PROS AND CONS OF TOURISM GROWTH

WHILE a rapid growth in eco-tourism in and around Nepal's Sagarmatha (Everest) National Park has helped alleviate poverty in certain areas, it is threatening the preservation of this Himalayan region's environment and culture.

Now a unique project has been launched in the Khumbu region to encourage trekkers to follow a Sacred Sites Route which will benefit isolated communities outside the main tourism loop — Page 2.

The Brazilian Pantanal, considered to be the world's largest freshwater wetland, could disappear by 2050 if deforestation continues at the present rate. Environmentalists are urging Brazilian legislators to better enforce habitat preservation regulations and help create more protected land — Page 4.

How do we rate the visitor-value performance of national parks? If there was a measure, Australian-based biologist Andy Donnelly believes Torres del Paine in Chilean Patagonia would score highly — Page 14.

John Farrington concludes his two-part report on Central Asia's Tian Shan mountain range with a warning that many human activities are posing problems for biodiversity conservation — Page 16.

Other articles in this issue feature Sweden's Soderasen National Park, Europe's largest protected broadleaf forest; the creation of Ascension Island's first national park; plans go forward for Northern Ireland's first national park; Australian and Canadian rangers exchange places; sustainable tourism charter awarded to first English protective area and moves to save rainforest in British Columbia.
HOW TOURISM CAN HELP ISOLATED COMMUNITIES

A unique project in the Khumbu region will encourage trekkers to follow a new Sacred Sites route to benefit isolated communities outside the main tourism loop.

A report by ANG RITA SHERPA, Senior Himalaya Programme Manager, and SARAH SUBBA, Programme Development Manager, who are based at The Mountain Institute's Kathmandu office.

TREKKING, more than any other type of tourism, benefits local communities because it injects money directly into rural areas. Properly handled, trekking can play an important role in poverty alleviation through jobs for guides and porters, and business for lodges and restaurants along the trails.

But trekking and tourism also isolate sections of the poor, mainly benefiting the already privileged segments of society. Communities living in and around tourist destinations often remain neglected. There is also the worrying impact of mass tourism on the environment and culture of trekking destinations.

This is where community-based ecotourism comes in: motivating local people to tackle the threats and problems associated with tourism, livelihood and conservation. It also poses the question of how tourism can inspire local people to retain their cultural assets and protect the environment.

A form of community-based ecotourism is currently being tried out in the Khumbu region, where villagers are actively engaged in natural and cultural heritage conservation. The aim is to reduce trekking’s ecological and cultural footprint while maximising its benefit for marginalised communities.

Sagarmatha National Park, gazetted in 1976, is one of Nepal’s two most visited national parks and is of global cultural and environmental importance. The region saw 3,600 trekkers in 1979 and by 2001 the numbers had soared to nearly 22,000, putting the ecological equilibrium which existed in the park area for centuries under increasing strain.

Trekking tourism has helped boost the local economy and standard of living with better health care, education and housing. But it has also degraded the region’s fragile ecology and cultural traditions. Moreover, the benefits of trekking tourism are not distributed equally throughout the park, as many areas remain culturally and economically isolated.

Trekking tourism has not led to the preservation of the region’s vibrant culture. Economic benefits have taken precedence over the conservation of natural and cultural sacred sites. Many groves, trees, water sources and caves that are regarded as holy are being neglected. The rich oral traditions, rituals, dances, clothes, folklore and stories are not properly documented and are suffering erosion.

In 2003 a unique project, the ‘Sacred Sites Trail in Khumbu Region’, was launched. This community-based tourism initiative tries to integrate multi-themed conservation needs, diversify tourism benefits and preserve cultural values in different stages of development.

At a time when indigenous culture is under increasing threat from encroachment of modern civilisation, loss of livelihood opportunities and Maoist conflict, the hope lies in replicating strategies like the Sacred Sites Trail in other parts of Nepal as well. Already a ‘Sacred Himalayan Landscape’ project encompassing national parks and biodiversity regions — from Langtang, north of Kathmandu, to the eastern slopes of Kanchenjunga in Sikkim — is being proposed to conserve the cultural, religious and environmental treasures of the eastern Himalaya.

At a ‘Sacred Himalayan Landscape in Nepal’ conference last year, participants said that traditional conservation measures taken to safeguard biodiversity alone are inadequate; the goal should also be to preserve the cultures and traditions that nurture and revere nature.

And once local communities are mobilised to preserve traditional value systems, culture and religion, the environment is automatically protected. After all, only by strengthening society’s moorings can society benefit from protecting the environment from tourism.

Khumbu Glacier: the view towards Everest Base Camp.
FOR INSTITUTE DIRECTOR

THE Mountain Institute’s Director of Research and Education, Dr Alton C. Byers, recently received the prestigious David Brower Conservation Award from the American Alpine Club.

A mountain geographer who has worked for more than 30 years to protect mountain ecosystems and improve the livelihoods of mountain people worldwide, Byers’ work in the Everest region of Nepal was highly praised by Peter Ackroyd, chairman of the Alpine Club’s International Conservation Committee.

He said: “Dr Byers strongly believes that the education, involvement and commitment of the local population is key to the success of any project, and the Khumbu Alpine Conservation Council is a testament to his ability to inspire a community to take control.”
A senior monk presents a participatory planning scheme for the Sacred Sites Trail.

ALPINE ZONE PROTECTION

ANOTHER important project involving the local community in the Sagarmatha (Everest) National Park is the Khumbu Alpine Conservation Council (KACC), a Sherpa-led NGO established in 2003. Committed to the conservation and restoration of the park’s fragile alpine ecosystem, KACC is the first alpine conservation council in Nepal endeavouring to improve the working conditions of the thousands of porters who work with tourists in the region.

A recently awarded US $50,000 grant from the UNDP Small Grants Programme will strengthen the capacities of KACC members in project management, fundraising and project monitoring. It will also co-finance a range of activities over the next two years which include the development of education programmes, small enterprise development, shrub juniper and medicinal plant nurseries, demonstration enclosures, a series of workshops to improve porter working conditions and porter rest-house restoration.

The formation of KACC was based on the long-term research of The Mountain Institute that found the Everest alpine zone to be a comparatively neglected but heavily impacted ecosystem, concluding that most impacts were related to unregulated adventure tourism over the past 20-30 years.

In its first two years of operation, KACC banned the harvesting of all shrub juniper used for fuel in tourist lodges, resulting in an annual saving of 80,000 kg/79 tons of juniper shrubs. A kerosene and stove depot was established to provide alternative fuel for trekking groups, a porters’ rest house was renovated in Lobuche and a 5,000 seedling capacity nursery was established in Shomare.

The project’s long-term goal is to take the models and successes developed by the KACC to other impacted high-altitude sites around the world.

* For more information, or to make a contribution to both the Sacred Sites Trail and Everest Alpine Restoration projects, contact Alton C. Byers: abyers@mountain.org or Ang Rita: Sherpa-angrita@mountain.org

brazil

THE Brazilian Pantanal — considered to be the world’s largest freshwater wetland — may disappear by 2050 if deforestation continues at the present rate, according to a report by Conservation International.

The area of land affected by deforestation has quadrupled in recent years, largely due to increased agriculture and grazing. An alarming 17% of the original vegetation has already been lost in the region, which lies to the south of the Amazon basin close to the borders with Bolivia and Paraguay.

The Pantanal, a Brazilian National Heritage site which comprises an area of some 2,410,000 sq km/930,500 sq miles, is a fragile and naturally fragmented ecosystem. It is recognised as an internationally important wildlife sanctuary for large populations of species including howler monkey, capybara, caiman and butterflies.

Floodwaters from tributaries of the Paraguay River annually expand to cover more than 200,000 sq km/77,200 sq miles of grass savannah during the rainy season between October and March, then drain away leaving the area waterless for much of the dry season.

