

Heavy Hands on the Land

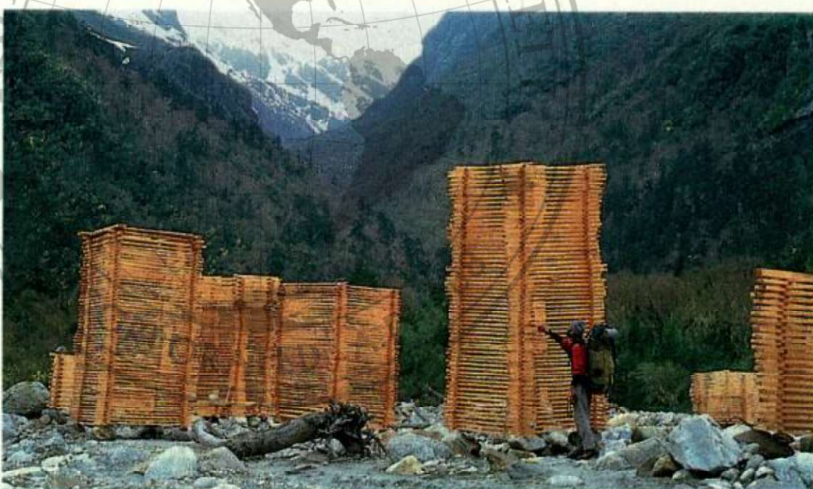
By LARRY KOHL NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SENIOR STAFF

Photographs by WILLIAM THOMPSON and GALEN ROWELL

EAST OF EVEREST, in an unspoiled wilderness along the Kama River, a woeful harvest is under way, as Tibet's rarest resource—its forestland—falls to the ax. Here, where brightly colored rhododendron trees grow 60 feet high amid stands of juniper, silver fir, larch, and birch, photographer Galen Rowell encountered tracts of tree stumps. Nearby, great stacks of freshly cut timber awaited transport to local villages.

In a land famous for its barren, windswept expanses, only a handful of regions in southern Tibet enjoy sufficient rainfall for forest cover. All border tributaries of trans-Himalayan rivers, whose valleys, according to Rowell, are "like open windows for the monsoons from the south that normally can't penetrate the Himalayan barrier." Conservationists believe that these valleys provide invaluable refuges for wildlife, including the rare red panda. But the government is considering proposals to log the entire Kama Valley to supply building material for the population centers of the arid Plateau of Tibet.

Sparsely populated and remote from most human commerce, the Tibetan side of the Himalayan range nonetheless faces some of the same ecological pressures that plague the entire 1,500-mile arc of the



ALL BY GALEN ROWELL

world's highest mountain system. The source of three major river systems—the Indus, Ganges, and Brahmaputra—the Himalayan watershed is vital for the well-being of hundreds of millions of people in the Indian subcontinent. Today this vast ecosystem stands under great threat, as its inhabitants continue to strip their vertical world

of its soil-holding forest cover for fuel, building material, and cropland.

South of Everest, in the Kingdom of Nepal, the environmental threat is far more urgent than in Tibet. There the toll taken from the land by a large local population is exacerbated by a growing tide of fuel-consuming tourists.



THE BURDEN OF DEVELOPMENT, timber cut in the Kama Valley is hauled to Kharta, a five-day trek, by Tibetan women, who traditionally shoulder much of the physical work. Though timber harvests here are still modest in scope,



GALEN ROWELL

the threat of wholesale exploitation clouds the future of this virgin forest. To meet the lumber needs of a growing population in Lhasa and other Tibetan cities, the government is considering plans to build a major road into the valley.