The Environment in 1991

JOHANNA MERZ

One hundred years from now: those who come
after us. For whom our lives are showing
the way. Will they think kindly of us?
Will they remember us with a kind word?
I wish to God I could think so . . .

Sometimes we cut wood out of necessity,
but why be wanton? Why?
Our forests fall before the axe.
Billions of trees. All perishing.
The homes of birds and beasts
being laid waste. The level of
the rivers falls, and they dry up.
Our climate is ruined. And sublime
landscapes disappear, never to return.

What must Man be, to destroy what he
never can create? God has given Man
reason and power of thought, so that he
may improve his lot. And what have we
used these powers for but waste?[1]

Anton Chekhov
(1860 – 1904)

The 1989 Report on the future role of the Alpine Club invited the Editor of the *Alpine Journal* to commission articles 'grouped round the great issues of the day'. One of the most important issues today is the Environment, which is the theme I have chosen for this year's Journal. A group of articles examines different aspects as they concern mountaineers, and my editorial recalls some of the more influential events of 1991.

The Gulf War and its aftermath

The beginning of the year was dominated by the Gulf War and the environmental disasters associated with it: over six million barrels of oil were released into the waters of the Gulf, threatening its fragile ecosystem; in Kuwait more than 700 oil wells were set on fire; water supplies in Baghdad were

contaminated as a result of the aerial bombardment; millions of Iraqis and Kurds were subjected to malnutrition and disease.

By the end of March there were reports that snow, blackened by pollution from the burning oilfields, had fallen on the slopes of the Himalaya more than 2000 miles away. A vast plume of pollution rose as high as 5000m on a drift eastwards across Iran, Afghanistan and northern Pakistan. It was feared that black soot would affect the world climate system and that the Asian monsoon would fail. It was even feared that the smoke from the oil fires might rise high enough to enter and be trapped in the stratosphere; from there it could circulate around the globe, acting as a dust shield and causing worldwide cooling. Although disasters on this scale did not take place, these events showed how an occurrence in one part of the world can influence conditions elsewhere. The Gulf War and its aftermath provided dramatic illustration of the environmental dangers facing the world.

Threats to the mountain environment

Throughout the year the relentless destruction of forests in many parts of the world caused a chain of ecological damage. In Nepal, hillsides were still being cleared of trees to provide fuel for trekkers and climbers; topsoil that is washed away from the hills inevitably seeps into the rivers, causing flooding sometimes on a disastrous scale.

Skiers continue to wear away the mountains of the Alps. The small town of Abbeville in France needed five years to prepare for the 16th Winter Olympic Games in February 1992. A heavy building programme was carried out to accommodate the million visitors who attended the games, and for the men's and women's downhill events special pistes were made, by cutting down and burning large swathes of forest, followed by massive earth-moving operations. Excessively steep and fast runs were created which will scar the landscape for the foreseeable future. 'Death by tourism and overdevelopment is one of the major threats hanging over the Alps,' wrote Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, whose charity Alp Action, established in 1990, is working towards a comprehensive conservation strategy for the Alps and for the preservation of its mountain lakes, rivers, forests, species and historic monuments.[2]

There was a strong movement in favour of 'cleaning up' the mountains: the UIAA's Mountaineering Commission developed an International Mountain Code to promote good environmental practice in mountaineering. At the same time, the American Alpine Club Conservation Committee recommended that host nations should be encouraged to draw up locally appropriate codes of conduct for visitors and to enforce them, if necessary, by denying future visas or permits, and other sanctions. Sponsors were urged to require their expeditions to explain, in advance, how they would finally dispose of their waste and keep their impact low. Because of environmental damage caused by mountaineers, the Nepalese Government increased its peak fee for Everest, from September 1991, from £4700 to £6000, and threatened to raise it even higher.

In a letter to the Editor, Chris Bonington wrote: 'There should be no need for formal clean-up expeditions. Those of us who visit the mountains must clear the

mess ourselves. If every expedition gave a part of a day to disposing of any mess left in a campsite, we would quickly get the mountains cleared and, in doing so, would show the concern for our environment so necessary if we are to preserve the mountain wilderness areas of the world.'

A very personal perspective, and deep disquiet about the future of mountain wilderness areas, is expressed by Rob Collister in his article 'Trench Warfare on Makalu' in this volume.

The management of Antarctica

By 1991 Antarctica, the last great pristine wilderness, had become a test case for international environmental cooperation. Its unique importance is not only as a place of unspoilt beauty but also as a regulator of the world's climate and a base for scientific research which may be vital to our survival. There are arguments both for and against the exploitation of its mineral riches. 'Nobody wants to see the industrial rape of Antarctica,' wrote Dr Peter Clarkson, Executive Secretary of the Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research, 'but the whole question needs to be seen in a practical perspective.' In October, the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting in Bonn discussed the latest developments in the management of Antarctica; these, and many other aspects, are discussed by Dr Clarkson in his article 'Antarctica: The Lore and the Profits'.