In addition to critical habitats for a diverse and highly concentrated array of vegetation and wildlife, the Pantanal’s hydrological system supports and provides invaluable ecosystem services to local communities such as water purification, nutrient storage, sediment trapping, flood control, storm protection and climate stabilisation.

Monica Barcellos Harris, director of CI’s Pantanal Programme, said: “The devastation of the Pantanal can already be seen. Deforestation in the headwaters of the Taquari, a tributary of the Paraguay River, has caused erosion and silting which in turn has permanently flooded hundreds of farms downstream. Many of these farmers have lost their livelihoods.” A dramatic decline in fish populations has also had a major impact on local fisheries and river communities.

Harris, the principal author of the report Estimated Loss of Natural Area in the High Paraguay River Basin and the Brazilian Pantanal, said: “We have made several key recommendations, one of which is to revise Brazilian legislation to better enforce regulations. We are
The Pantanal: considered to be the world's largest freshwater wetland.

WETLAND FINDS ENVIRONMENTAL SUPPORTERS

also appealing to local, state and national governments to help create more protected land. The report is the result of many months' work. It takes quite a few months to prepare the satellite image and at least another couple of months to evaluate the results and write them up."

Currently, only small areas of the Pantanal are protected, including a cluster of UNESCO World Heritage Sites and proposals for a conservation corridor along the wetland's major tributaries, encompassing the Brazilian Cerrado biodiversity hotspot.

More than 99% of the wetland is privately owned and primarily used for cattle ranching. Commercial logging and mining activities are also prevalent in the region, and new government incentives may soon attract more steel producers. Charcoal production is also cited in the report as a cause for concern. Industry in the Pantanal remains mostly unregulated, and those regulations which are in place are inadequately enforced.

"Only 30% of the Pantanal is covered by forest, so the current deforestation rate and the pressure to produce charcoal will definitely put it under further pressure," said Harris. "Grasslands are easier to convert to exotic pastures, and when they are not converted they are managed by fire to produce palatable grasses for the cattle. Populations of bird species dependent on grassland areas for reproduction will most likely decline. Erosion and siltig of the wetlands will also have a large impact on endangered top predator species such as giant otters, which depend on river banks for habitat and fish for their diet.

"Fish populations are declining because of river pollution and silt ing, and the resulting impact on nursery areas. There is currently a big debate about whether overfishing is a problem, and if the population decline is due to overfishing or normal low wet cycles that result in less productivity."

Brazilian law requires landowners to protect all natural vegetation surrounding rivers and lakes, and an additional 20% or more of their property in the case of the Pantanal. Known as 'permanent protected areas' and 'legal reserves', these areas could - in theory - safeguard vast areas of the Pantanal. However, annual floods make it difficult to demarcate the land and, due to inadequate law enforcement, some owners continue to clear land.

Conservation International is supporting a private programme which awards small grants to landowners who wish to conserve areas of their land beyond the required 20%. Based on their proximity to protected areas, the number of endangered and critically endangered species on their land and other criteria, funding is offered to help offset the costs of either creating a new protected area or managing an existing one.

Horse riding is one of the activities attracting ecotourism to parts of the Pantanal.
Views like this may have disappeared by 2050.

This has encouraged some landowners to set up environmental education and awareness programmes and ecotourism activities on the protected portions of their land.

“Ecotourism has already become a leading economic alternative for many local landowners,” said Harris. “However, the industry could benefit from government incentives. It is difficult to obtain a licence to operate a tourist lodge through a process that can take more than one year compared to a three-month waiting period to obtain a licence to log or clear the land.

“According to the Brazilian government industrialisation of the Pantanal is imminent, but the environmental community is coming together and challenging state governors to rethink the development model being proposed. Safeguarding the area is possible, but it will require the engagement of all stakeholders.”

CI has also explored the economic opportunities of organic production as another sustainable alternative in the Pantanal. Preliminary research shows that raising cattle organically (with certification), without clearing the land and by using native grasses, could aggregate up to 25% more than the current value.

Monica Barcellos Harris was raised not far from the fragile ecosystem she now works to protect. Her love and respect for nature is something she learned from her parents and grandparents who took her on family holidays in the Pantanal when she was a child. Her great-great grandfather was one of the earliest settlers in the Pantanal, arriving in 1895 in the Nhêcolândia region, where her family still live.

She started as a CI contractor in 1998 after taking a zoology degree at Reading University (UK) and attaining a Master’s degree in Aquatic Resource Management from King’s College, London. Before joining CI full-time in 2000 she investigated relevant stakeholder groups and economics in the Pantanal region in preparation for the establishment of more fully developed conservation priorities and strategies.

She is particularly proud of her work on the Social Jaguar Programme — with partners the Jaguar Conservation Fund (JCF) — which has benefited many landowners and secured more than 300,000 hectares/1,150 sq miles of private land to form Brazil’s first private reserve for jaguars.

As the savannah and forest roamed by these big cats have become smaller and more fragmented, ranchers have become more worried by cattle predation. Now, under the programme, 11 ranches in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul have undertaken to safeguard jaguars on their land and in return are entitled to compensation for lost cattle when evidence of jaguar predation is proved.

The programme also provides free medical and dental services to ranchers, their families and employees who in the dry season face a drive of up to 10 hours on muddy roads to seek medical assistance in the nearest town of Aquidauana. In the rainy season their only option is to fly — hardly affordable for the great majority.

In partnership with medical teams from the University for Development of the Pantanal Region, JCF and CI provide these services twice yearly at the CI lodge and research centre at Fazenda Rio Negro run by Harris, who said:

“Protecting this area is more than just a job for me. I want my children and their children to see the Pantanal the way I saw it as a child. It’s all about preserving biodiversity for the future.”

*The Pantanal has been recognised by UNESCO as a biosphere reserve. The World Heritage Site is a complex of four protected areas: the Pantanal National Park and three private reserves of 187,819 hectares/725 sq miles. Website: whc.unesco.org/en/list/999

Hyacinth macaws are part of the Pantanal’s rich wildlife.
ascension island

CREATING A NATIONAL PARK ON A REMOTE OUTPOST

by SIMON EMSON

IT is almost a year since Ascension Island’s first national protected area, Green Mountain National Park, was declared open. In addition to the island’s remote location, the national park is unusual in that it is essentially a man-made environment.

Introduced species are protected alongside the few remaining endemics, while consideration also needs to be given to the small but growing numbers of eco-tourists and other visitors to the island.

The small volcanic island of Ascension lies approximately eight degrees south of the Equator in the middle of the South Atlantic Ocean and covers an area of around 90 sq km/35 sq miles. The UK overseas territory has no permanent population but accommodates around 1,000 employees of the various military and communications organisations based on the island.

Much of Ascension is covered by basalt lava flows and cinder cones and, apart from the introduced invasive Mexican thorn, there is very limited vegetation. The exception to this is the island’s aptly named summit, Green Mountain, which rises to a height of 859 metres/2,818 feet.

When Ascension was first settled in 1815, the island was extremely arid, with vegetation only on the highest slopes of Green Mountain — mostly ferns, mosses and some grasses. However, in the 1840s hundreds of new species were introduced from around the world and planted on the mountain in order to induce more rainfall. The plan succeeded and the result has been to create a small tropical cloud forest, from scratch, in about 150 years. There is now a massive diversity of flora ranging from prickly pear, casuarina, eucalyptus and Norfolk pines through guava, green aloe, coffee, bananas, gorse and ginger up to a forest of bamboo adorning the peak.

