

# UNL Extension: Acreage Insights

## Acreage eNews-April 2013

<http://acreege.unl.edu>

### Nepal and Tibet: International Trip An Eye-Opening Experience

By [Sharon Skipton](#), UNL Water Quality Educator



My husband and I were two of 12 people who participated in an expedition to the Himalayan Mountains of Nepal and Tibet last September. The trip was not work-related; it was a very special, once-in-a-lifetime anniversary celebration. However, it proved to be an eye-opening experience as it related to my work at UNL.

My areas of focus at UNL include drinking water systems and wastewater treatment systems. As related to those focus areas, this trip was very educational. The World Health Organization reports that approximately 3 million people die each year from water borne disease. According to the United Nations, 2.5 billion people do not have access to basic sanitation or toilets. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation sponsored a competition to discover a new toilet design that could be used in developing nations. When I teach, I often share this information. Now I've seen it in person.



### Limited Electricity

Our group of 12 met in Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal. Upon checking in to our Kathmandu hotel, we were given an “electricity schedule.” Electrical power was limited to a few hours each day. Consequently, lights, hot water, etc. were also limited to those few hours each day. The water was not safe to drink – even in the hotel. We did have “western toilets” in our rooms, and they did flush sometimes.

In Kathmandu for two days, we anxiously waited to see if we would be granted Visas to travel through Tibet. Until the 20th century, Tibet was a closed country, inaccessible to outsiders.



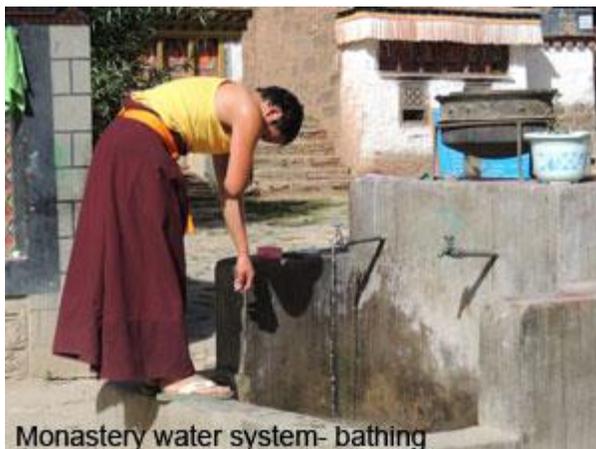
Clean Toilet

Tibet continues to be closed to foreign travelers, on occasion with no notice, with this being the norm rather than the exception in 2012. We were fortunate to get one of the few group Visas granted this year. With Visas in hand, we flew to Lhasa, the capital of Tibet.

The hotel in Lhasa did not restrict electricity, but they did limit hot water to a few hours a day. However, actually receiving hot water in your room was never a guarantee. Again, the water was not safe to drink. The “western toilets” usually flushed. As soon as we left our hotel rooms, the toilets were simply holes in concrete or stone floors. Many were filthy, as people often “missed” the hole.

I’ve just described the best accommodations we encountered. Once we left the capital cities and headed toward the Himalayas, conditions deteriorated rapidly.

Water was supplied to monasteries and villages via mountain-fed streams. A single water source might be used to meet all water needs.



Monastery water system- bathing



Monastery water system- washing laundry



Solar water heaters were common at mountain locations. It is a technique I covered when teaching National Guard Agribusiness Development Teams (ADT) groups preparing to go to Afghanistan. I tried it in my back yard prior to teaching the concept, but I had never seen the technique being used on this scale. The solar heaters are very effective. We hauled bottled water for drinking purposes and used “wet wipes” to wash up. Thanks to my husband’s humor, group members started bartering assistance (such as taking someone’s picture for them) for bottles of water. While it was fun and tabs added up, no water actually changed hands. It did, however, emphasize how rare and valuable drinking water was.

### **Public Toilet Facilities**

Public hole-in-the-floor toilets were available at most stopping points like mountain villages or monasteries. However, our Sherpa advised us not to use them. He encouraged us to use “nature” instead. Once in the mountains, there were no trees or bushes to hide behind. There were rocks, but often they were not large enough to provide privacy. So, we all tried the public toilet option when one was available.



Public toilets in remote mountain villages don’t seem to be maintained or cleaned on a regular basis. They were so unsanitary that we all resorted to the “nature” option regardless of the fact that we were traveling with other people and had little or no privacy.

## Personal Cleanliness

Our Sherpa also advised us not to bathe, even when water was available. And he suggested we not change our clothes. He believed it was healthier.

Since we were severely limited in the volume and weight we could take, we had very few clothes with us. We didn't quite have to wear the same thing for 20 days, but we did wear the three-or so pair of pants, t-shirts, fleece tops, etc over and over and over and over again. Yes, even underwear and socks were worn multiple times. And, when I stepped in human waste left when someone missed, and then smeared it on my pant leg, I was left with only two pair of hiking pants for the rest of the trip. Following our Sherpa's advice didn't seem to help.

Everyone in our group of 12 got sick at some point. Nearly all developed diarrhea with some, including me, needing antibiotics. Our Sherpa remained healthy!

Water-borne disease results from unsafe drinking water supplies and a lack of sanitation. I've now experienced both conditions. I can understand now how 3 million people might die as a result of living with those conditions. I can understand why the very young and the very old are at greatest risk. The trip was certainly an eye-opening experience.

I have to spend some time talking about the mountains, the reason we went on the trip. The Himalayan range is home to the planet's highest peaks, including Everest. But the entire range is massive! There are over a hundred mountains exceeding 23,600 feet in height.

The highest peaks in the lower 48 states are just over 14,000 feet.

Our goal was to reach 17,000 feet. We slept at over 15,000 feet at our highest camp and we did make it to over 17,000 feet.

*The very old and very young are at greatest risk of water-borne illness.*



I've included two photos in this article taken of Everest. The photo below was taken from the air as we flew from Nepal to Tibet.

The one at the top of this article was taken from camp.

