

The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

TOURISM: Conflicting Perspectives

Does it do More Harm than Good in Nepal?

Tourism is among Nepal's fastest growing industries. Supporters credit it with spreading money more quickly than any other industry throughout society. But, some critics believe the cash generated by tourism actually makes life more difficult for those stuck on the industry's sidelines.

Gillian Forrester writes from Kathmandu

Nepal's rising industry



Narendra Tsathapa, a Nepali trekking guide, says many people who do not earn their living from tourism but who live near the trekking trails now sell off their possessions one by one, just to buy basic necessities. The resulting upsurge in poverty encourages overuse of terraced mountainsides, whose eroded soils are already exhausted from excessive harvesting.

Tourism has also wrought cultural changes. In recent years, children have learned to wave at passing tourists, a practice foreign to Nepali culture. They have also learned to say "hello" and ask for gifts with the few English words they know: "pen", "chocolate", "one rupee".

Tourists often give small

gifts such as pens and candy to the children they meet. But Coburn believes it is dangerous to hand out gifts or extra money to people who did nothing to earn it. "When you give someone a handout, they learn to hold out their hands."

The influx of foreigners is also blamed for damage to the environment. Only 16 years ago, the city of Kathmandu,

Maturip, still continued to rumble and splutter. A series of eruptions also happened over a nine-month period from mid-1941.

In 1971, a major earthquake was followed by a tidal wave which swept into the town centre. More volcanic activity struck in 1984. Rabaul's harbour is in fact the flooded crater of a huge volcano more than three kilometres across.

But volcanic upheavals have not been the only events to shake the Tolai people of Rabaul. As the seat of the capital of the German colony of New Guinea — at the coastal township of Kokopo on the other side of the harbour — it was the target of Australian soldiers who invaded New Britain to seize Bita Paka radio station during World War One.

Rabaul — its name means "mangrove" — remained the Australian capital of New Guinea until shortly before World War Two when it was moved to Lae on the mainland.

After Japan's sudden attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941, Australian and other foreign citizens were evacuated from Rabaul. However, more than 400 expatriate civilians were still in the town when the Japanese launched a bombing attack. Japanese forces seized Rabaul, intending it to become a major supply base for the imperial forces.

However, with defeats at Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands, Milne Bay, Kokoda Trail and in the Battle of the Coral Sea, Japan was forced on the defensive.

Rabaul was transformed into an impregnable fortress with tunnels, bunkers and caves. Mostly sites for anti-aircraft guns and artillery, the cave network also housed a hospital and the support headquarters for a submarine base.

At its peak there was a garrison of more than 90,000 Japanese troops. At the end of the war the city was devastated but the defenders had held out and were repatriated to Japan.

Rabaul was developing the town's tourism potential when the latest volcanic eruptions happened. Ironically, it was the only town in Papua New Guinea with a tourist office.

— GEMINI NEWS

DAVID ROBIE writes on Pacific issues. He is lecturer in journalism at the University of PNG.

THE beauty of the Nepali people and mountains was inaccessible to travellers until 1951 when, after a century of isolation, the Himalayan kingdom opened its borders to foreigners.

Two years later, New Zealand mountaineer Sir Edmund Hillary made it to the top of Everest. Since then, trekking in the Himalayas has grown more popular with each passing year.

The first trekking agency in Nepal was set up in 1965. Today 127 registered agencies organise guides, porters and cooks for tourists who want to head into the mountains, often for weeks at a time. Half Nepal's visiting trekkers do not make use of Nepali porters and guides, helpers, but instead boost the local economy by sleeping and eating in family-run lodges along the trail.

The tourism industry is more effective than most at spreading money to the poor. And the Nepali government has an effective way of encouraging high spending by tourists. It has passed a law that requires them to change a minimum of \$20 for every day they spend trekking — four times what they actually need to get by.

When the trek is over, tourists are prohibited from changing more than 15 per cent of their rupees back into their own currency, so trekkers find themselves with pockets of rupees that need to be spent.

Nepali merchants, taxi drivers and lodge owners along the trails appreciate the money brought in by the tourists.

But some critics contend that the cash influx ultimately does more harm than good to Nepali society as a whole.

