

First blind man to reach the south pole

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Pollock and O'Donnell both lost between 12 to 20 kilograms each during their three week long adventure.

He said the competitors were delighted with the South Pole Challenge but were looking forward to returning home to their loved ones.

In an interview before the race began, Pollock told The Epoch Times he was deeply worried he wouldn't be able to finish the race or would be disqualified for missing the cut-off times.

Once Mark realized that his team was able to make the cut-off times at each transition point he started to enjoy the race more. The constant worry of being eliminated because they failed to arrive at a checkpoint on time was something that played on Mark's mind the whole time during his preparation for the adventure.

"I was really really worried about not making the time cut-offs... day one, two, three, four and five we were way above the cut-offs and that was a huge high, knowing that we could do the distances."

Looking back on his adventure Mark said making their cut-off times and finally finishing the race were deeply rewarding.

But of all his days on the sub-continent, Christmas stood out the most, he said.

"We started with a little shot of Brandy and some Christmas cake, which was wrapped in a message from home... the weather was great, the skiing was fast, an amazing Christmas day."

After talking with some of the other competitors, Pollock found that many of them had a similar experience, that at certain moments when they were skiing, they would

suddenly start crying, sometimes tears of joy, other times tears of sorrow.

"You think about something or someone at home, you think about something that has happened in the past and it just sets you off."

He said the race was a strain both mentally and physically for all involved and that they had underestimated how tough it would be mentally. During the race Pollock said he realized that he would have to control his emotions because after the great highs he would experience great lows. It was important to keep things constant, he said.

"Staying completely neutral was very important."

Team South Pole Flag got its name because Mark was carrying a flag with over five hundred pictures of friends and sponsors. He said the flag was more than just a piece of cloth covered in photographs — it was the last ten years of his life.

While most of his adventures were about him and his efforts, Mark said this time the project was the culmination of all the help and support he received from friends and family over the past ten years since he went blind.

"This month January ten years ago I was training with Larry (Mark's guide dog). I hadn't been out of the house for nine months. We made our first solo run."

Ten years on and Mark has become the first blind person to race across the desolate lands of Antarctica to the South Pole.

When asked if he would do the race again Mark said that he wouldn't be afraid of doing an expedition of that length again but not to the South Pole.

"I like the snow but we were naive, no doubt about it."

Energy saving lights not such a bright idea, say critics

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Then there's the thorny issue of mercury. The five milligrams of mercury—an amount as small as the tip of a pen—that each compact fluorescent contains is in vapour form, which means it disperses through the air if a CFL is broken.

"When mercury is in vapour form and you inhale it, it can get into the brain very easily. If you're pregnant it gets into the placenta, it gets into mother's milk. So there's a real problem with this form of mercury," says Magda Havas, associate professor of environmental and resource studies at Trent University.

Both Natural Resources Canada and the Environmental Protection Agency in the U.S. advise that if a CFL is broken, the room should be cleared of people and pets and aired out immediately, and that the glass fragments should not be vacuumed. Havas says this is because the vapour will remain in the vacuum and re-distribute it each time the vacuum is used.

Havas, who teaches and does research on the biological effects of electromagnetic fields, dirty electricity, and electrical hypersensitivity, says the Canadian government, for one, did not do its homework before jumping on the CFL bandwagon.

"Has the government done enough research—definitely not. They just accepted this as something that was the next best thing. They've just gone with it and I think it was a mistake."

Theo Paradise-Hirst is head of lighting design for U.K.-based Max Fordham, an award-winning company of design technologists who specialize in energy efficient and sustainable systems for building services and the wider environment.

Paradise-Hirst says there are many "forgotten costs" in the production of CFLs, the vast majority of which are manufactured in China.

"The processes, waste and by-products created by manufacturing CFLs are hideous. I've been to the Far East and seen the factories where these lamps are produced, and the waste toxins and by-products are alarming."

He says that because many CFLs are produced in countries where "environmental issues and human rights are just ignored," continuing to import them is "offsetting our environmental responsibility."

"By sourcing products in this way we are transferring our environmental responsibilities to unaccountable communities for commercial gain."

Although some stores such as Canadian Tire, Home Depot and Ikea accept spent CFLs for recycling,

both Paradise-Hirst and Havas fear that many will end up in landfills, leaching mercury and other chemicals into the environment.

Paradise-Hirst also says the disposal process of CFLs is "very complex and energy-consuming."

However, the green movement holds that the reduction of carbon dioxide emissions by a projected five million tons a year offsets any shortcomings CFLs might have. Keith Stewart, a climate change analyst with the World Wildlife Fund, thinks CFLs have their place.

Stewart says despite the mercury content, "CFLs are still a good option because you can capture that mercury and reuse it, whereas once it goes up in a coal stack there's nothing you can do about it. More mercury is released into the environment from burning coal for the extra energy needed to run a regular light bulb than is in a CFL."

He says CFLs have improved greatly in the last 10 years and other options available.

"If all the street lights around the globe were dimmed by 50 per cent after 2:00 a.m., that would save significant amounts of energy."

