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THE COMMODIFICATION OF MOUNTAINEERING

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Abstract: This article argues that mountaineers, with their long-term relationships with specific regions and peoples, complex motivations structuring their presence and activities, and lengthy history as a distinct cultural community, represent what ecotourism is striving for. They are a group of socially aware, self-reflective travelers who are proactive in the growth and restructuring of the mountain experience. Mountaineering literature is used to describe the changes in the sport and in the mountains, and to illustrate some of the ways in which cultural values, social meaning, and physical reality change when the human/nature relationship is commodified. Assessing consequences of a commodified alpine experience raises further questions as to the efficacy of ecotourism development models, and achievability of "sustainable" tourism. **Keywords:** mountaineering, ecotourism, alpine ecotourism, sustainable tourism.

Résumé: Le marchandisage de l'alpinisme. Les alpinistes représentent bien les buts de l'écotourisme, vu leurs rapports avec certains peuples et régions, leurs motivations pour structurer leurs activités et leur histoire comme communauté culturelle à part. Ce sont des voyageurs qui sont au courant des problèmes sociaux, qui ont pris conscience d'eux-mêmes et qui participent activement à la restructuration de l'alpinisme. Leur documentation décrit les changements dans le sport et les montagnes ainsi que les changements dans les valeurs culturelles, la signification sociale et la réalité concrète qui ont lieu quand on change le rapport gens/nature en une marchandise. On pose des questions au sujet des modèles de développement de l'écotourisme et la possibilité de réaliser un tourisme "soutenable". **Mots-clés:** alpinisme, écotourisme, écotourisme alpin, tourisme soutenable.

INTRODUCTION

In many places of the world where unique lifestyles and settings are threatened, people at all levels of the development system are planning and promoting tourism as the sustainable industry of choice. Cognizant of the complex dynamics that occur as tourism development inserts a new group of resource users into the economic and social scene, international lending agencies, national governments, nongovernmental agencies, commercial operators, and indigenous groups have invested time, money, and land in ventures that are consciously designed

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to enhance the socioenvironmental milieu of the host while educating and entertaining the guest. These "alternative tourism" ventures sell the exotic to gain money, labor, and/or foreigner presence: consciously employing tourism as a means to protect critical habitat, restore degraded environments, or attack social inequities (Draper and Driscoll 1991; Draper and Kariel 1990; Johnston 1990). This article takes a critical look at ecotourism experience by examining the history, growth, and socioenvironmental consequences of a significant ecotourism sector: that of mountaineering.

Ecotourism, in this use, refers to those ventures that rely on the commodification of nature, and/or the commodification of human/nature interactions. Ecotourism is typically articulated as an "ideal": an integrated conservation and development concept where entrepreneurs, host communities, and tourists all consciously strive to create sustainable experiences (Lee and Snepenger 1991). Sustainable, in this sense, refers to touristic endeavors that are planned and managed in ways that protect or restore degraded environmental settings and enhance socioeconomic opportunities for local residents, while entertaining and educating visitors. Tools to accomplish a transformation of tourism industry and tourist behavior include: codes of conduct designed to create a travel ethic in industry providers and their clients; planning design and assessment models that rely on environmental impact analysis to ensure "sustainable" design, and that attempt to integrate community participation and, thus, sensitivity to community need; and, management models that incorporate mixed-use strategies and utilize notions of visitor carrying capacity to monitor, assess impact, and adjust management regulations (Boo 1990, 1992a, 1992b; MacGregor and Prohaska 1992; Munoz 1992).

Cross-cultural reviews (Boo 1990; Johnston 1990; Whelan 1991) present a mix of ecotourism experiences, with no single case of "sustainability": documentation of an ecotourism venture where it is demonstrated that immediate as well as long-term security is created, profits are distributed equitably, political control of the critical resource stays in local hands, and environmental integrity of the resources are ensured. Arguments to the contrary exist (Dixon and Sherman 1990; Lindberg 1991), where ecotourism is presented as a means for generating income to manage protected areas and as an alternative to direct resource use by local residents. Assessment of sustainability in these cases relies on biological indicators of environmental integrity, and quantifiable indicators of socioeconomic status. Lesser quantifiable variables, and long-term social, cultural, political, and environmental ramifications of ecotourism development, are not calculated into the analyses.

This apparent lack of an on-the-ground example of sustainable ecotourism (e.g., long-term socioenvironmental viability) raises the question of whether the "ideal" objective of ecotourism development models is achievable. Does the creation of a socially-aware and proactive group of travelers and industry providers—the end result of ecotourism planning and development models—result in structural conditions that foster "sustainable" ecotourism? What happens to the social and envi-

ronmental values that originally shaped ecotourist ventures, when economic success is achieved? What happens to the socioenvironmental milieu when economic success results in an escalation of people and pressures?

These questions are used here to frame an analysis of mountaineering: tracing the patterns of growth and eventual transformation from adventure and exploration travel to a commodified alpine ecotourism. The analysis is, for the most part, derived from the mountaineering literature, and this focus on the perceptions and experiences of the participant sets it aside from other analyses (Kariel and Draper 1992). The mountaineering literature is considerable. The Alpine Club library had amassed some 600 entries when it appointed its first librarian in 1861, by 1976 that library had some 16,000 volumes of mountaineering literature (Neate 1980). Thus, mountaineering, as an example of ecotourism, is of particular value considering its lengthy history and its distinct community of travelers who record and analyze the meaning of their experience and the impacts of their presence. Their experience, as a group of ecotourists and as critical actors in an emerging alpine ecotourism industry, illustrates some of the complex ways in which cultural values, social meaning, and physical reality change when the human/nature relationship is commodified.

