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Trekkers in the High-altitude Pyrenees: What Representation for Which Practice?

Radu Cristian Barna

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- 1 The emergence of new values in what concerns social time translates into a need for freedom and self-awareness, but also into an awareness of the need for nature, and implicitly for its protection (Messerli, Ives, 1997). And that's how trekking is the apanage of people who want to go back to the simple life, often to rediscovery of the self (AFIT and SEATM, 2001). This is primarily due to the fact that "trekking allows people to get to a better knowledge and acceptance of themselves, because the end of the trek is unthinkable in the absence of big efforts, sufferings and concessions" (Michel, 2009, p. 5).
- 2 Mountain trekking is the answer. But trekking is also practiced as a form of therapy, to leave the stress and the hubbub of daily life far away, or as a form of pleasure button within a novel experience in a space as full of myths as is the mountain, or again so as to discover a different territory and to fulfill a need for autonomy and emotional and physical vitality (Versant Sud and Altimax, 2009).
- 3 With all this in mind, some publications on trekking (Berthelot, Corneloup, 2008, or Dienot, Theiller, 1999) had highlighted a change of mountaineering practices and in the profile of trekkers that is currently in progress. They mark the appearance of new representations, especially linked to green and contemplative culture. Alas, these publications do not distinguish between the Alps and the Pyrenees, and because so little information on the Pyrenees exists, the general impression is that there are similarities in the representations held. Nevertheless, "the Pyrenees, by their peculiar physiognomy, would open the soul to the poetics of the space [...] it makes the possibilities of another look possible" (Arnauld de Sartre, 2011, p. 126).
- 4 Debarbieux (2001a.) mentions the Alps as the stereotype of a mountain range, and Frolova (2001) states that the Alps have been the frame of reference by which the

Pyrenees were viewed, and that “the usage of the alpine model has led to at least a partial concealing of the specificity of the Pyrenean mountain range” (Frolova, 2001, p. 161). And if to this day in most of the information on the mountains the Alps hold center stage (a situation that is also reflected in our list of references), besides some “hard facts” differences, the information on the Pyrenees observes a general lack of information about practices and motivations (Barna, Rayssac, 2019).

- 5 If the representation is the translation of the manner in which “a subject thinks and structures himself within his relations with the objects that affect him/her” (Leroux, Rigamonti, 2017), this representation is defined by Bauer and Gaskell (1999) as the link between objects, subjects and activities, that together form the common sense. The geographic object the Pyrenees is different than the geographic object the Alps, so we infer that the link must be different in the Pyrenees as opposed to the Alps due to the fact that it adapts to the elements it interlinks. But does this theoretical reality translate the representations of trekkers on the high-altitude Pyrenees? Do they really make the difference between the practice of trekking in the Pyrenees and in the Alps?
- 6 In order to answer these questions and understand how the behaviors of trekkers in the Pyrenees is influenced by representations they have about this space, we will first study the practice of trekking and the high-altitude Pyrenean mountain range. Then, we will explain the methodology we used in order to present and subsequently discuss the results of our research.

The trek

- 7 Trekking signifies “the walk on a trail with a more or less clear aim” (Berthelot, Corneloup, 2008, p. 12), which, according to the authors, is the combination between an itinerary and roaming more or less around that itinerary. If hiking is a “long walk” (www.larousse.fr), the definition of the trek we chose is the one given by the FFRP¹ (2014), which considers trekking as a hike longer than 3 days, with overnight stays in different places.
- 8 Trekking would then be part of a group dynamic, where one is supposed to share, to integrate in the atmosphere and to live group experiences (Berthelot, Corneloup, 2008). But trekking is mostly freedom: “First and foremost attached to autonomous living, the nomad philosophy is based on mutual respect and the freedom to think and travel” (Franck, 2008, p. 62). Moreover, the person trekking in high-altitude mountains attaches his/her values to the physical and moral virtues of the mountain (Seigneur, 2016). Therefore, the mountaineer would be the person who “practices the mountain with conscience” (Lemaire, 2014, p. 7). Indeed, the practicing with conscience means that the person shall respect everything s/he finds in the mountain environment, plants and animals and persons, cabins and hideaways. S/he must know where they are, why and what they do there (rules, safety etc.): “The mountain is to be savored with the teaspoon, not with the ladle” (Cristea, cited by Mititeanu, 2016, p. 23).
- 9 But this attitude may vary, depending on certain values and representations, differing from culture to culture. That’s how even the physical aspects, the “hard facts” of the mountain, which comprises 4 plans (volume, horizontality, verticality, space-time), can have varying representations, which mentally produce “other mountains” (Seigneur, 2006, p.27). These representations mirror social relationships as well (Depeau,

