

David Breashears on GlacierWork for Sustainable Marblehead

By Chris Stevens

marblehead@wickedlocal.com

@MheadReporter

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Climber, author, filmmaker brings his view of climate change to the Old Town House

David Breashears has seen the impact of climate change up close and personal and the climber, author and filmmaker is bringing his views to Marblehead as the first in Sustainable Marblehead's speaker series "Conversations on Conservation."

"I've been climbing the Himalayas for 40 years," he said from his Marblehead home. "I started out as a young man wanting to be a climber, a rock climber, an ice climber and a mountaineer."

And he is.

Breashears has climbed Everest five times. When he reached the summit for the first time on May 7, 1983 he was the 137th to do so and one of only five on the entire mountain top.

"And it was wonderful," he said.

Last spring an image emerged that showed 400 people waiting in a line to summit Mt. Everest. Breashears is quick to note he would not deny anyone their dream, but he is clearly grateful for the intimate experience that included only 40 people total on the mountain that day.

Breashears also transmitted the first live television pictures from the summit that day. In 1996, he co-directed and co-produced the first IMAX film shot on Everest and ended up documenting a now famous blizzard that took the life of eight climbers. Next he performed the first live audio WebCast from the summit in 1997. In 2004, he shot a fourth film, "Storm over Everest."

"And somewhere along the way, I shifted gears," he said.

It's that shift Breashears will discuss Thursday Oct. 17, at the Old Town House, 1 Market Square, from 7 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.

Around 2014, Breashears was asked to climb the north side of Everest, which is Tibet, he said. The project was for "Frontline" producer David Fanning, who said if they were going to talk about climate change they needed to find evidence of the change.

"We're very diligently and accurately providing the continuum of the loss of a landscape," Breashears said.

Breashears said he took a photograph shot by George Mallory in 1921 and reoccupied his position within four feet "and I saw what happened to the glaciers I had walked on for 25 years."

You don't notice it while it's happening, until you see the photos side-by-side, he said.

The Fanning project led Breashears to launch GlacierWork, "a non-profit organization that vividly illustrates the changes to Himalayan glaciers through art, science, and adventure."

Since 2007, when Breashears snapped that first photo, GlacierWork has undertaken 12 expeditions to document the current state of glaciers by retracing the steps of pioneering photographers and shooting photos from the same position.

Breashears said the photos meander across the Himalayas, from Karakorum in Northwest Pakistan to Mt. Kangchenjunga in India.

"If we were to put it on a map, it would stretch from Jackson Hole to Nashville or Denver to Savannah," Breashears said.

The vast ecosystem has very different weather, it snow in the winter on Karakorum, but on Everest snow comes during the monsoon season, he said. But they all suffer the same fate, the glaciers are vanishing.

“The talk is about the conditions of this ecosystem, the heating and water systems on the glaciers,” he said.

But don’t use the word “warming” when talking to Breashears about climate change.

“It’s heating,” he said.

And it’s impacting the regions that surround the Himalayas such as India, China, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Nepal, 280 million people that rely on the vast ecosystem for water and life, he added.

GlacierWork is about using education and art exhibits to spread the message of climate change, where the answer is often mitigation, Breashears said.

“But mitigation is going to be slow, it’s too big a system and we’re not going to stop burning a lot of fossil fuels for years,” he said. “We teach adaptation.”

That means doing things like teaching farmers about heat resistant crops, and giving the 280 million people who rely on water from the Third Pole, a voice, Breashears said.

The Third Pole are the glaciers in the mountains of Central Asia, the largest repository of ice outside the non-polar regions, he added.

Breashears said he counts himself lucky that he had the skillset to tackle Fanning’s project, which led to his own. And that something so mystifying as Everest got under his skin, but he doesn’t romanticize any of it.

“For me it’s just work,” he said. “I identify with the lobsterman who gets up at four in the morning and goes out in the freezing cold. It’s just hard, cold work.”