



## WWF Girls Scholarship Program

December 2006 Stories from the Field

### Paying Tribute to Two Great Leaders of Conservation and Education

Yeshe Choden Lama and Mingma Norbu Sherpa



*On September 23, 2006, a terrible tragedy in Nepal led to the loss of life of 24 individuals, two of whom were close to the hearts of Girls' Scholarship Program staff, donors, and beneficiaries: Yeshe Choden Lama, the Coordinator of the Girls' Scholarship Program in Nepal, and Mingma Norbu Sherpa, the visionary behind WWF's first Girls' Scholarship Program and a champion for the program throughout the world. A helicopter departing from a ceremony marking the historic handover of the Kangchenjunga Conservation Area to the local community, crashed, taking with it the lives of all of those onboard.*

**Yeshe Choden Lama** "was the unsung hero," declared Eric Wikramanayake. Warmly described as passionately dedicated, brilliant, and unassumingly modest by her close colleagues and friends, Yeshe worked with quiet diligence to help conserve the biological and cultural diversity in the mountains of the Himalayan landscape. Born in 1968 in the northwest of India near the Tibetan border in Tetjun, Yeshe received her Bachelor's

degree in sociology and anthropology from Middlebury College in Vermont, and later completed her Master's in sociology and anthropology from the School of Oriental and African Studies in London.

Yeshe started work in the WWF Nepal office about ten years ago where she was responsible for administering, monitoring, and reporting on WWF's mountain programs and projects. Yeshe's project management work at WWF eventually grew into a deeper personal and professional conviction. Through her work and publications, she demonstrated a commitment to the conservation of medicinal plants and maintaining the practice of the traditional healers of the mountains, the *amchis*.

Yeshe's passions also included education. She once dreamed of becoming a professor, though instead inspired young minds by becoming the Girls' Scholarship Program in Nepal, thereby helping students obtain schooling opportunities. Yeshe has helped dozens of girls and assisted in

expanding this program from the highland areas of Kanchenjunga to the Northern Mountain Conservation Area. Yeshi was also in the process of finalizing expansion of the program into the Dolpo region, when her life ended. She played a major role in making Nepal's Girls' Scholarship Program a model for girls' education and environmental capacity-building throughout the WWF Network and the conservation sector.

Yeshi's compassion and gentle spirit allowed her not only to gain respect, but also to bridge cultures from all groups, from her co-workers and supervisors at WWF, to school girls and government representatives, to the *amchis* whom she welcomed into her home for refuge.

The life of **Mingma Norbu Sherpa** was an iconic example of how educating children about conservation at an early age can reap benefits of global proportions, while improving the lives of those who live in the most fragile and remote of ecosystems. Born in 1955 in the Sherpa village of Khunde, in the Everest region of Nepal, Mingma was one of the first students to graduate from the Hillary Khumjung School - the first of many schools developed for Sherpa children with the assistance of Sir Edmund Hillary, famed conqueror of Mt. Everest. With further support from the Hillary Foundation, Mingma went on to receive a diploma in Parks and Recreation from Lincoln College, University of Canterbury in New Zealand in 1980 and a Masters degree in Natural Resources Management from the University of Manitoba in 1985. Among his many academic achievements, Mingma was a Fulbright Scholar in 1987 at the School of Natural Resources, University of Michigan. He moved on to develop a strategy for environmental education and management in the Annapurna Conservation Area Project, overseeing efforts to clean up the trash left behind by tourists, devising plans to halt deforestation, earning the acceptance and participation of local people, and eventually turning management of the Annapurna park over to the local people entirely. Mingma believed very strongly that, "saving nature need not take place at the expense of people."

Key to Mingma's ability to achieve remarkable results was his consistent return to the values, philosophies and teachings of Sir Edmund Hillary. Sir Hillary believed that without the support of the local people, the natural heritage of the Himalayas could not be protected. Mingma adopted and applied Hillary's approach in Bhutan, and extended this philosophy throughout the Eastern Himalayas.



*Mingma giving a presentation about the Himalayas to the Bhutan girl scholars in February 2006- WWF Bhutan.*

Mingma played a major role in advancing the Girls' Scholarship Program in the Eastern Himalayas. He considered education of local people as fundamental to the long-term success of conservation programs, and worked tirelessly to fundraise for educational opportunities for Himalayan communities, and to educate outsiders who wished to support conservation in the Himalayas about the importance of improving health, livelihoods and education of local people in order to achieve this goal.

A testimony to his dedication to this conviction occurred during the environmental exposure trip for Bhutanese girl scholars in February of 2006. This trip proved to be a capstone event in the program as 14 scholars learned about large threats facing their native Himalayan ecosystem and livelihoods, the efforts of environmental organizations, and leadership opportunities.

