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COMMERCIALISATION AS A FACTOR OF MOUNTAINOUS AREAS DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract:

The article raises the issue of commercialisation which has affected mountainous areas. It presents the opinions on commercial expeditions of Polish Himalayan mountaineers gathered in interviews with them. Selected mountainous areas were characterised in terms of tourist infrastructure development and organisation of mountain expeditions. Aconcagua peak is an example where a dynamic development of services and tourist infrastructure development is observed together with a clear systematic increase in prices of mountaineering permits.

Introduction

The organisation of commercial expeditions started in the 1980s in the US. Then David Breashers achieved renown for leading businessman Richard Bass onto the highest peak of the Earth in 1985. This was a turning point in the history of Himalayan expeditions, which inspired many Himalayan mountaineers. They saw potential financial benefits from organising expeditions and leading clients onto various peaks of the world. Such a big number of climbers and tourists resulted in building tourist infrastructure facilities in mountainous areas. In numerous countries guide agencies and associations for the organisation of mountain expeditions started to appear.

1. Methods, literature overview

The issues of high mountains have frequently been discussed in literature, however mainly within the scope of interest of earth studies. The impact of tourist activity on various components of the natural environment was mainly studied in naturally diverse areas (including Byers, 2005, Byers, 2009, Cunha, 2010, Edwards, 1977, Farrell & Jeffrey, 2001, Karan, 1985, Marek & Zienkiewicz, 2013, Stevens, 2003).

An important issue on the highest peaks was presented by Apollo who attributed pollution of the natural environment with wastes and faeces to tourist activity (2010, 2011, 2014). Mountain trails, especially in the area of Mount Everest are analysed too. Changes resulting from tourist activity are often visible on them. Research indicates correlation between tourists and trail degradation (Nepal & Nepal 2003, Nepal 2003).

Literature in the scope of medical sciences is also rich. The impact of altitude above the sea level on human organism has been studied frequently. The studies gave grounds for analyses of the causes and effects of the acute mountain sickness (AMS).

The problem of high mountain expeditions in sociological scope is covered by many publications. Motives of climbing and high mountain tourism were analysed among others by Taher and Jamal, 2012, or Domicelj, 2003. The least interest has been given to the aspects directly related to tourist infrastructure development and diversity of tourist activity in the area of mountain massifs. These issues were raised by Łojek, 2008, Marek, 2012 and others.

In this publication, interviews were used as one of the methods. These were carried out among Polish Himalayan mountaineers in order to find out their opinions on commercial expeditions.

2. Commercialisation according to Himalayan mountaineers

Commercialisation has become very desirable in view of the economic development of regions. It has contributed to raising the standard of living of local population and has driven economy (jobs in new accommodation, catering, transport facilities). However, commercialisation has had a negative effect on mountainous environment by too drastic interference of technical infrastructure in the natural environment. Commercialisation is also related to a sociological background as expedition groups often include participants lacking appropriate skills, preparation and knowledge, which increases the number of accidents.

Most Polish mountaineers have negative opinions about the phenomenon of commercial high mountain expeditions. According to Andrzej Zawada “Commercial expeditions during which organisers lead clients onto Everest for money have become a new phenomenon. I would like to know what the proportion there is of high motives and plain snobbery. Can one be satisfied with climbing Everest as merely a passive client, being given oxygen by an accompanying assistant? Those are not mountain people, they are not happy with the very presence in the mountains. They want everything at once and take shortcuts. They are ready to pay any sum to facilitate and guarantee the ascent. And this is impossible, hence they sometimes pay for their ambitions and naïve notions with their own life.” (Matuszewska 2003). Piotr Pustelnik claimed that „commercial expeditions (...) have shown that without experience but with organisational skills one can afford the Himalayas, providing they have money and someone to go with. The degree of self-reliance of participants is inversely proportional to the degree of commercialisation. The more commercial an expedition the lower the self-reliance of the participants. The more self-reliant the expedition, the less commercial it is” (Interview with Piotr Pustelnik, Łódź, 1 December 2006). According to mountaineer Marek Głogoczowski commercial expeditions are a natural consequence of civilisation development: “The client demands so they have to try hard. A bit like prostitution. Some things are done for love and some for money” (Interview with Marek Głogoczowski, Słupsk, 4 February 2007.)

Few Polish mountaineers have positive opinions about this phenomenon which has functioned on the Polish market for a few years. “This is a trend like in everything else. There is commercial diving and if someone has got the money, is fit and does not want to go all the way from the beginning to the end and does not want to call himself a great Himalayan mountaineer, then fine, let them go. It should only be emphasised that it is not great Himalayan

mountaineering – just treading the beaten track” (Interview with Joanna Piotrowicz, Konradów, 24 October 2006). Krzysztof Wielicki is of a similar opinion. He believes that commercial expeditions do not make history of mountaineering. They enhance personal experience, at the very most. “A Kowalski or Brown is glad to have climbed Mount Everest. It cannot be forbidden. It is as if only professional anglers were allowed to go fishing” (Kamrowska, 2003).

