The 8000-er Mess

The History of Climbing the World's Highest Peaks Is Not What it Seems

This flag-draped rock pile on Manaslu is just below the point where most climbers stop their ascent—a point about 20 meters before the actual summit. Photo by Guy Gotter

In recent years an international group of mountaineering researchers came to the realization that there was a major problem with the history of 8,000-meter climbing. The group, which coalesced around Eberhard Jurgalski, the leading chronicler of Himalayan and Karakoram mountaineering statistics, and his 8000ers.com website, determined that on several 8,000-meter peaks, many climbers had not been going to the summit and that this had been happening for decades. Usually this has been because of understandable ignorance or confusion about the exact nature of the summit topography. However, it has led to the remarkable situation where it is possible that no one has stood on the true highest point of all the 8,000-meter peaks.

I feel that I have to state immediately that the summit is the highest point on the mountain and there is usually only one. So, in this article, I don't say "main summit" or "true summit"—just "summit." Everything else is a top, a peak, a bump, or a ridge, but not the summit. You might feel that you can stop 30 meters away and 10 meters below the very highest point and still say that you have "climbed the mountain," but you have not been to the summit.

The questions that have arisen in recent years are not the well-known issues with climbers stopping at the rocky foresummit of Broad Peak or the central peak of Xixabangma (Shishapangma). They involve three other 8,000ers. It has become apparent that only around half the climbers claiming a summit of Annapurna (8,091 meters) had been to the highest point, and that almost all climbers on Manaslu (8,163 meters) had not continued to the summit. There has also been confusion on Dhaulagiri's summit (8,167 meters). The full dossiers outlining the historical and current issues with these three 8,000ers are available for free at 8000ers.com.

Many of these non-summits occurred in recent years during the boom in commercial guiding of 8,000-meter peaks, but some of the ascents in question also involve some of the biggest names and ascents in the history of Himalayan climbing. For those climbers ascending only one or two 8000ers, these missed summits may not be an issue. However, the researchers feel that these issues have significant importance for the historical record of those claiming—or attempting to climb—all 14 of the 8,000-meter peaks.

It must be stated that in the vast majority of cases the research group believes these non-summits are due to honest mistakes or justifiable ignorance, rather than willful dishonesty. Above 8,000 meters, climbers are physically and mentally extended, in no state to be conducting accurate topographical surveys or historical comparisons. Poor visibility, bad weather, fear about the descent, and concern for partners exacerbate the difficulties. The group does not want their findings to result in climbers pushing further than is safe for them at the time. There is also a long history of climbers stopping just below the summits of certain major peaks out of respect for local beliefs and traditions (e.g., Kangchenjunga) or because the highest point is an unstable cornice; however, these concerns do not apply to the mountains under discussion here.

The researchers are also aware of the socio-economic reality that underpins modern Himalayan climbing, in that there is significant financial pressure on the Sherpas and other high- altitude guides and workers employed by so many aspirants to 8,000-meter peaks to have their clients feel they have

been “successful.” Depending on the company and client, this may mean a summit bonus, which can encourage Sherpas to accept tops lower than the summit (especially if other groups are stopping there), or a bonus for simply getting their client over 8,000 meters, which may reduce motivation to continue to the highest point. With a slow, tired client in a line of similar climbers all close to the top of the mountain, and with their own safety also in mind, there is tremendous pressure on Sherpas to simply “call it good” short of the summit, and a grateful but inexperienced client may not know any better or simply not care.

NEW SOURCES OF INFORMATION

These issues have surfaced only recently for several reasons. The last decade has seen a proliferation of self-propagated photos and other media from the 8,000ers, available online. This new material and other information has made it easier for researchers to compare ascents and claims, and to shed new light on the ascents of decades past. This wealth of information was not available to researchers, publishers, or climbers until very recently, a factor the research group takes into account when judging what anyone could have known previously about the summit locations.

For decades, the chronicling of mountaineering in Nepal, home to eight of the 8,000-meter peaks, was methodically done by the renowned Elizabeth Hawley. While Hawley mostly accepted climbers at their word, she grilled them mercilessly if she had doubts, particularly for bigger claims, and as one American climber attempting Everest found in 2003, she did not consider eight meters from the summit to be a successful summit. However, for information about summit topographies, Hawley relied solely on the reports of earlier climbers whom she trusted due to their experience and reputation, and from relatively scarce photos provided by climbers over the years. The research group has now realized that these climbers have been mistaken in some cases, and photos need to be carefully examined and compared to fully understand the various summit topographies of each mountain.

