

## Mountains

by Richard Sidaway

Here's a look at three popular mountain sports and some serious environmental problems facing mountains and the people who live on them.

### Snowboarding

Thankfully, 'the winterstick' and 'the snurfer' never caught on as names for the snowboard, or this sport might not have attracted such a cult following. Initially looked down upon by skiers and ski resorts, snowboarding has rapidly increased in popularity and is starting to replace skiing as the top alpine sport. Snowboarding debuted at the 1998 Nagano Olympics, but despite 'selling out' to the mainstream, the sport retains the spirit of alternative culture.

### BASE Jumping

Extreme with a capital X, BASE jumpers don't necessarily limit themselves to jumping off mountains. These thrill seekers will jump off just about anything. The name is an acronym for Building Antennae Span Earth, and refers to the fixed objects from which jumps are usually made. In search of the ultimate adrenaline rush, a BASE jumper will throw himself off a structure or cliff face, hurtle downwards at speeds of up to 60 mph and open a small parachute at the last possible moment. Jumpers have tried anything from hilltop monasteries in Greece, to fjords in Norway and the Grand Canyon in the USA.

### Rock Climbing

There are many climbing techniques, but 'Solo' is seen as the purest form. Here the climber has no ropes or safety equipment and is free to move as he or she pleases up the face of the mountain. It's the most exciting method, but obviously the most dangerous and only for highly experienced climbers. For the truly adventurous, 'Ice Climbing' adds an extra level of excitement and an extra level of risk. The Alps, Himalayas and Rockies are the mountain ranges of choice for serious climbers.

Mountain regions are not just playgrounds for the richer citizens on the planet, however. The disappearing snows of Mount Kilimanjaro are a worrying sign that nowhere is safe from the adverse effects of human actions. The United Nations has identified three main areas that need to be addressed to ensure the future safety of the world's mountains. These are: the protection of mountain ecosystems, the encouragement of peace and stability in mountain regions, and assistance for mountain people to maintain their ways of life

### Ecosystems

From the bustling cities of India to the farmlands of California, more than half the world's population is dependent on mountains for their fresh water supply. Global warming, deforestation, mining and heavy farming seriously damage fragile mountain ecosystems and put vital fresh water sources at risk.

### Peace and Stability

Mountain regions host a large proportion of the world's wars. From Afghanistan to the Balkans and the Andes to many parts of Africa, territorial and drug related conflicts have devastating effects on the local environment and the lives of the local people. Fighting makes essential tasks such as farming impossible. Land mines make large areas of potential farming ground unusable. Also schools, roads, bridges and other important infrastructure are left in ruins.

### Mountain People

Mountain people are among the poorest, least represented groups on the earth. They face many hardships and each day can be, 'a test of survival'. Damage to mountain ecosystems worsens their situation and leaves them even more vulnerable to disease and 'natural' disasters such as floods and landslides. It's been recommended that forest revenue should be reinvested in mountain communities and the people living there should be given a stronger political voice. Their fate is in many ways directly connected with that of people living at sea level.

There is an old motto for visitors to the countryside which advises them to leave nothing but footprints. It is still as relevant today as it always was. Unfortunately, the size of our footprints seems to be getting larger.

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