

K-2: The Italian Connection (/news/1036029/k-2-the-italian-connection)

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One hundred years ago, the first scientific expedition set out from Skardu into the high mountains of Baltistan, led by the Italian scientist Fillipo De Fillipi. This was an important scientific expedition to the Karakoram Mountains and Central Asia, organised under the auspices of the Indian and Italian Governments. For his valuable investigations Fillipo De Fillipi received in 1916 the Order of Knight Commander from the Indian Government. For the Italians, the 100th anniversary of that expedition is special and they plan to celebrate the event and the long ties between Italy and Pakistan. A few years ago in 2004, there was another important celebration marking the Karakoram association when the Italian and Pakistani governments marked the 50th anniversary of the summiting of K-2, arguably the deadliest mountain on Earth.

A huge pyramid like tent was set up to commemorate the first successful ascent of K-2 by an Italian expedition in 1954. This was **an expedition mired in controversy** (<http://adventure.nationalgeographic.com/2004/09/k2/david-roberts-text>) although it was a source of immense national pride for the Italians. This pyramid is located in the garden of the PTDC K-2 Motel, the most popular hotel in Skardu, which is the hotel of choice for all the mountaineering expeditions on their way to Concordia and K-2. The area, which has some of the highest peaks in the world, attracts over 50 expeditions a year. The mountaineers and trekkers acclimatise in Skardu and buy their supplies there, before setting off for Askhole, the last village on the 5 hours jeep track. From there they have to go on foot to Concordia, with porters carrying their equipment and supplies.

The pyramid is today a museum called the K-2 Museum and it was inaugurated by the Italian government in 2004. It is dedicated to “the people of Pakistan and to all mountaineers”. Inside, there are numerous interesting photos (both colour and black and white) documenting the historical K-2 expedition, as well as previous expeditions into remote Baltistan like the one led by De Fillipi. “The ascent of K-2 was a big deal in Italy,” explains Italian journalist and photographer Stefano Ardito. “There are hundreds of bars and shops in Italy named K-2”. Ardito is currently in Pakistan to make a documentary to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the first scientific expedition led by De Fillipi. He says: “The high mountains are a very important place, an extremely important laboratory; they are the water towers/tanks of the region”.

K-2 is located in a remote mountain area now designated as the **Central Karakoram National Park (<http://www.cknp.org.pk/>)**. One of the goals of the SEED project (funded by the Italian and Pakistani governments) is to protect the CKNP.

“The CKNP covers almost 10,000 square km and 38 per cent of this area is covered by glaciers”, explains Raffaele De Cima, who is heading the SEED project in Islamabad. “One of the main pillars of SEED is to support the forestry department to establish the CKNP’s management”.

The Government of Pakistan established the CKNP in 1993 and the park encompasses the greatest concentration of high mountains on earth. Sixty peaks over 7,000 metres are located within the park’s boundary. Hundreds of mountaineers and trekkers from around the world visit the park each year. According to the 1998 census, there are around 350 settlements and the total population of these settlements is approximately 211,000. “The local population is sparse, with a high infant mortality rate and a literacy rate of around 51 per cent,” says Raffaele De Cima. Another pillar of SEED is to “help the socio-economic development of the community living in the outskirts of the park”. SEED is improving local livelihoods by providing gemstone trainings and setting up Concordia rescue teams in addition to helping with agricultural productivity.

According to Raja Abid Ali, the Director of the CKNP, “this is the largest protected area of Pakistan and it has the highest glacial complex outside the Polar region. It is home to unique biodiversity”. The SEED project became involved in the park’s management in 2009, and

they are helping to set up a trophy-hunting programme in the park's buffer zone. "We have conducted wildlife surveys and involved the villages of Ashkole and Arundu in coming up with valley conservation plans. We are raising community awareness about their role in CKNP's management," explains Raja Abid Ali. The project is also planting trees in the watershed areas and improving the watch/ward system by hiring more wildlife watchers so that the illegal hunting of animals like the Ibex is reduced.

The plan is to build proper visitor information and registration centers for tourists in Ashkole, Hispar and Hushe and develop over a hundred park signs to guide visitors around the park. The staff is also being trained with exposure visits. Although the project has come up with a comprehensive management plan with basic guidelines for all park activities within the CKNP, it is still awaiting the Gilgit-Baltistan government's provisional approval. The management plan's latest version will be presented to the authorities in September after incorporating any suggested changes from the Gilgit-Baltistan government. Funding for the project is due to end in 2014, so the Italians are in a hurry to have the management plan approved; they would like to set up a properly functioning and sustainable park in an area they have been associated with for the past 100 years.

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