# What Kind of Loving?

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(*Plate 31*)

The tenderness with which the mountaineer treats the objects of his or her affections, the mountains themselves, has for long been the subject of controversy. Well documented tales abound about base camps left strewn with garbage, mountain paths being heavily scarred and eroded, and rock climbers denuding cliffs of their natural plant cover in order to create new climbs. 'Loving our mountains to death' is by no means a new expression.

For the mountaineer, however, it can be a concern which becomes one of acute paranoia, and its importance in terms of the global mountain environment assumes a status of hugely exaggerated proportions. Within a context of mountain areas being subjected to blanket deforestation and afforestation, overgrazing and agricultural intensification, military activity, transport and energy developments, and even the expansion of other recreational activities such as downhill skiing, the environmental effects of mountaineering remain relatively small.

In some North American protected areas mountaineers and hikers are required to pack out their own excrement, while massive natural forests in and around the Rockies are completely felled. Some estate owners in Scotland complain about public access and erosion, while they themselves construct tracks into its wildest areas with bulldozers. Proposals to restrict the visits of mountaineers to Antarctica are promoted, while it still remains subject to the possible development of huge oilfields.

## Mountaineering – a convenience commodity

In spite of these inconsistencies, the growing demand for 'convenience mountaineering' in the 1990s warrants special attention in terms of how it may affect the places where we climb. The term 'convenience mountaineering' may be defined as mountaineering which is readily available without complicated arrangements having to be made beforehand. Someone else will have organised the trek or expedition; the climber or mountaineer can avoid navigation difficulties and having to walk long distances to the foot of the cliff; large racks of nuts, wires, slings and camming devices will not be needed; and even the cold and discomfort of being outdoors can be avoided.

Mountaineering is becoming an increasingly convenient activity to partici-

pate in. For trips to the greater ranges, trekking agencies will sort out the travel arrangements and red tape; in the Alps, helicopters and ski lifts can give easy access to mountain summits and to the foot of alpine climbs; paths are often clearly waymarked and, where physical obstacles get in the way, ladders, handrails and steps are provided; bolts are placed for protection and even paint is used to minimise route-finding difficulties; and finally the mountain is brought to the climber in the form of the artificial indoor climbing wall.

Convenience mountaineering is only one element in the packaging of adventure which has gradually changed the nature of outdoor pursuits to make them available more widely than to just a small minority of individuals who are prepared to sustain considerable physical stress, discomfort and even risk to life in order to participate in their preferred activity. Downhill skiing is the most obvious area where this packaging has been prevalent, but it was somehow inevitable that the development of trekking holidays in the Himalaya would eventually extend to the summits of the highest peaks and even Everest itself.

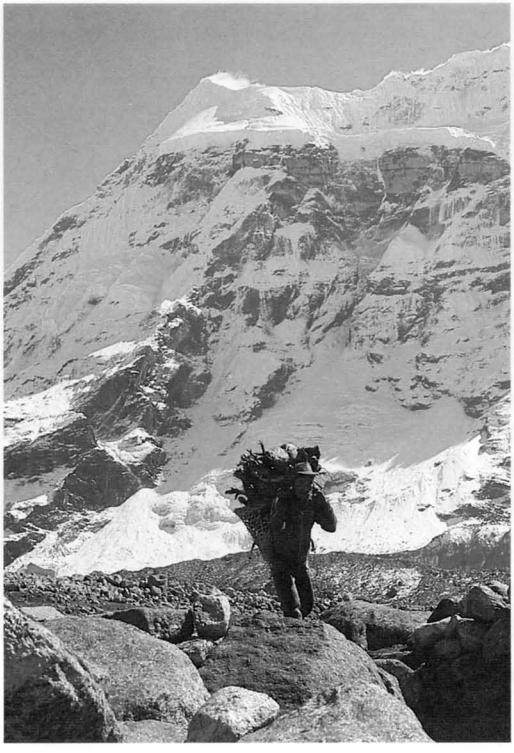
Arising from this packaging, there are likely to be two main results affecting the places where we climb: firstly, an increase in the number of mountaineers and climbers, and more of them will visit more places. Secondly, it will gradually effect a change in the way mountaineers regard their playgrounds. Changing attitudes are by no means new. Compare, for instance, the many committed botanists amongst the earliest climbers, and their respect for plant life, with those of the 1960s and 70s who carried out wholesale 'gardening' exercises, with little concern for the value of the soils and plant communities they were destroying.

## Mountaineering – because it is where?

Today's climbers enjoy intricate physical movement, competition, meeting like-minded companions and being photographed in spectacular positions. George Mallory's famous response to being asked why he returned to Everest, 'because it is there', is a reason seldom quoted by the modern climber seeking to offer a rational answer to a question which, in the past, would have prompted an apparently irrational response. Given that the traditional motivations, such as 'freedom', 'escape', 'solitude', 'beauty', 'adventure' and 'being at one with nature' assume diminished importance in the eyes of many modern climbers, it is fair to conclude that the future climbing community could well be less committed to protecting those qualities, provided that the other benefits which climbers enjoy are readily available.

