

Mountains : our Alps are at risk

Autor(en): **Crivelli, Pablo**

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tourists, eco-tourism is an important element of domestic tourism." An additional financial potential of 10 to 40 percent is estimated over the next ten years. With this in mind, the government is supporting initiatives to create landscape parks, biosphere reserves and similar projects, and is in the process of designing a seal of quality for eco-tourism. Willy Geiger, Vice Director of the Federal Office for Environment, Forests and Landscape, is convinced that "The planned labelling system for natural and

landscape parks will provide better information on Switzerland's tourist offerings". The government plans to recognise only nature parks which are based on regional initiatives and enjoy cantonal support. The hallmarks of eco-tourism are: regional added value, promotion of public transport, care and preservation of ecologically fragile regions, and unique offerings. Yet at least some environmentalists are sceptical, and worry that this will launch a tourist onslaught on the last vestiges of unspoiled natural landscape.

Jürg Schmid, Director of the Swiss Tourist Board, disagrees: "On the contrary. The trend is in a different direction. According to the findings of the seco study, everyone now understands how important it is to keep Nature intact. Unspoiled landscapes are the basic capital for the entire sector. So we must and will do everything to protect it." 

Translated from the German

Our Alps are at risk

PABLO CRIVELLI


Greenhouse effect, mass tourism and road traffic pollution are threatening a globally unique ecosystem. People, too, are suffering.

IMAGINE IF, in another fifty years, Swiss glaciers were nothing but a memory, or a gigantic landslide had buried the Grisons community of Pontresina and erased it from the map. These are no futuristic hypotheses, but scenarios projected by experts concerned about the future of the Alps. Their prognosis is bleak, and they place the blame for endangering this ecosystem squarely on Man.

While the effects of human activity on nature used to be moderate, the situation changed dramatically in the last decades of the 20th century. Mass tourism and increased strain on the environment (including noise pollution) caused by the transit of international goods traffic through the Alps are inexorably taking their toll on the health of a globally unique habitat – a region which is home to thousands of flora and fauna, some of which are threatened with extinction. Yet it is not only insects and plants that are at risk. Noise and environmental pollution are also directly affecting human health.

Some risks are less evident but just as real nonetheless. Permafrost, the permanent

layer of frost which covers at least five percent of Switzerland's territory and for centuries has protected alpine communities from landslides, is slowly melting. This phenomenon is attributable to global warming caused by the rise in CO₂ emissions from industrial activity, motorised traffic and heating systems. This pollutant is also responsible for the marked regression of Swiss glaciers, clearly visible to the naked eye. The most pessimistic forecasts predict that Swiss glaciers may disappear by 2050–2100, resulting in unforeseeable consequences to humans and the economy.

After much resistance, therefore, the residents of Pontresina decided to build a protective wall on the slopes above the village. The growing instability of slopes due to melting permafrost, coupled with the lower frequency and greater intensity of rainfalls (another "secondary" consequence of climate warming), could send parts of the mountain sliding down to the valley floor. The risk is not immediate and has never yet become a reality. But it is better to prepare for it in good time. 

Translated from the German.



The mountain reflected by the modern world.