

STATEMENT BY A GROUP OF MOUNTAIN WILDERNESS GUARANTORS

We are fully aware that our considerations will prompt little or no practical consequences – at least within a short lapse of time – but we still feel it is our moral duty to convey them to the mountaineering community world-wide, to the mountain associations, to the specialized press, to the governments of mountainous nations on all continents and particularly in Asia. As a matter of fact, the evolution of the mountaineering practice is taking deteriorating aspects mainly in the Asian area, gradually setting aside ever more the ethic imperatives and the responsible attitude towards the environment that are the backbone of this activity we all believe in. Lacking such responsibilities and imperatives, mountaineering is partially deprived of its reason for existing, of its potentiality of shaping the mind, of the wealth of its meanings.

The first serious problem concerns rescue operations. It must be absolutely clear that anybody who considers himself a mountaineer must be willing to give up reaching his goal, whatever important it seems to be to him, for the purpose of tempting to save the life of any other mountaineer being in danger, quite apart from his judgement on the technical and physical conditions or the dangerous light-heartedness of the person in trouble.

On the other hand, the tendency to allow a rescue operation to become a mediatic event should be definitely rejected, as it often sends not only to the broad public but also to fans a distorted image of the practice of mountaineering. This is particularly true when the operations are organized in very distant countries and reveal to be of no help to the persons in need. Even the best rescue operator, being suddenly dropped at the foot of any Himalayan peak without an adequate acclimatization period, will not be able to give efficient assistance.

Mountaineers facing in alpine style the highest peaks of the Asian ranges without arranging their own support team, are fully aware of the choice they have made, which includes the acceptance of a high level of risk, and they know perfectly well that they can rely only on their own strength and ability in case of an accident. It may be repeated: this does not dispense other groups of well acclimatized mountaineers, who happen to be close by, from giving assistance as rapidly as possible, even if such operations should jeopardize their own schedule.

Last summer's tragedy has once again set in the limelight the problem of the use and abuse of fixed ropes. Therefore, it is advisable to state again some of the concepts and rules of behaviour not all mountaineers trying to climb the Asian giants have yet interiorised. Using fixed ropes to expedite transport to upper camps is a widely accepted practice, which, as such, should not be criticized. But the attitude of not removing fixed ropes at the end of an expedition for lack of time or energy to do so, must be strongly rejected. All traces of the expeditions' passage should be completely cancelled. Leaving fixed ropes on the mountains could be tolerated exceptionally only in case of a severe change of weather conditions that may put at risk the lives of the climbers. In a similar case the expedition should be compelled to inform UIAA and local authorities accordingly. Fixed ropes should not be left "in heritage" to following expeditions, not even at the request of the latter. We are convinced that the use of ropes fixed by a previous group diminishes the importance and value of the victory, to the extent that the international community of mountaineers and the UIAA offices concerned should not accept such feats as valid. This is even more so, when the hard and risky work of setting up ropes is carried out by sherpa teams hired by commercial expeditions.

The above considerations lead us to the logical consequence that it would be wise to reach a well balanced limitation of the number of expeditions challenging the eight-thousanders. We are not so naïve or misinformed not to fully realize that our point of view is close to utopia. In spite of this awareness we feel we have the moral duty to stimulate the international community of mountaineers to give thorough consideration to the way we think some dignity to mountaineering in the Himalayas could be restored. Although the present evolution of mountaineering on the high Himalayan peaks is such that it is – hélas! (at least for the time being) - unrealistic to avoid allowing more than one expedition at the time on one climbing route, we stress the necessity of a more severe and more selective allotment of permits. Obviously, a similar regulation would arouse strong protests from many quarters, unless at the same time efficient and credible alternative rules are set up, thus avoiding to hit the local people who draw financial profit exactly from the uncontrolled number of foreign visitors. The rush on the eight-thousanders should be discouraged both by initiatives that will de-mystify the fame of the highest peaks, lowering at the same time the appeal of commercial expeditions, and by acting on royalties: raising them for the most required itineraries and cutting them sharply for the so-called minor peaks. Furthermore, for the above mentioned reasons mountaineering associations should become active at all levels, in order to obtain a real

re-qualification of local Liaison Officers, make their employment compulsory everywhere, give them a clear definition of their tasks and a more efficient control on the foreign expeditions' environmental behaviour. It may be remembered that some years ago the theoretical and practical training courses held by Mountain Wilderness in Pakistan and India served that particular purpose and deserved some success.

During the last few years it has been shown clearly that mountaineers in good physical shape and with an adequate psychological mind are able to reach peaks of over 8000 metres without using oxygen. Maybe the time is ripe to establish two different categories of climbers, granting the first authentic ascent to those who have been able to accomplish it with natural means only, and without oxygen bottles. It must be remembered that usually the empty bottles are abandoned along the route, giving a strong blow to the environment.

We sincerely hope that UIAA, the national alpine associations, the specialized press and the authorities of the nations involved will begin a thorough debate on the above topics. The fate of mountaineering depends on a stricter and widely shared re-definition.

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