During this month, Mingma had a full schedule of meetings in Nepal and was suffering from a severe

cold. Despite these setbacks, he heard about this first-ever trip and offered to host a dinner including a slideshow presentation. The scholars were very grateful for this opportunity and their evaluations confirmed that the experience was transformative.

Tenzin Dema, one of the fourteen Bhutanese scholars states, “WWF is not only looking toward conserving forests and animals but also looks after people. If people cut down more trees, our forest will soon change into desert and soil erosion will take place. All this will affect our natural environmental and peoples’ well-being. Sir Mingma rightly explains the necessity of balance in our actions... Thank you, Sir Mingma for explaining everything to us.”

## **Study Room on Mafia Island Destroyed, Ready for Rebuilding**

This past February, the Tanzanian girl scholars of the Mafia Island Marine Reserve’s Kitomondo Secondary School were given a frightening example of how the power of nature affects their lives. The Southern monsoons struck their study room with torrential rains and menacing gusts of wind, destroying the roof of their study room and crushing the tables and shelves. The girls were unharmed in this incident, but left hindered by the absence of a proper study room. These terrifying weather events are not uncommon to this region. Over the past month, floods have affected more than 700,000 people in Kenya and 1.8 million people in Kenya, Somalia, Rwanda, and Ethiopia, a region once stricken by years of drought and insoluble soil.

The Kitomondo Secondary School is the only girls’ scholarship site that sponsors a dormitory, library, and study room. When the Mafia Girls’ program was first envisioned, local community members explained that one of the biggest obstacles to sending their girls to school was that the only secondary school in the area, on Mafia Island, had no safe place for the girls to stay. Most of the families lived in remote fishing communities off of the Mafia coast, and distances between the islands meant that daily commuting was impossible. In

this traditional Muslim area, gender-separated facilities are a prerequisite for parents’ willingness to allow their daughters to stay in school. These facilities are crucial to enabling future cohorts of girls to continue their studies and brighten their futures.

The Kitomondo Secondary School has seen much success over the years. Each year, this program has increased the number of girls completing Form 4, with 37 girls out of 40 graduating last year. Since the redesign of the program to focus more on environmental education and familiarizing the girls with Mafia Island’s Marine Park, the scholars’ knowledge about marine conservation issues and the Park have significantly changed. The original baseline survey showed that the girls were unable to list even 5 marine resources. The follow-up survey showed that the girls were able to name at least 7 resources, including fishes, corals, sea turtles, mangroves, seaweeds, sea cucumber, dugongs, shells, octopus, and squids. Additionally, the girls learned about various ecological processes and marine habitats, and human impacts on them. As the school year comes to a close, the WWF-Mafia staff looks forward to continuing the evaluation of the level of knowledge gained since the restructuring of the program.

As a result of the incident and the lack of a study room, the girls actually came together and made an effort to find quiet places to study in groups. They fared well and found other temporary places in which to study. The girls’ difficult study conditions will soon be over, as a portion of this year’s program funds were recently approved to refurbish the roof of the study room. Books that were temporarily placed in the WWF office will soon be back in the study room, ready for an even greater number of enthusiastic girl scholars.

## **Girls’ Scholarship Program Part of “Extraordinary Gifts” for Members to Support**

WWF-US has just launched an exciting new fundraising initiative that reaches WWF’s 1.2

million membership base with a special invitation to contribute directly to the Girls' Scholarship Program. WWF's Holiday Gift Catalog contains donations that can be given in a recipient's name for the upcoming holiday season or throughout the year. In the one month since it was published, it has already demonstrated impressive fundraising potential for several WWF programs.

The Girls' Scholarship Program is featured in the "Extraordinary Gifts" section, where members are given an opportunity to sponsor a scholarship for a young girl in one of the program's four countries for the price of \$1,000. The catalog notes, "Throughout the developing world, many decisions about the use of community resources lie in the hands of women. To prepare girls to make wise choices when they grow up, WWF has established a Girls' Scholarship Program in key conservation areas, where many families are too poor to educate their girls. The program provides girls with the basic education and area-specific knowledge needed to become active stewards of natural resources within their extended families and communities. Your gift will enrich the life of a girl and help empower a new generation of local conservationists. Your scholarship would fund a girl in Kenya, Tanzania, Nepal, Bhutan (or Madagascar)." It is our hope that with the assistance of our vast membership base, we can increase the number of scholarships available for girls in need, as well as scale up our capacity to provide quality education that will have a lasting impact on conservation.

## **Girls' Scholarship Program Contributes To Increase in Turtle Population in Kiunga, Kenya**

The youths of Kiunga Marine National Reserve (KMNR) are mobilizing to protect the turtles and sea life they depend on for their survival. These marine resources have suffered greatly as a result of over-extraction and destructive practices from artisanal fishing. This is of particular concern to the KMNR, which hosts one of East Africa's most important, and increasingly threatened, marine turtle nesting sites for all five species of the Indian



*WWF scholars in Kiunga recycling old flip-flops by making crafts during the Eco-Holiday Program*

Ocean's marine turtles. Protecting turtle nesting sites is crucial for their survival, as marine turtles return to their birth place to nest and lay eggs of their own.

