

CLIMBING ETHICS

ALPINE STYLE VS COMMERCIAL EXPEDITIONS

*The opening night of the Piolets d'Or included a discussion on Climbing Ethics. Here, mountain guide **Victor Saunders** expands on his contribution to that spirited debate.*

There are those who think commercial expeditions are unethical, that commercial expeditions should use alpine-style tactics, and that maybe they should not exist at all. I will show that this view is mistaken and that the ethical issue is in fact irrelevant; but before dealing with the so-called ethical issue, I wish to set aside the usual diversions that get mixed up in this discussion. There are three that I commonly hear:

First: Commercial expeditions bring too many people to the same mountain, by the same route. Well, to these people I say, if you have a romantic desire to find raw nature, go away and do new routes on unclimbed mountains. Let the wonderful climbs that have been nominated for this year's Piolets d'Or inspire you. It is not intelligent to do the normal route on Mont Blanc in August and complain that you are not alone.

Second: The environmental thing. Commercial expeditions typically go back to the same site year after year, and so it is in the operator's interest to keep camps clean and tidy for the next visit. Amateur expeditions rely solely on the good moral values of the climbers, because there are no other controls on them. By far the worst garbage I have seen in the mountains was left by a recent European amateur expedition with sponsorship. It included half burned Karrimats and lead-acid car batteries (see photos).



78.

No reputable commercial outfit could return to any campsite it left in such a state. Garbage left by a European 'amateur' expedition below Shishapangma.
(Victor Saunders)

This was nothing less than a desecration of one of the most beautiful bases under an 8000m mountain. No self-respecting commercial expedition would leave this kind of mess behind. Let us just agree that this kind of thing is completely unacceptable to all types of expeditions, amateur, sponsored and commercial.

Third: This diversion is surprising. I hear climbers say that commercial trips are dangerous. This seems to me to be a really strange one. Between

1970 and 1982, British expeditions trying new routes on 8000m peaks were losing climbers at a rate that would not be acceptable in the commercial world. No commercial enterprise would survive the litigation. On the other hand, there is no doubt that alpine-style climbing at high altitude is extremely dangerous; we just prefer to use the euphemisms 'serious' and 'committing'. We need to be honest about this. We need to accept that 'serious' and 'committing' are the very qualities we are somewhat romantically attached to in alpine-style climbing.

Let us set aside these diversions then and move on. For 'ethics' read 'rules of the game'. All climbing is just a game; it is governed by rules. The fact that people 'cheat' and/or get accused of 'cheating', proves the case that it is all about rules. Whether we follow the rules or break them is up to us. There is only one meta-rule here; do not lie if you have not followed the rules. That is almost the only really unforgivable sin in climbing.

As the game evolves so do the rules. The first recorded climbs had no recognized rules, though Moses did return with a nice set of commandments. The common ancestor of modern climbing is the first ascent of Mont Blanc, but it is not till almost 100 years later that we begin to see the idea of 'fair means' expressed by Alfred Mummery. By 1913 the great Paul Preuss was writing that all artificial aids are unethical in the game of rock climbing. Meanwhile, at the end of the 1800s bouldering had been invented by Oscar Eckenstein, its grading and rules to be redefined in the 1950s by John Gill. The use of pitons, bolts (invented in 1927), ice-screws, crampon heel-spurs, bottled oxygen, fixed ropes, porters, fixed camps and chalk have all been circumscribed by rules.

All of this reflects the evolution of climbing into differing and quite separate activities. We started with the same common ancestor, and now climbing has evolved into many species, each with its own rules. If you are bouldering, the rules for a hammerless ascent of The Nose are not relevant. On the other hand, it would be plain silly to say that because you have been bouldering, you are now no longer allowed to climb The Nose.

The corollary is, there is no contradiction in climbing with lightweight alpine-style rules on one expedition and guiding clients on a commercial trip with fixed ropes and camps the next. To say there is an ethical contradiction between alpine-style climbing and commercial expeditions is exactly equivalent to saying that a boulderer is not allowed to climb any other style; it's not that logical. If you have agreed with me so far, you will agree that the criticism of the ethics of commercial expeditions, by climbers following alternative rules is ultimately just an irrelevance.

And finally I must diverge from the strict tramlines of my argument to add something that is not predicated on the rules of the games. I believe in tolerance: we should keep to as light a footprint as possible and interfere with the other games as little as possible. If we accept these constraints and that one game does not negate another, we should tolerate other styles of climbing, even if we do not follow or delight in them. This would be a mark of the respect we owe to other climbers and to ourselves.