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Book review: Deep engagement with Himalayas, empathy for conservation

Stephen Alter's book reflects not just his encyclopaedic familiarity with the world's highest mountain range but also passion for its conservation, writes Shyam Saran

Shyam Saran

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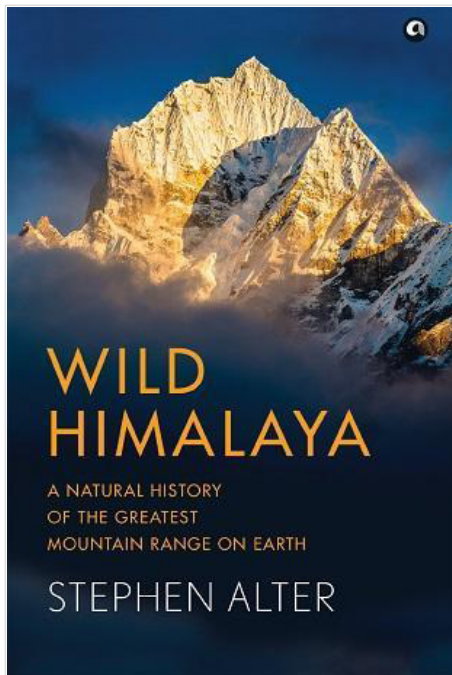
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more than that. Across nearly 400 densely packed pages, grouped in eight sections and 50 chapters, Alter turns biographer, narrating the incredible tale of the mountain range, almost in stream of consciousness style, mixing science with legend, history with myths and personal affinity with how others have related to its varied landscape of intense fecundity and frozen desolation.

The author begins by restoring the original Sanskrit singularity to the mountainscape. This enables one to look upon the entire range as one vast and forbidding entity, a mother embracing many formidable snow-covered peaks, each with its own name or names, and its own personality. Alter tells some of their stories, like Nanda Devi and Nanga Parbat, the Kanchenjunga and the mighty Everest. But the Himalaya is not just its mountains, but its valleys and lakes and its rivers, too. And above all, the incredible variety of life that springs from its soil. All this and more find place in the book and the detail may occasionally feel overwhelming. For a general reader the liberal use of technical jargon is distracting. The book is organised in short, stand-alone chapters. It can be savoured in smaller, selective doses. There are some fine colour photographs but these are not specific to the book's contents and this is a pity.

Wild Himalaya reflects the affinity and empathy the author feels for the mountains from the vantage point of his family home in Landour, Mussoorie. He has travelled widely across the entire

stretch of high mountains from west to east, interacting with the many different ethnic groups that have made home in its folds and the unique flora and fauna that nurture a wealth of bio-diversity. Nature's profusion is matched by the incredible stories and fantastic legends attached to living landscape. Alter has a good ear for such local stories and blends them skilfully with the more staid technical bits.



Wild Himalaya: A natural history of the greatest mountain range on earth **Author:** Stephen Alter **Publisher:** Aleph Book Company **Pages:** 440 **Price:** Rs 640

The first section, entitled Orthogenesis, is an account of the dramatic birth of the mountains as the bed of the ancient Sea of Tethys crumpled upwards in the violent clash of the Indian sub-continent with the Eurasian landmass about 50 million years ago. The Himalayan range is strewn with marine fossils. During treks in the deep gorge of the Kali Gandaki river in western Nepal, one could pick up any number of fossilised ammonites, known as Shaligram, from the shallow river bed.

The next section, The Third Pole, explores the Himalaya as a source of the major rivers and their life-sustaining currents. But the glaciers are melting as a result of climate change, affecting the flow of rivers. Then there is the paradox of people worshipping rivers as sacred deities but not thinking twice about dumping rubbish and hazardous wastes into them.

The next three sections, entitled Flora Himalensis, Winged Migrants and Mountain Mammals, respectively, explore the rich and varied flora and fauna across the Himalayan range. Alter's account of his journey to the Deosai plateau in the region of Skardu in Baltistan and encounters, though from a safe distance, with native bears, is a window to how our estranged neighbour Pakistan is grappling with the

challenge of conservation. I was particularly happy to find an approving reference to the Jabarkhet Nature Reserve that lies across Landour and of which I am a supporting member. This once-degraded private forest has been revived through the efforts of Sejal Wohra, who was successful in mobilising the local community to protect and nurture this precious patch of green.

Then there is the fascinating story of tea cultivation in India, of how in the mid-19th century, a Scotsman named Robert Fortune smuggled tea saplings from China into India. India had its own indigenous variety growing wild in Assam. It is the blend of both varieties that give Indian tea, growing in the foothills of the Himalayan range, their characteristic range of flavours. Alter weaves into his narrative the history of colonial ingress into the Eastern Himalaya, the migration of labour from Nepal and other parts of India to work on the expanding plantations and how this legacy is playing out in contemporary politics.

The last three sections, entitled Ancestral Journeys, At the Edge of Beyond and In a Thousand Ages of the Gods, explore the complex relationship between Man and Mountain. There is at one level a sense of deep affinity with the soaring mountains, the source of life and, at times, of death too. Just as there is breathtaking beauty inspiring poetry and song, so is there fear and foreboding that lurk in its folds and find expression in legends of the Yeti or the Abominable Snowman. Then there is the urge to conquer the highest peaks and pit oneself against treacherous and unpredictable challenges that they hurl at every step advancing towards the summit. Alter has brief accounts of the Himalayan expeditions associated with well-known climbers like Messner, Shipton and, of course, Hillary and Tenzin Norgay. They, too, fell under the spell of the mountains, half believing in the existence of the Yeti and of a Third Man on the Mountain who sometimes emerged as a phantom guide to lead mountaineers in distress to safety. But technology is making the erstwhile perilous journeys almost commonplace adventures. Everest today is yet another destination to be ticked on the tourist menu.



Wild Himalaya is testimony to the deep, almost

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encyclopaedic, familiarity that

Stephen Alter possesses about the world's greatest mountain range. But more than that, the passion and empathy with which he relates to his subject makes this book eminently readable. There is a profound message, which shines through the pages, a message that is warning and hope in equal measure. In Alter's own words, "Being the dominant species on this planet and placing ourselves at the centre of a web of man-made meaning, we have consciously and unconsciously separated ourselves from the wilderness out of which our ancestors emerged. Nevertheless, from time to time, most of us still experience an inexplicable longing for the lost memories and mysteries of our primal habitat."

Nowhere is the inexplicable longing more compelling than when walking among the soaring snow peaks of the [Himalayas](#).

The reviewer is a former Foreign Secretary and an avid trekker in the Himalayas

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