. This can be commercially difficult because customers compare companies and may select the one offering greater comfort.

The industry therefore benefits when environmental standards become collective rather than optional advantages for a few companies.

Everest as Workplace and Symbol

For international climbers, Everest often represents a once-in-a-lifetime dream. For companies such as Asian Trekking and the workers they employ, it is also a workplace.

Environmental rules must function inside both meanings.

Romantic appeals to keep the mountain sacred are not enough if the labour and economic system still rewards wasteful behaviour.

Dawa's position inside the industry gives him unusual credibility in trying to bridge the symbolic and operational worlds.

The Next Phase of Himalayan Tourism

Nepal's tourism future will depend on managing greater access without allowing the most successful destinations to become ecologically degraded. Climate change adds urgency because conditions are already becoming less stable.

Technology can improve waste tracking, energy use and logistics, but governance and industry culture remain central. Rules need enforcement, companies need incentives and communities need meaningful authority.

Dawa's career suggests that commercial operators can become part of the solution when sustainability is integrated into the business model early enough.

A Different Kind of Expedition Legacy

Mountaineering records are easy to communicate: number of summits, speed, altitude. Environmental leadership is harder because success often means something did not happen—a camp remained cleaner, rubbish did not accumulate or a route received less unnecessary pressure.

This makes Dawa Steven Sherpa's legacy less spectacular than a summit record but potentially more systemic. He used the visibility of Everest to argue that adventure tourism has obligations after the photograph is taken.

The Waste Problem Below Base Camp

Everest cleanup attracts international attention because rubbish at extreme altitude is visually dramatic, but much of tourism's environmental pressure occurs lower down. Trekking villages deal with food packaging, plastic bottles, sewage and the seasonal concentration of thousands of visitors.

Sustainable tourism therefore requires waste systems across entire routes, not only high-profile cleanup expeditions. Municipalities, lodges and trekking companies need collection and treatment systems capable of functioning during peak seasons.

Dawa's wider environmental argument becomes stronger when Everest is treated as the visible tip of a much larger tourism-management problem.

Helicopters and Convenience

The growth of helicopter use in mountain tourism adds another tension. Helicopters provide essential rescue capacity and logistical support, but they also create noise, emissions and incentives for visitors to bypass slower trekking routes that

distribute income through villages.

There is no simple answer because the same aircraft may save a climber in the morning and transport tourists for convenience in the afternoon. Regulation has to distinguish essential use from patterns that undermine the experience and economy the region is trying to protect.

This is exactly the kind of trade-off sustainable tourism must confront: environmental protection cannot be reduced to one obvious rule.

Climate Adaptation for Tourism Businesses

Expedition companies also need to adapt operationally to climate change. Traditional assumptions about snow, ice stability and seasonal timing may become less reliable, affecting routes and insurance costs.

Businesses that collect long-term environmental observations can help scientists and government understand these changes, while also using the information to plan safer operations.

Climate adaptation therefore becomes a shared interest between researchers, local communities and the companies whose employees spend the most time in changing mountain environments.

What Responsible Growth Would Look Like

Nepal still has strong economic reasons to grow tourism. The sector creates jobs, foreign exchange and international visibility. The goal is not reducing tourism automatically but increasing the value generated per unit of environmental pressure.

Higher standards, stronger local ownership and better waste management can make growth less extractive. Visitors may need to pay more for systems that protect the places they came to experience.

Dawa's career is ultimately an argument for that mature version of tourism: one that treats environmental cost as part of the price rather than an external problem left for the next generation.

The Next Generation of Expedition Companies

Future expedition operators will probably be judged on environmental performance far more strictly than earlier generations were. Clients increasingly ask about waste, carbon and labour conditions, while governments face pressure to regulate overcrowding and pollution.

This creates an opportunity for companies that treat sustainability as operational competence rather than marketing. The same

discipline used to plan oxygen, camps and rescue can be applied to waste, energy and community impact.

Dawa's early adoption of environmental practices may therefore become less exceptional over time—which would be a sign of success.

Why the Mountain Economy Needs Better Data

Responsible tourism policy also depends on knowing what is actually happening: how much waste is generated, how many helicopters are flying, where visitor concentration is rising and which communities receive the income.

Without good data, debates become symbolic. One side blames tourists, another points to jobs, and neither can measure the trade-off accurately.

Expedition companies possess operational information that could contribute to better public planning if shared through transparent systems.

From Personal Advocacy to Industry Standard

The most important transition for Eco Everest is whether ideas associated with one leader become normal industry practice.

Environmental progress is fragile when it depends on one company voluntarily doing more than competitors.

Common standards create a level playing field. If every expedition pays for waste removal and follows similar environmental rules, responsible operators are no longer commercially disadvantaged.

Dawa's long-term influence will be strongest if the practices he promoted become so routine that future climbers no longer know who first argued for them.

The strongest outcome would be for environmental responsibility to disappear as a separate niche because it has become part of standard expedition competence. At that point, "eco expedition" would no longer need to be a special label; responsible logistics would simply be how serious companies operate.

That shift would also protect the business itself. A cleaner, safer and more resilient Himalayan tourism system is not only environmentally preferable; it is economically necessary for a country whose global tourism identity remains deeply tied to its mountains.

That responsibility will only grow as the mountains themselves change.

The mountain economy and the mountain environment now depend on the same answer.

Dawa Steven inherited a business built on the Himalaya and spent much of his career asking how that business could help protect the Himalaya. The answer is still unfinished. But Eco Everest, the Great Himalayan Trail and his wider work make one principle clear: if tourism earns from the mountains, cleaning, conserving and adapting to climate change cannot remain somebody else's responsibility.

Originally published by Nepal Digest - <https://nepaldigest.com/dawa-steven-sherpa-eco-everest/>