Ramadier, 2011), thus they build up the “mountain spirit”, a sort of “between us” for those who share practicing the mountain with conscience.

- 10 Travel is an integral part of this practice, and the walking is an aim unto itself (Boutroy, 2008). This is how trekking is very different from one-day hiking: it's not the peak, the hideaway, the view or any other “reward” that motivates the practice, but the walk all by itself. Corneloup (2016) claims that trekking symbolizes a redefinition of the framework of life in society, seeing as the person co-authors the movement. It is therefore a redefinition of certain values and an introspection: “The trail works a miracle: by liberating you from all your experiences, responsibilities, tasks, successes, failures, it allows you to become another person” (Rufin, 2013, p. 45.)
- 11 The study by Corneloup (2003) in the Alps shows that, with time, the cultural foundation of the mountain, which was laid by effort, contemplation, implication, suffering, tends to be replaced by fun-seeking, speed, celebration or lazing. The dominant cultural vision would be therefore shaped by performance aspects, competition and adventure. The author also notes that there's a masculine culture of the mountain that seeps into the spaces of sports and adventure practices, and that contemplative practices stem rather from a feminine culture. But would trekkers in the high-altitude Pyrenees be birds of the same feather?

The high-altitude Pyrenees

- 12 The Pyrenees stretch from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic Ocean over approximately 430 km and are 150 km large at their widest point. They cross six French *départements*, seven Spanish provinces and the Principality of Andorra. Generally, the valleys are narrow and oriented North-South, with the peaks stretching rather organically from East to West, thus forming the border between France and Spain². These mountains are home to close to 2500 lakes and 129 main summits over 3000 m altitude. The highest peaks are at the center of the range, over 140 km between the Pic d'Estats (3115 m) on the border between the Ariège *département* and Catalonia, and the Balaitous (3141 m), in the Béarn (Taillefer, 2000).
- 13 The French mountain side is marked by numerous glacier valleys, whereas the Spanish mountain side is known best for its canyons formed by erosion. There are three trekking trails crossing the Pyrenees from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic Ocean: the GR10 on the French side, the GR11 on the Spanish side, and the HRP (Haute Route Pyrénéenne) skirting the peak line. We have chosen them as field of study because they cross the best-known places of the range and are also the starting point of numerous round trips³.
- 14 **GR10** – *La Grande Traversée des Pyrénées* – is a trail that alternates mid-range and high-altitude mountains. Numerous legs are relatively long and require a bivouac. It is a very complex trail, due to the terrain, the landscape and the cultural richness. This enables us to meet a high variety of trekker profiles. This is one of the reasons we have chosen to do our research on the go, in order to have access to these profiles which might prefer specific spots of the trail.
- 15 The **HRP** is an exclusively high-altitude mountain trail that crisscrosses back and forth between France and Spain. It is not an official trail, but it is described in certain guides, certain legs are marked on some maps and its marking has started in certain places.

Walking this trail requires certain techniques and mountain-climbing apparel. Because it is a more difficult trail than the GR10, it attracts a population of trekkers that combine trekking and mountain-climbing. From this point of view, it complements the profile of trekkers one can find in the Pyrenees.

- 16 **GR11** – *Senda Pirenaica* – is considered by many as “the trail” for trekking that crosses the high-altitude Pyrenees. It is well-marked and well-studded with refuges, which in their turn are very well equipped to host overnight mountaineers. This trail is very frequently used by French trekkers because of its differences to the GR10. The cultural differences are an attraction, of course, but it is the differences in geomorphology and climate that have shaped the South face of the Pyrenees so differently.