In addition to this wide variety of vegetation, Green Mountain is also home to some interesting fauna. For instance, the curious and colourful land crab is an indigenous species which inhabits burrows dug into the cool, damp slopes of the mountain and which only occasionally ventures down to the sea to breed. Another example is the fairy tern, a most inquisitive seabird which prefers the mountain’s inland cliff ledges and tree perches to the island’s rugged, barren coast.

There is also a great deal of historical interest, with various engineering schemes and constructions associated with the past quest for water, including a 300 m/985 foot-long tunnel dug in the 1830s to enable collected rainwater to be pumped through the mountain.

The conventional way to view the introduced vegetation on Green Mountain would be to consider it a conservation disaster. Indeed, the botanist Joseph Hooker, who recommended the introductions, later wrote: “The consequences to the native vegetation of the peak will, I fear, be fatal, and especially to the rich carpet of ferns that clothed the mountain.” Certainly if the original vegetation still survived, ecologists and conservationists would abhor anything other than preservation.
However, the current Green Mountain ecosystem is itself scientifically interesting and is unusual in the variety of species and habitats found within such a small area. Although very much a man-made environment, it is considered just as deserving of protection as other, more 'natural' areas of the Island.

The national park encompasses the whole of Green Mountain and covers an area of approximately nine sq km/3.4 sq miles. The park is seen as a pilot scheme for a host of other proposed protected areas on Ascension, and one of its main aims was to raise public awareness — not just for Green Mountain but also for the local environment in general. The creation of the national park was also a major step in implementing a detailed management plan drawn up for Green Mountain. As with all environmental initiatives on Ascension, the plan adheres to the island's environment charter, a set of commitments agreed by the UK and Ascension Island governments.

Funding for the implementation of the plan was provided by the UK government's Overseas Territories Environment Programme (OTEP), a joint programme of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development to support the implementation of environment charters in the UK overseas territories.

Before a national park on Green Mountain could be created, legislation enabling such a designation first needed to be enacted, as formally protected areas such as this are a new concept for the island. Three categories of national protected area are now provided for: national park, nature reserve and wildlife sanctuary. Green Mountain National Park was subsequently designated by a legal order, with local bylaws set out in associated regulations, and the park was officially opened with organised public events on June 25 and 26, 2005. Management of the national park has so far been undertaken by the Ascension Island government conservation department; however, while this is likely to continue in terms of day-to-day matters, it is planned to set up and transfer strategic control of the park to an independent management committee.

One of the most positive achievements so far, as a result of dedicated work undertaken by conservation staff and volunteers, has been the successful propagation and reintroduction of some of the mountain's threatened endemic species. Special nurseries have been created and areas have been

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**The dew pond, complete with water lilies, marking the bamboo forest on the slopes of Green Mountain.**

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**ocean acidity**

**CARBONIC ACID Threatens Marine Life**

NEW studies into man's impact on the oceans have found that increased carbon dioxide emissions are raising levels of carbonic acid in the sea and as oceans become more acidic this could result in a mass extinction of marine life.

Professor Ken Caldeira, of the Carnegie Institution's Global Ecology Department, told the American Geophysical Union's ocean sciences conference in Hawaii that huge volumes of carbon dioxide being released by humans are dissolving into the oceans so fast that coral reefs and shellfish are at risk. The shells of coral, crabs, oysters and mussels dissolve in acid and, as the oceans become more acidic, they may become unable to build and repair their shells.

He said that the current rate of carbon dioxide input was nearly 50 times higher than normal. In less than 100 years the pH measure of alkalinity of the oceans could drop from its natural level of 8.2 to about 7.7, and this would mark a huge change in ocean chemistry.

Similar findings were contained in a report published by Ospar, the inter-governmental organisation set up by northern European countries to monitor the state of the North Sea and North Atlantic.

One of its authors, Carol Turley of Plymouth Marine Laboratory, said: “This issue is emerging as one of the most serious environmental threats humanity has faced. The oceans are acidifying very rapidly and many marine organisms are at risk.”

An estimated 23 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide are emitted annually by human activities such as power generation, air travel and car use, and about half of these emissions are absorbed by the world's oceans.

Acidification can also alter the amount of oxygen dissolved in sea water, and the Ospar report warned that fast-swimming creatures such as squid and some fish could find it impossible to extract enough oxygen to survive.
Above: a view of Green Mountain from the barren lowlands of Ascension Island. Below: the land crab is indigenous to the new national park.

set aside, fenced and cleared with the aim of recreating the 'carpet of ferns' referred to by Joseph Hooker. Most notably, the population of the critically endangered *Pteris adscensionis*, of which only 50 specimens were known to remain, has already increased more than ten-fold.

Green Mountain has also been made much more accessible, with many of the historic paths and trails within the park being maintained and improved, and a 250 m/820 ft-long boardwalk constructed through the muddy bamboo forest up to the summit. Vast improvements have also been made to the interpretation provided for visitors in the form of information boards, leaflets and guided tours. These enhancements enable both overseas visitors and residents of the island to gain a much better understanding of the mountain’s rich natural and human heritage.

Additional works are currently being planned, with the assistance of more funding from OTEP, to further improve access and preserve the mountain's heritage. This will add value to the national park by increasing recreational and educational opportunities.

Visitors will safely be able to access much more of the park and see fauna, flora and landscapes that they might not otherwise encounter. Preservation of the mountain’s heritage will also add interest to and put into context the surrounding environment. Meanwhile, the propagation and planting of endemic flora is also continuing, while ongoing maintenance is necessary for those areas of reintroduction already completed.

As previously mentioned, Green Mountain National Park is seen as a pilot scheme for a host of other national protected areas across Ascension. Plans include designating Long Beach, the island’s main nesting beach for green turtles, as a nature reserve; and Boatswain Bird Island, currently the only nesting site in the world for the endemic Ascension frigate bird, as a sanctuary. In the meantime, work continues to ensure that Ascension’s first national park remains one to be proud of.

* SIMON EMSON has, until recently, served as acting Conservation Officer on Ascension Island.
FUTURE IS BRIGHT FOR THE FOREST OF BOWLAND

by STEWART BONNEY

THE Forest of Bowland, one of England's largest Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), has become the country's first protected area to be awarded the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism.

Extending over an 800 sq km/300 sq mile area of rural Lancashire and a corner of North Yorkshire, Forest of Bowland is one of 41 AONBs in England and Wales which guarantee that more than 20,000 sq km/7,725 sq miles of land are protected by law to ensure the conservation and enhancement of their natural beauty.

An area of international importance noted for its unspoilt, diverse landscapes and wildlife, Bowland has 13% of its total — consisting of heather moorland, blanket bog, ancient woodland, geological formations and nationally important mosses and liverworts — designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), and most of its heather moor fells have been designated as a Special Protection Area (SPA), in recognition of its importance as a habitat supporting many threatened species of ground nesting birds.

In spring, the fells and tracts of wet boggy farmland attract 2,500 pairs of lapwing, 900 pairs of oystercatcher, 3,000 pairs of curlew — which are in serious decline elsewhere in the UK — and significant numbers of snipe and redshank.

Much of Bowland's extensive wild heather moorland has traditionally been conserved and managed as a sporting estate for grouse shooting and this has also benefited birds such as golden plover, merlin and hen harrier, the latter of which is one of Britain's rarest species. Bowland is the only regular English breeding ground for this nationally threatened bird of prey, and last year 19 young hen harriers bred here.

A total of 16,000 people live within the AONB, mainly in scattered villages which contain over 500 listed historic buildings and 18 scheduled monuments. Sheep and beef farming predominate in Bowland's central upland core, while dairy farming is the major land use in its wooded river valleys and lowland areas.

Forest of Bowland, established as an AONB in 1964, and the Cairngorms National Park in Scotland, are the latest members of a now 30-strong group of protected areas across Europe which have achieved the Europarc Federation's charter status awarded for following a creative best practice approach in delivering tourism which takes account of environmental needs, local communities and the local economy.