Havas says a study in which she participated to be released later this year found that a far more efficient alternative to CFLs are light emitting diodes (LEDs).

To give the same amount of light as a 60 watt traditional bulb, a CFL would use 15 watts while LEDs use only about three or four watts and don't contain mercury, she says. However, LEDs are new to the market and still quite pricey, just as CFLs were a few years ago.

Stewart says there are silicon-based bulbs currently being pioneered in Canada that also contain no mercury and use less energy than either CFLs or LEDs.

Because fluorescents as a technology have been around since the turn of the last century, Paradise-Hirst believes the time has come to support new technologies, including LEDs, the plasma lamp invented by Nikola Tesla, and an environmentally friendly, high-energy efficiency bulb produced by Ceravision which uses microwave technology.

In the meantime, we should simply dim the lights.

"We need to examine our energy usage more thoughtfully," he says. "If all the street lights around the globe were dimmed by 50 per cent after 2:00 a.m., that would save significant amounts of energy."

Senate OK's softened "Buy American" plan

WASHINGTON (Reuters)—

The U.S. Senate voted on Wednesday to soften a "Buy American" plan in its \$900 billion stimulus bill after President Barack Obama expressed concern the original language could trigger a trade war.

Senators, on a voice vote, approved an amendment requiring the Buy American provisions be "applied in a manner consistent with U.S. obligations under international agreements."

The change gives Canada, Mexico, the European Union and certain other major trading partners some comfort they would be exempted from a strict requirement in the bill that all public works projects funded by the stimulus package use only U.S.-made iron, steel and manufactured goods.

The House of Representatives has passed a nearly identical Buy America provision without such a guarantee.

Sen. John McCain, an Arizona Republican, urged the Senate to go further and specifically bar any Buy American provision as part of the stimulus package. But senators rejected his amendment by a vote of 65-31.

"The Buy American provisions... have echoes of the disastrous Smoot-Hawley tariff act," McCain said, referring to 1930s legislation often blamed for prolonging the Great Depression. "It sends a message to the world that the United States is going back to protectionism."

The Emergency Committee for American Trade, an organization of U.S.-based corporations, and a coalition of more than 125 businesses and trade associations have warned the Buy American plan could trigger a string of trade restrictive measures around the world. They urged senators to kill it.

But Sen. Byron Dorgan, a North Dakota Democrat, said all supporters of the Buy American plan were trying to do was to ensure American workers benefit the most from public works projects funded by the stimulus plan.

"Twenty thousand people a day are losing their jobs. ... We're going to shovel a lot of money out the door of this Congress in support of economic recovery. The question is are we going to try to put people back to work," Dorgan said.

The United States has made commitments under the North American Free Trade Agreement and the World Trade Organization to provide trading partners such as Canada, Mexico, Japan and the EU with access to its government procurement market and has received similar commitments in exchange.

But other countries such as China, Russia, India and Brazil are not party to those pacts so would not have any protection from the language passed by the Senate on Wednesday.

Obama, asked about the Buy American provisions in television interviews on Tuesday, said the United States had to be careful not to include any provisions in the stimulus bill that could "trigger a trade war."

"I think it would be a mistake ... at a time when worldwide trade is declining, for us to start sending a message that somehow we're just looking after ourselves and not concerned with world trade," Obama said on the Fox network.

U.S. steel companies and workers who have seen demand plummet as result of the recession have pressed hard for a Buy American provision, arguing U.S. tax dollars to fund public works projects should be used to create American



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jobs.

The House included a Buy American provision for U.S.-made iron and steel in its \$825 billion stimulus package last week, triggering an intense effort by other business groups to have it removed before the final bill reaches Obama's desk.

John Bruton, the EU ambassador to the United States, told Reuters in an interview this week that approval of the measure would damage Obama's global leadership.

Canada's ambassador to the United States, Michael Wilson, also has urged Congress to drop the provision.

White House spokesman Robert Gibbs said Obama supported

Buy American provisions already in U.S. law that give preferences to domestic manufacturers in public works projects, but wanted to avoid an expansion that violates trade commitments.

Lawmakers from steel-producing states insisted on Wednesday that the "Buy American" plan approved in the House remain part of the huge U.S. economic stimulus bill.

"If it's not in, I'm not supporting this package and I'll bring a lot of votes with me," House of Representatives Transportation Committee Chairman James Oberstar, a Minnesota Democrat, said after a Congressional Steel Caucus hearing.

Education as a path to peace in Afghanistan

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Mortenson has what he calls his "academic" reasons for wanting to educate girls: Once a girl is educated past the fifth grade, infant mortality rates go down, population growth slows down, and the quality of health improves.

He also has personal observations about the benefits of educating females from his years of work in these countries. Once a girl learns to read and write, she helps her mother write letters to the family, decreasing their isolation. Mothers will ask their children to read newspapers to them (food brought from the market place is often wrapped in old newspapers). Further, educated mothers are much less likely to let their sons join the Taliban or other militant groups. Mortenson believes that educating girls breaks the power of religious extremists.