Methodology

- 17 From a morphological point of view, the high-altitude mountains start at the highest level of the subalpine forest, between 2000-2400 m in the Pyrenees (Debarbieux, 2001b). Since we have chosen the high-altitude Pyrenees as our field of study, we have limited this to the central part of the range. Nonetheless, even here the trekking trails sometimes descend beneath the limits of high-altitude mountains in order to cross valleys or to give access to refuges.
- 18 We have combined three methods of collecting data (interview, questionnaire and participative observation), based on the multi-method analysis model by Bauer and Gaskell (1999). We have found this model to be most pertinent, as it allows “to determine central and peripheral elements of a representation, to record the contradictions and its constituent parts, as well as to explore its functions” (Bauer and Gaskell, 1999, p. 178). Thus, by confronting the results of our three methods we were able to verify certain data and adjust the analysis⁴. Data collection was performed as follows:
- Time frame 1 (June 2017): 15 on-site interviews with professionals of the mountain (hut wardens and representatives of various organizations: AGREPY⁵, SNAM⁶, PGHM⁷, PNR⁸, FFRP, CAF⁹ (Interviews E1-E15).
  - Time frame 2 (28 June - 8 August 2017): 66 questionnaires with trekkers on the three trekking trails.
  - Time frame 3 (19 July - 25 August 2018): 100 questionnaires and 10 interviews (E16-E25) with trekkers on the three trekking trails, plus observation of some of them by accompanying them for several hours or for several days.
- 19 **The interviews** were semi-directive and took an average of 1h30. They were conducted based on the interview guide that had as main topics the high-altitude Pyrenees, the trekkers and the hiking activity.
- 20 The interviews with the trekkers were conducted after we have submitted them the questionnaire, which proved to be a good method to obtain more explanations regarding their answers to the questionnaire.
- 21 In order to collect and analyze the information from the interviews, we resorted to content analysis that we then aggregated with information from the observation and from the questionnaire.
- 22 **The questionnaire:** Going by estimates of the PDIPR¹⁰ Ariège, there are approximately 850 trekkers per year in this *département*, and approximately 2200 in the Haute-

Garonne and the Hautes-Pyrénées. This is why we have limited our research to 166 questionnaires¹¹. The questions were based on indicators we had identified as linked to explanative variables of the three dimensions that characterize trekkers:

- adventure,
- contemplation,
- “mountain spirit”.

- 23 **The observation** was highly useful for us in order to go deep into the context, to gain the confidence of our discussion partners and to collect information on the habits of high-altitude trekkers in the Pyrenees. In 2017 (Time frame 2 of info gathering), we went to meet trekkers between l'Hospitalet-près-l'Andorre in the Ariège valley and the Pont d'Espagne in the Hautes-Pyrénées. In 2018 (Time frame 3 of the gathering), we did the reverse route, between Gourette in the Atlantic Pyrenees and Andorra, because the majority of trekkers go this way. The grid we used took over the indicators that were easier to measure in an interview or questionnaire, as well as others, easier to determine by observation, like contentment, determination, attitude towards the mountain surroundings, or attitude towards other mountain practitioners like mountain-climbers or day hikers.

General characteristics of trekkers in the Pyrenees

- 24 Our research indicates a percentage of 52% male trekkers and 48% female trekkers¹². And when our observation in the refuges has noted a bigger male presence, this is due to the fact that mountain climbers are male, for the large majority. The nationality of trekkers is as follows: 55% French, 15.6% Spanish, 12% German and 17.4% others (Switzerland, Northern and Eastern Europe) on the French trails, and vice-versa between Frenchmen and Spaniards on the Spanish trails.
- 25 We recorded a difference between round trip trekkers (between three days and one week) and those long-distance trekkers (over one week and with no return to starting point).
- 26 Round trips are the preferred activity for singles who choose the round trip for the coaching, but also in order to make new acquaintances. They subscribe to the culture of a “comfortable mobility” (hut warden, E3), meaning a hike with little backpack and high aversion to risk.
- 27 Long-distance trekkers are persons who are accustomed to high-altitude mountains, who are good at orientation and who can adapt easily to changing conditions. To these people, everything is more in flux, which is why they have to be better prepared than hikers.
- 28 E3 considers all trekkers as being semi-pro sportsmen. They do not have a problem with effort and are in a state that mixes defiance and contemplation, but they are not mountain conquerors. The conquerors would be the members of the CAF, that one might often encounter on the peaks and who “as a general rule do their trekking elsewhere, since they are in the Pyrenees every weekend” (E3). E13 (CAF member) was more nuanced in this respect and indicated that people who live close to the Pyrenees are the habituals, the ones who are at home while hiking in these mountains, who climb them to breathe, for recreation and sometimes for training; to conquer, they go to the Alps or sometimes elsewhere: “I come here to these mountains for the peace of