Charter holders are required to have established a permanent structure for working in partnership.
The Forest of Bowland offers some of the quietest, remote wilderness walking in northern England.

... with others, have a strategy for sustainable tourism, and follow a set of actions which address identified sustainability issues. They must also make a five-year commitment to further co-operation with local stakeholders and tourism partners, implement agreed joint actions and continue to strive for excellence in management of tourism.

Lucy Barron, one of Forest of Bowland's team of full-time officers, said: "This area was badly hit by foot-and-mouth disease in 2001 and many farmers began looking to tourism as a means of diversification. In the past, different local authorities had responsibility for marketing certain parts of the AONB, but there had been no cohesive action to promote the whole area as a tourism destination.

"We saw that the process involved in seeking European Charter status was a really good way to bring everyone together to discuss sustainable tourism and put together a strategy that we could implement as a partnership.

"The process, which involved all stakeholders, started in mid-2004. It took about a year to complete consultations with partner bodies, local businesses and communities and gather the information we needed to prepare an action plan which identified key areas for progress and a five-year sustainable tourism strategy. We received a positive assessment from Europarc and heard that we had been awarded the charter in July 2005."

Core funding for the AONB, which is managed by a joint advisory committee representing landowners, farmers, voluntary organisations, wildlife groups, local councils and government agencies, is provided by the Countryside Agency. Further support is given by local authorities and United Utilities, a private company that owns large areas of the fells which are used for water catchment. Following the award of Charter status, the AONB team has made successful bids to a range of sources for project funding and has now secured a package of funding to deliver its strategy priorities.

In the past year, a £100,000 Sustainable Development Fund enabled the AONB to award grants to a range of small projects which protect, conserve and enhance the landscape, heritage and wildlife of Bowland while encouraging visitors to enjoy it in a sustainable way. One community project supported by the fund has been the provision of renewable energy power to a number of village halls.

A focal point for tourists is the Bowland Visitor Centre, located in the south-western corner of the AONB at the 75 hectare/185 acre Beacon Fell Country Park, a hilly area of woodland, grassland and moorland which offers three nature trails, an orienteering course, and mountain bike, horse riding and cycling trails.

A recent innovation here has been the introduction of all-terrain electric buggies, known as 'Trampers,' which are provided free of charge to visitors with limited mobility.

Lucy explained: "Three special trails have been constructed around the fell, and these were tested out for safety by members of the Disabled Ramblers' Association. Visitors who are disabled or who have impaired mobility are given a training session by a park ranger and can then set off to explore on their own. The Trampers..."
FIFTY YEARS OF AONBs

THE UK's first Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty was established on the Gower Peninsula in Wales in 1956 and, to celebrate its 50th anniversary, it is hosting the 8th annual conference of the National Association of AONBs at the University of Wales, Swansea, between July 5-7 this year.

Mourne AONB, in Northern Ireland, was the first protected area in the British Isles to be awarded the European Charter in 2003. See article on Page 24.

Right to Roam legislation a huge area of the fells owned by private estates has now been opened up for those seeking recreation on foot. Forest of Bowland offers some of the quietest, remote wilderness walking in northern England.

Additional funding has also enabled the AONB's four-strong management team to expand with the creation of three new posts. A business development officer will strengthen links with tourism businesses to help promote the special qualities of the area and increase the availability of accommodation and activity packages linked to cycling and horse riding.

One of the priorities for a new information officer is the design of a new website to give Forest of Bowland a stronger identity; and a new community officer will work with local people to develop interpretation projects, including village leaflets which will help promote local businesses and farm produce.

Denise Baker, from Access Lancashire, tries one of the all-terrain Tramper buggies.

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Denise Baker, from Access Lancashire, tries one of the all-terrain Tramper buggies.
AN area of temperate rainforest twice the size of Belgium has come under protection along the Pacific coast of British Columbia in an agreement between the provincial government, the local indigenous population, environmentalists and commercial loggers.

The Great Bear Rainforest area starts some 240 km/150 miles north of Vancouver and stretches north to the Alaska border, covering in total 1.8 million hectares/6,950 sq miles. It will become a sanctuary for species including black and grizzly bears, the rare white 'spirit' bears, wolves, wolverines, eagles and other spectacular birds of prey. The fjords and rivers of the region form the spawning ground for 20 per cent of the world’s wild salmon.

Logging companies will be able to continue operations under strict rules designed to safeguard the existing ecosystem, but specific valleys important as animal breeding areas will be completely out of bounds to the loggers.

The decision follows years of protests at the invasive nature of the timber industry, and the outcome could act as a model for conservation in the Amazon and other endangered forests. The region accounts for a quarter of the world’s remaining stock of temperate rainforest. Its heavy rainfall means that extensive forest fires are extremely rare, allowing large trees like cedars to grow and survive for up to 1,000 years.

Executive director of the Raincoast Conservation Society, Chris Genovali, said: "After 15 years of working to protect the Great Bear Rainforest, we are encouraged by the establishment of protected areas. This announcement can be largely attributed to the efforts of the coastal First Nations. Their work to further conservation in the rainforest should be commended."

Speaking for the First Nations, chairman Dallas Smith hailed the agreement as an end to long-standing conflicts over use of the land and its natural resources. "Our people now have a more active role in how and where business is done in our traditional territories," he said. "We can move toward cultural, ecological and economic stability in this region."

One of the features of the deal is a $120 million conservation fund which will pay for environmental projects and eco-friendly businesses to be set up in the territories governed by the indigenous peoples — the First Nations. The protected areas conserve more than 200,000 hectares/770 sq miles of the spirit bear’s habitat, including the 103,000 hectare/400 sq mile Kitasoo Spirit Bear Conservancy on Princess Royal Island.

Said the premier of British Columbia, Gordon Campbell: "The agreement reached represents a marriage that balances the needs of the environment with the need for sustainable jobs and a strong economic future for coastal communities."

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QUÉBEC PLANS PROTECTED AREAS

PUBLIC hearings are now under way into an ambitious plan to create three mountain protected areas extending over 22,490 sq km/8,685 sq miles in the northern half of Québec province.

The Québec Ministry of Environment and Parks and the Inuit Kativik Regional Government are working together on the projected Parc National des Monts Torngat et de la Rivière Koroc, covering an area of 4,295 sq km/1,658 sq miles of the highest continental summits in eastern Canada and the watershed of the Korok River. The area contains archaeological sites dating back to 3500 BC and a number of recently discovered rare plants including 14 crustose lichen species.

The projected Parc National Albanel-Temiscamie-Otish, covering 17,038 sq km/6,578 sq miles, will include the Otish Mountains, the source of Québec’s three major watersheds, which are situated at the northern limit of the boreal forest. The zoning plan for this park project will include 'sacred area zones' identified by the Cree Nation, which is playing an active role in the park’s development.

The development of a 1,157 sq km/447 sq mile protected area, the Reserve de Biodiversité Projétée des Monts Groulx, on an extensive plateau situated in the boreal forest zones north of the St Lawrence estuary and gulf, is being undertaken jointly with the Innu/Montagnais Nation.

(From Mountain Protected Areas Update, No 48)
REMOTE TORRES MAKE A LASTING IMPRESSION

by ANDY DONNELLY

HOW do we rate the performance of our national parks? If we could measure this I've no doubt that, in South America, Torres del Paine — in Chilean Patagonia — would be close to the top spot.

Looking back on an exceptional series of travel experiences in South American national parks in 2005, I was a little surprised that the park which left the most lasting impression on me was one that I hadn't heard of before I'd planned the trip: Torres del Paine. And this was in comparison to places that I had looked forward to visiting since I was small. Why this was has made me reconsider what motivates me as an ecotourist, and what I look forward to most from a visit to a national park.