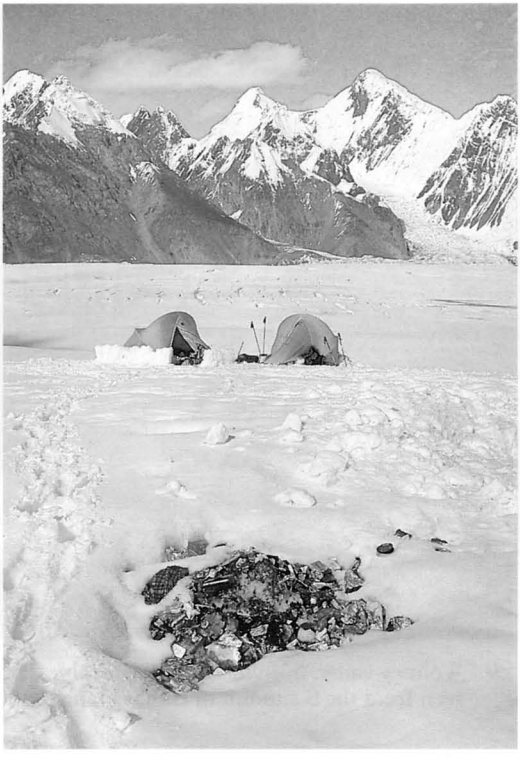
However, 'you get out what you put in' and given the ease, comfort and relative safety with which some modern mountaineering prizes can be obtained, the returns are often more limited. This is not to say that the rock gymnasts who spend weeks 'working' a piece of rock get nothing out of their efforts, only that the returns are significantly different from those to be derived from traditional mountaineering.

In future, competition will become more important, as mountaineering challenges are increasingly repeats or eliminate lines, and status will be gained instead by being the fastest or furthest in increasingly quantifiable terms. It must



30. *Left* Wood being brought up to a high camp on Makalu. (*Rob Collister*) (p85)

31. *Right* Abandoned rubbish in the Tien Shan. (*Roger Payne*) (p79)



be noted that skiing, skating and other Winter Olympic sports all started life as non-competitive activities. The disregard shown for the environment by the organisers of the 1992 Winter Olympics, in particular, has been the cause of considerable controversy.

## Mountaineering in the UK – problems of access

In the UK the mountaineering community can still claim to be one of the main driving forces concerned with protecting the natural character of the uplands and freedom of access to them. However, when considering the charges being levied at some of the newer commercial indoor climbing walls, and the willingness of many climbers to pay £2 or £3 a session, it is no longer beyond comprehension that the same climbers would be willing to pay 20p or 30p for access to a quarry or crag. They already do so in four isolated locations. At the same time, the wider mountaineering community faces the growing possibility of private arrangements being made between some climbers and landowners to the exclusion of others. This might particularly apply where 'management development' groups are receiving high fees for taking clients climbing and abseiling and do not wish to keep their clients waiting until a minibus load of youngsters from an inner city vacates an area of cliff.

Charges could rapidly change from being 20p or 30p to £5 or more per climber visit. Witness the rise in charges for orienteering levied by the Forestry Commission, from modest 'administrative' sums to an opening demand of £70,000 for a national access agreement with the British Orienteering Federation. It initially only cost a 'few pence' to climb at High Rocks near Tunbridge Wells and now costs £3 per day, or approximately £30 per year under a privately negotiated annual 'reduction', to which our national representative body, the British Mountaineering Council, is resolutely opposed.

Payment for access remains a clear threat to the future of climbing and mountaineering in the UK, despite the views and efforts of past and present generations against it. At a time when flocks of climbers and mountain walkers arrive in expensive cars at the foot of crags and mountains, and then drape themselves in hundreds of pounds' worth of mountaineering clothing and equipment, it is no longer a valid claim that they should be allowed free access to walk and climb because they are exploited and underprivileged. Often today it will be the tenant hill farmer on whose land they walk and climb who faces real financial hardship.

## Our mountains – whose heritage are they?

The resentment of farming communities to 'outsiders' is often heightened when they may be facing bankruptcy and they play unwilling hosts to climbers and mountain walkers who add to the erosion and other pressures they may already face. Yet the farming and landowning community, when they complain about 'the great unwashed' and the problems they create for them, often conveniently forget two things: firstly, the huge agricultural and forestry subsidies they themselves receive from the public in the form of taxes; and, secondly, the

damage they themselves do to our natural heritage through overgrazing and blanket afforestation and felling.