MOUNTAINEERING AND ALPINE ECOTOURISM

The history of mountaineering, of a socially cohesive climbing community and related economic structures, begins with Europeans and their Alps. Initially, people climbed for pragmatic reasons: moving animals to pasture, defining national boundaries, conducting scientific experiments. Recorded ascents of the European Alps can be found as far back as 1336, when Francesco and Gerardo Petrarch ascended Mont Venoux (1,912 m) (Nunn 1987:136). Europe's highest peak, Mont Blanc (4,807 m), was first successfully climbed in 1786 by scientists M. G. Paccard and J. Balmat. The sport of mountaineering emerged when people began to climb for pleasure: to refresh their spirit, to challenge their limits, to define the boundaries of survival, to live an adventure. Fueled by the popular press publication of mountaineering exploits, and by the development of a European railroad system that allowed people to gain access to previously isolated regions, a seasonal alpine ecotourism industry evolved with entire villages hosting the adventuresome and athletic European elite and professional middle classes. Given the preexisting patterns of pastoral land-use and settlement, relatively minimal capital investment was required to build an alpine ecotourism infrastructure. Villages were often located at the base of the intended peak. The pastoral economy, with its patchwork of pastures up and down the alp, meant a network of trails and huts was already present, as well as "guides" familiar with the terrain. Climbers could leave the comfort of a feather-bed, warm fire, and centuries-old roof, and find themselves well into their objective, if not home again, by the day's end (Brugger 1984; Cole 1972).

Much of the mountaineering literature from the mid-1800s involves

descriptions of the first ascents “punctuated by horrific accidents which could not fail to attract public attention and bemused concern” (Nunn 1986:136). Between 1854 and 1872, 31 of the 39 first ascents were claimed by British mountaineers, who then returned home to write up their exploits (Whymper 1871). By 1877, all of the European Alp first ascents had been “claimed” and climbing objectives diversified to include winter ascents, rock climbing on the needles and towers of Chamonix, and first ascents via new routes on the unclimbed faces and ridges.

The quest for higher peaks led mountaineers through colonial outposts to the Himalaya where, as in the Alps, the first objective was to reach the top by any means possible. Achieving this objective, however, was not so simple. The Himalayan mountains are, simply put, phenomenally high. Some 14 peaks reach higher than 8,000 meters. The highest European Peak, by comparison, is Mont Blanc at 4,807 meters. Preexisting villages were located in the livable regions, two or even three weeks walk from the Himalayan peaks. Climbing in the Himalaya posed enormous challenges, and in meeting these challenges, the region and the sport were forever changed.

The Role of Technology in Conquering the Peaks

The first full-scale Himalayan expedition took place in 1892, when Martin Conway explored the glaciers of Baltoro, Hispar, and Biafo. The first Everest expedition took place in 1921 by Colonel Howard-Bury. In 1950, Annapurna was successfully scaled, becoming the first Himalayan peak over 8,000 meters to be “claimed” by a European climber. In 1953, New Zealand climber Edmund Hillary reached the top of Mount Everest, and was bestowed a knighthood by the Queen of England for his successful effort. By 1964, all of the remaining 8,000+ meter peaks had been reached.

An alpine siege typically lasted several months. Climbing at altitudes above 8,000 meters, and hauling equipment and supplies to these isolated alpine regions, required large climbing teams and hundreds of porters. Over the years heavy, cumbersome equipment, food and fuel have been replaced, often by materials produced specifically for high altitude climbing needs. Lighter and more efficient stoves replaced the heavy loads of porter-carried firewood. Lightweight synthetic fabrics replaced heavier woolen clothing, bedding, and shelter. Synthetic fiber ropes replaced hemp ropes, the type that failed Edward Whymper’s 1865 descent after scaling the Matterhorn, killing four members of his party. Synthetic ropes are longer, lighter in weight and have greater elasticity than hemp ropes, allowing climbers to survive an arrested fall. By the 1960s dehydrated, prepackaged meals—originally designed to feed humans in space—provided mountaineers further independence from the weight of tinned goods and the reliance on porters. Climbing tools have been redesigned, with nuts, chocks, and camming devices (“friends”) replacing the hammer and piton method, allowing the climber equal or better protection utilizing existing fractures in the rock. The wooden staff was replaced by the ice axe, and most recently the down-curved ice axe and ice picks. The leather rope soled boot has

evolved through Tricouni nailed soles to a wide variety of crampons—an alloy or steel spiked sole and frontpoints that attach to felt lined plastic boots. With improved foot gear, climbers no longer need to cut ice steps and can tackle more direct ice routes up the mountain face (Chouinard 1978:18; Roberts 1980:62).