More than ten years ago, in 2007, Eberhard Jurgalski noticed in “summit” photos that climbers on Manaslu seemed to be stopping short of the high point that the Japanese reached on the 1956 first ascent of that mountain. After more research and discussion with a number of experienced climbers, Jurgalski was proved correct; in fact it became apparent that Manaslu claimants have been stopping at several different points and that this had been happening for years.

Then, in 2012 and 2015, Sherpas guiding clients on Annapurna published purported summit photos and video that did not seem to be on the highest point of the summit ridge. In ensuing discussions and research, Jurgalski approached the German Aerospace Center (DLR), which had recently published significant new satellite imagery and photographic analysis of some Himalayan regions. [One result was a book, Mountains: Die vierte Dimension (“Mountains: The Fourth Dimension”), published in 2016.] This imagery proved particularly interesting on Annapurna.

Video capture of the north side of Annapurna, showing the various tops along the summit ridge, from C0 at the east end to Ridge Junction (RJ) in the west. C2 and C3 mark the 8,091-meter summit. (A) Upper east ridge. (B) Gully leading to C1. (C) “French Couloir.” (SFE) South face exit. Photo by Joao Garcia

ANNAPURNA

The new DLR data revealed the unique topography of the long summit ridge of Annapurna, showing that two small tops, barely 30 meters apart, could realistically lay claim to being the highest point of the mountain—a rare situation. Since then, the examination of climbers’ photos and reports by researcher Rodolphe Popier has shown that for decades many Annapurna climbers have not stood on either of these twin summits—some have been close, others significantly farther away.

In the photograph shown here of Annapurna’s summit ridge, taken from the north side in 2010 from an airplane, the various points along the ridge have been labeled by Popier as C0 to C4, with “C”

denoting “cornice,” as this is the nature of much of the ridge. The common exit point from south face ascents (SFE), east of the summit, is also shown, as is the ridge junction (RJ) at the western end. Climbers approaching the summit of Annapurna from the north side routes, as the majority do, have ascended to the summit ridge by three variants: the upper east ridge, a thin gully leading up to C1, and the “French Couloir” at the western end of the face, meaning they end up at different places on that ridge, with different views of what appears to be the highest point. Popier’s dossier on Annapurna, available on Jurgalski’s 8000ers.com site, goes into much more detail about this topography, identifying key landmarks and analyzing many climbers’ photos to ascertain their highest location on the summit ridge. The analysis shows that many—perhaps half—never stood on either of the two tops (C2 and C3) now shown to be the summit.

It is important to restate here that the intent of researching and publishing this information is not to denigrate any climber, nor to completely rewrite the history of 8,000-meter climbing, including landmark ascents on Annapurna and other peaks. Climbing is about much more than topographical heights—it is about people, and the history of Himalayan climbing is a tapestry of people and their exploits and experiences on and around those heights. As in other strands of alpinism, some 8,000-meter climbers have put more emphasis on a difficult or new route than the summit itself, and for such climbers reaching a summit ridge or a distinct but non-summit top, or joining a previously climbed route, may have been sufficient to claim success. These climbers’ places in history are set, and questions about the precise topographical details of certain climbs should not change the cultural importance of their exploits.

Dhaulagiri from the north, showing traditional finishes to the northeast ridge (A) and today’s more common finishes (B) to the ridgeline west of the summit. (P) Metal pole east of the top. (S) Dhaulagiri’s 8,167-meter summit. (WRF) Western rocky foresummit. Photo by Boyan Petrov

DHAULAGIRI

For years, many climbers on Dhaulagiri’s regular northeast ridge route followed the final part of this ridge toward the summit, but some of them stopped at a point considerably down the ridge, not going to the actual summit. From the late 1980s, there was a pole placed at that lower point, which undoubtedly caused confusion. Elizabeth Hawley rejected the summit claims of an Italian pair who mistakenly stopped there in 2005, as Hawley realized even back then that the pole was not on the summit. The Italians returned in 2006 and climbed to the summit, as other climbers have done on Dhaulagiri (and for similar reasons on Xixabangma and Broad Peak), because these climbers understood that if they wanted their summit to be universally accepted or for them to be included in any definitive list of 14x8000-meter summiters, they must go to the highest point.