Access and conservation

In the UK, controversy rumbled on between landowners on the one hand and climbers and walkers on the other over problems of access and conservation. A letter to *High* magazine gave robust expression to one side of the argument: 'Landowners have every good reason to restrict access to their land by ramblers, climbers and the like. We hardly have a very good reputation when it comes to respect and care for those places to which we *do* have free access!'

The Labour Party produced a policy document, entitled 'Enjoying the Countryside', backing a campaign by the Ramblers Association to legalise the 'right to roam', but later it was discovered that some of its safety provisions would restrict rather than widen the activities of mountaineers.

Throughout the year a successful campaign for more freedom of access and against erosion from inappropriate developments was waged by Bill Wright, Access and Conservation Officer for the British Mountaineering Council, whose dedication to the welfare of the mountain environment is reflected in his article 'What Kind of Loving?'

The use and abuse of bolts

There was widespread concern about the misuse of bolts, especially on big walls, mountain cliffs and on Alpine routes (see *AJ96*, 179–81). The conflict of interest between so-called 'sport' climbing and 'adventure' climbing became ever more threatening. Traditional routes, it was feared, were in danger of being lost to future generations of climbers. After lengthy consultation, the BMC

issued a policy statement listing crags and areas where bolting was acceptable, while at the same time urging that, wherever possible, traditional methods of protection should be used. Ed Douglas, writing in *Climber*, thought this was an unacceptable compromise – a view shared by many people. When a climber meets a crag, no preliminary adjustments should be made: 'You tie on the rope and just do it.'

The Earth Summit

In mid-October, at the Royal Geographical Society, there was an opportunity for non-governmental organisations to meet and formulate their ideas on sustainable development, with a view to influencing the decision-making at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED or Earth Summit), due to take place in Rio de Janiero in June 1992. Its Secretary General, Maurice Strong, said 'No conference in history has ever faced the need to take such an important range of decisions – decisions that will literally determine the fate of the earth.'

Evidence of global warming

At the very end of 1991 a note of optimism was briefly struck by the Meteorological Office, when the results of a two-year study revealed that previous predictions might have overestimated the potential damage from warmth trapped by pollutants in the atmosphere. A change in the earth's climate would still occur but it might take longer to make itself felt. Leading environmentalists, however, were sceptical, and concerned lest this latest study should undermine progress at the Earth Summit. They hoped that, by the time the conference took place in June 1992, Britain, in common with most other European Community countries, would have entered into a binding commitment to stabilise carbon dioxide emissions at 1990 levels by the year 2000.

There is no doubt that in many mountain regions glaciers are already receding as a result of global warming. On Mount Kenya, for example, there has been a marked change in weather patterns during the last decade. In his article 'Changes on Mount Kenya' Iain Allan draws attention to these and warns of the dangers resulting from the rapid shrinkage of ice masses on the mountain.

Some efforts by individuals

It might be thought that there is little anyone can do, as an individual, to help tackle the exigency of our situation, but a number of people showed that this is not the case. Only a few of them can briefly be mentioned here. Chris Bonington launched the Himalayan Tourist Code on behalf of Tourism Concern. Robert Swan's 'Project Earth' was designed to involve young people directly in the problems of the environment; 'Earthwalks' were organised in Nepal, the Solomon Islands, Poland, East Africa and Alaska. Sir Crispin Tickell has laboured unstintingly, in books, articles and lectures, to increase public

awareness of threats to the environment. Edwin Drummond launched an annual 'Climb for the World' to raise funds for environmental projects worldwide. One of the objects of the fund was to pipe fresh water to the Karakoram village of Askole where pollution had previously caused high rates of childhood mortality. It was from this village that Doug Scott received help after his accident on the 'Ogre' in 1977. To support the project, Doug led a climb of the Eiger and urged that 'outdoor people should look beyond their immediate concerns to help those less fortunate than themselves'.

Alpine Club Policy Statement on Climbing Ethics in the Alps and Greater Ranges

In June 1992 the Committee of the Alpine Club issued a Policy Statement expressing concern about the protection of the mountain environment, its people, its flora and fauna, and the challenges which the mountains present. In particular, the Club:

1 supports the use of protection and belaying techniques which cause minimal damage to the rock; pegs, nuts, slings, etc, which make use of natural rock features are felt to be acceptable, but the use of bolts and the chipping or altering of rock features is to be deprecated;
2 believes that the mountains should be left as they are found; equipment abandoned should be kept to an absolute minimum and no litter should be left on the approach, around huts, at base camp, or on the mountain;
3 encourages small expeditions to the Greater Ranges and minimal impact on the local environment.

Facing the future

There is something obsessional about climbing which perhaps encourages mountaineers to be rather preoccupied and inward-looking; many of us take refuge in the belief that threats to the mountain environment are someone else's responsibility. But we are finding it increasingly difficult to insulate ourselves from these problems. 1991 has shown that we can make a positive contribution towards their solution and help to ensure that those who come after us will indeed 'remember us with a kind word'.

REFERENCES

1 The quotation is from *Uncle Vanya* by Anton Chekhov, adapted by David Mamet. Adaptation copyright © 1988, 1989 by David Mamet. Used by permission of Grove Press, inc.
2 Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, 'Saving the Alps', *Newsweek*, 3 February 1992.