Broughton Coburn, a former US aid worker in Nepal, says the tourist boom has led merchants to realise that trekkers can afford to pay more than locals. As a result, they have jacked up their prices, and many goods are no longer affordable to local Nepalis.

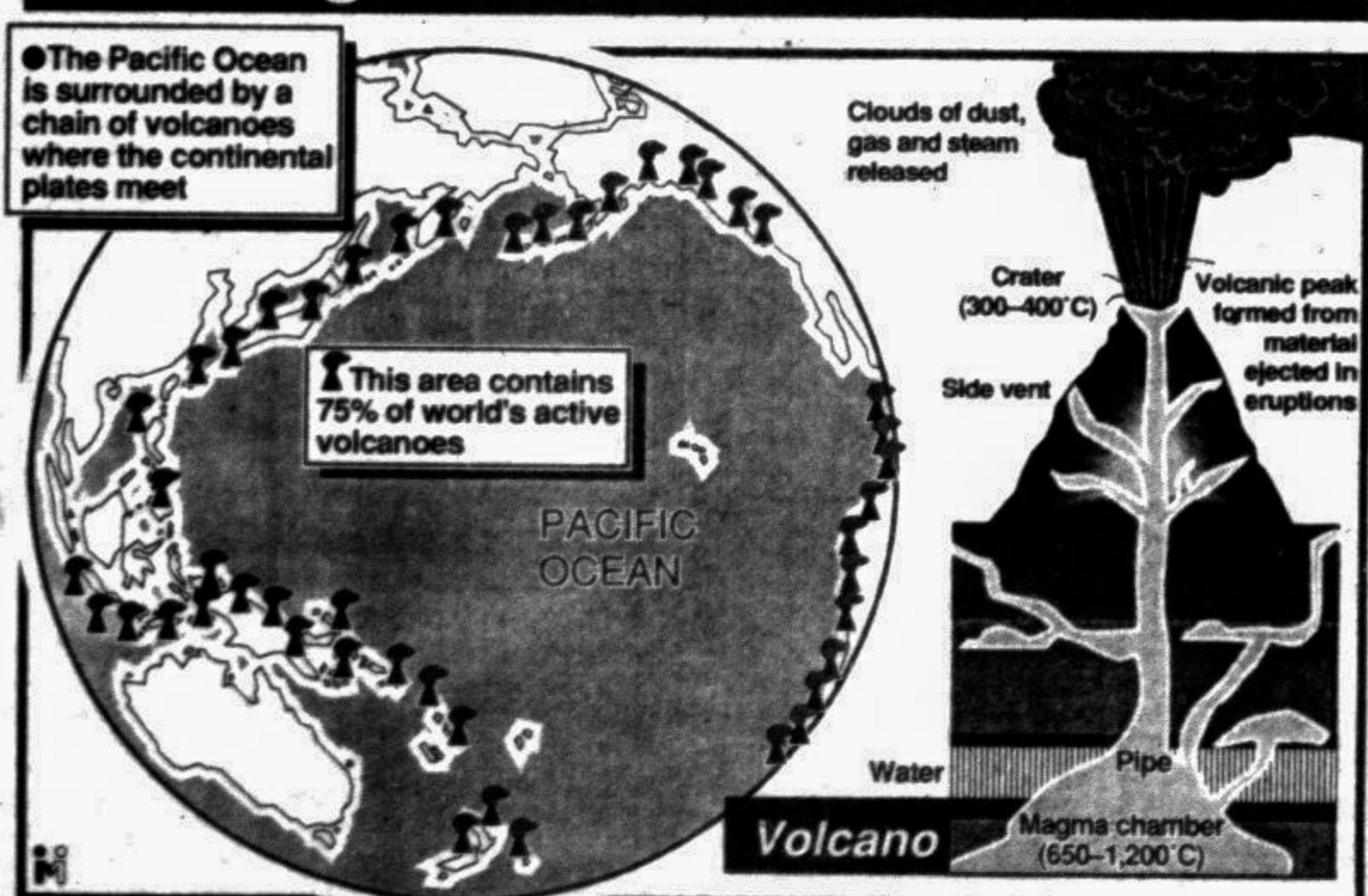
"The worst thing you can do," he says, "is to pay people more because what you end up doing is pricing the local people right out of the market."