Despite the collapse in the price of lamb, farmers continue to have as many sheep as possible in order to receive the headage payment from the government and the EEC. These subsidies were originally designed to maximise agricultural production, with little regard for the effect of overgrazing on our hills and mountains. Likewise, despite the decreasing attractiveness of the system of forestry subsidies to those who wish to plant blankets of conifers, there remain sufficient government subsidies and targets to encourage the planting of large areas of blanket sitka spruce.

The agricultural surpluses that have been created by past systems of public subsidy and the current plight of the hill farmer are obviously incompatible with the demand of the public for both protection of our natural heritage and access to it. Clearly, the system of public subsidies should be changed. Rewards should be aimed at those farmers and landowners who provide for the increasing public interest in access and conservation, rather than at those who take no heed of it.

Some welcome moves have already been made. More 'Environmentally Sensitive Areas' are being designated, with incentives for more sensitive management. The Countryside Commission's Stewardship Scheme, which offers incentives to farmers for projects which provide for improved conservation and public access, could be adapted and employed more widely. (In its original form, this scheme is deeply flawed, with ridiculous incentives being offered for doing nothing more than allowing people onto land.) More ridiculous still was the claim for three million pounds from the taxpayer, made by a landowner in Scotland for not planting conifers on his estate in the Flow Country because it is a Site of Special Scientific Interest.

Why should landowners receive any more remuneration for doing nothing than any of the nation's other unemployed subjects? It is, after all, not the government but we the taxpayer who are subsidising them, and any legal loopholes which enable such misuse of taxpayers' money should be shut firmly as a matter of priority.

## Public ownership – or public management?

The most effective way for the important parts of our natural heritage to be protected is by ownership by the public, in whose interest it should be secured. This is not some wild left-wing concept but a principle which has been widely adopted in the national parks of Western Europe and North America. The interests of conservation, access and economic return to local communities can be more evenly balanced in a publicly owned national park than in areas where the primary concern of the private landowner, who may often be absentee, is usually to gain a return on financial investment (or to stop himself going bankrupt), whether acquired by purchase or inherited by birth. Mar Lodge Estate in the Cairngorms is a sorrowful illustration of how the present system of land tenure has so badly let the nation down. The damage done to the Caledonian Pine Forest by poor deer management in this key wilderness area will take literally decades to restore.

Failing public ownership, the most effective method of ensuring that our most valuable climbing areas are protected is by the devotion of sufficient powers and resources by the government to national park or similar authorities to ensure that the whim of a current landowner does not destroy what may have taken decades or even centuries to evolve. It also facilitates the resolution of the potential for conflict between the interests of access to, and conservation of, our most cherished corners by managing them so that they are both defended and enjoyed.

## Shop-window mountains

While the proportion of damage done to the natural environment in Great Britain by recreation remains at around 4%, in the case of certain mountains it is much higher. Snowdon, Ben Nevis, Cairngorm and Pen-y-Ghent have been sanitised with the use of foreign and artificial materials to accommodate the wider interest there is in climbing these mountains than simply that of the committed mountaineer. Almost equally popular are other accessible locations, such as Goat Fell, Ben Lomond, Cader Idris and several of the Lakeland fells which, unless under the proper influences, could be subjected to a similar sanitised fate. These mountains are the 'shop-window' of our mountaineering locations for visitors who may, possibly on impulse, be experiencing mountains for the first time.

Outside Britain, the Aiguille du Midi, the *vie ferrate* in the Dolomites, the Zermatt Breithorn, Mount Whitney and Half Dome have all been sanitised to come within the reach of the 'impulse buy'. Indeed suggestions have been made that even the icefall at the foot of Everest itself should be rigged for the duration of each season, in order to avoid the continual portering of ladders, ropes, etc, in and out, with the passage of every expedition.

## Do we love our mountains enough?

Fortunately there are grounds for optimism about our ability to limit the effects that mountaineers will have on the greater ranges in the future: firstly, the growing trend towards lightweight expeditions climbing in alpine style; and, secondly, the respect shown for new Codes of Practice being developed and promoted by bodies such as the UIAA. In the lesser ranges and outcrop situations the indications are not quite so encouraging. Here, the 'convenience factor' will play a greater role and, unless we are prepared to accept greater restrictions on our use of the motor car (in particular) in getting to our chosen playground, we may either have to face licensing and permit systems on the pattern of US models or further sanitisation of our most cherished areas. If we are not prepared to face longer approach walks to our mountains and crags in order to enjoy their wider qualities, we will likely find those very qualities of natural beauty and freedom severely diminished in order to provide for new priorities of safety, vanity and convenience.

In future we may not be asking ourselves 'Are we loving our mountains to death?' but, instead, 'Do we love them enough?' Whether we make a deep and

long-term commitment to our mountains and cliffs, or only have a casual affair, is something that should be considered by each and every one of us.