mind” (E13). Moreover, numerous members of the CAF told us that climbing the Aneto was not that difficult, but that trekking the HRP from one end to the other might be¹³.

- 29 Several hut wardens declared that in the Pyrenees the majority of trekkers were older than in the Alps, and they explained this observation with the more competitive image of the Alps. But the answers of trekkers revealed another reality:

Graph 1. Spread of trekker population by age range

Source: the author, 2018

- 30 Thus, people over 50 make out only 18.2% of the total population. The under 30 account for 42.4%, but since they use the bivouac almost exclusively, they are not very visible either to refuge guardians or other hikers or trekkers: “Those ones, we see them very rarely in the refuge” said E3, also admitting that they were very discreet.
- 31 Certain interviewed persons say that trekkers can be split into two categories, depending on their capacity to pay: the more moneyed socio-professional categories who overnight in the refuge, and the ones who use the bivouac. By category, this is their frequenting:

Graph 2. Socio-professional category of trekkers

Source: the author, 2018

- 32 Still, we cannot confirm the two categories with regard to the use of the bivouac. In fact, if students and unemployed trekkers use it almost exclusively, its use by the other categories does not depend only on their capacity to pay, but also on their willingness to pay, and many trekkers use the bivouac for the freedom (18%), the autonomy (64%), the tranquility (54%). Others have mentioned spontaneously the desire to be close to

nature, as well as the ease of using the bivouac in the Pyrenees, as compared to the Alps.

Characteristics associated to representations of the high-altitude Pyrenees

- 33 “The Alps astonish; the Pyrenees seduce and tender your heart. They have a supreme and indefinable lyricism about them” (Russel, 2005, p. 46). The wild character and the lack of apparent anthropization are the oft mentioned characteristics when it comes to the attraction of the Pyrenees. And among the reasons given (multiple-choice question) for the stay in the high-altitude Pyrenees, 60.3% of the persons asked claim the difference to the Alps, well before 33.3% who come because it’s close to their home, followed by almost 15% who are attracted by its wild character. Authenticity is only mentioned by 3.17%, behind the number of lakes with 14.3% and the soothing character with 6.35%. But these aspects are just elements meant to identify the same “authentic” and “human” character, which allows the possibilities of another look over the Pyrenean mountain range.
- 34 This is why we have dedicated two questions that draw specifically on the subject of contemplation. One asked about the number of summits ascended during the trek, while the other enquired about the number of photos taken in a day. The less summits reached (an average of 4,13 per stay) may indicate a penchant towards contemplation, but the statements about the reasons for climbing said summits leaves even less to doubt. Indeed, if only 12.2% ascend for the performance and 14.63% to “check the name”, all the others climb for the view, because the peak is on their way, or because “it’s part of the mountain”.
- 35 A conqueror has no time or interest to take photos. S/he would take two or three photos with him/her on the tippy top. By contrast, the contemplative trekker would take dozens, of all that s/he is surrounded by. This is how we have established chunks between 5, 10 and 20 photos, and if the questions about the peaks had more or less indicated the contemplative character of the trekkers, the answers to this other question left no doubt.

