



Nelson Lebo tutors Ladakhi students Nendon, Dechen, and Lanzis in Accountancy at the SECMOL campus in Phey.

Nelson Lebo's Semester In The Himalayans

By Nelson Lebo
For the Beacon

I first heard of Ladakh, India about a decade ago when I saw the film *Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh*. Ladakh seemed like a great case study to use in the Environmental Science classes I was teaching at Proctor Academy to illustrate a culture struggling to retain its traditional, sustainable culture while being overwhelmed by the global consumer society. I also had personal interests in Ladakh relating to its connection to Tibetan Buddhism and its location in the Trans-Himalaya mountains. But it was not until April of 2005 that I got my chance to go.

On a one year leave of absence from Proctor, I signed on to lead a high school semester program for Vermont Intercultural Semesters (VermontIS.org). Accredited by the Vermont Board of Education, the program emphasizes cultural exchange and sustainability.

The honors-level curriculum includes classes in English, science, social science/history, Ladakhi language, and an independent study. Two other teachers and I led 12 juniors and seniors from nine schools around Vermont on this 15-week program. The experience changed all of our lives.

While we traveled around Ladakh to a certain extent, our options in February and March were limited by low temperatures and snow on the mountain passes. The program included home stays in rural villages and one five-day trek along an ancient trade route. Most of the time we stayed at the Phey campus of the Students Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh (SECMOL).

On Monday, September 18 at 8 PM, I'll present the story of Ladakh and SECMOL and of a remarkable man, SECMOL's principle founder, Sonam Wangchuk. The presentation will be in the Norris Family Theater at Proctor Academy.

Ladakh is a former Buddhist king-

dom high in the Trans-Himalaya, currently within the borders of India. A high altitude desert whose annual precipitation is measured in millimeters, Ladakh is the size of Ohio, but with only 200,000 residents.

Ladakh constitutes the eastern-most part of Kashmir, making Ladakh key to India's border security. The Indian military maintains a force 100,000 strong in Ladakh, and since 1974, when Ladakh was first opened to tourism, annual tourist visitation has increased nearly every year. Trekkers from Europe, Israel, and more recently the United States, flock to Ladakh during its short summer. The dual impact of tourism and the military have caused profound change in little over three decades.

While newfound wealth and opportunity poured in, there have also been cultural consequences. A Western-style consumer mentality has infiltrated what had been a sustainable society within living memory. Every year, more Ladakhis leave rural villages and flock to the capital city, Leh, to embrace the fledgling cash economy. Age-old systems of community support and bartering have broken down.

Meanwhile, for much of this time the Ladakhi education system has remained dismal. Textbooks written in Urdu (the state language of Kashmir) provided young Ladakhi readers with stories about elephants, coconut trees, and monsoon rains. These were all strange and unfamiliar examples for children living over 10,000 feet in the mountains.

After eight years of instruction in Urdu, students were abruptly switched to English for two years leading up to the all-important 10th class exam. So unprepared were most Ladakhi students that roughly 5% passed on an annual basis. As a result, Ladakhis developed a cultural identity as an inferior race of people.

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