

Global Geotourism Perspectives



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A Perspective on Rock Climbers, Scramblers and Hill Walkers

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A Perspective on Rock Climbers, Scramblers and Hill Walkers

John Watson

Introduction

The mid-19th century heralded a wave of mountain tourism in the European Alps. This was led predominantly by English adventurers such as Alfred Wills, Lord Francis Douglas and Edward Whymper. All of the 4000-m high peaks around Zermatt and around many other centres throughout the Alps were ascended during this so-called 'Golden Age of Mountaineering' from 1850–65, the latter year being when the famous Matterhorn was eventually climbed, but with tragic loss of life (Whymper, 1871). During this period, Queen Victoria and many of her subjects regarded mountaineering as a controversial and 'dangerous eccentricity' (Ward, 1966). Almost a hundred years later, however, Queen Elizabeth II awarded Tenzing Norgay the George Medal and Edmund Hillary and John Hunt knighthoods for their 'first ascent' of Mount Everest in 1953.

Now, almost another 60 years after the ascent of Everest, rock climbers and mountaineers continue to be drawn as tourists to mountains and rock faces, not only in the European Alps and the Himalayas, but throughout the world, in their hundreds of thousands each year. Furthermore, rock faces need not be solely associated with mountains. They commonly occur in a number of geological settings including within river gorges, on cliff line escarpments and at sea level as coastal cliffs. Indeed, there are mountains or suitable rock faces for rock climbing in all continents and nearly all countries.

Whilst several adventure sports also come into close contact with rocks and geological features, notably caving and canyoning, the focus of this chapter is on the climbing and walking activities and, in particular, rock climbing, scrambling, hill walking and some more committing variants of hill walking including extreme walking and long distance trails.

There is an extensive literature associated with these outdoor activities ranging from personal accounts of exploration and achievements through to a myriad of practical guidebooks in both hard copy and electronic format. Whereas the 'environmentally educative' component normally associated with

geotourism may appear to be somewhat limited in these activities per se, the secondary educational 'spin-off' through such publications is extensive and frequently highly inspirational to others in both a visual (through pictures) and a descriptive sense.

There is no indication that the participation levels, whether undertaken privately or through commercial operator services, is likely to decrease. For example, all of these activities are now increasingly available through commercial guided holiday packages, subject of course to an acceptable level of participant physical fitness and the use of appropriate safety measures including correct clothing and footwear. They are also frequently available through youth and training organizations, mainly targeting young people, however these are generally not conducted in a tourism context.

As the number of participants in these challenging outdoor activities has increased from the mere handful a couple of centuries ago to the millions of participants today, so too there has been a significant increase in resultant environmental impacts especially through unnatural escalation of erosional processes and loss of the sense of 'wildness' in more popular areas. This in turn has led to new challenges for land managers, particularly within protected areas such as national parks where biodiversity conservation, landscape protection, wilderness preservation and visitor safety issues all rank very highly in management responsibility.

Later in this chapter an attempt will be made to provide a simple comparative analysis of the various attributes of rock climbing, scrambling, hill walking and long distance walking in the context of their different degrees of 'geocentricity', their potential for an increased level of geo-interpretation, their inherent safety risks and their erosional impacts, together with some comments on potential management responses.

Such an analysis is very generalized and quite subjective, being largely based on the author's experience as a participant in these activities over some 50 years in a limited number of countries and his associated protected area management experience of over 30 years in Western Australia. It does nevertheless illustrate some fundamental differences between the various climbing and walking activities in the context of geotourism and provides a simple management tool which could easily be modified for local circumstances elsewhere.

Perspectives on the geotourism–recreation–sport spectrum

Rock climbing

On a rock climb the climbers face the rock at eye level, feeling the rock with every move, crossing subtle changes in the strata and seeing the rocks and world around from a perspective that most people never experience....and they are

Chapter extract

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