Graph 3. How many photos do you take per day?

less than 5	7.69%
5-10	15.2%
10- 20	26.34%
more than 20	50.77%

Source: the author, 2018

- 36 Because of this, trekking can be seen as another step towards a closer connection to the mountain: “the more time you spend on the mountain, the more you learn what counts in life” (Association les Amis GR’distes, E14). But for this interlocutor, one can go

through several states of sentiment during the trek, from contemplation to conquering, depending on the day, the surroundings, as well as the physical and state of mind. For instance, the state of the trekker would be shaped by several dimensions, like the need for discovery of the surroundings and of others, the need for introspection and the need for love. Indeed, the evolution with the rhythm of nature triggers the discovery of one's soul, as well as the soul of the world, only with responsibility and organization. Mountain trekking means walking with one's eyes open on oneself and on the world; by contrast, roaming in the mountains is the equivalent of rashness and irresponsibility.

- 37 Conquering or contemplation, it's "the mountain spirit" that may change. E2 (hut warden) confirmed that often people who climb the peaks are less autonomous than trekkers, especially when it comes to orientation: "To climb a peak, they follow a marked trail to the refuge and then onwards to the peak. There's no risk of getting lost, whereas when trekking, one must make do without marked trails sometimes, with bad weather or fog". E5 (PGHM) also agrees that trekkers are well equipped and know how to adapt their walk to the given conditions. This aspect was confirmed by several interview partners, who had started out with little walks, just to get to know the mountain, then stayed overnight in a refuge, then several nights, and only afterwards did they dare think about trekking: "with trekking you cross a line; orientation, confidence, apparel..." (Young couple from Tarbes, E25).

Characteristics linked to representations on the practice of trekking

- 38 Our interviews have revealed that, even though the Pyrenees are not considered a difficult mountain, the trails may be, because the slopes can drop abruptly, the valleys can be very deep and the weather changing. Thus, a beginner on the GR10 may experience an elevated sense of adventure. But among the terms used most and regularly to define their practice, autonomy and endurance were first to be mentioned. Trekking serves to gain autonomy and closeness to the mountain, whereas the performing of the practice would be more a question of endurance. So, there is also a question of performance in trekkers, even if the main scope is to spend time on the mountains (several interview partners). This daredevil aim may be to finish one leg of the GR, or to do the Great Crossing. This was confirmed by our research, which shows that 24% of interview partners had as aim to do all or one leg of GR10, GR11 or the HRP.
- 39 In this respect, several interview partners consider that trekking means thinking beforehand about the route and the conditions, thinking during the trek about integrating with the mountain environment, and thinking afterwards about how to better integrate all this information during the next trek. Therefore, by preparing and knowing one's route, these trekkers are imbued by the "mountain spirit".
- 40 The majority of the trekkers we interviewed have testified to the importance of the link between this mountain spirit and the time spent on the mountain. Indeed, the more time spent, the more they developed the "mountain spirit" that motivated them to keep going, seeing as the trail grew more and more charged with the values they were looking for in the mountain: "during the first week you get accustomed, the second week you relax and only the third week do you enter into this other dimension of the spirit, to measure up to the grandeur of the mountains" (single woman in her 50s, E20).

- 41 Unfortunately, time and money constraints shrink the possibility to spend more time on the mountain. The vast majority of people have told us that they dreamed of one day doing the Great Crossing from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean.

Graph 4. For how many days did you trek?

Source: the author, 2018

- 42 As we can see, a little over half of the trekkers stay less than 2 weeks in the Pyrenees. That explains why most of those who do the Great Crossing, be it on the GR10, GR11 or the HRP, do it over several years in different legs of the journey. Which reinforces the myth. Preparation, recollections and dreams contribute to the imagination of the trekkers being full of the idea of the Pyrenees during years and years. It is they who, at the end of their voyage, of their pains and moments of happiness, finally fall in love with the Pyrenees. It is this why E14 states that there's something mythical going on on the trails of the Pyrenees, because "crossing the mountains from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean is akin to being born and ending one's days in the sea, with lots of highs and lows". Indeed, the Association of Friends of the GR was born out of this attachment and continues to be a testament to the existing culture of the GR10.

