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Le tourisme montagnard au crible de la durabilité

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Pierre Dérizoz and Philippe Bachimon

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Preface

Mountain tourism and sustainability

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Translation: Brian Keogh

- 1 Since their “invention” during the second half of the 18th century (Briffaud, 1989 – Debarbieux, 1993), associated with society’s changing perceptions of them, high mountain areas have proved attractive to tourists by virtue of their landscapes (tourism based on sight-seeing and contemplative pursuits) as well as the outdoor activities that they offer (initially conquests of the highest peaks, followed later by a range of activities from rock climbing to hiking, then alpine skiing and a variety of other snow sports). This development of tourism, extending over a century and a half and affecting some mountain massifs and valleys more than others, can be thought of as being based on two major models - sometimes unrelated, sometimes superimposed - that have given rise to multiple interactions: 1) excursion tourism, which generally takes place in the summer (hiking and outdoor recreation activities of every type) and is theoretically “light” in terms of installations and impact, or at least perceived as such, even if numerous examples suggest otherwise, beginning with the creation of the early resorts like Chamonix or Zermatt; 2) winter sports tourism, more recent, undoubtedly heavier in terms of investments and impact (ski resorts), and today an activity which in the current uncertain context of climate change is confronted with the need to ensure that snow resources will remain adequate. Although the different types of mountain tourism initially tended to be associated with a particular season, both are increasingly becoming bi-seasonal (winter hiking on foot, skis and snowshoes, development of ice climbing, and conversely summer skiing on glaciers, ski resorts offering a range of summer activities, use of chairlifts for summer hiking, mountain biking, etc.). Despite inter-annual fluctuations, related to economic, social and climatic conditions, visitor numbers have continued to rise as access to the mountains has become increasingly democratised¹. Beginning with the original activities – walking,

skiing, mountain climbing –, pursuits then became more segmented and hybrid in form (1980s) before diversifying (2000s), to adopt the distinction observed by P. Bourdeau (Augustin, Bourdeau and Ravenel, 2008). New destinations, particularly in the Andes and Himalayas – following in the footsteps of the “*conquérants de l’inutile*” (Lionel Terray) –, have also gradually extended the range of areas frequented (adventure races, trekking, extreme sports), governed by a different set of conditions but in some cases exhibiting certain similarities with the initial alpine model (Boujrouf et al., 1998).

- 2 In different ways, through the transfer of revenue, population, cultural models and lifestyles (domination effects), as well as through the direct impact of the development of tourist facilities, these two types of tourism exert pressure on high mountain areas both in terms of the elements of the often fragile “natural” environment (soils, water resources, flora, fauna) (Escourrou, 1993) and the local economic and social contexts in which they take place, contexts that have shown varying degrees of resilience, leading in some cases to destabilisation (situations of decline). Obviously tourism’s spin-off effects may contribute to the development of high mountain areas (direct income, job creation, contribution of the real estate economy (Davezies, 2003; Talandier, 2007), but the indirect effects also lead to profound changes, some more rapid than others, in traditional activities (particularly agro-pastoral), and thus in the way space is used and developed. This frequently results in changes to landscapes and ecosystems, changes which may be direct and massive, as in the case of construction carried out for winter sports facilities and residential developments, or indirect and more diffuse over time, as in the abandoning of slopes or valley bottoms to the spontaneous encroachment by vegetation. These insidious and brutal environmental changes run counter to a general desire to preserve these environments which are often also the subject of various heritagization processes. Mountain areas in fact remain one of Nature’s main social metaphors with a sort of “layering” of their social representations based on that of the natural milieu, a situation that allots the role of “untamed” nature to high mountain areas, where there is direct physical and psychological confrontation between the tourist and the natural environment, while at low altitudes, in the mountain pastures and valley landscapes shaped by agro-pastoral activities, there is a belief that the dream of traditional rurality can still be seen, where man has adapted to his environment in an almost symbiotic relationship. In this somewhat mythical space of evasion, however, the dominant cultural representations are no longer always in agreement with changing social, landscape and environmental realities, reflecting an increasing multi-functionality of mountain areas that may ultimately lead to them losing their meaning.
- 3 Developing out of the notion of sustainable development, and fed by the earlier experiences of “ecotourism”² and the pioneering work on the “carrying capacity” of tourist sites (Butler, 1980; Thurot, 1980), the concept of “sustainable tourism” gradually gained ground among international authorities – adoption by the European Union of LIFE (L’Instrument Financier pour l’Environnement) in 1992 (Lozato-Giotard, 2006), drawing up of UNO world charter on sustainable tourism in 1995, preparation of a European Charter of Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas by Europarc (Federation of Parks and Protected Areas of Europe) in 1997, adoption by the World Tourism Organisation (WTO) of a code of ethics for tourism in 1999. An examination of the twelve fundamental principles of the European Charter of Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas (ECST), resulting from a collective process entrusted to the supervision