Eruptions may End Pacific Tourist Town

Destroyed by volcanic eruptions in 1937 with the loss of 500 lives, devastated during the wartime occupation by Japanese forces, and plagued by volcanic rumblings and tidal waves, Rabaul has had a turbulent history. The former capital of the German colony of New Guinea now faces an ignominious return to history.

David Robie writes from Rabaul, PNG

The ring of fire



INGED by a chain of spectacular volcanoes and honeycombed by wartime bunkers in the jungle, Rabaul was arguably the most beautiful town in the Pacific.

But the picture postcard port in Papua New Guinea's Islands region has been the scene of many tragic and historic events over the years. And now the latest eruption of the "ring of fire" may be its death knell as an urban community.

Rabaul has become a ghost town after a series of earthquakes and volcanic explosions forced more than 10,000 people to flee or be evacuated to villages and plantations up to 30 kilometres away. At least two people were reported to have died.

Emergency officials praised a public education programme over recent years for the orderly evacuation of the town.

As Prime Minister Sir Julius Chan declared a state of emergency and the relief operation

got under way, planners were already debating an alternative site for a new capital and another airport for East New Britain province.

Successive governments have been accused over recent years of being indecisive over a choice for a town and airport, causing great hardship and inconvenience to the 190,000 people of East New Britain.

Critics argue that if the Tokua airstrip south of the town had been developed as both a domestic and international airport, it would have been easier to mount the disaster operation.

About 500 Tolai tribespeople had gathered on the island for a festival and perished when Vulcan suddenly erupted. After another day of eruptions, Vulcan island was thrust into the mainland as a volcanic peak. More than 5,000 people were evacuated during the four days of eruptions.

At risk, he writes, are sites containing "all we need to know about human evolution" over two million years. The evidence comes in the form of human remains and artefacts

with its ancient Hindu temples, was free of smog, clogged traffic and tall buildings.

Soaking tourists for their money is a well-practised art in Nepal. On arrival at the airport, tourists are assailed by Nepali men eager to carry their bags. In Kathmandu they are approached by a never-ending stream of aggressive salesmen offering carpets, wooden carvings and Tiger Balm lip ointment.

Fresh arrivals from rich countries who are not used to bartering and who do not know the going rates often pay more for goods and services. What they pay is still cheap compared to prices at home, and many do not mind spending, believing they are helping spread their wealth to the people of a very poor country.

Indeed, 60 per cent of Nepalis are said to be living below the poverty line, while only 22 per cent are literate and life expectancy is estimated at 52 years.

Tourists, particularly Westerners, are usually unaccustomed to Nepal's enormous wealth disparities. Porters who carry tourists' food, tents, cooking gear and belongings up mountain trails are paid only a fraction of what their guides receive, which itself is a small amount.

Appalled by such inequities, a group of British travellers who regularly trekked in Nepal decided three years ago to set up an agency which pays substantial bonuses to its Nepali trekking staff.

After being accompanied by the same porters and guides several years in a row, the British group had left large tips for them with their boss, only to discover the following year that the money had never reached them. Says Sharu Prabhu, one of the trekkers: "We were hoping maybe they'd be able to buy some decent clothes and help their kids get some education."

Astounded by the agency's dishonesty, Prabhu and her fellow British tourists set up the British-based Specialist Trekking Cooperative in an attempt to remedy the injustice.

Prabhu says the inequities faced by Nepali porters mirror a broader set of injustices which permeate Nepali society: wealth is kept among the wealthiest and very little trickles down to the rest of society. Competing agencies oppose

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Omanis Rejoice in Shining Sea and Ships

After decades of isolation, iron-clad border security and tight visa restrictions, Oman is seeking to attract well-heeled tourists to a Gulf country with cultural as well as oil riches. Gemini News Service reports — by dawn's early light — from the port of Sur, home of a revived shipbuilding industry.

Ian Cummins writes from Sur, Oman



Photo: Ian Cummins

Sambuqs at sea and fish on the beach at Sur

ANDAL-shod feet scuff with rasping urgency across Sur's market square in the paling darkness. A pair of pick-up trucks and a taxi come bustling through the half-light to join a honking, jostling convoy of vehicles heading for the waterfront.

