

Adventure versus the Mountain

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As an Outdoor Pursuits instructor, first at Ogwen Cottage and latterly at Plas y Brenin, I have vehemently defended myself for some years against the charge that I, and others like me, are filling our tiny but precious mountains with youngsters who do not want to be there, and gain nothing by being there. Now I am beginning to have my doubts. It is a rare teenager who really enjoys the river as well as the rapid, the mountain as well as the climb. It is action, thrills, adventure that matter most, and rightly so at that age. These, we are being shown, can be provided as effectively in the city as in the hills; initially, at any rate.

A taste for landscape, for natural beauty, for wildness (as opposed to wilderness, which we do not have) is not innate in human beings, it is an educated response. It is a truism now, that mountains were usually feared and disliked, occasionally venerated, but certainly not enjoyed until the eighteenth century. The writings first of Rousseau, then of the Lakeland poets, of Ruskin, Thoreau and Jefferies, changed all that, but it is no coincidence that the early climbers were from the educated middle-class, often academics. It was not just a question of leisure and cash, it was the way they had learnt to look at mountains in an age of proliferating man-made ugliness. Today, the Romantic view of mountains permeates the pages of *Climber* and *Rambler*, but it is an educated attitude nonetheless, one that has been acquired through experience, talking and reading. The silence, the space, the solitude so valued by many, though admittedly not all, adult mountaineers, may be actually threatening to a youngster impelled into it from the heart of a city. He reacts by yelling raucously into an empty cwm, shattering with stones the mirror of an upland lake, and throwing aside his crisp packet and empty pop-can. Not only is there none of that 'sense of wonder, that most precious of gifts, the birthright of every child' that Shipton believed in, but for any other who had entered that cwm, like R. S. Thomas, 'on soft foot, breath held like a cap in the hand', the moment is destroyed and the place sullied.

Why a sense of wonder is so noticeably absent in inner-city groups, I do not know. It could be a total lack of familiarity with fields and woods, let alone mountains; or excessive exposure to the vicarious experience of television; or a protective shell grown against the innumerable hurts and failures of school. Maybe, as teenagers, they are just too grown-up and worldly-wise. I do not know. But repeated disappointment at the reaction of groups to the mountain ambience has led me to revise my attitude towards outdoor education. It is not so much a conviction that our approach has been wrong all along, as that it has become inappropriate. Things have changed since the outdoor pursuits boom of twenty years ago. On the one hand, government agencies like the CEGB, the Welsh Water Authority and the Forestry Commission, for all their glib assurances, have continued inexorably to build, plant and disfigure the landscape, and with their persistent demand for service roads, to whittle away the remoteness and effective

scale of our mountains. The jets and helicopters of the armed forces all too often render the 'peace of the hills' a hollow myth. On the other hand, the numbers of climbers, walkers and canoeists enjoying the mountains has multiplied staggeringly. This can only be a good thing, vindicating the existence of our National Parks. But these pressures combined, create a situation in which we can no longer afford to bring youngsters into the mountains unless they actively want to be there. Otherwise we will destroy completely the qualities for which we value mountains: we will kill the goose that lays the golden egg.

Yet the last three or four years have seen the growth of yet another source of pressure, a fresh invasion of the mountains. I am referring to YOP courses and the like. A good idea in themselves, they have been the salvation of many a struggling centre and the making of many an entrepreneur, so criticism is unlikely to be popular. But many youngsters attend only grudgingly, because otherwise they would not be paid, and the prime purpose of such courses is to provide a residential experience, which could be obtained effectively almost anywhere away from home. The educational benefit to largely unappreciative youngsters does not justify the environmental damage to our National Parks and other wild places. In Snowdonia, the litter on summits has, if anything, decreased, but through the clear waters of every lake, tin cans glitter and broken glass makes bathing hazardous. High camp-sites are betrayed from afar by rings of stones; closer inspection reveals a wider circle of blue Marvel sachets and poly bags, and in all probability a pile of rubbish shoved under a boulder. Even underground, in old mine workings, a powerful sense of recent history is diminished by a trail of sweet papers and torch batteries. Still, long crocodiles of bright orange anoraks and clusters of orange tents destroy the delicate but important illusion that the landscape is empty, or nearly so. And the impact of many an outdoor experience, be it on a mountain top or crag, or in a gorge or mine, is reduced by overcrowding as local centres and an increasing number of inner city groups flock to the same venues. Some blame must be attached to leaders and instructors. But really, the situation has been brought about by bringing youngsters, often against their will, to places that they care nothing for.

There is no doubt that for many an unemployed school-leaver the only prospect for positive living lies in a hobby or sport, and the potential of outdoor activities here is enormous. But expensive residentials are not the most effective way to spark off an enthusiasm, let alone sustain it. Rather than use the mountains as an outdoor gymnasium as we do at present, outdoor pursuits, adventure activities, call them what you will, should start in the city where they will cost relatively little, can involve greater numbers than heretofore, and can allow for continuity, progression and involvement with a project. Those who enjoy this introduction can progress to activities, with or without the acquiring of skills, in the 'urban fringe', the countryside accessible from the city. A visit to Snowdonia, or the Lakes, could be something of a climax to a period of training in general. It does not automatically follow, but often an awareness of the natural world develops alongside the acquisition of skills and a broadening of experience. Therein lies my hope, both for the mountains and for the youngsters concerned.

Instead of the one-off introductory courses that are their present bread and

butter, Local Education Authority centres would play a more useful role providing advanced courses for groups, not necessarily from schools, who already have the basic skills and really want to be there. Less than 1% of Birmingham's schoolchildren ever visit Ogwen Cottage. Most of that 1% enjoy themselves, but only a very small proportion appreciate the mountain setting; and the personal and social development that undoubtedly does take place, even in a week, could equally well occur nearer home. Terry Nicholls has been making this point for a long time and putting his ideas into practice in Sunderland. Others are now doing the same in London, Manchester, Nottingham, Liverpool, Birmingham, Edinburgh, and no doubt many other places. The Community Leaders' courses, instigated by Roger Orgill, which we have been running at Plas y Brenin for the last four years, must have added impetus to this movement, though being in the heart of Snowdonia they have always been anomalous, and would seem to be no longer necessary.

Such an approach is not elitist. It makes both the excitement and the multi-faceted education of outdoor pursuits available to far greater numbers yet makes it more likely that our fragile and dwindling inheritance of wild country is used by those who value it and treat it with respect. I am not suggesting that mountains be preserved for the privileged middle-class or for a mountaineering elite. On the contrary; I see them being more heavily used than ever. What I *am* suggesting is that we try to bring youngsters to the hills who are already on the way to being canoeists, climbers or hill-walkers, and confine adventure education to the neighbourhood of school or home, which is not, in fact, a great limitation. Wild and beautiful places are important for the well-being of our society: that is the *raison d'être* for our National Parks. My concern is for the inner city as much as for the mountain. What we are doing at the moment is of negligible benefit to the one and disastrous for the other.