Beyond streamlined personal equipment, mountaineers now employ other technologically-dependent strategies that profoundly alter their presence in the mountains. Satellite imagery has aided in the production of more detailed maps. Expeditions have employed aluminum ladders to cross crevasses in the Khumbu icefall near Everest; others have brought mortars to trigger avalanches before climbers begin. September 1971 saw the first helicopter rescue of climbers on the Eiger Norwand, an event that has become increasingly common in mountain regions. Most recently, climbers have been packing Parapentes to summits, thus avoiding long and dangerous descents, though these flights are not without their own risks, as recent fatal accidents testify. Ski equipped aircraft eliminate long, harsh treks to Denali in Alaska. In short, the modern mountaineer has high-tech support systems available that can supply food drops, weather reports, or (if needed) rescue service.

These technical advances have had far reaching impacts on the sport. Greater speed over more efficient routes has reduced time spent in the face of the mountain's objective threats such as rockfall, avalanche, and crevasses. Reduced time at high altitude has also minimized to some degree subjective dangers such as anoxia-created stupidity, edema (both pulmonary and cerebral), and frostbite. This relative alleviation of physical threat, coupled with improvements in the transportation infrastructure (airstrips, highway construction, lower cost of jet travel), has meant dramatic increases in the number of people traveling to and up mountains. Between 1980 and 1984 there were more expeditions to the Himalaya than in all the previous 60 years of expedition history (Messner 1987). In 1986, Fisher (1990:188) reports 94 climbing expeditions in the Khumbu region alone (where Mt. Everest is located). In Nepal, tourist arrivals grew from 16,000 in 1962, to 181,000 in 1985 (Adams 1992:538). In Argentina, there were only two climbing parties on the Ruta Normal of Aconcagua in 1982. Over the two-year period of 1991–1992, some 2,600 permits were given for the same route (Balf 1992). Tourist arrivals in Denali National Park had reached 250,000 by 1981, and 500,000 by 1991 (Chase and Shore 1992). In 1978, 539 people attempted to summit Denali (Mt. McKinley, Alaska). In 1986, 755 climbers registered with the National Park Service, with 308 climbers attempting the peak during the week of May 20, 1986 (Seibert 1987). By the 1990s, an average of 1,000 climbers attempt to summit each year: on May 31, 1992, a record 500 climbers swarmed the summit (Kraukauer 1992).

The rise in numbers has intensified the role of competition in structuring climbing action and behavior. With the ascent of all the highest summits, climbing goals have involved ever more difficult routes or employed radically new climbing styles. If, for example, a climber has summited Everest, a subsequent expedition to Everest might involve a different ridge or face. The issue of "firsts" has been broadened

considerably to include first female ascent, first ridge, first face, directissima ascents (plumb line route), first solo, and first winter ascent, to name a few. If a route is to be repeated, it might utilize a lighter, faster alpine style (such as Reinhold Messner and Peter Habeler's oxygen-free ascent of Everest in 1978), a style now commonly employed on other Himalayan peaks (Messner 1979).

Improved gear, increased accessibility, and reduced levels of risk all serve to put more people in the mountains, many of them perhaps better equipped than experienced, as illustrated by the 1992 season on Denali where 11 climbers died. Climber Jon Krakauer (1992) suggests that the 1992 season, and earlier fatalities (between 1986 and 1992, some 28 climbers died on Denali), are tied to an underestimation of Denali's conditions. European and many Asian climbers gained their experience in the Alps where easy access and routine helicopter recovery service gave rise to the fashion of fast, unburdened ascents. These climbers are not prepared for the weather extremes of a high-altitude subarctic mountain: weather that interferes with radio transmissions, hampers helicopter rescue efforts, and in its extremes includes temperatures between 30 to 40 degrees below zero, not counting the windchill factor. Italian climbers Roberto Piombo and Giovanni Calcagno, for example, having climbed most of the routes in the Alps, tried to apply the fast and light strategy to Denali in 1992. Without bothering to acclimatize, the two left base camp without a tent, or even a shovel to dig a snow cave in case the weather turned. The weather deteriorated with winds over 100 miles per hour, and the Italians were blown off the Cassin Ridge.

The 22,834-foot Aconcagua in Argentina is another case in point. Increased accessibility, high-tech supports, and the development of a tourist infrastructure have placed thousands of people atop the peak in rapid order. A hotel has been built at 14,000 feet complete with private bath, satellite TV, a restaurant, bottled oxygen, and a helicopter pad. Flying into the hotel eliminates the two-day hike from the road to base-camp. It also eliminates the opportunity to acclimatize. Each year hundreds of novices collapse from altitude sickness contributing to a 70% failure rate on a mountain that requires little to no technical expertise (Ruta Normal is a hiking route with no technical climbing faces) (Balf 1992:27-28). The climbing scene on Aconcagua and Denali suggests that commitment, the very backbone of mountaineering, has been compromised by enhanced convenience and security—a situation that can lead to dangerous consequences.

The Economics of Mountaineering

Significant changes are also seen in the economic structure of the sport, with more and more people competing for a limited number of peak permits and sources of expedition support. While economic concerns have always been a significant facet of mountaineering culture, in recent years economic motivations have become central. Eric Ship-ton, in describing plans for his 1951 Everest expedition laments:

Money, of course, was our first concern. Try as I would, I could not bring my estimates to below £150 each, if we were to allow ourselves

the rather important luxury of three Sherpa porters, and spend the whole season in the field. I had managed to raise a little money by the distasteful business of lecturing during the winter, but not as much as that (1985:401).