And there, revealed by sun rising over the coast of eastern Oman in a flood of laser-bright light, is the reason for the haste. An armada of sambuqs — 30 or more of the classic Arab vessels known as dhows — ride at anchor in the mercury-smooth sea. They have

been sailing through the night from the deep water Arabian Sea fishing grounds to arrive at port at dawn.

There is, to be sure, all manner of business in Sur and Oman's merchants' run shops, offices and counting houses of every conceivable kind. But only the sambuqs, laden with great gleaming fish, have the magnetic power capable of drawing men from their beds to the beach at sunrise.

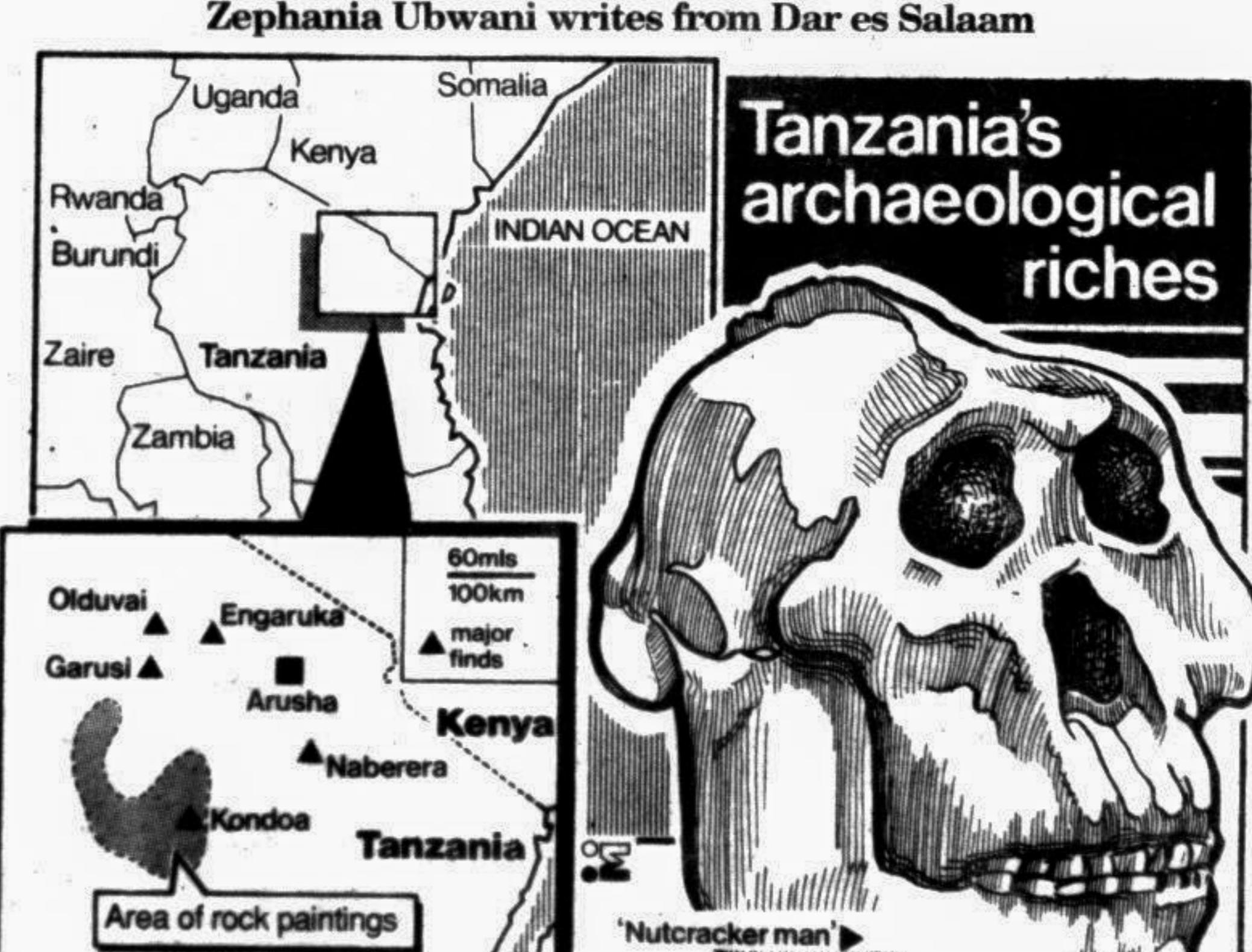
For these boats, skippered by proud nakhodas, are much more than fish-catchers. Competing agencies oppose

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Tourist Feet Threaten Prehistoric Footprints

For millions of years, remains of prehistoric human life remained untouched in Tanzania. Now, tourism and poor maintenance are putting these priceless finds at risk.

