
Return to the Alps

'... The Himalaya are so vast, and there is often no sign of human activity or anything else to which to anchor a sense of scale. The Alps are smaller, but what they have is more effectively used, perhaps so effectively that it can never be bettered.'

Philip Bartlett, *The Undiscovered Country*



3. Alp Action: the programme 'Hindelang Natur und Kultur', sponsored by Riso Deutschland, aims to preserve the villages of Hindelang in the Allgäu region of Bavaria. (*Alexander Keck*) (p3)



4. The district of Hindelang is known for its rural charm, the natural wealth of its meadows and grasslands and for the rich diversity of its flora and fauna. (*Andreas Riedmiller*) (p3)

PRINCE SADRUDDIN AGA KHAN

Views from the Alps

(Plates 3–6)

Prince Sadrudin Aga Khan is a leader in international environmental causes and the founder and chairman of Alp Action. The Corporate Funding Programme of Alp Action unites business and conservation to promote a positive approach to Alpine ecological and cultural issues.

Under the towering Jungfrau in the Bernese Oberland, the Timberland Company is creating the first Timberland Trail in the largest nature reserve in the Swiss German Alps – ‘The best place in the entire Alps to watch mountain wildlife!’, says Jacques Morier-Genoud, President of the Swiss League for the Protection of Nature which owns the park. With the support of the media and the company’s retail network, this discovery path will be the basis of a public awareness campaign, helping to promote individual advocacy in daily environmental action.

This is just one example of 30 concrete initiatives launched throughout the Alps in three years by Alp Action – the International Corporate Funding Programme for the Alpine Environment. They are contributing to the preservation of a precious natural and cultural heritage. The keys to our approach are surprisingly simple: specific, diverse, results oriented. Organisations such as Major Media Partners, Reuters, Newsweek and Financial Times Television are generating worldwide awareness of action in the Alps. Each project has become the pride of corporations and employees and of the local communities who called on us to act with them. Each is a jewel where the traveller can see how people working together can achieve long-term results. Environmental consciousness cannot be stipulated by law. Rather, it begins with individual awareness and the behaviour of each one of us.

Should beauty and harmony not suffice, preserving the Alps is vital for scientific reasons: they are a reservoir that stabilises world climate. Like a huge air-conditioner, they protect us against global warming. As an ecosystem, they contribute animal and plant diversity to the whole of Europe.

Many believe that the Alps are inviolable, that they could never be hurt. But conservationists and scientists point to a steady, alarming decline in habitats, air quality and water cleanliness that is undermining the fragile equilibrium of this ecosystem. 100 million tourists visit the mountains of the Alps each year, while 73 million tonnes of goods are transported along the valleys and over the passes. Considering that

transport will double by the year 2010, there is good reason for fear. Obviously a prime objective is to reduce pollution. A second is to reduce the attack of concrete and steel, the excessive and often poorly planned construction of roads, ski-lifts and other infrastructure. A third is to re-orient the focus of tourism so that people come to appreciate rather than destroy the environment and help to preserve the fabulous cultural and natural diversity of the mountains.

Leading upwards from the colourful Valley of Rhododendrons, overshadowed by Monte Rosa, a nature reserve, or 'Panoramica', stretches for 69km through a region where wildlife thrives in harmony with human traditions. Created in 1938 by Ermenegildo Zegna, visionary founder of the world's leading manufacturer of men's ready-made garments, the 'Oasi Zegna' is now a model of corporate citizenship attracting residents and nature-lovers alike. Anna Zegna, granddaughter of the founder, says that 'with the steadfast commitment of the community, environmentalists and government authorities, and with the involvement of our own personnel and marketing expertise, we can send a powerful message for the successful preservation of the Alps'.

Over half the species of Alpine flora and fauna are threatened or disappearing, and Alp Action is trying to protect them all. It might seem whimsical to save an animal as tiny as a butterfly! Yet, without this essential link in the ecological chain, the entire ecosystem is upset: flower species dependent on butterflies for pollination disappear and birds which feed on their larvae starve. Nature's cycles are jeopardised. In response, Clarins – Europe's leading cosmetics firm, which has a butterfly as logo – created the first butterfly sanctuaries. After virtual eradication by hunters, environmentalists have now brought back the beaver and the ibex. A founding partner of Alp Action, Safra Republic Holdings have just co-produced an outstanding documentary with the BBC on its efforts to reintroduce the *Gypaetus Barbatus*, one of the biggest of all Alpine birds, in the French Alps.

Alp Action is also working to halt the depopulation of the mountains and the erosion of its traditions. High up, at the far end of the Lauterbrunnen valley, and in the secluded paradise of the Ticino and Pays d'Enhaut meadows, four old chalets, one dated 1433, were falling into disrepair. Yet their role – sheltering cheese-makers, shepherds who bring up cows and goats to let them graze carefully in order not to destroy the vegetation cover which protects the valleys from erosion and floods – is pivotal for the farming culture and environment. Zschokke Holdings, Switzerland's first construction group, Tetra Pak and Swiss-based Banque Unigestion have revitalised this tradition and ancient Alpine building crafts, in particular the art of *Tavillons*, a type of spruce tile that can last a hundred years.