Mountaineering expenses have increased considerably since Shipton's time. Members of the 1978 American Women's Expedition to Annapurna, for example, first faced the task of fund-raising \$80,000 before they could initiate a journey that led 10 members to climb the mountain, and eventually one member (with two Sherpa guides) to summit. Personal funds were used for travel to Nepal, lodging and food while in Katmandu, and personal equipment. Expedition funds were used for 8,000 pounds of food and equipment acquired in the United States, Nepalese expedition permit fees, porter and guide wages, and 4,000 pounds of food and supplies purchased in Nepal. It took a caravan of 230 people carrying 12,000 pounds of supplies—an average 66 pound load—three weeks to walk from Pokhara to Annapurna base camp (Blum 1980:42–59).

Expedition expenses are also relative to the region—by way of contrast, an expedition to Denali, Alaska has comparatively few costs, other than travel, personal gear, and food. A highway leads directly to Denali National park. Skiplane service places climbers and their gear on Kahiltna Glacier on the west buttress of Denali, a strategy that reduces transportation time and costs to a mountain base camp.

For many years being a professional mountaineer meant supporting future expeditions by selling the story of recent experiences. More recently, however, corporate sponsorship and product endorsements have come to play central roles in providing equipment and food, or in overall expedition sponsorship, and some climbers have been quite successful with these methods. Climber Reinhold Messner, author of over two dozen mountaineering books, commands by some estimates, an annual income of \$1 million from corporate sponsors (Gabriel 1991:38).

British climber Adrian Crane has also had some success in garnering corporate sponsorship, as his recent series of ads for "Hi-Tec" boot manufacturer illustrates. Crane was "challenged" by Hi-Tec to climb the highest peak in every state in the United States, and to do it faster than anyone had ever done before. To quote from their advertisement:

Whitney. Katahdin. Borah. Rainer. Creatures and crevices better left undisturbed. Mud. Floods. Rocks and Storms. An unprecedented challenge. An unparalleled performance. Not to mention an unparalleled product . . .

As a professional climber Crane had achieved a remarkable feat—climbing 50 peaks in just 101 days: summiting a mountain every other day. His laurels rested, of course, on the subsidies of his sponsor who covered the costs of air travel, helicopter transport, food and equipment, not to mention Crane's boots. Underwriting the alpine adventures of climbers like Crane provides the manufacturer with a comprehensive high visibility advertising program. All publicity surrounding the event incorporates the product name, in this case the "Hi-Tec 50

Peaks." Subsequent advertisements are built around the photos and journal entries kept by the climber (*Backpacker* 1995:35).

This example illustrates one of the many strategies being employed by professional climbers to fund their alpine adventures. It also illustrates a significant change in the mountaineering literature. Accounts once written for a public audience in the hopes of documenting routes and explaining away a publicly perceived madness (the risk of it all), are now written for a corporate audience, in the hopes that a few graphic sentences can make good advertising "copy."

The above example aside, for most mountaineers corporate support is increasingly difficult to find, as noted by the late Alan Rouse: "The national media and consequently the national companies are unlikely to have any interest in your project unless you have a curious angle like attempting to take a dog to the summit or performing some circus-like stunt which might be eligible for the Guinness Book of Records" (1987:212). An account of the 1990 Mount Everest season illustrates the truth of the above statement:

The mountain has been climbed so often in so many ways that aspirants now conjure up bizarre twists to attract financial backing and news coverage. Enter Turbo expedition, an attempt to go from a Paris chamber depressurized to 27,000 feet to the summit as fast as possible. Meet the Parapente family, a father and son who planned to jump off the summit together on a parachute. There was an attempt by a one-legged man. Ten French women on different expeditions were vying to be the first from their country to climb Everest . . . And then there was Marc Batard, the famed Frenchman who had already reduced Everest to a racetrack, climbing the whole thing in twenty-four hours. He returned in 1990 with two modest goals: to sleep on the summit, and to climb two 8000 meter peaks in one day. His promotional posters plastered every tea house on the approach march (Williams 1991:8).

What are the costs of structuring mountaineering objectives around the economic needs of a for-profit sponsor? For many climbers, increased reliance on corporate sponsors has undermined the meaning of the climbing experience as objectives are defined and publicized by sponsors, and the experience is commodified. For example, British climber Chris Bonington argues that "should expeditions become sponsor-driven with the sponsor deciding upon the style of the expedition and even on the tactics to be employed, this could only lead to an erosion of mountaineering values" (1990:14). Climber Mo Antoine describes sponsor reaction when his Andean summit attempt was halted: "The expedition had been financed by a provincial newspaper group which was very upset. They wanted either the summit or a death. Anything in between was a failure as far as they were concerned" (Alvarez 1988:40).

The increasing competition for and distaste with corporate sponsorship has led many mountaineers to explore alternative sources of support. According to a 1990 season expedition report published in *Mountain* (1991:9), a team of Swiss climbers on the Nepalese peak Dhaulagiri 1 (8,167 meters) sold their route (with its fixed ropes) to subsequent

Italian, Greek, and Czechoslovak climbing teams, transforming the dangers of being the first of several teams up the mountain, to an economic opportunity. In fall 1992, a Katmandu trekking agency established and maintained the dangerous route across Mount Everest's Khumbu Icefall, charging \$20,000 for this service. The fee was paid by the climbing teams at a rate of over \$200 per foreigner (Hawley 1993:54-55).