3. Commercialisation of selected mountainous areas

The dynamically developing tourist and climbing activity in the area of Aconcagua Massif has brought about a network of institutions specialising in organising expeditions and services for mountaineers and tourists. These are private agencies which offer complex services to individual tourists as well as organised groups in the scope of transport, accommodation, catering, guiding, assistance in obtaining permits, expedition equipment rental (tents, heaters, clothes, crampons, ice axes, trekking poles etc.), porter services to altitude camps, etc. Commercialisation is visible especially on peaks which belong to the so-called Seven Summits. In the mountainous areas of Aconcagua, Mount Blanc and Mount Everest, infrastructure is adapted to satisfy the most demanding clients. For example, the Aconcagua Provincial Park area is served by 18 mountain agencies, of which as many as 16 occupy the main camp Plaza de Mulas (table 1).

TAB. 1: Operations of mountain agencies in Aconcagua Provincial Park area

No.	Mountain agency	Confluencia	Plaza de Mulas	Plaza Argentina	number				
					porters, drovers	rental	camp service	porters	
1	Aconcagua Expeditions				13	2	16	12	
2	Aconcagua Express S.A.				6	0	2	1	
3	Aconcagua Trek and Puquios				6	0	2	0	
4	Andesport				1	0	4	0	
5	Turismo Aymara				12	1	12	21	
6	Base Camp Travel & Adventure				1	0	2	1	
7	Cumbres Argentinas (Summit Argentinas)				1	1		0	
8	Daniel Lopez Expeditions				0	1	1	2	
9	Juan Herrera Expediciones & Trekking				0	2	2	1	
10	Geotrek				0	1		3	
11	Viajes Ghisolfi (Azimut 360 Travel)				0	2	3	1	
12	Fernando Grajales S.A.				13	3	9	12	
13	Inka Expediciones				0	1	2	0	
14	Lanko Altas Montañas				4	2	6	3	
15	Mallku Expediciones				2	1	1	2	
16	Mdq Expediciones By Nuestra Tierra				0	0		0	
17	Pared Sur (South Wall)				1	1	1	0	
18	Xperience Aconcagua				0	0		0	

Source: Marek, 2012.

Fees and permits have been introduced for climbers and trekkers in the Aconcagua Massif area. They depend on the type of mountain activity and duration of stay (table 2).

TAB. 2: Fees for permits for mountain activity in Aconcagua Massif

Type of mountain activity	Length of stay (days)	Price in UD dollars								
		Season 2007/2008			Season 2011/2012			Season 2015/2016		
		low	medium	high	low	medium	high	low	medium	high
Climbing	20	85	175	250	300	550	700	582	582	800
Long trekking	7	38	38	50	165	165	200	204	204	233
Short trekking	3	25	25	38	95	95	103	102	102	116

Low season: 15-30 November and 21 February - 15 March, medium season: 1-14 December and 1-20 February, high season: 15 December - 31 January.

Source: Own study on the basis of Marek, 2012, <http://www.aconcaguaexpeditions.com> (10.11.2015)

On the basis of the field research performed by the author during the expedition to the Aconcagua peak at the turn of January and February 2008, 240 small tents and 87 large tents were observed. Large tents function as warehouses of equipment, kitchens, canteens as well as accommodation for organised groups. The permanent objects of the Plaza de Mulas main camp include: a medical point, rangers point and a 20-bed mountain hotel Refugio Plaza de Mulas (Łojek, 2008).

As for Mont Blanc Massif there are no legal regulations concerning the mountaineering, trekking and tourist activity. This area can be seen as adequately developed in terms of accommodation. In the French and Italian parts of the Massif there are 26 mountain hotels including shelters which provide emergency accommodation in case of weather break. The sub-mountainous area is linked with many mountain railway routes which facilitates area exploration. Very intense mountaineering and tourist activity has brought about the establishment of numerous mountain agencies located in villages adjacent to the Massif. They offer complex services in the scope of guiding, transport, mountain equipment rental etc. A lack of statistics makes it very difficult to estimate the number of people visiting the Massif.

Mount Everest peak, due to its location, still has difficult access. However, numerous firms and agencies have contributed to the improvement of the most difficult fragments of the mountain. Ladders and ropes have been installed on the glacier to aid passage and improve safety. The landscape of Mount Everest is being increasingly transformed, not only due to the use of artificial support in glacier crevasses but also in higher parts. A significant and growing problem of the recent several years is the pollution of the environment by many expeditions, which various ecological organisations are trying to tackle. At the mountain foot there is a camp occupied sometimes by several thousand people daily. Several tens of mountain agencies were established in Nepal offering services to tourists.

Conclusion

The intensification of tourist activity has been very noticeable on peaks which belong to the so-called Seven Summits. The interest in mountain expeditions has contributed to the establishing of appropriate accommodation and communication infrastructure, which has led to negative

changes in the mountainous landscape. In many areas the destructive impact of expeditions on the natural environment can be seen (solid and liquid waste, treading on vegetation). The participants of commercial expeditions are often inexperienced, lacking the ability to use equipment, foresee danger and unfamiliar with the terrain. Such a situation poses a threat to other people undertaking mountain activity. Another negative aspect of commercialisation are high prices for services related to organisation of expeditions or stay. An advantage of commercial activity is sometimes an improvement of the economic situation of the inhabitants of nearby villages and an inflow of money to stage budget or various institutions. The interest in the mountains has contributed to the establishment of numerous mountain firms and agencies in different parts of the world which organise expeditions for fees.

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