Woodlands once represented an income for mountain communities. Today, numerous lumber trades are in the red. As a result, Alpine villages and farms are threatened by lack of maintenance of their protective



Left

5. Alp Action: restoring the ancient roof of Cascina Dell'Or, Ticino, Switzerland. Zschokke Holdings are currently sponsoring ancient Alpine crafts in the area. (Laurent Guiraud) (p3)



6. Bounavaux Chalet in the Swiss Alps was restored with a contribution from Banque Unigestion, which sponsors traditional agriculture and crafts. (Daniel Aubert) (p3)

forests. Moreover the number of trees that are withering is increasing. Over 25% of Alpine forests are seriously damaged. Pollution and lack of immunity to parasites are the principal causes of decline, making forests prone to devastating storms. The storm 'Viviane', which hit the Alps in February 1990, blew down 600,000 cubic metres of woodland in the French Savoie Department alone. The largest privately-funded tree planting campaign in the high Alps, funded by Kraft Jacobs Suchard, involves the planting of 400,000 trees in six countries to protect mountain communities against the threat of avalanches and landslides.

Providing financial support for foresters or work for craftsmen, even helping to create new small-scale handicraft concerns, is laudable but how can each one of us contribute to ensure long-term security and a brighter future for mountain communities? While travelling through the Alps, we should refuse tasteless, mass-produced agricultural fare in favour of regional and local, high-quality products which are the key to maintaining these communities and, through their ancestral activities, helping to preserve the landscape.

The inhabitants of l'Etivaz, in the Pays-d'Enhaut region of the Swiss Canton of Vaud, describe themselves as 'a village of indomitables who resist depopulation ... now and for ever'. There were 59 of them ten years ago and they now number 74, collectively managing 2700 dairy cows. They produce a cheese carrying the name of the village. It is produced biologically over a wood fire according to ancestral techniques, and has borne a registered quality label since 1988. This is one of the rare Swiss products which respond to European Community rules governing *Appellations d'origine contrôlées* (registered seals of origin). To market 250 tonnes of cheese per year, the l'Etivaz co-operative has opted for direct promotion at sales outlets in partnership with the Chateau-d'Oex tourist office with whom it launched its 'cheese trails' two years ago. A two-day pedestrian trail through mountain pastures allows visitors to discover the life of cheese-makers and the techniques of cheese-making.

Hindelang is a district the size of Liechtenstein at the heart of the Allgäu region of Bavaria. Its six villages and 5000 inhabitants have preserved the area's rural charm and the valley is considered a little paradise. Dominated by mountains and established along the upper reaches of the Ostrach river, Hindelang is known for the natural wealth of its meadows, grasslands and marshes and for the rich diversity of its flora and fauna. 83% of Hindelang's surface area is legally protected territory, the fruit of the labour of generations of indigenous farmers. Yet this age-old activity has been affected by ever lower subsidies from the European Community with its emphasis on intensive farming. From 200 Hindelang farmers in 1960, the number fell to 70 in the eighties. Their produce was collected and commercialised through a regional co-operative, together with that of 2000 other farmers. Certain valuable sites which had become difficult to cultivate began reverting to scrubland. The habitats of numerous species of plants, birds and other Alpine fauna had begun to disappear, threatening the

very survival of species. The three decades which witnessed agriculture decline also saw tourism boom. Today, a million yearly visitors, attracted by the region's charm, provide Hindelang's principal revenue.

In 1991, Hindelang's authorities decided to take positive action to preserve its natural heritage and create a rampart against mass tourism and chaotic development by launching the Hindelang 'Nature & Culture' quality label. Riso Deutschland, a subsidiary of the Riso Kagaku Corporation, the Japanese multinational leader in the printing sector, helped to launch the fund. Since last October, all 86 Hindelang farmers have converted to methods which eliminate any chemicals noxious to the environment. They also practise reaping techniques that preserve natural floral diversity. The Hindelang 'Nature & Culture' label is marketed by Hindelang's retailers, hotels and restaurants, who also inform the public about the crucial role of agriculture in the protection of nature and the preservation of landscape.

In balanced natural ecosystems, species' populations remain more or less constant, resources are recycled and energy used efficiently. In the human ecosystem, population grows continuously, producing vast quantities of pollution and waste owing to inefficient energy use and poor recycling. Yet, the planet's resources are not unlimited! Today, a single generation consumes more than all those that preceded it. The bright economic prospects of recycling and recycled materials are demonstrated in films competing for the Financial Times TV-Alp Action Awards. The Awards document describes green technological advances which often anticipate legislative constraints. One of the judges, Professor Klaus Schwab, Chairman and Founder of the World Economic Forum, states: 'This is simply a matter of survival, for industry and consumers alike ...'

The Alpine environment mirrors a fragile global equilibrium and reflects the challenges that lie ahead.