A more common strategy employed by many professional mountaineers is the selling of expertise, with climbers capitalizing on the growth of adventure tourism, and as a result, entering the tourism business. For example, *Mountain* (137:9) magazine expedition reports for the 1990 season record the efforts of father-son climbing team Bertrand and Jean-Noel Roche. Their summit earned 17-year-old Jean-Noel a place in the record books as the youngest climber to stand atop Mount Everest. On page two of the same magazine, a small ad reads: "Go Climb Everest: Two French guides, Jean-Noel and Denis Pivot, reached the summit of Everest last fall. They invite you to join an international guided party which will attempt Everest via the normal route (South col.) from August 17 to October 20th 1991. Basic Price per person: \$17,000" (1991). The 1992 Mt. Everest season saw 32 climbers trudge up the South Col route to the summit in one day. Six of the climbers who summited were guided clients who paid at least \$35,000 each for their chance to "bag" Everest (Howells 1992).

Other climbers have linked their expeditions to first-world based travel agencies and climbing clubs, who organize treks to their climbing base camps. In some cases, trekkers pay for the privilege of working as high-altitude porters, carrying loads between camps on the mountain. In 1989, Alpine Ascents International advertised in *Outside* magazine for summit team members: "join an actual summit attempt. Join a group of professional climbers on the North Face of Everest in Spring 1990. Qualified applicants considered full members" (1989). Explorations, a Boulder (Colorado) company, advertises 1991 season Everest and K2 basecamp treks. Out There Trekking, of Berkeley (California) advertises similar base camp treks as well as guided expeditions to four 6,000+ Nepalese peaks during 1991 and 1992. In these cases, the climbing objective is defined by the mountaineer, peak permits are acquired (for Nepalese peaks over 6,000 meters) and tourist dollars are used to support that effort. Peak permits for Mt. Everest in 1992 cost \$8,000 per party. In fall 1993, peak permits increased sharply to some \$50,000 per 5-member team, plus \$10,000 for each additional team member (with a \$70,000 fee ceiling).

Climbers also work as professional guides for first-world based adventure travel agencies, organizing their treks and climbs on tourist demand. Some find employment in a growing number of climbing schools, an endeavor that provides high altitude training time while transforming recreational interests into a way of life. Reinhold Messner, for example, owns and sometimes teaches at his mountaineering school in the Dolomites. A few mountaineers have become major tourism entrepreneurs, as is the case with the owners of Ecosummer, a Vancouver-based adventure travel company who built a business out of their Canadian alpine and arctic experiences.

Most mountaineers utilize diverse strategies to support their climbing interests. Canadian climber Dan Culver owned and operated Blue Heron Adventure Experiences, providing Outward Bound-style motivational rock climbing seminars to companies like Canadian Tire, whose managers learned the technical and problem-solving skills of rock climbing. Culver also owned and operated a white-water rafting and an adventure cruise business. His 1990 ascent of Mount Everest was part of a joint US/Canadian climbing effort. Culver and four other professional climbers acted as guides for five US executives whose adventure travel fees covered the expedition expenses (Bell 1990). Similar strategies allowed Culver to return to the Himalayas in 1993, again as part of a joint Canadian/American team whose expenses were funded in part by adventure travel fees. Culver lost his life on the descent from the summit of K-2 in Pakistan.

In short, more and more mountaineers are able to sustain their lifestyle as professionals by participating in an alpine ecotourism industry, an industry which, for various reasons, is undergoing rapid expansion. The traditional methods of publishing expedition accounts sustains the mountaineering community in producing and reproducing its lore and introducing newer generations to the addictive, adrenalin-laden sport of mountaineering. Newer methods of garnering economic support also serve to create an ever broader pool of potential participants. Strategies such as corporate sponsorship and subsequent advertising campaigns bombard the public with images of mountains and stimulate a taste for exotic mountaineering experiences. Images provided by climbers to their corporate sponsors are used to sell outdoor gear, clothing and equipment, trucks, bikes, campervans, watches, cameras, film, transportation and other services, credit cards, batteries, and even magazines. (*Buzzworm's* March/April 1991 issue has a cover photo of three climbers in the foreground of a Himalaya Peak, but there is no article related to that photo in the contents of that issue.)

Corporate sponsorship has shaped mountain experiences, and even the fantasy of a mountain experience, in order to sell commodities to a consuming culture. People respond with their pocketbook and with their feet: the result of these strategies for defining and sustaining a professional mountaineering career is that many more well-equipped, stylishly dressed holiday consumers are traveling to mountain regions. They are sent there by an ever-growing legion of adventure travel companies who advertise their services in "Adventure Travel" magazines and guides such as *Just Go!* and *Outside* (Frommer 1991; Holing 1991). They arrive carrying clothing and equipment purchased at outdoor shops staffed by adventure enthusiasts; and they are guided through their mountain adventure by mountaineers turned tour guides.