South America offers such an abundance of riches to the ecotourist that planning to suit your timescale and budget can pose some problems. There were a few 'must sees' which took priority and around which the trip was based, including the ecotourism magnets of the Galápagos and Amazon (see NPIB Issue 19) but the appeal of Patagonia was that it offered probably the greatest contrast to the other regions. I wasn't prepared for the impact the place had on me.

This made me start to think about the values that I place on the experience a national park has to offer. What makes one better than another?

So turning to the first source of all research these days for some background information — the internet — into the question I spent a largely fruitless hour or so combing the search engines. The only rankings of national parks I could find were based on visitor numbers, largely in the USA, which doesn't really convey much about the intrinsic worth or impact of a place to that visitor.

For example, of the top 10 in the USA in 2005 the Grand Canyon is number 10 and Yosemite doesn't even make the rankings. This kind of figure probably reflects more the proximity to major population centres and ease of access than the real visitor value. I'm sure with a bit more digging I could uncover better comparative statistics such as the park that includes the most endangered or endemic species, diversity of threatened habitats or the highest number of culturally significant sites. But these would not really help either.

The problem is that the measure I am looking for is extremely subjective and personal. What ranks as a life changing experience to one person is another's nightmare.

So I can only analyse my own motives as an ecotourist to inform the choices I will make in deciding where to visit. To do that I need to understand what was so special about Torres del Paine.

Torres del Paine covers 182,000 hectares/450,000 acres of land approximately 2,500 km/1,550 miles south of Santiago. Founded in 1959, it was declared a Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO in 1978.
It's attractions centre around the peaks of the Paine Massif which dominates the park and the lakes, rivers and waterfalls that are formed by the melting glaciers. These lakes take on the colours of the dominant minerals in the glaciers and are startlingly varied, from azure blue to pale viscous grey. The towers from which the park takes its name are sheer spikes of granite formed some 12 million years ago that reach a spectacular 2,500 m/8,200 feet.

Vegetation varies greatly throughout the park, generally with altitude, the dominant wind-swept grasslands broken by copses of lenga woodland and extensive southern beech forests. Sheltered pockets harbour a great variety of flowering plants including numerous orchids, particularly around the lake shores. The most obvious fauna are the guanacos, relatives of llamas, which roam the hillsides in large herds. Rheas are common in some areas of the park, as are condors that circle above peaks and in valleys. There is a healthy population of puma in the park which are rarely seen, other than spoor and the remains of guanaco which confirm their position as top Andean predator.

The park has many trails and hikes managed by the Chilean National Forestry Corporation, which range from strolls along lake shores en route to viewpoints, waterfalls and glaciers to some of the most challenging climbing in the world. Kayaking, rafting and horse riding are popular, more adventurous ways to see more of the park. Spectacular scenery, wildlife encounters and ever-changing weather conditions are common factors, however you choose to explore the area. At the time the closest I could get to describing it was the best of New Zealand, Scotland and Scandinavia combined in one view (which doesn't really help if you haven't been to any of these places, I know) but it was the best I could do while my breath was taken away by both the scenery and the temperature of the wind.

Prior to protection, the park area was widely ranched and many areas were — and remain — affected by overgrazing and deforestation. But even this legacy of human impact has become a positive attribute of the area. Outside the park pastoral areas are better managed, but due to the remoteness and harshness of the terrain are still largely traditionally operated. This means gauchos.

The gaucho, from the Quechuan Indian word meaning 'orphan' or 'vagabond', is the South American equivalent of the North American...
cowboy. Some supplement their ranching by acting as horseback tour guides in and around the park, allowing the ecotourist a peek into a traditional way of life which has disappeared from most of the lowland areas of the continent.

Gauchos are descended from both Spanish and Quechuan stock and are exceptional horsemen. They are also exceptionally colourful, both in character and appearance. Sharing a cup of *matte* (an infusion of leaves) with them overlooking the glaciers while helping cook a sheep on an oil barrel was an experience not quickly forgotten. Neither was the taste of either, and I'll stick to latte over matte while I'm at home.

Reflecting on this, I am still really no closer to understanding why this was of greater impact on me than the Amazon, the Galápagos or even Machu Picchu, each of which offered incredible experiences. I can only think that it was the combined wildlife interactions, stunning, constantly changing vistas, unique geology and culturally new experiences that the park offered.

But, probably more importantly, this was all with a sense of remoteness and of being privileged to be there that was sometimes surprisingly missing from the more popular destinations amid the queues of tourists. If we could somehow capture that and quantify it, what a management tool it would be — far more effective than recording visitor numbers. That contact with the wild and having a personal interaction with nature is what makes our protected areas special.

Of course, there are many reasons why national parks are an essential part of our society. Internationally designated sites are defined and managed often to meet home countries' obligations to international agreements on biodiversity. This is the prime reason behind most park designations, and rightly so. Many parks are reservoirs of biodiversity and the last refuges of threatened species and habitats from the ever-increasing human sprawl of civilisation. It is because of modern civilisation and all its trappings that, as a species, we have become increasingly divorced from the natural world.

National parks allow us an interaction with nature that we would otherwise not have. The impressive geology, landscapes and wildlife that make up an experience in a park are among the most powerful adverts for preserving what remains of our natural world. The experience of Torres del Paine was such that it left a long-lasting impression on me, and this is as close as I can get to measuring it. This should be the ultimate aim of any ecotourism venture, for the experience to have a significant impact on someone so we appreciate the importance of preserving our wild places.

**ANDY DONNELLY is a professional biologist with 15 years' experience in research and consultancy, currently managing conservation research projects in Australia for both government and private sectors.**

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**central asia**

PROBLEMS facing biodiversity conservation efforts in the Tian Shan mountain range today are numerous. Poaching of animal life takes on many forms, including subsistence hunting of argali, ibex and wild boar by border guards assigned to desolate posts with insufficient food supplies.

Snow leopard, Eurasian lynx, Pallas's cat and other species are illegally trapped for the black market in animal pelts. Live snow leopard cubs are sold abroad to private zoos and circuses, which can reportedly net the seller US$20,000 per cub — and animal parts are sold for traditional Chinese medicine.

In addition, almost all herding camps in the western Tian Shan have at least one rifle for protecting livestock from wolf predation, but which are almost invariably used for opportunistic hunting of any wildlife which the destitute herders come across. Meanwhile, legal hunting expeditions conducted by licensed big game hunting camps in and around protected areas in Kyrgyzstan are detrimental to wildlife conservation efforts while making no contribution to the upkeep of these protected areas, or to conservation of the species being hunted.

In addition to rampant poaching of wild animals, illegal logging for firewood and lumber is common in most forested areas of the Tian Shan, leading to widespread habitat disturbance. Unfortunately, authorised logging of forested buffer zones is part of the management plan at most protected areas containing sizeable forests, since this is one of the few options these reserves have for generating revenue for reserve management.

In some areas, the problem of poachers cutting the tops off young conifers for sale as Christmas trees is adversely affecting attempts to re-establish evergreen forests. One large issue at the more heavily visited national parks is the problem of visitors picking wildflowers — a problem which has become so severe that a number of rare wild tulips and other flowers found at certain parks are in danger of extinction.

While poorly paid rangers are generally permitted to graze limited numbers of their own personal livestock in the protected areas they patrol as a way of supplementing...
their salaries, illegal grazing of livestock by other herders in protected areas is common. This causes a large problem for wild animals, which are forced to compete with domestic livestock for grazing resources and are exposed to domestic livestock diseases.

In general, acute overgrazing around villages in the foothills of the Tian Shan since the disbandment of nomadic herding collectives has led to a reduction of high quality grass species, a proliferation of unpalatable woody species, severe erosion, and an increase in the frequency of catastrophic landslides, which in recent years have claimed dozens of lives.