More recently on Dhaulagiri, most climbers have avoided the upper northeast ridge and instead traversed high and right across the top of the north face, before cutting left up one of two shallow couloirs to reach the summit ridge. On 8000ers.com, Rodolphe Popier’s Dhaulagiri dossier outlines the routes to the summit and other tops. As seen in the photograph above, climbers taking the east couloir arrive on the summit ridge to the west of a small peak, the Western Rocky Foresummit (WRF), and must continue moving east to reach the summit. If climbers take the west couloir, they hit the ridge farther away from the summit and, after turning back east, must pass an additional small top before encountering the WRF and continuing further east to the summit.

Approaching by either couloir, some climbers have been stopping at the WRF, not realizing that the point around 30 meters farther east is the summit. Several have noted that the summit is only about one or two meters higher than the WRF, and given that these tops gain considerable snow cover in the post-monsoon season, the research group has proposed that Dhaulagiri perhaps should be considered in the same way as Annapurna, having two acceptable summits that are quite close horizontally and unusually close vertically.

The distance between C2, where most Manaslu climbers stop their ascent, and C4, the 8,163-meter summit, is roughly 20 meters horizontally and three to six meters vertically, depending on snow

conditions. Photo by Guy Cotter

MANASLU

During the last decade, Manaslu, the world's eighth-highest mountain, has become a more reliably accessible alternative to Cho Oyu (8,188 meters) for aspiring 8,000-meter climbers, many of them joining commercial expeditions and using the climb to prepare for a future attempt on Everest. However, as with Xixabangma, an otherwise straightforward climb ends with a final tricky ridge, a situation that makes Manaslu perhaps less suitable for commercially guided clients than it first appears.

At 8000ers.com, Tobias Pantel's Manaslu dossier examines this summit ridge. A climber approaching the final ridge on Manaslu cannot see the summit, but can see the prominent point C2, as shown in the accompanying photo, and some small tops before it. The summit ridge continues beyond C2, over another intermediate top, before rising to the highest point, denoted in the photos here as C4—this is the 8,163-meter summit of Manaslu. For over a decade, the majority of climbers claiming a summit of Manaslu have not reached this point, either because they did not realize that C2 was not the summit or they were not capable of the further climbing to reach the summit (C4) or unwilling to risk it.

The large numbers of climbers now on Manaslu has made this situation even more problematic. While it may be feasible for a climber, guide, or Sherpa to fix a rope from C2 to the summit even in post-monsoon snow, it is probably not feasible and certainly not safe to have dozens of people traversing such a rope back and forth within the narrow window of time they are there—and in recent years around 250 to 300 people a year have claimed a summit of Manaslu, most of them having stopped around point C2. This is a concrete example of one of the pitfalls, and the paradox, of mass commercial guiding: The summit is sold to clients based on its apparent achievability, and thus attracts large numbers of clients, but those large numbers end up making the summit less achievable.

The situation seems to be exacerbated in the autumn post-monsoon season on Manaslu, when deep snow and large cornices form on that final summit ridge. The spring pre-monsoon conditions of April and May usually have fewer cornices, making the final narrow traverse relatively safer, but the guiding companies are busy on Everest in the pre-monsoon spring season, so prefer to prepare clients on a lower mountain in the preceding autumn.

If climbers just want to go high over 8,000 meters on Manaslu as preparation for Everest, then following the ropes to the prayer-flag-draped "selfie spot" by C2 may suffice. But if a climber wants to be unequivocally recognized as achieving all 14 of the 8,000ers, or make any other claim based on summiting Manaslu, then it seems only fair that they must unequivocally go to the summit. This may mean going in the pre-monsoon season, prepared to fix their own rope on the final ridge.

TOLERANCE ZONES?