In the last year, youth who received environmental education and awareness training from WWF's scholarship program motivated all five villages possessing turtle landing beaches in the KMNR to organize Year of the Turtle (YoT) awareness events. In addition, thirty new youth volunteered to take part in the KMNR's turtle conservation program – illustrating the effectiveness of educating youths about conservation and building skills that allow them to actively participate in conservation activities such as turtle monitoring.

As a result of the students' commitment and broader support from the community, the turtle conservation and monitoring program has noted a 40% increase in reported turtle nests, of which more than half were reported by the youth and other community members. This year, 170 marine turtle nests were recorded. Twenty-six of those nests belonged to returned (tagged) turtles, a promising sign that efforts to increase people's awareness of the importance of turtles is resulting in fewer killings and longer lifespans of the turtles.

These impressive successes in marine turtle conservation also demonstrate how the youth scholarship program has contributed to improved community attitudes towards conservation. Community participation in local conservation activities is increasing, thereby improving management of the KMNR. To sustain these results, it is crucial that WWF continue to support youth involvement in conservation and provide scholarships to help youth finish their studies. The long term viability of the reserve's nesting turtle populations and the reserve itself depends on the vision, capacity, and knowledge of its youth.



*KMNR girl scholars on a beach clean-up campaign at Chandani village, during the year of the turtle celebrations*

## Girl Scholar Highlights – Kenya



### Shamsa Athman

*“Our environment is an exciting part of our lives. To appreciate it, we must first try to get a deeper understanding of its’ meaning and purpose. This is exactly how KMNR approaches it through Eco-holiday program. I enjoyed my stay at KMNR; the team guided us through various lessons relating to our environment, from turtle to HIV/AIDS. I am so grateful to the KMNR team for graciously spending their time to help me understand conservation and other social issues. I have learnt so much from this program. The lessons are invaluable and will always be near and dear to my heart. Being a KMNR ambassador I will strive to set an example for others at school and in my community.”*

Shamsa is from Faza village and is the first born of 8 siblings and admits to having a difficult home life. Her father passed away at a young age, and she lives with her mother who strives to support the whole family. Shamsa believes that the ESP has given her new hope because she feels that if it was not for the program, she would only be at home helping her mother care for her siblings. She is a third year student at Faza secondary school. She confidently believes that the Eco-holiday program within the ESP have helped her to keep her mind healthy, clear, and positive.



**Batuli Abuu**

*“Before I participated in the KMNr Eco-holiday program, I used to ask myself, why should I care about creatures on the other side of the world that are becoming extinct? What difference would it make to my life if turtles, dugongs or corals die out? The program was so useful in making me understand in depth, the crucial role these creatures play within the web of life that forms the natural world. Our lives are entirely dependant on this natural world. When we continue destroying it, we are destroying the very branch that provides for our livelihoods and this is why extinction really DOES matter. Now that I am a KMNr ambassador, I will strive to protect our environment for the generations to come.”*

Batuli is 17 years old and from Kiqingitini village. She is in her second year at Mpeketoni secondary school. The second child out of 6 siblings, she watched her older sister drop out of school during her second year due to an inability to pay for school fees. As her sister was unable to, she is committed to completing her education. Batuli is a clear example of a young woman whose indifference towards conservation transformed into a passion after the ESP program. Her ultimate dream is to become an environmental educator to change attitudes just as the program did for her.



**Fatma Said**

*“Keep up, WWF for your commitment to promote girls education! Supporting girl’s education is particularly important. The need is great and the impact is powerful! We are often disadvantaged and yet it is the mother’s education level that most influences her children’s education. Besides improving the lives of many girls, education will makes us better caregivers when we have children of our own. This will in turn lead to better education for our future children. I am proud of myself... I am now an empowered girl. I know that lack of education hampers economic and social development, triggering a vicious cycle that contributes to unsustainable resource use and environmental degradation.”*

Fatma is 17 years old and is from Mbwejumali village. She is in her second year at Lamu girls secondary school and is considered by others as a very focused and assertive student. She states that her books and school assignments are her boyfriend’s at the moment, and she does not have time for a real one because her efforts are focused on her education. Fatma is a mature young woman who sees the overall greater picture of the benefits of education for women. She aspires to be a medical doctor and hopes to make a difference in her community.

**Special Thanks:** This year **WorldWomenWork (WWW)** has generously provided support to the World Wildlife Fund’s Girls Scholarship Program in four countries within two high-priority ecoregions: Nepal and Bhutan within the Eastern Himalayas Ecoregion, and Kenya and Tanzania within the East African Marine Ecoregion.

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*Kiunga Marine National Reserve scholars in front of their classroom.*