Unregulated development is a growing problem in and around a number of protected areas in the Tian Shan. In spite of Lake Issyk-Kul's three protected area designations (state nature reserve, Ramsar site and UNESCO-MAB biosphere reserve), unregulated development along the lake's shoreline is rampant, with new hotels and resort complexes being constructed all along the lake's northern shoreline to cater for middle-class tourists from Central Asia, Siberia, and European Russia.

Plans are also afoot to construct a Chinese-owned and operated US $200 million golf resort and hunting lodge complex in a section of the nature reserve on the southern shore of Lake Issyk-Kul. In Kazakhstan's Ile-Alatau National Park and elsewhere, unauthorised eateries and campgrounds with yurts for rent have sprouted along park roadways, while one attempt was made to construct an unauthorised jeep road across the northern Tian Shan from Kazakhstan to Lake Issyk-Kul. Mining operations in Kyrgyzstan are a huge problem for biodiversity conservation efforts in and around protected areas. In spite of legal prohibitions on such activities, mineral exploration in the core zones of protected areas is routinely authorised by the government, and gold was recently discovered in the core zone of Sarychat-Ertash Nature Reserve. The highly secretive, open-pit Kumtor gold mine, located on the western boundary of Sarychat-Ertash, is one of the world's largest, and lies in the headwaters of the Naryn River, upstream from the Nary Nature Reserve. Thus any industrial spill at the mine would probably have dire consequences for these two reserves as well as for much of the Syr-Darya watershed. At present the mine site blocks westward expansion of the Sarychat-Ertash reserve.

A further critical issue now threatening the ecological integrity of the entire Tian Shan Range is that of global warming. Scientists now believe that global warming may lead to the disappearance of most of the Tian Shan's extensive icefields in the coming few decades. It's a situation which will radically alter the availability of water resources for both the wildlife of the Tian Shan and the region's human population — which is
almost entirely dependent on the Tian Shan’s glacier-fed rivers for most domestic, agricultural and industrial water supplies.

Other problems facing the Tian Shan’s protected areas include urban air pollution, which has particularly adverse effects on forest and wetland ecosystems, and heavy visitor pressure at protected areas near Tashkent, Bishkek, Almaty and Urumqi, which can number hundreds to tens of thousands of visitors each day in summer.

Finally, one of the most immediate problems facing protected areas in the Tian Shan is simply lack of funding. Kyrgyz rangers typically receive US $18 a month, must supply their own equipment — and often their own horse — and many work under extremely difficult conditions in remote areas with harsh climates. In the case of Sarychat-Ertash, most of the reserve’s rangers are snowed into the reserve and out of touch with the outside world from January until early May.

Although many rangers are permitted to keep livestock in protected area buffer zones, on occasion rangers have resorted to poaching the wildlife they were hired to protect, simply to support their families. While the granting of UNESCO-MAB biosphere designation to Issyk-Kul province in 2001 was accompanied by a highway toll booth charging each motor vehicle entering the province a US $2.50 ‘ecological tax’, as yet the province’s protected areas have received no additional funding from this tax.

At present, little substantive work is being done to improve the state of biodiversity conservation in the Tian Shan. In spite of the numerous severe threats to the integrity of the unique and diverse ecosystems, flora and fauna of the Tian Shan, the range remains on the frontier of international conservation efforts, and none of the major international conservation NGOs currently has a field office in the Central Asia region.

One statistic which illustrates the magnitude of the plight of wildlife inhabiting the Tian Shan is that of the snow leopard population in Kyrgyzstan. Although the total population was estimated at 1,400 animals in the mid-1980s, today’s figure is thought to be just 150. Continued inaction will have dire ecological consequences — not only for the Tian Shan, but also for the whole of Inner Asia.

TRAVEL IN THE WESTERN TIAN SHAN

BIODIVERSITY conservation, wildlife research and ecotourism development efforts in the former Soviet western half of the Tian Shan have been greatly hampered by the general decline of the transportation infrastructure in the region, and by the numerous travel restrictions which have arisen as the national boundaries of the new republics solidify.

KAZAKHSTAN

Access to Tian Shan protected areas is very easy, with all three protected areas having major transportation routes along their northern boundaries. Access to the Aksu-Jabagly Nature Reserve is by a 30-minute taxi ride from the town of Tulkibash, located on the Almaty-Tashkent train line, 600 km/375 miles west of Almaty.

Ile-Alatau National Park is a short 10 km/six mile taxi ride south of Almaty, while the main entrance to the Almaty Nature Reserve is about a 10 km/six mile taxi ride from the town of Talgar, located 20 km/12 miles east of Almaty with frequent public buses and vans between the two.

KYRGYZSTAN

Access to protected areas can be highly problematic at times. The reserves of southern Kyrgyzstan, including Sary-Chelek and the region’s largest wild fruit and nut forests, are reached via the Bishkek-Jalalabad highway. This route crosses three major mountain passes and is frequently closed by snowstorms in autumn and winter, and by major avalanches in late winter and early spring which can close the highway for several weeks at a time. The southern Kyrgyz city of Osh can be reached by daily flights from Bishkek, and there are several flights per week from Bishkek to Jalalabad — but these flights sell out quickly when the highway is closed.

Besh-Tash National Park lies in northern Kyrgyzstan’s Talas river valley, just south of the town of Talas, but is only accessible by road from Bishkek during summer months. At other times of year, the main pass on the Talas-Bishkek road is snowed in, forcing travellers to reach Talas via the southern Kazakh city of Taraz — a journey which requires a fixed-date double entry Kazakh transit visa.

In eastern Kyrgyzstan the protected areas of the Lake Issyk-Kul basin are accessible from Bishkek year round, although the numerous mountain reserves at the eastern end of the lake receive deep snowfalls, and require snow shoes or skis to travel beyond entrance stations during winter months.

The Bishkek-Kashgar highway remains open most of the year, only being intermittently closed by deep snows or avalanches for a

Lake Issyk-Kul Nature Reserve, Kyrgyzstan.
schrenk's spruce forest in the naryn nature reserve, kyrgyzstan.

few days at a time. Thus the chatyr kul and song kul reserves can be reached by jeep year round, though these high-altitude lakes freeze over from october to june, and are blanketed in deep snow all winter.

the entrance to the naryn nature reserve can be reached by road from the provincial capital of naryn, though travel within the reserve is limited to ranger-guided horseback trips between about mid-april and mid-october. for the other six months of the year the core zone of the reserve is inaccessible due to deep snow.

sarychat ertash is by far the most inaccessible of kyrgyzstan's largest reserves, with the road to the reserve's main ranger base on the southern side of the reserve being closed by deep snow from january to may. from june to september, this same road is frequently flooded by snow and glacier melt or intense rains, as all soviet-era culverts and bridges along the route have been washed out in the 15 years since independence due to lack of maintenance funds.

in addition, access via this route requires a military border zone permit, which took the author three months and numerous visits to the issyk-kul army border patrol base to obtain.

while the reserve can be reached by horseback via the excellent kumtor gold mine access road on the east side of the reserve, this requires a somewhat strange role reversal whereby the park rangers must show their identification and papers to the mine security guards in order to enter the reserve. in good weather, the journey is three days by horse from the kumtor mine to the main reserve ranger base, though deep snows and swollen rivers make this journey impossible for much of the year. september and october are said to be the best times of year to attempt it.

in far eastern kyrgyzstan, the peak pobeda-khan tengri region is accessible by a soviet-era paved road from lake issyk-kul to the tin mining town of engilcheke, located just north of the chinese border. in spite of numerous landslides and a general lack of maintenance for 15 years, this road remains in remarkably good condition, though it can be closed at times by deep snow and avalanches. at engilcheke, visitors must present their military border zone permits to the army border patrol before proceeding by jeep up the engilcheke valley to the engilcheke glacier which flows off peak pobeda.