The 8000ers.com research group has considered and discussed the concept of a "Tolerance Zone" (TZ), a small region around the summit, usually along a ridge that includes slightly lower tops, which would be acceptable to reach for the purpose of claiming a summit and for chroniclers of mountaineering to record a successful ascent. But where should the boundaries of such a zone stop? Is 10 meters from the summit OK? Why not 20 meters? Is five meters vertically acceptable but 30 meters horizontally too far? Given the different topographies of each summit area—Manaslu is tiny and steep, Annapurna long and indistinct—there would need to be different parameters for each mountain, and that may prove to be unworkable.

For future climbers, the summit picture is clear. Given that the nature of the summit regions on these problematic peaks is now known—and has been available for a few years and covered in climbing media—the research group feels there is now no excuse for claiming a summit of these peaks without verifiably reaching the highest point, particularly for those wanting to claim all 14 of the 8,000ers. So

there should be no Tolerance Zone on any of these peaks for claiming ascents after 2020. The summit is the summit.

When looking at past ascents, however, the research group feels it is both fair and practical to give leeway for understandable confusion or errors, and therefore summit claims should be respected for climbers who historically finished in the following zones:

Annapurna: C1 in the east to the Ridge Junction (RJ) in the west

Dhaulagiri: the Western Rocky Foresummit (WRF) as well as the summit

Manaslu: C2 to C4

It is now clear from the dossiers at 8000ers.com that a number of people previously considered to have climbed all 14 of the 8,000-meter peaks have not done so, even if you allow for the grace of a Tolerance Zone. Although the research group has attempted to acquire as many climbers' photos and accounts as possible, much of this has not been forthcoming. Moreover, some of these climbers have died and therefore cannot explain their actions (let alone consider reclimbing summits). So, with a lot of information from climbers still missing, it is impossible to make the bold claim that no one has climbed all 14 of the 8,000ers, but it is also possible this might be true. The most accurate and comprehensive list of 8,000-meter collectors is Jurgalski's at 8000ers. com. However, any such list is just a list of claimants—at present, there can be no definitive list of climbers that can be unequivocally verified to have reached all of the summits.

Can any list ever be "final"? Revision is common and ongoing in all forms of history, including the history of alpinism—facts are rarely final, and there are many aspects to stories. A definitive list for this particular matter is likely an illusion—an illusion of precision that does not exist, an illusion of control over history that can never exist.

Yannick Graziani celebrates on the summit of Annapurna after an eight-day alpine-style ascent of the south face with Stéphane Benoist. The two exited the face to the east of the summit, beyond the C1 point visible in the distance along the summit ridge, then plodded to the top. To be certain he reached the highest point, Graziani continued to C3 West, then returned to this point to start the long descent. Photo by Stéphane Benoist

DOES ANY OF THIS MATTER?

The research group has tried to come to conclusions that are topographically accurate, ethically fair, and socially acceptable, but this has proven extremely difficult. The group is reluctant to impose contrived rules on others or shine a harsh light on the minor missteps of inspiring climbers of the past. But they feel strongly that lines need to be drawn somewhere to clarify the historical record, to make the future chronicling of ascents workable, and to respect the efforts of those who have made the effort to go to the summits—particularly those who have returned to a mountain after realizing an earlier mistake, with all the risk, expense, and effort this requires.

If you want to spend your holiday doing some enjoyable climbing, you're better off going to the Sierra Nevada or Chamonix than to the Himalaya or Karakoram. If you just want to experience the Greater Ranges, you can go to any of a hundred other peaks on the permitted lists or go trekking. The 8,000ers are tough, dangerous, expensive, and rarely fun, even by the weird and masochistic standards of climbers.

On the 8,000-meter mountains, people are almost always aiming to climb to the summit. The vast majority are not exploring new terrain or pushing any boundaries in the world of alpinism. These are trophy peaks, and you don't get a trophy for stopping at 90 meters in the 100-meter sprint. Almost all climbers attempting 8,000-meter peaks nowadays are there to achieve a singular goal—the

summit—not just to have a laugh with friends or enjoy the athletic movement. So, if we climbers are honest with ourselves about why we are on these mountains, then we should maintain that honesty through the process, accepting that summit success on an 8,000-meter peak means going to the highest point.

