

3rd SEMINAR ON PROTECTED NATURAL AREAS AND MOUNTAIN SPORTS

“THE CONTRIBUTION OF MOUNTAINEERING TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT”

Introduction

Mountaineers from all over the world that have traversed mountain ranges over the past two centuries for scientific, exploration or sports purposes see the mountains as the repository of landscape, cultural and biodiversity, and have helped promote certain mountainous areas as a framework for harnessing the life and culture of highland peoples, conservation of the environment and the practice of mountaineering as a sport. On the other hand, human activity is clearly having adverse effects in the form of erosion, water pollution, climate change, galloping urban development or the loss of cultural values and abandoned regions, which are particularly palpable in such sensitive areas.

Throughout the whole country, as of 30th June 2005, there are officially 1,105 Protected Natural Areas, 13 of which are National Parks and another 139, Natural Parks. Over 80% of these declared areas correspond to mountain regions. Spain is one of the European countries with the greatest amount of environmental biodiversity, with three National Parks – Garajonay, Doñana, and Ordesa y Monte Perdido – that have been declared World Heritage Sites, and 27 protected areas declared by UNESCO to be “World Biosphere Reserves”, meaning that the country ranks third in the world behind the USA (48) and Russia (34).

The number of active mountaineers has also increased all over Spain in these natural areas judging by the growing number of permits (71,884), affiliated clubs (1,287) and programmed activities, which are constantly on the rise.

Mountaineering is not only a sports activity but also a way of life that favours the development of social and educational values associated with people and nature. Mountaineers have to continue practising their own sport in the mountains, contributing to the development of their towns and villages and the conservation of their ecosystems; they have to remain in mountain areas pursuing their activities in accordance with the principles of best practice, since this is an inalienable right to freedom of movement and has no limitations other than those established by law for technical and scientific reasons.

Mountaineers claim their right as citizens to have free access to the mountain regions, to be able to practise sport in appropriate conditions of safety and to have a network of sports facilities capable of providing the services demanded by the general public nowadays.

Sports activity is compatible with the conservation of nature, and more specifically, with the declaration and management of Protected Natural Areas. Mountaineers express a desire to cooperate on conservation and development policies in mountain areas, and in the processes involved in drawing up their specific regulations. **For these reasons, it is important to set up**

meeting places for the mountaineering federations, public authorities and professional sectors associated with such activities to be able to discuss and propose strategies to enable mountaineering to make an effective contribution to the sustainable development of mountain regions.

1.- Sustainable Mountaineering

Taking the Brundtland Report (1987) as a reference, by *sustainability* we mean the model of human development that enables the needs of today's generations to be met without jeopardising the capacity of future generations to satisfy their own particular needs.

In purely sporting terms, we have to see sustainability as outlined in Article 10 of the European Sports Charter, of 15 May 1992, which reads as follows: "Safeguarding and enhancing the physical, social and mental well-being of the people from one generation to another requires that sports activities, conducted in urban, rural and nautical areas, adapt to the limited resources of the planet and are performed in accordance with the principles of sustained development and environmental management. These include:

- Taking the values of nature and the environment into account in planning and building sports facilities.
- Supporting and encouraging sports organisations in their efforts to preserve nature and the environment.
- Increasing knowledge and public awareness of the relations between sport and sustained development and their understanding of nature".

The Spanish Mountain Charter drawn up in 2002 for the International Year of Mountains recorded the need for leisure activities in mountainous regions to form an integral part of the broader strategies of local development. One of the recommendations to come out of the Seminar on Conservation and Sustainable Development in Mountain Areas (Valsain, 2003) establishes that protected natural areas are enclaves of enormous importance not only for demonstrating the achievement of sustainable development, it being possible to use these to generate very positive experiences in environmental education and awareness.

Mountaineering can be said to be a sustainable sporting activity providing it has a positive effect on the well-being of the individuals that practise it, and respects the natural resources used during the course of the activity, thus affecting the quality of life of the mountain inhabitants in a favourable way.

Mountaineering should form part of the social policies for ordering and developing the mountain regions, contributing its vision on the way to use and profit from the cultural and natural resources. Strategies relating to public use and conservation of mountain regions should take account of the traditional practice of mountaineering wherever this exists, and channels for collaboration should be set up between the federations and managers of such areas for the rational and orderly promotion of the possibilities mountaineering has to offer individuals and society in its many facets (sports, education, leisure, etc.).

2.- Access to the mountains

Mountaineering should be compatible with the objectives of environmental conservation in mountain areas. Mountaineers should abide by the criteria of minimising their impact on the environment and respecting the regulations for protection of natural areas when carrying out their sport. In the same vein, environmental departments are responsible for providing users with adequate information on the reasons behind the protective measures in place with respect to mountaineering.

The number of visitors possible in a particular mountain area should be given careful consideration, with the various parties involved being encouraged to participate (sports federations, local corporations and socio-economic agents).

Of particular interest are the recommendations put forward by the Nature Access Committee forming part of the UIAA (the French acronym standing for “Union Internationale des Associations d’Alpinisme, the International Mountaineering and Climbing Federation), which are as follows: self-regulated diversification of mountain areas, establishing natural barriers in areas with problems involving indiscriminate access to vehicles, and a more responsible and even distribution of information on paths, mountaineering and climbing routes.

