Perhaps Mountains should *not* be Climbed?

MIKE BURNS

Why climb mountains? The question is older than mountaineering itself and there are many possible answers to it, all arising from the fact that mountaineering is an addictive pastime which can be enjoyed in many different ways. This article, however, aims to show why mountains should *not* be climbed!

Mountains, especially high mountains, are among the few natural habitats left. They are affected by atmospheric pollution, such as acid rain or radiation, but compared with other environments they remain relatively untouched. Unlike many habitats, neither the living nor the non-living parts of mountains need active protection, except from people like ourselves. At best our presence has only a minimal effect upon the mountain environment, but any effect we do have will be an alteration to one of the few untouched natural habitats left.

Habitat damage may be minimal on a snow-capped peak, but often crampons scrape across rock which may be supporting lichen and moss plants, or heavy boots kick off a snowy foothold, taking with them some soil which is the home of plants and animals. We no longer like to place pitons if we can slot in a nut, but this sensible attitude to conservation may be prompted more by the wish to keep routes looking tidy for our own enjoyment than out of respect for the mountain itself. Mountains have survived intact because they are inaccessible and can only be tackled safely by properly equipped people such as ourselves. Alpine plants already have difficulty in surviving on their steep, unstable and climatically extreme habitats, and our feet are yet another factor which can do them nothing but harm.

The harmful effects of deforestation, which can only be worsened by trekking and mountaineering, are obvious to everyone. But dramatic, wide-scale deforestation for economic gain may, in the long run, be better than the slow erosion of forests, if it leads to more sensible forestry strategies in the future.

Cultural damage, or at least alteration, has been another adverse consequence of mountaineering on distant ranges. We, as mountaineers, have the power to influence endemic populations and their economies, although I suspect that the people of Nepal, for instance, would not complain of cultural change if it benefited their economy.

We consume a great deal of fossil fuel when we travel to distant mountains or even drive to the nearest crag, but perhaps we would use up just as

much irreplaceable fuel and generate just as much atmospheric carbon dioxide whatever pastime we chose.

It is ironic that environmental awareness and concern have been unprecedented in the last 20 years, but so too has the rate of destruction. The Alpine Club promotes further damage by encouraging us to climb and by publishing a journal full of excellent articles and photographs which fire our imagination and enthusiasm. Our most knowledgeable and experienced members have probably done the most damage. The person who simply reads or talks about climbing does least disservice to the environment.

What therefore do I think we should do to help protect the mountain environment? Give up mountaineering, I suspect! Personally I cannot resist mountaineering and I'm a knowing sinner. At the same time, I know that there's a price to pay in terms of my over-burdened conscience.