

CANYONING IN PROTECTED NATURAL AREAS

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1. Canyons and canyoning

Canyoning is a sporting activity that consists of making your way by walking and/or swimming along a series of canyons or ravines, torrential rivers or mountain streams, using specific techniques and your own resources, as defined at the 2nd Seminar on Protected Natural Areas and Mountain Sports.

Descending canyons has been included as a feature of mountain excursions since the beginning of the 20th Century. It was in this context that the sports category we now know as canyoning was formulated.

Rivers have been the focus of human attention as a linear ecosystem since prehistoric times. Throughout history we have always found them, and indeed still find them seductive for a number of reasons. They have provided a constant source of clean drinking water and nutrition and a communication route over the years. However, they have always been subjected to natural pollution.

As an element that interacts with the environment, water forms a biotope with very important characteristics. The volume of water, speed, and chemical properties are inherent elements of its own making that need to be taken into account and that endow it with the characteristic features peculiar to the specific ecosystem.

Another factor is the physical surroundings of the river, the geological materials it flows over, its disposition and topography, along with the processes of erosion and transport, carving out the canyon and/or ravine morphology, which makes it possible to traverse such terrain.

For all these reasons, a series of factors must be taken into account when canyoning down a ravine to ensure that the activity is conducted in the most sustainable way.

2. The need for regulation

It is considered that, like other types of sporting activities that are traditional in the mountains, canyoning must be regulated by legislation pertaining to sports and environmental issues, particularly when carried out in Protected Natural Areas, with due regard for technical and/or scientific provisions.

The regulations governing canyoning in Protected Natural Areas should always be based on scientific knowledge. Ensuring that this is so requires PNA technicians and canyoning experts from FEDME and other competent federations to work together at state and regional level, on the following points:

a) Inventory and catalogue of the natural values of each canyon or ravine and its surrounding area, evaluation of its state of conservation and protection needs.

b) Detection of threats and incompatibilities that canyoning can cause to the ecosystems and species present in this environment.

c) Adoption of regulating measures, deriving from the above. It is considered that four potential scenarios exist:

- canyons with free access.
- canyons with access subject to authorisation from the PNA manager.
- canyons with spatial or temporary access regulation determined by zone and/or season.
- canyons with no access whatsoever.

These factors should be taken into account when establishing zoning criteria and be inserted in the PRUG (Master Plans for Use and Management) for Protected Natural Areas.

3. The opportunity for regulation

The managers of Protected Natural Areas have the means to re-orientate sporting activity in their area towards environmental education and understanding and to become an exemplary model for reconciling sport and knowledge, and protection and mutual respect for one another.

Human beings are part and parcel of the environment and can therefore not be considered alien to it. Ignoring this fact implies a misconstruction of our own identity, of our deepest aspirations, which will lead us to stumble in our efforts and objectives.

By way of a logical, appropriate conclusion, it is understandable to consider it convenient for regulation to be approved for all the different uses that affect Protected Natural Areas. Such regulation must always pursue the integration of people with nature.

4. Determining factors for regulation

The need for regulation based on scientific knowledge should consider different environmental criteria such as the presence of protected or threatened species, the mating or breeding seasons of any species, and the risks of erosion or fire.

The implementation of these environmental criteria can be realised by regulating the frequency, seasonality, facilities, accessibility, information and publicity afforded to them.

Along with the criteria presented above, it should also be possible to implement various sectoral laws.

5. Criteria for regulation

It is considered convenient to establish a flexible and appropriate system of guidelines, suggesting the need for:

- A) Basic preventive legislation aiming to establish “best practices”, and tending towards environmentally-friendly activities, with little impact on the surroundings while at the same time being safer and more dynamic for patrons.

This can be achieved by:

- a) Limiting the number of people per group (to prevent chaotic, reckless descent).
 - b) Recommending environmentally-friendly practices.
 - c) Not supplying or re-supplying equipment, save in cases of obvious emergency or where previously existing equipment has been disabled.
 - d) Fostering unification of pedestrian access points through the use of a minimal basic system of way marking.
 - e) Taking unfavourable periods for protected species into consideration.
 - f) Establishing an information strategy, especially at signposted access points: physical and environmental conditions of the ravine, etc.
- B) Specific legislation indicating when and where regulation is to be applied, this being as follows:
- a) With respect to area - indicating the places and not necessarily the total number of ravines.
 - b) With respect to time - determining the dates when the regulation is to be applied.

6. Permits

Measures should be adopted in every Protected Natural Area that are designed to speed up the efficient processing and issue of permits without making the clerical work involved more complicated, while at the same time making it easier for users to obtain their permits .

7. Supply and Re-supply of Equipment

Any plan or project to supply and/or re-supply equipment requires specific authorisation from the Protected Natural Area if so specified in the regulations, and should be issued by the PNA manager. A proposed work plan should be submitted for such purposes.

In this respect, PNA managers are recommended to work together with FEDME and any other federations involved on matters including the supply and/or re-supply of equipment, amongst others.

8. Opening up of New Canyons

Any canyon that is to be descended for the first time after the regulation comes into effect must be given prior authorisation by the Protected Natural Areas, taking into consideration the "Study of complaints filed with the Natura 2000 Networking Programme"

9. Cooperation between the Public Authorities, FEDME and other federations

To develop the suggestions stated in the previous points it is considered to be essential for communication channels to be set up between the Public Authorities and FEDME and any other federations, which can be articulated through agreements and other cooperation mechanisms, with special importance being given to integration of the federations in the organs of all the Protected Natural Areas where canyoning is practised.