Mountaineering as a Tourism Category

Smith, in her touristic typology, places mountaineers in the category of explorers who "quest for discovery and new knowledge" and "by definition. . . are not tourists and traditionally are almost akin to

anthropologists living as active participant-observers among 'their' people" (1989:11-12). A close reading of the climbing literature substantiates this representation of mountaineers as participant/observers: travelers who develop long-term relationships with "their" people, and who record their experiences in minute, ethnographic detail. Smith's conceptualization, however, fails to consider the mountaineer from the host perspective: as an outsider whose presence instigates complex social, cultural, economic, and environmental repercussions. A Himalayan village priest (or *gomchen*) tells climber Bruce Bunting: "I always pray to the local deities for snow when you outsiders come to our valley, so you will go away. You use all our firewood and show little respect for our traditions" (Smith 1991:82). Climbers themselves, in confronting the impacts of their presence have redefined their identity from traveler to tourist:

As a mountaineer, I have always felt I was shunning the tourist haunts and paying homage to mountains while shivering on their sides, cupping my hands and drinking deeply from glacial streams. Here in crowded Khumbu, however, it comes as a revelation that I am just another one among hundreds of people who will subtly impact both culture and environment. Yes, I am a tourist. Would the summits become sacred again if the tourists vanished? (Waterman 1991:22-23).

Like other categories of tourists, mountaineers introduce and reproduce complex socioenvironmental changes. Unlike many other tourist categories, however, they are active participants (rather than passive recipients) in creating and reproducing an alpine ecotourism industry, as the preceding discussion of economic strategies demonstrates, and as the following quote by Sir Edmund Hillary illustrates:

I first visited Mount Everest in 1951 as a member of Eric Shipton's British Reconnaissance Expedition. Our objective was to reconnoiter a feasible route to the summit up the south slope of the mountain. . . . Almost 30 years later I repeated this very same journey. The valley of the Dudh Kost river was still beautiful, but the forest was woefully thinned by the axes and saws of Sherpas cutting timber for buildings. The trees below Namache Bazaar were scarred by the *kukhris* (heavy knives) of Nepalese porters taking branches and bark for fuel. The forests around Thyangboche had lost many of their mighty trees, and the Pangboche area was almost bare. Up the Khumbu Glacier Valley there was hardly a juniper to be seen.

What had happened to produce such a change? Our conquest of Everest brought mountaineers of many nations to attempt the top of the world. Fuel for their expeditions rapidly exhausted supplies of the widespread juniper—but at first the forests themselves were left untouched.

In a way, I was inadvertently responsible for the subsequent damage to the forests. In the early sixties I made an effort to assist my friends the sherpas by building schools, hospitals, bridges and water pipelines. To help in the transport of building materials, my group constructed an airfield at Lukla. But the airfield had an unexpected effect—it gave much easier access to the Everest area, and increasing

numbers of trekkers and tourists accelerated the demand for fuel (Hillary 1982:698,702).

Hillary's recollections illustrate several other significant features of the mountaineering tourist community. Mountaineers typically develop long-term relationships with regions and peoples (Adams 1992; Fisher 1990). Complex motivations structure their presence and activities—motivations that are distinctly articulated as spiritual, psychological, and sociocultural reasons for being there (motivation is a dominant theme in mountaineering literature, and is well-documented and analyzed in Mitchell 1983, and Bernbaum 1990). Unlike other tourist categories, mountaineers have a lengthy history as a distinct cultural community complete with its own technical language, history, organized social structures, and organized institutional structures. Most nations have a mountaineering society that records the achievements of its members, establishes guidelines for climbing technique and climber behavior, and through the various climbing journals, provides “a forum in which the values of the climbing community are developed and reinforced” (Mitchell 1983:100). Many national and international mountaineering associations and commercial trekking agencies have adopted codes of ethics that typically emphasize soft-path travel in, rather than consumption of, mountain regions.

In essence, the mountaineering community represents that which ecotourism is striving for: they are a group of socially aware, self-reflective travelers who record and analyze the meaning of their experience, and the impacts of their presence. This self-reflective nature has played a critical role in the emerging alpine ecotourism industry, an industry that operates with multiple institutional structures that monitor and sanction behavior, and allow mountaineers to actively structure the economic and social conditions of their presence. Mountaineers, it is argued, are ecotourists. They are also employers and employees in an alpine ecotourism industry. The question remains: does the creation of a socially-aware and proactive group of travelers and industry providers result in structural conditions that foster “sustainable” ecotourism?

SOCIOENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION

A growing body of social science literature documents the adverse environmental, social, and cultural impacts of travelers in the mountain regions (Adams 1992; Brugger 1984; Fisher 1990; Goering 1990; Kariel and Draper 1992; Ives and Messerli 1989; Norberg-Hodge 1992; Price 1990; Singh 1989). Awareness and concern are similarly expressed in the mountaineering literature that recognizes commodification-induced impacts on the sport of mountaineering, as well as host mountain peoples and their environs. Inward concern is tied to the social, cultural, and physical impacts of growing numbers and the increased commercialization of mountaineering. Norwegian climbers, for example, in an effort to restore commitment and simplify human/nature interactions advocate a climbing style called “friluftsliv”: “We have only natural fiber equipment—we have no nylon clothing, and very little steel or aluminum. We want to get away from the techno-

culture, and use equipment that is the least harmful to nature and at the same time durable and suitable to our purpose. The gap between man and nature is getting wider, and we want a reunion" (Boardman 1988:183). A similar desire to restore integrity in mountaineering is found in Reinhold Messner's proposal to establish a "white wilderness" in the Antarctic: places without any traces of humankind where an adventurous soul might be left totally alone with only the environment for companionship. He urges the erasing of mapped features, reinstating blank spots on the maps, and suggests that "just knowing such places exist is essential to the human soul, even if they are never visited" (Harlin 1990:8). As alpine ecotourism continues to grow, and more mountaineers develop structural ties to the trekking and guided expedition industry, some are concerned that the pool of experienced amateur clients will be exhausted. Thus, guides will be forced to take on lesser qualified clientele and the potential for increased rates of accident and fatality will rise (Howells 1992).