BREATHING SPACE

As this article was completed in late spring of 2020, all spring and summer expeditions to the Nepal and Indian Himalaya had been canceled because of COVID-19, the Karakoram season was very likely to be a non-starter, and it was possible the post-monsoon Nepal-Tibet seasons would be canceled as well. This unique and worldwide hiatus has given the mountaineering community a rare chance to pause and draw a line under practices that have distorted our culture and its history. The community can declare that, from 2021 onward, if climbers want to be included on official summit lists and in definitive histories, we only count ascents verified to have been on the summit, not on any lower points.

This year also gives us space to think about why we do this, why we climb. Is it really for the experience, for all the intangibles we allude to in literature and social media? Or is it as simple as wanting to tick a listed item for some reason? Do we value primacy over quality, results over experience? The summit is the summit, but climbing is more than summits.

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Images

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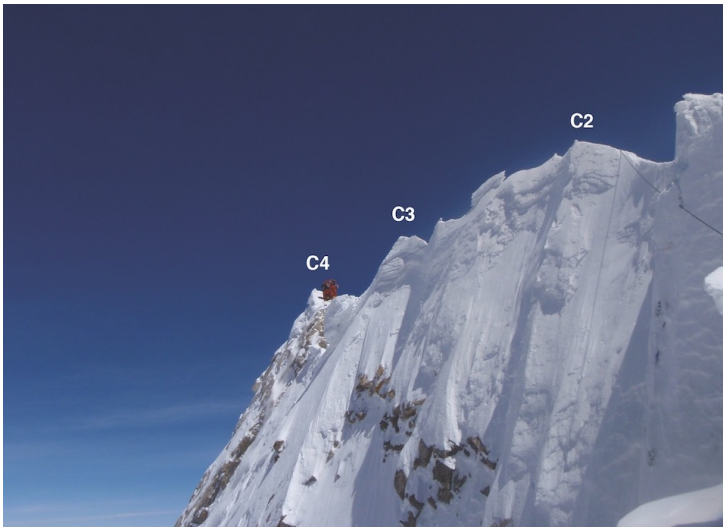
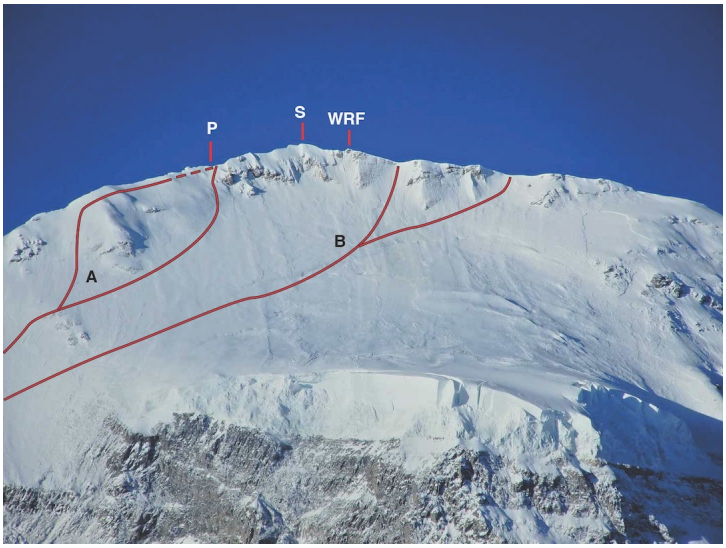


The distance between C2, where most Manaslu climbers stop their ascent, and C4, the 8,163-meter summit, is roughly 20 meters horizontally and three to six meters vertically, depending on snow conditions.



Dhaulagiri from the north, showing traditional finishes to the northeast ridge (A) and today's more common finishes (B) to the ridgeline west of the summit. (P) Metal pole east of the top. (S) Dhaulagiri's 8,167-meter summit. (WRF) Western rocky foresummit.

This metal pole well to the northeast of Dhaulagiri's summit was mistakenly declared to be the summit by various parties in the past.

Video capture of the north side of Annapurna, showing the various tops along the summit ridge, from CO at the east end to Ridge Junction (RJ) in the west. C2 and C3 mark the 8,091-meter summit. (A)

Upper east ridge. (B) Gully leading to C1. (C) “French Couloir.” (SFE) South face exit.

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Article Details

Author	Damien Gildea
Publication	AAJ
Volume	62
Issue	94
Page	
Copyright Date	2020
Article Type	Feature article