south of engilcheke, the sary-jaz river, which flows over the border into china, is popular for rafting trips, though on occasion summer tour groups have been stranded when floodwaters have blocked their return along jeep tracks leading back to engilcheke. the main lodge, campground and trailheads at ala-archa national park are 40 km/25 miles south of the capital bishkek, about a 45-minute taxi ride from the city centre.

uzbekistan

at the time of research, the government no longer allowed motor vehicles from kazakhstan and kyrgyzstan to cross its borders, forcing travellers to enter on foot and find new transport inside uzbekistan. in addition, the uzbek authorities routinely close their frontiers to overland travel without notice during periods of civil unrest, both at home and in kyrgyzstan and kazakhstan.

ugam-chatkal national park is easily accessible by car from tashkent while the large mining town of angren, located on the southern boundary of the park, is a popular starting point for treks.

while, during the soviet period, raft trips on the chatkal river from kyrgyzstan's besh aral nature reserve across the boundary to uzbekistan's ugam-chatkal were a popular activity with soviet tourists, these cross-boundary raft trips are no longer permitted.

in addition, numerous protected areas and scenic sites in southern kyrgyzstan's pamir-alai ranges are most easily reached through uzbekistan's portion of the fergana valley, forcing visitors to obtain double-entry uzbek visas in order to visit these areas from elsewhere in kyrgyzstan.
TRAVEL IN THE EASTERN TIAN SHAN

WITH China's drive to modernise its remote western provinces, the entire highway along the southern slopes of the Tian Shan from Kashgar in the west to Hami in the east has been paved. It is now served by regular bus routes between major towns on this northern leg of the ancient Silk Road, making for fairly easy access to the Tian Shan range and its protected areas. In addition to the recent highway improvements, in 1999 the Urumqi-Kashgar railway line opened, making it now possible to take the train all the way from Beijing to Kashgar.

The Tuomuer Peak (Peak Pobeda) Nature Reserve is accessible by road from the town of Ak-Su, located 450 km/280 miles east of the desert oasis of Kashgar. Because of the reserve’s location in a border area, visitors will require permits which can be obtained from travel agencies catering to trekkers and climbers in Kashgar or Ak-Su.

The town of Bayan Bulak lies high in the Tian Shan on the scenic mountain route connecting the fabled Silk Road town of Kucha, with its nearby Buddhist grottos, and the frontier town of Yining near the Kazakh border. Bayan Bulak can be reached by bus from Yining or Kucha, but visitors will need to hire transportation at Bayan Bulak to reach the swan reserve, some 30 km/18 miles south of town.

Finally, located just 115 km/70 miles east of Urumqi, the Tianchi Lake area of the Bogeda Peak Biosphere Reserve is most often visited by tour bus from Urumqi and has some excellent hikes if one needs to get away from the crowds along the park road.

CONCLUSION

In general, the protected areas of the Tian Shan which lie far from the large population centres of Tashkent, Bishkek, Almaty and Urumqi are little visited and have excellent potential to make an important contribution to the preservation of Central Asian fauna, flora and ecosystems. However, at present these reserves are severely underfunded and most lack comprehensive, long-term management plans, and at the time of writing there were no transboundary efforts under way to co-ordinate conservation efforts in both the former Soviet and Chinese halves of the range.

If progress is to be made in saving the Tian Shan's rapidly disappearing wildlife and preserving its many scenic wonders in a wild state, much assistance will be needed from the international conservation community in both the fields of conservation and rural development.

* The research for this article was conducted from September 2003 to November 2004 and was funded by the Fulbright Commission of the U.S. State Department. For further information on the status of conservation in the Tian Shan, the author may be contacted by email at: doeage@excite.com

ACROSS THE ROOF OF ASIA

RISING to a height of 7,439 m/24,400 ft, the Tian Shan is the world's seventh highest mountain range, only being exceeded in height by the ranges of the Himalaya and the Tibetan Plateau. The Tian Shan lies on the territory of four nations — Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and China, and is Asia's longest mountain range north of the Tibetan Plateau. From the outskirts of the Uzbek capital, Tashkent, the range stretches some 2,400 km/1,500 miles eastward, disappearing into the sands of the Gobi Desert just east of the Silk Road oasis town of Hami in Xinjiang province, China, with the bulk of the range being about evenly divided between Kyrgyzstan and Xinjiang.
Coral Reefs: Tsunami Damage in Perspective

A COMPREHENSIVE report by IUCN on the status of coral reefs in tsunami-affected countries shows that most Indian Ocean coral reefs escaped serious impact damage and could naturally recover within five to 10 years if damage from human activities can be reduced.

A small number of coral reefs may take up to 20 years or more to recover, and some individual coral reefs may not recover at all as a result of damage caused by backwash of debris and sediment from land. But Clive Wilkinson, one of the report's editors and Global Co-ordinator at the Australian Institute of Marine Science, said that more damage was being caused by cumulative direct anthropogenic stresses such as overfishing, destructive fishing, sediment and nutrient pollution and unsustainable development and reconstruction efforts.

South Africa:
Second Litter for Relocated Cheetah

A CHEETAH female has made conservation history by giving birth to her second litter of cubs since being relocated. Affectionately named Sibella, the cheetah was rehabilitated after being severely injured by a pack of hunting dogs.

In 2003 she was relocated to the 12,000 hectare/46 sq mile Samara reserve in the Graaf Reinet district by the De Wildt Cheetah and Wildlife Trust. During August 2004 two male cheetahs were released in the reserve, and in December this resulted in the birth of five cubs.

Defying the odds, all five cubs have survived, and this January Sibella followed her natural instincts and set the cubs free. A subsequent search of Samara reserve by manager Richard Slater revealed her with a second litter of six cubs — unheard of in the cheetah world.

Over the past five years, the De Wildt Trust has relocated 135 wild cheetah onto selected private and state-owned reserves and national parks in South Africa. They have been removed from livestock and game ranches in the Limpopo and North West Provinces, to prevent their death at the hands of angry and frustrated ranchers.

USA:
Ranger Kit Goes to Congo

RANGERS working in the Democratic Republic of Congo are the latest recipients of equipment provided by a Ranger Relief project co-ordinated by the Association of National Park Rangers (ANPR) in conjunction with WWF-US.

Much-needed equipment including body armour and uniforms was donated by a range of federal, state and provincial organisations in the USA and Canada. Rangers in Gabon are next in line to receive equipment from Ranger Relief which has previously assisted rangers in Ivory Coast, Cambodia and Thailand.

Argentina:
Fires Congress

THE country's National Parks Friends' Association are to hold the Mercosur Forest and Wild Grass Fires 2nd Congress at Malargue, Mendoza province from November 7 to 10.

For further information email: parquesnacionalesorg@yahoo.com.ar
BROADLEAF WOODLAND RETURNS TO SÖDERÅSEN

by MIKE RIDDELL

THE 1,600 hectares / six square miles of Söderåsen National Park, established in 2001, form northern Europe’s largest protected broad-leaf forest. With a human presence since the Bronze Age, the park incorporates both social and natural history.

The 1800s brought the clearing of the broadleaf forest and the planting of spruce, and in the 21st century there is a modern human impact — that of intensive management to satisfy European and Swedish biodiversity conservation goals, partially funded by LIFE-Nature.

By early March the snows have usually lifted in Söderåsen National Park, and come April the visitor season blossoms in time with the flora.

This park was created due to the distinctive geology and landscape, the extent of the broadleaf forest, the biodiversity and the cultural history of the area. It is impossible to visit Söderåsen — some 30 km/18 miles east of Helsingborg — without recognising its unique status in southern Sweden. In true Swedish style, the design of the park’s hiking trails, overnight lodges and education centre, or ‘Nature-Room’, makes it public-friendly while protecting the natural heritage which is increasingly in line with European policy.