Zephania Ubwani writes from Dar es Salaam



HOMINID footprints and other evidence of prehistoric human life lay undisturbed in Olduvai Gorge and Laetoli for 3.5 million years. Now tourists are endangering Tanzania's unique archaeological sites.

Lack of maintenance is another damaging factor, warn archaeologists.

This has not only reduced the educational value of such sites but also resulted in the disturbance and displacement of the preserved archaeological and paleontological objects, laments Dr Fidelis Masao, senior lecturer in archaeology at the University of Dar es Salaam.

At risk, he writes, are sites containing "all we need to know about human evolution" over two million years. The evidence comes in the form of human remains and artefacts

as well as of animal plant traces.

Dr Masao cites the establishment of a tourist camp on the edge of one of the most important sections of the Olduvai Gorge, where ancient fossils of "nutcracker man" were found in 1959, putting Tanzania on the world archaeological map.

The discovery of the nearly two-million-year-old fossil was made by Kenyan-born British anthropologist Louis Leakey. It was considered to be so significant because the remains were found to be those of an early hominid, the line that eventually lead to *homo sapiens* or man.

Dr Masao, who has carried out extensive research at Olduvai Gorge and the Laetoli footprint sites, recommends that tourist facilities, especially hotels and camps, should be prohibited in the areas of the Gorge.

He blames the government for not doing enough to preserve the sites, and says the initial conservation measures were not followed up effectively although both sites are on the United Nations' World

Local vessels, the *boums* and *baglahas* built of richly grained Malabar timber, were left stranded in an economic backwater when ships of steel and aluminium-skinned aircraft came to take over and dominate Oman's trade.

Many of the local boat-building skills withered and very nearly perished when the port became the reluctant home of a coast-hugging fleet. Some *nakhodas*, determined to stay in business, still sailed the monsoon routes to Africa when

targoes or passengers could be found. Mansour al Amry recalls his vessel was *soon* *broken* by contrary winds and was later caught in a fierce storm which blew the ship into the coast of Somalia.

"We lived in a cave for nearly two weeks on dry rations and water we carried with us in steel drums. The water was red with rust and very bitter by the time we were able to set sail again. I shall never forget

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Heritage list because of their global significance.

The unique 3.5 million-year-old footprints excavated in 1979 are now said to be covered by soil and vegetation.

The government's antiquities department, a section of the Ministry of Education and Culture, set up a committee last year to investigate the matter.

It has not yet submitted its report but already been criticised for not involving experts from the university of Dar es Salaam and other archaeologists who have worked in the area.

"We have good reasons to believe that the committee may not advise the government properly on how to save the footprints," says Dr Masao. It should include internationally recognised experts in geology, geochemistry, paleontology, botany, forestry, chemistry, archaeology and conservation sciences.

The dangers are not confined to Olduvai and Laetoli. Ancient rock art in central Tanzania, particularly in Singida and Dodoma regions, are also endangered by natural and human induced factors.

And several historic sites and monuments along Tanzania's sea coast and on off shore islands are severely threatened by beach erosion.

These include 1,000-year-old houses, tombs and a great tower at Kilwa Kisiwani and Kilwa Kivinje in the south-east and old sites in the historic town of Bagamoyo, north of Dar es Salaam.

Many of these places were visited by the famous Arab explorer Ibn Battuta in the 13th century.

The erosion of the ancient cemetery at Kilwa Kisiwani has left some exposed skeletons. A wall built by the Germans during their period of rule in Tanganyika to protect houses at Kilwa Kivinje has been broken down by the relentless battering of waves.

GEMINI NEWS

ZEPHANIA UBWANI has worked as a reporter with the Tanzania News Agency for ten years.