

Access Seminar “Climbers, Mountains and the Environment” (Barcelona, 1-3 May, 1998)

20 experts from 13 different countries met in Barcelona last 1-3 May to discuss and to agree a set of recommendations and guidelines regarding Access to rock climbing sites, under the title “Climbers, Mountains and the Environment”. This Seminar was a joint event with the World Conservation Union- IUCN –European Programme and the UIAA’s Access and Conservation Working Group (ACWG) and the Mountain Protection Commission (MPC). The local Catalonian Alpine Club hosted and organised the meeting.

This Seminar was under the double framework of the ACWG’s planned seminars covering different aspects of the Access issue, as well as under the Pan-European Biological and Landscape Diversity Strategy (PEBLDS), promoted by the Council of Europe and approved by most European countries in 1995. The Executive Bureau of this Strategy approved a number of activities for implementation. Among these was Activity 10.5, on the minimisation of the ecological impacts of recreation, and responsibility for implementing this activity was given to IUCN and UIAA. A report on the main conclusions of the workshop have been submitted to the PEBELDS Secretariat for transmission to the fourth “Environment for Europe” Ministerial Conference that took place in Aarhus (Denmark), 23-25 June 1998.

The priority given to this activity recognised:

- that the issue of potential or actual restriction of the access of rock climbers to cliffs for environmental reasons is a clear example of the need for coordination between diverse stakeholder groups;
- that this issue must be approached at a Pan-European level, as limitations in one country will inevitably lead to increased pressures on sensitive sites elsewhere.

Before the Seminar, a pan-European survey of existing restrictions on access for environmental reasons was done through Climbing and Conservation organisations of the whole Europe. Organisations in 20 countries in the Pan-European region provided summaries of existing restrictions on access, and reasons for these. These may be summarised as follows:

- protection of ecosystem (breeding birds and/or sensitive plant species)
- national park (complete ban on climbing within park boundaries)
- geological significance, danger of rockfalls
- landowner conflicts and parking restrictions
- military use, live firing range
- area of “quiet recreation”

The first three of these may be classified as ‘environmental’ restrictions. In 14 of the 20 countries, negotiations have taken place in order to secure access to climbing areas, between climbing organisations and 1) environmental NGOs, 2) authorities responsible for national parks or nature reserves, 3) private landowners.

Results of expert workshop

Presentations revealed sophisticated participatory strategies for addressing potential or actual conflicts in a number of countries, including Austria, Germany, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. These strategies are largely based on knowledge of the ecology of

potentially threatened species living on cliffs. Research to ensure the availability of such knowledge is taking place in a number of countries, involving climbers, scientists, and members of conservation agencies and NGOs.

Guidelines

The participants in the workshop developed a series of guidelines for implementation by all stakeholders. The guidelines have been formulated primarily for rock climbing on crags and cliffs below the Alpine zone, but may often have general application in the Alpine zone. The guidelines include three components: principles, strategies, and actions. Strategies should be defined and implemented through actions at two levels: national/regional and local.

The guidelines are based on the following **general principles**:

- 1) Freedom of access to all crags and cliffs, and climbing in a responsible and sustainable way, should be basic human rights.
- 2) While climbing and the enjoyment of nature are essential ingredients for nurturing the human spirit, nature also has rights.
- 3) Where potential, actual, or perceived conflicts between these rights occur, knowledge, flexibility, dialogue, and cooperation should be employed in order to establish whether any restriction on access is appropriate, and in implementing any such restriction.

These general principles are supported by other more **specific principles**:

- 1) Many crags and cliffs have considerable importance for the conservation of birds, animals, and plants.
- 2) The natural conditions of crags and cliffs are very diverse.
- 3) Climbing is only one of a number of activities that may endanger the survival of particular species of birds, animals, and/or plants on a particular crag or cliff.
- 4) Decision-makers should not misuse restrictions.
- 5) Climbers should accept restrictions on climbing in specific places and at particular times when these restrictions are supported by well-founded data.
- 6) Climbers should follow minimum-impact principles.
- 7) Active pioneers, group leaders, and guide writers have special responsibilities for fostering sustainable climbing through example, awareness-raising, and education

Implementation of guidelines and other follow-up

The guidelines will be presented for endorsement at the next UIAA General Assembly, in Malaysia in October 1998. UIAA member organisations will be encouraged to implement the guidelines in collaboration with other interested parties, through the establishment and implementation of national, regional, and local structures. The process of establishing these structures, and their ongoing activities, are clearly defined in the guidelines. It is anticipated that these guidelines will be a model for guidelines relating to other recreational activities, as foreseen in the Pan-European Biological and Landscape Diversity Strategy.