"People themselves have such a fierce desire for education ... they see it as a path to prosperity," says Mortenson. In fact, when he asks people in Pakistan and Afghanistan how he can help, most people tell him they don't want their babies to die, and they want their girls to go to school.

In the years since his failed attempt to climb K2, Mortenson and his non-profit, the Central Asia Institute, have built 78 schools throughout the rural and mountainous areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The book chronicles not only his journey to build schools and provide education to children in Pakistan and Afghanistan, but his efforts to influence hearts and minds here in the United States. As a reader, it is hard to miss Mortenson's compassion and determination as he makes his way through Pakistan and Afghanistan. He painstakingly builds trust with everyone from village chiefs, to clerics, military leaders, the children he ends up building schools for, and strangers eager to help his cause.

Although most people he encounters support his work, he says he also has critics, both in the United States and in Pakistan. Some fear that his work has been for naught, as the Taliban are again aggressively destroying girls' schools in the region.

According to UNICEF, in 2007 and 2008, militant groups have bombed or destroyed approximately 519 schools. And in Pakistan, since 2007, militants have blown up or burned down more than 170 schools—over 70 percent of these schools are girls' schools.

Mortenson believes that one cannot underestimate the impact of the education that people are now

receiving.

"Why are the Taliban bombing girls' schools?" asks Mortenson. "Their greatest fear is not the bullet, but the pen."

As an example of the power of girls' education, Mortenson relates the story of Aziza, a woman from a village of 4,000 people in the Charpusan Valley in Pakistan. She was the first girl to get an education in her valley where there is no doctor, no medicine, and no clinic. When she first went to school, the boys threw stones at her. In 2000 she graduated from high school to become a maternal healthcare worker. Before 2000, 5 out of 20 women died during childbirth in the valley, but since Aziza's graduation in 2000, there has not been even one such fatality.

Providing schools and an education to Pakistanis and Afghans is only part of Mortenson's work. His greater mission is to promote peace one child at a time, whether in Pakistan and Afghanistan, or in the United States.

He has received thousands of e-mails and letters from readers giving him suggestions on how to make his work more accessible to younger children. Mortenson says children see his book as being "about building relationships and friendships."

Since the original release of Three Cups of Tea, Mortenson has been traveling and giving talks at jam-packed venues across the United States including universities, high schools, and elementary schools.

"When I go to schools," he says, "I see that children really want to make a difference in the world. [They] want to help."

January marked the release of the young reader's edition and the children's picture book edition of Three Cups of Tea. The young reader's edition is complete with a map detailing various cities and villages that Mortenson visits on his regular journeys to Pakistan and Afghanistan. It also includes a timeline, glossary, and a candid Q & A with his 12-year-old daughter, Amira, including her feelings about having a father who is gone so often to a volatile part of the world.

These two new titles are part of a seemingly natural progression to speak to the needs of people—especially children—eager to know more about their world, eager to build friendships, and eager to help.

Mortenson says his connection to children both in Central Asia and the United States is what gives him faith and determination.

"I feel like they are part of my family," says Mortenson about the young people he encounters. "When I look

into the eyes of the children, I see my children; we as parents and adults, we should leave our children a legacy of peace."

Pennies for Peace is another outgrowth of his work with children. Fifteen years ago, Mortenson told a group of children of his desire to build a school for children who had to learn their multiplication table outdoors on the ground, using sticks, in a place where a penny could buy a pencil. Moved by his story, they donated their pennies to Mortenson to help build that school. In 2009, approximately 6,000 schools around the world will participate in this educational and philanthropic program.

His work has also brought him into direct contact with U.S. policy makers and military leaders, including U.S. Navy Adm. Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and General David Petraeus, Chief of U.S. Central Command. Although the U.S. government has offered, he does not take any money for his work from them.

According to Mortenson, Gen. Petraeus has read his book and quotes him as saying he learned three things from it, "one, build relationships, two, we need to listen, and three, we need to have respect for other people."

The title Three Cups of Tea is a reference to the Pakistani and Afghani cultures' emphasis on hospitality and loyalty to friends and family. Mortenson finds comfort in the fact that Mullen, Petraeus, and Defense Secretary Robert Gates will stay on in the Obama administration. The established relationships between these men and leaders in the region will be critical to building the momentum toward progress in the region, he says.

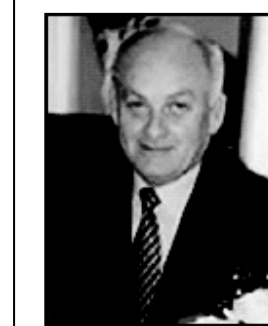
He also has a suggestion for our new president: "Obama should go to Afghanistan, and hear the people say, 'We don't need firepower, but brainpower ... most of all we need education.'"

In March 2009, the government of Pakistan will honor Mortenson with its highest civil award, the Star of Pakistan, for his courageous and humane work to promote education and literacy in Pakistan.

If the popularity of Three Cups of Tea, the overwhelming attendance at his speaking engagements, and his growing reputation are any indication, both Americans and other people around the world are hearing his message ever more clearly—education, especially for girls, is a path to ending the cycle of terror, and a path to peace.

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