Concerns about the outward impacts of growth and change in mountaineering typically involve issues of garbage, sanitation, and deforestation. Everescalating numbers of alpine ecotourists encounter "the weathered debris of previous expeditions: rusted cans, spent fuel bottles, cracked and swollen batteries, toilet paper, and remnants of tent fabric . . . [and] the stench of human feces" (Williams 1991). Adverse consequences of high-altitude dumps include the pollution of water supplies: "We had all suffered from Giardia, a form of dysentery, at Camp 1, almost certainly because the snow from which our water was melted was polluted from the latrines of earlier expeditions" (Bonington 1986:256).

The "yellow snow" syndrome is a common problem on the more popular climbing destinations. Because of steep terrain, base camp sites and routes up the mountain are few and well-established. Mountaineer and photographer Galen Rowell included an eloquent black and white photo in his *National Geographic* account of an American expedition to K2 entitled "Turd Field, Paiyu" about which he wrote:

"The land itself was suffering. At each place where our 600 porters had stopped for the night and gathered firewood, the hillsides looked as if a swarm of giant locusts had passed through. By government regulation every expedition camped at exactly the same sites. On our approach, a three day porter strike meant 1800 turds. On our return march we smelled both Liliwa and Paiyu before we reached them" (Rowell 1986:297).

The typical response to these issues has been the call for a softer-path into and up the mountain. Some argue the need to change ascent tactics, to abandon wasteful "siege" style approach for rapid or solo attempt. Others have organized "green climbs" like the "Aseo del Aconcagua" expedition in 1985, and the "Free K2" Earth Day 1990 expedition. These expeditions cleared up rubbish and removed fixed ropes and abandoned camps. This soft-path/green climb philosophy is increasingly reflected in government policy, tourist provider guidelines, and travelers guides—thanks to the articulation of codes of ethics by national and international mountaineering associations. Participants

at the Himalayan Adventure Trust Conference, for example, discussed the environmental and social consequences of their mountain expeditions. They recommended that all non-biodegradable materials be carried out; smaller groups be encouraged; kerosene depots be organized on key routes; local school children be educated on environmental issues; local people be employed in clean-up projects; differential fees for peak/offpeak seasons be introduced; new areas be opened up to relieve pressure on over-used areas; tour operators give environmental briefing sessions to all groups (*Mountain* 1990:9–10). A similar statement emerged from the 2nd International Mountain Adventure 2000 Conference held November 1991 in Florence, Italy (*Summit* 1992:8).

Less common has been the recognition of environmental imperialism—the imposition of western notions of environmental value and integrity that distract from local notions of environmental crisis. An editorial in the Spring 1992 issue of *Summit*, and a subsequent letter in the Fall 1992 issue illustrates: In the former, mountaineer Al Read (1992) formulates a plea for soft-path trekking, including imposition of limits to the number of climbers in various regions (similar to Bhutan's limited entry system) and economic incentives to ensure long-term solutions to environmental problems (defined as litter, water quality, and deforestation). Read argues for a redefinition of success in mountaineering with the goal of minimum impact as opposed to the traditional focus on peak bagging. Broughton Coburn (a mountaineer/trekking guide/ and former-peace corps worker among other things) responds in a later issue with questions about the ability of ecotourism, as enunciated in Read's article, to truly meet local needs (1992:91). Coburn writes that "the international focus on garbage along trekking trails is an unfortunate distraction from fundamental environmental issues . . . litter is an aesthetic problem, not ecological. . . . The real issues are the status of nutrition, health, and drinking water, as well as deteriorating forests and pasture land. . . ." Pastureland, for example, in the case of Langtang Valley, is overgrazed to produce Yak cheese sold exclusively to tourists in the Kathmandu market. Coburn also remarks on the "green climbs" organized to collect and remove accumulated litter. From the local perspective, litter, he suggests, is a sign of socioeconomic status, a consumer indicator. The use of helicopters to remove litter (efforts that are presented in the name of helping local people) is perceived by resource poor villagers as a "bizarre insanity of wealth." More direct forms of assistance might be the use of helicopters to transport the sick or injured, or the use of a \$5,000 plus helicopter fee in addressing urgent problems of deforestation and degradation.