Conclusions

- 43 If the "possibility of another look" on the mountain -especially given the difference in altitude to the Alps- may be responsible for a more contemplative practice of trekking in the high-altitude Pyrenees, our study also revealed certain other aspects that stem from the "hard facts", like the existence of numerous lakes and lack of apparent anthropization, that accentuate said differences. They orient the look and influence the representations that trekkers gain over the Pyrenees. Given the shaping of a different imaginary because of the wild, preserved and authentic aspects of this mountain space, these representations influence in their turn the attitude of trekkers towards their practice. And when they encompass the quest for adventure, what seems different in the Pyrenees is that adventure here is linked more tightly to nature as a wild place than to pro sports achievements, and that sports achievements here mean endurance, more than they mean conquering summits.
- 44 Another conclusion is also that trekking is not compatible with roaming in the mountains, as the preparation phase is one of the most essential aspects of trekking. Mititeanu (2016) states that a true trekker walks the same trail three times: "one time at home, on the map, a second time on the actual trail, and the third time with friends over the photographs" (Mititeanu, 2016, p. 132). Representations structure a real

culture, which starts to build up during the preparation phase and continues with the remembrance of the experiences one has lived through. In this respect, trekkers of the high-altitude Pyrenees can be considered imbued by the “mountain spirit”, through the responsibility, the apparel and the organization of their practice.

- 45 The three dimensions we followed (adventure, contemplation and “mountain spirit”) are not uniformly spread throughout the population of trekkers. In combination with the type of practice (round trip or long-distance trekking), they allow for different categories of trekkers. And since “the individuals select the tourist hotspots by the values they carry” (Violier, 2017, p. 91), trekking in the Pyrenees may be explained by the search for another sense to life, closer to nature and more orderly, that the mountain can offer in what seems to be the chaotic life of the 21st century. Trekking is perceived as an investment in spiritual values and often expresses regret for the brevity of time passed in this authentic mountain place. And finally, it’s the reason why the main motivation for trekking in the high-altitude Pyrenees is to many trekkers to spend the most time possible on the mountain.

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NOTES

1. Fédération Française de Randonnée Pédestre.
2. www.pyrenees-fr.com (consulted on 28 May, 2017).
3. For instance, the Aneto trail (highest peak of the Pyrenees, 3404m) superimposes over more than half over the HRP and over the GR11.
4. As an example, in the questionnaire almost all trekkers find the prices in the refuges as high. But in the interview they admit that, given the difficulties in functioning at such high altitude, the prices are correct.

5. Association des gardiens de refuges des Pyrénées.
  6. Syndicat National des Accompagnateurs en Montagne.
  7. Peloton de Gendarmerie de Haute Montagne.
  8. Parc Naturel Régional.
  9. Club Alpin Français.
  10. Plan Départemental des Itinéraires et Petites Randonnées.
  11. To a population of 2200 and a number of 166 respondents, the level of confidence is 95%, with a margin of error of 7.32% (calculated on checkmarket.fr and verified with surveymonkey.com).
  12. Numbers of the FFRP (2014) differ, as they state that 67% of trekkers are male and 33% female, 56% are between 25-49 and 39% over 50. But these numbers were obtained for all French mountain ranges, including mid-range mountains.
  13. Discussions during numerous hikes as a member of the CAF d'Ariège.
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ABSTRACTS

This article paints a portrait of trekkers in the high-altitude Pyrenees. Sometimes depicted as different from the trekkers of the Alps, this image may stem from a different imaginary construct, be it in terms of a particular representation of the high-altitude Pyrenees, or of their practice. In order to better evaluate said aspects, we have conducted 25 interviews with professionals of the mountains, members of mountain associations, representatives of institutions and the trekkers themselves. As a follow-up, we have asked 166 trekkers to fill out a questionnaire and we have followed some of them for several months on the Pyrenean trekking trails GR10, GR11 and HRP. This multi-criteria approach allowed us to get to know them better, to understand their representations and motivations, as well as to update more general knowledge about mountain trekking and trekking in the high-altitude Pyrenees. We were finally able to see that “the possibilities of another look” on these mountains, driven in part by the difference in altitude with regard to the Alps, leads to a more contemplative practice and to seeking an adventure that is more linked to enjoying nature, seen here as wild, preserved and authentic.

INDEX

Keywords: trekkers, Pyrenees, high-altitude Mountains, representations

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