3.- Environmental indicators of sustainability

Environmental information is one of the vital elements in preventing actions that affects the environment. It is essential for these indicators to be developed further, by creating efficient tools that will make it possible to measure the evolution of the state of the environment in mountain areas on a regular basis, and with respect to our own group, to measure the impact on mountain areas caused by the practice of mountain sports and tourist and leisure activities, with a clear distinction being made between these activities when assessing such impact.

The mountaineering federations and competent authorities should look for ways to cooperate that will help meet this objective.

4.- Educating and awareness-raising

Knowledge of the natural environment where the sports activity is conducted is fundamental for guaranteeing behaviour respectful of the environment on the part of the sportsmen, based on protocols and codes of good practice.

In this context, establishing regular meetings between the managers of natural areas and mountaineering federations is proposed, along with an effort to spread the “Mountain Culture”, understood to embrace a broad concept (diverse and historic) of the natural and cultural forms of life that prevail in these areas.

Environmental education should form one of the most important elements. The mechanisms required should be articulated to organise training programmes in line with the concept of “Sustainable Mountaineering” for federations, clubs, refuge wardens, guides, monitors, sports coaches and businessmen in the sector.

With this in mind, the managers of Protected Natural Areas, in conjunction with the sports federations, should organise and disseminate these training activities and refresher courses for

guides, sports coaches and interpreting experts that contribute towards a better understanding of the values and problems of each natural area under protection.

5.- Participation in Environmental Management

Given the historic tradition of mountaineering in some protected natural areas and the importance currently enjoyed by mountain sports in public use strategies, **it is imperative that mountaineering federations are formally represented in the environmental bodies involved in such activities.**

Mountaineers have paved the way in issues concerning the defence and conservation of the environment, inasmuch as they have played an active role in protecting these regions. Mountaineers should be encouraged, through various channels of cooperation between federations and participatory bodies associated with protected natural areas, to take part in those aspects that are of relevance to both, as described above in various sections of this document.

6.-Infrastructure

Mountaineering has generated significant sports infrastructure for society to be able to gain a better understanding of nature: a network of over 50,000 kilometres of approved trails, 500 rock climbing zones with equipped routes and 30 mountain refuges with over 100,000 overnight stays per year are a sample of the work done by the federations and clubs. These facilities have been put in place with an eye to the collective needs of the group that wants to get to know the mountains using its own resources, in a responsible and active manner in keeping with conservation of the environment.

Before commencing with this type of sports installation, an assessment should be made of the environmental impact and traditional uses, guaranteeing that the activity is respectful of the environment while at the same time answering sporting, free time and leisure demands. **A comparative study should be performed for each type of installation, along with a maintenance schedule, and a safety and dissemination programme for each one, in coordination with the managers of the natural areas in which it is located.** Given that these facilities are for public service, these environmental findings should be implemented directly by the Public Authorities, by setting up plans for investment, research and staff training.

7.-Refuges

Refuges should be erected in such a way that mountain activities are compatible with conservation of the natural environment. There should be a tendency to “extend the mountain area”, distancing shelters from the summits and generating foot access for users.

Mountain refuges are, first and foremost, sports facilities designed for mountaineering activities, although they are affected by sector regulations governing tourism, health, fire, etc., which are legally binding. Mountain refuges of the 21st century must become a model and reference for harnessing management, protection and care of the environment. In this sense, environmental managers should facilitate cooperation, and where appropriate, the means and resources required to implement sustained improvement plans through *Environmental Management Systems*.

Proper environmental management of the refuges should include activities designed to improve the environmental conditions of areas with installations for public use, waste management (removal and recycling), health and safety conditions, the rational use of energy, and adequate sanitation and maintenance systems.

Installations in the refuges should conform to environmental principles, regulations governing protected areas, and the codes of good environmental practice. Such information and activities should form the focus of cooperation between the refuge managers and those responsible for the region.

8.-Support for the local economy and creation of new job opportunities

The practice of mountaineering in the 21st century is another factor contributing to the development of mountain regions and which over the course of the two hundred years since it began has played a key role in the cultural process of attributing new meaning to the mountains. Although social and sports objectives may be fundamental, certain areas of the mountains may be conducive to economic activities such as hotel and catering, sports facilities in a natural environment, etc., thereby contributing to a certain extent to the creation of jobs and increased income for the local inhabitants. Mountain sports have helped to boost the local development of mountain regions as viewed from the perspective of ecotourism.

Work should be done at the Town Halls in the Areas of socio-economic influence of the Protected Natural Areas, Mountaineering Federations, Rural Development Groups and Protected Area Managers to stimulate and train the local population so that it can become the main beneficiary of these new economic sectors that are either linked or provide a direct service to mountaineering.

In particular, priority will be given to those activities that imply an increase in quality and added value for services such as those deriving from the application of the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in protected natural areas.

9.-Mountaineering and regional planning and development

Mountain organisations are non-profit-making sports associations that have contributed for over 125 years to creating an associative fabric that forms the bedrock of a freer and more democratic society. The commendable results of these organisations and their federations throughout their history make it imperative that the authorities should consider them in the management of sports, social and environmental projects, with this organised sector of society being favoured in plans and strategies for sustainable development of the region. Furthermore, a distinction should be made - as is the case in other European countries – in the promotion and development of schemes for public use between these non-profit-making entities and business firms, recognising and shaping the role they play in each case in the sustainable development of disadvantaged mountain regions.