of the Fédération Française des Parcs Naturels Régionaux (French Federation of Regional Natural Parks), and to which 75 European protected areas – including several high mountain areas – are today signatories, makes it possible not only to define ambitions and specify operational directions, but also to sense the limitations of this “virtuous” approach to tourist activities and tourism development³. Based on the recognition of the heritage value (natural and cultural) of these areas and the need to preserve them (principle 1), it is a question of identifying a strategy for tourism development and activity management that reconciles the first environmental requirement with the interests of local residents, whose quality of life must not suffer as a result (principle 9), visitors, who must be offered a “high-quality experience” (principle 5), and economic operators, especially at the local scale, who must be able to obtain benefits from their activities (principle 11). Three levels of implementation are implicitly suggested, from the simple reduction of negative impacts (principle 12) to the definition of links between protection and development, if not even (ideally) their synergy (principle 10). In order to move toward a form of tourism that is “respectful” of natural and cultural resources, including resident populations, the charter recommends a special effort to diffuse environmental information to economic operators (principle 9) and visitors (principle 8), the adoption of participatory approaches open to all stakeholders (principle 3), the adoption of a common “strategy” and “action plan” (principle 4), and the creation of “specific tourism products” (principle 6). After a first phase aimed at getting the action on the agenda for the territory with the help of a shared diagnostic of the protected area, phases II and III are designed to target two distinct groups of economic actors, the local companies and the tour operators.

- 4 In such approaches, mountain areas represent an ideal field of experimentation with respect to the adjustment of tourism activities and practices to the real or supposed fragilities of the different environments and areas (Clarimont, Vlès, 2008). In contexts that differ as widely as those of the protected areas (National Parks, Reserves, Regional Natural Parks) or the major winter sports resorts, in countries of the North as well as the South, the question of the sustainability of different forms of tourism development is brought to the fore in the governance of territories. Beyond the rhetoric and the effects of announcements such as adherence to the principles of the charters cited above, there seems to be a general concern about the passage to the implementation phase. However, without denying the interest of the numerous experiments inspired by these charters, and at the risk of being “politically incorrect”, it must be admitted that these documents often have an incantatory character. The documents’ carefully worded texts avoid pointing out, in too explicit a manner, the possible incompatibility between the pursuit of tourism development in its most massive manifestations – but also the most significant from an economic point of view – and the objectives of the preservation and sound management of the natural environment. As such, they are hardly less ambiguous than the provisions of the French Mountain Law of 1985. The Law’s two objectives, “development and protection”, were explained separately in the first two points, but their contradictions became particularly apparent at the time of the creation of the New Tourist Units (UTN), a source of “*passionate local political jousting between developers and protectors, and of disputes that were taken before the Administrative Tribunals* (translation)” (Deprest, 1997). The intensity of these conflicts among stakeholders (Gerbaux & Marcelpoil, 2006) is also puzzling in the light of the systematic preconceptions of these charters in favour of methods of governance founded on

consultative and participatory approaches. Their success therefore implies a more or less hypothetical voluntary adherence of stakeholders to “codes of good conduct”, the content of which would probably call into question their current practices and run directly counter to their interests. Analysis of the “Agenda 21” experience at both the urban and territorial scales tends, in any case, to show that *“behind a façade of participatory democracy, the local agenda 21 approach is clearly institutional [and] is based on local constituted powers (translation)”* (Mancebo, 2006). But this localist approach, a source of heterogeneity, also fails to provide a clear definition of the role of the State in clarifying a common scientific, technical and legal framework, setting up and monitoring evaluation procedures, and in arbitrating both between stakeholder groups and between development options.