Long-term involvement with mountain communities has allowed many mountaineers to document the process of change, and comment on the complex influences that tourism presents society, culture, and economy. Similar socioeconomic sensitivity is found in Galen Rowell's description of the impacts of building the Everest View Hotel:

For fifty dollars a day rich tourists could sit behind picture windows at 13,000 feet elevation and sip martinis at the bar, as isolated from the mountains as if they were seeing the Himalaya in a theater. Yet

the hotel itself had a major effect on the Sherpa way of life. Airplanes coming in and going out droned into the great silence they once had. Water for cooking and cleaning had to be carried by porters from the base of the hill. The labor was done by Sherpas, and the pay contributed to the monetary inflation that had begun before the hotel was proposed. Unskilled laborers were paid ten rupees a day (eighty cents) to work on the hotel. A farm worker—drawing a plow all day—had been paid two rupees plus meals a dozen years before. Sherpas who worked on the hotel or for tourism elsewhere had to match the ten rupees to get their own fields plowed, which inflated the cost of the food they grew. By degrees, the commodities they had to buy rose to the new price level. Soon the porter or hotel laborer could buy no more with ten rupees than the field worker used to buy with two- and the field workers had been given their meals. With outside labor being brought in to work the fields while many residents worked elsewhere, the region's accustomed production of food was being distributed to feed more mouths. The new hotel was causing a net loss of buying power for most of the villagers, especially for those who had counted on the ten rupees a day they made from trekking as extra money, above their normal income (1980:60).

The process of confronting the mountaineer role for instigating social fragmentation and environmental degradation has led to a critical evaluation of climbing motivation. Richard Nelson's writings illustrate: "My hope is to acclaim the rewards of exploring the place in which a person lives rather than searching afar, of becoming fully involved with the near at hand, and nurturing a deeper relationship with home" (1990:91). Nelson suggests that the compulsion to summit peak after peak reflects significantly on the cultural voids. Comments by Jeremy Schmidt reflect, perhaps, a more typical view: "the real adventure comes from attitude. The ultimate adventurer would be able to find adventure without traveling. A Buddhist lama would tell me I could experience the whole universe without leaving my room, but personally I'd rather go places" (Howe 1992).

CONCLUSIONS

Mountaineers are caught in a trap of their own making. To feed their own compulsion to climb, mountaineers have initiated and participated in various endeavors that attract an ever-growing number of people to mountain regions. Climbing motivations have become increasingly complex, with economic concerns playing a more central role. This has led to a loss of meaning and value in the experience as mountaineers confront at each step in their travels the adverse impacts of their presence. The remarks reprinted here indicate an acute awareness of the contradictions in their lives: their mountain trek and summit struggles represent an ultimate challenge and respect for the "wildness" of nature; yet as a consequence of their presence, they transform, tame, and degrade "nature." This quandary is not unique. What is unique, is the commitment to mitigate their presence and to minimize future impacts: they involve themselves as active, rather than passive, participants in structuring mutually beneficial relationships with mountains and mountain peoples. The degree to which they are suc-

cessful in achieving mutually beneficial relationships is debatable (Adams 1992; Fisher 1990; Kariel and Draper 1992).

It has been argued that the socioenvironmental problems of hosting tourism, such as those noted here by mountaineers, are tied to global processes of development and acculturation (Smith 1989). It also can be argued that these problems are indicative of the sorts of changes peculiar to tourism. Under tourism, resources are redefined and valued differentially, and, control over access and use changes considerably (Johnston 1992). The structural form of tourist development parallels preexisting socioeconomic structure with tourism typically reinforcing existing power relations. Thus, local participation, a critical element in alternative tourism strategies, does not necessarily mean participation for the social collective good; and some have argued that tourism, like capitalism, has within it the seeds of its own destruction (Crick 1989). Certainly, in the case of ecotourism, "success" brings about decline as too many travelers threaten the very existence most ecotravelers seek (Johnston 1990; Kutay 1991).

Gonsalves (1991), in his third world critique of alternative tourism, suggests that the responsible/alternative/soft-path tourism development model does not offer, as advocates imply, substantial structural solutions to the conservation and development dilemma. Responsible/alternative/soft-path tourism represents technological intervention: strategies that allow adjustments in social activity, environmental impact, and economic involvement. But these adjustments, while arguably minimizing the adverse impacts of tourism endeavors, do not necessarily restructure contemporary social inequities.

This case of mountaineer-construction and reproduction of an alpine ecotourism illustrates Gonsalves' argument. Mountaineering values and actions foster an integrated conservation and development context where entrepreneurs, host communities, and tourists all consciously strive to create sustainable experiences. Strategies employed (codes of conduct, soft-path approaches) offer the structural opportunity to adjust, though not transform, their relationships with each other and the environment. Adjustments have brought about an increased reliance on economic motivations, and this has had consequences in meaning, behavior, and experience for mountaineers as well as host communities. The fundamental relationship that has been structured is one where mountaineers—as ecotourists and their providers—need, shape, and with their growing numbers, consume the wild, untamed nature of mountains. As has been demonstrated elsewhere (Adams 1992; Fisher 1990; Kariel and Draper 1992), host communities that build strong ties to alpine ecotourism also struggle with this contradictory nature of ecotourism, and with their dependencies on external markets, marketing, travel and trekking agencies, and the general health of the global economy. In cases where success brings too many people, the setting deteriorates, paths become well-worn, and markets shift. Host communities are left with a declining tourism economy, while newly "discovered" settings are visited and consumed.

In short, ecotourism encourages guests (including industry providers) to be proactive: social, economic and environmental dialogue and

partnership ease the socioenvironmental pains of hosting tourism. However, the fundamental dependency relations that structure tourism still exist. With regard to the initial question of whether ecotourism represents a sustainable development tool, "sustainable"—with its environmental quality/social justice connotations—is a distracting, and arguably, unobtainable notion. Perhaps what is needed is a more realistic articulation of what ecotourism can and cannot offer hosts and guests. □ □

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