- 5 The aim of the six articles making up this special issue of the RGA, and covering a wide variety of geographic scales (resort, regional micro-territory, mountain massif) and areas (French and Spanish Pyrenees, Alps, Nepalese Himalayas), is firstly to assess tourism practices and their direct and indirect effects on mountain areas from a sustainability perspective, and secondly to analyse some explicit experiments in sustainable mountain tourism. The articles dealing with French case studies all bear witness, in their own way, to the maturation of a tourism development model in which the return on investment in major ski development projects, aimed at maintaining visitor levels, can only be achieved through the construction and marketing of new real estate programmes. Faced with this logic, which, it should not be forgotten, has provided financial input, increased levels of economic activity and job opportunities for certain mountain areas since France’s “Plan Neige” in the 1960s, almost half a century ago, the implementation of sustainable tourism principles seems to be having trouble in getting past the stage of a declaration of intentions in order to move on to even short-term operations, while often it is nothing more than a sort of “greenwashing”, valued from a communications viewpoint but careful not to interfere with the economic motor of the development model. Reality is stubborn: there is no type of tourism that does not have an effect on the physical and human environment in which it takes place, an observation that is perhaps even more true in mountain areas than elsewhere. As R. Knafo (2003) points out, the economic logic, in the strict sense of the term, of tourism development is clearly that of increasing visitor numbers⁴. For it to have any meaning, the notion of “carrying capacity” must be interpreted from an ecological point of view, as a threshold beyond which the short-term resistance of environments regularly frequented by tourists no longer operates, and not from an economic standpoint, as a hypothetical threshold beyond which survival of the tourism “resource” is in danger. The example of trekking in the Himalayas, where tourist flows, the effects of spatial concentration, the extent of tourism development projects and the development level of local societies have little in common with those of the Alps or Pyrenees, provides evidence of the possibilities of de facto convergence between moderation of the environmental impact of increasing visitor numbers and local socio-economic development. However, it does not invalidate the observation that the principles of sustainable development, under the aegis of the Nepalese state, are being mobilised with a view to consolidating the country’s tourism resources in terms of image, and thence communication strategies with regard to their clientele from the developed countries.
- 6 The change towards the sustainability of tourism forms and activities in high mountain areas does not therefore seem to follow on from an unconditional adherence of local

developers and managers, or even most clients, to the precepts of sustainable development. The effects of inertia resulting from deeply rooted mentalities, resistance resulting from situational advantages, and especially the undeclared, but implicit, continuing attachment to the cycle of heavy investment in sports facilities / increases in the number of visitor beds on which the “productivist” model of development⁵ is still based, all act as a brake on implementing stated intentions i.e. limitation on visitor numbers, protection of remarkable sites and environments, more restrictive management of urban development, recourse to renewable energy forms, treatment of waste and effluent, preservation of heritage and cultural identities, etc. Undoubtedly, for a real change of paradigm to take place, the pressure of external factors will have to definitively disqualify the preceding model from an economic standpoint. Among these factors are the change in visitors’ purchasing power (with regard to tourist services as well as real estate investment) and the constraints and additional costs induced by climate change, the impact of which is generally likely to be a reduction in both the overall amount and the regularity of snowfall. The scissors effect, which has already affected numerous small resorts – reduction in visitor numbers and turnover/ increase in operating and investment costs/ increase in financial risk in relation to new equipment and real estate programmes – can only heighten interest in less costly forms of development and make managers more attentive to the new expectations of the public mentioned in the article by Philippe Bourdeau (new forms of tourism practices, slow assertion of an environmental conscience). These articles also show, however, that it is not at all certain whether the change toward sustainable tourism in mountain areas will happen without strong political input, providing both regulatory and planning controls, and even going as far as to impose principles at the local scale (François & Marcelpoil, 2008).

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NOTES

1. Even though this trend has levelled off since the 1990s (Baron-Yellès, 1999)
2. Without being much more clearly defined, this neologism appeared well before the expression “sustainable tourism”, and refers, as early as the 1970s, to tourism phenomena of a diffuse nature with a limited impact on the physical environments and host societies with low carrying capacities, underpinned by “ecological” approaches respectful of the environment and local cultures. (Tardif, 2003).
3. www.european-charter.org

4. R. Knafou mentions *“the saying that is as famous as it is false: “too much tourism kills tourism”; false because until now at least (...) we don’t know of any examples of a tourist destination that has collapsed because of too many tourists (translation)”*.
5. Despite the frequent warnings issued, for a good quarter of a century, of its state of crisis and forthcoming collapse (Knafou, 1991).