Braun’s holly fern (endemic to Söderåsen), maidenhair spleenwort, sweet mountain fern, holewort, baneberry, shining crane’s-bill and enchanter’s nightshade are just some of the rare and delicate plants which grow at Söderåsen. The park is one of Sweden’s top sites for mosses and lichens, and this diversity of life is thought to be due to the unique structure and geological formation of the area itself.

The region of Skåne, in which Söderåsen is located, lies on one of the world’s largest fault zones, and over the last 200 million years faults have developed in its bedrock. Some 70-80 million years ago the gneiss bedrock on which Söderåsen now stands was slowly thrust upwards as the surrounding land subsided, forming a ridge or ‘horst’. Fissure valleys which were formed throughout this ridge line by erosion created steep slopes with scree and rock formations ideal for ferns, lichens and a diversity of other plant and animal life.

Bird life includes lesser spotted and black woodpecker, stock dove, hawfinch, red-breasted flycatcher and long-tailed tits. Within the beech stands, deep valleys, lake-side reedbeds and marshes elk, wild boar, roe deer, red deer and pine martens can also be found. The park acts as a winter refuge for these mammals which utilise the surrounding agricultural and uncultivated land during the summer.

In the 17th century this ridge line was completely covered in beech forest but it was mostly cleared during the early 19th century, when valley bottoms were used for hay making. However, steep slopes played another essential role by harbouring the untouched parts of the broadleaf forests. This clearing for agriculture in the 1800s in Söderåsen is reflective of human activity in much of the region, and further change in the 20th century...
The horst (ridge) provides spectacular views throughout the park.

meant that remaining broadleaf woodland was cleared to make way for coniferous (predominantly spruce) plantations. Currently in the 21st century only five per cent of Sweden's broadleaf forest is now protected.

The return of broadleaf woodland is hindered by many factors, and in Sweden the grazing of hare, deer and voles, and the current coverage of coniferous plantations on past broadleaf sites have been major factors preventing re-establishment. However, appropriate land management can allow these forests to return.

In accordance with Natura-2000 (an ecological network with the aim of preserving biodiversity by maintaining or restoring natural habitats of community importance), the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency has partnered LIFE-Nature, the funding and administrative body which aims to support the implementation of habitats.

Southern Sweden forms part of the Continental Region of Natura-2000. In an effort to contribute to the ecological network, the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency formed Söderåsen National Park. Now in collaboration with LIFE-Nature, this has been taken another stage forward, and a three-strong LIFE-Nature team, working with a three-strong Skåne SWPA team (Swedish Environmental Protection Agency) are working on a re-planting scheme in Söderåsen covering over 1,000 hectares/three square miles of the park.

On 325 hectares/800 acres spruce is being removed and openings replanted with oak and beech (and possibly rowan, ash, alder and hornbeam), these areas then being fenced off to protect them from grazers. In the other areas in which spruce is growing within the under-canopy, the spruce is removed. The first stage of this project ends this summer, and the long-term goal is set for 2019.

Such a process is not uncommon: clearing and re-planting are practised throughout Europe, but the traditional methods that are being utilised include environmentally-friendly methods using a horse-drawn plough for clearing woodland, and periodic grazing by wild pigs throughout the year to lightly disturb the ground. These prevent the disturbance of dead wood, and contribute to the overall re-establishment of broadleaf forest.

More than 550,000 trees are set to be planted and 50 km/30 miles of fences installed during this project — no small task. The process is currently being filmed to create both videos for management tools elsewhere in Europe and educational films for the public. Public involvement includes bi-annual meetings and progress reports relating to the work being carried out. Meetings before the project led to some non-native tree species being spared from clearing, as they have acquired some cultural and aesthetic importance in local communities.

This stage of the project, from 2001-2006, will have cost a staggering €1.5 million. In the history of the region it represents another human impact, this time in the name of biodiversity conservation, which will contribute to the fascinating history of Skåne. However, despite these major management goals, Söderåsen — like the other Natura-2000 sites — supports the premise that human activity is often essential for the maintenance of biodiversity. In Söderåsen this takes the form of hiking trails, recreation areas and forest management, and the beneficiaries are those children looking down the microscopes in the Nature Room who are already part of this new life in Sweden.

* www.mikeriddell.co.uk
ONE might be surprised to learn that Northern Ireland has the rare accolade of not yet having a national park: a situation it shares with a select number of countries around the world including Iraq and some small island nations. However, the Mountains of Mourne in the south of the province are nearing the end of a process to decide if the area should become Northern Ireland’s first national park.

The Mourne area is already recognised as being one of the region’s most important landscapes and is an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), having been declared as such in 1966 (AONB is a designation fitting IUCN Category V Protected Landscape). Although designation as an AONB recognises the importance of the landscape, it doesn’t provide much in the way of legal management powers.

The area in question is dominated by the Mourne Mountains, a granite massif where hills blanketed in heather sweep down to the Irish Sea. It covers 57,000 hectares/220 sq miles of mountain, farmland and coastline and has a number of internationally recognised conservation sites including a Ramsar and 4 Natura 2000 sites, as well as many nationally important habitats.

The area also has a sizeable local population (50,000), the people of Mourne traditionally having been engaged in agriculture, fishing and granite quarrying, all of which have faced serious decline in recent years in Mourne, as they have in other marginal areas of Europe. As a consequence people are turning to a variety of other sources for their livelihood, including the sale of former agricultural fields as building sites. The development of these sites, known as ‘bungalow blight’, has become one of the principal threats to the beauty of the Mourne landscape, with the area having seen the highest incidence of single rural dwellings in Europe.

The Mourne area is also very popular for recreation, particularly with weekend hill walkers from...
other parts of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. This typically doesn’t bring great benefits for the local economy, as the visitors spend very little in the area and few stay overnight. Contrast this with the highly lucrative luxury golf tourism in the renowned Royal County Down golf course, which brings in a significant income to a major hotel chain and golf club but has only minimal benefits for the community in the form of employment. Tourism in Northern Ireland (and the Mourne AONB) is seeing something of a boom after the end of 30 years of political instability, and this provides hope that sustainable rural tourism will fill the gap in the economy left by the decline in traditional industries — something which the designation of a national park would support.

The movement towards a national park for Mourne has existed since the mid-1970s, when the government announced controversial plans to build a dam at Kinnahalla in the centre of Mourne, an initiative which sparked a public enquiry and the start of an active environmental lobby within the local community.

Pressure from this lobby led to the establishment of a succession of bodies which discussed the management of the area. The Mourne Advisory Council (1979) was followed by the creation of the Mourne Committee and then, in 1997, the creation of a local management partnership for the AONB. The partnership, known as the Mourne Heritage Trust, brings together representation and funding from local councils, farming, community, tourism and environmental sectors (www.mournelive.com). The creation of the Mourne Heritage Trust greatly strengthened the lobby for enhanced legal management powers and funding, and in 2002 the then Minister for the Environment in Northern Ireland’s devolved administration announced the start of the national park process.

So while the Mourne Heritage Trust gets on with managing the AONB, a dual process is under way to prepare for designation as a national park. Firstly, the UK government is preparing primary legislation to allow for designation and statutory powers for national parks in Northern Ireland; this is due to go before the government in Westminster later this year.

Alongside this legal process, the Mourne National Park Working Party was established in 2004 to consider the proposals for the boundary and management model for any future national park, and to consult the local population on any such designation. The working party is due to make a recommendation to the minister on whether or not Mourne should be declared a national park, and what form this should take, in autumn 2007. Assuming that the recommendation is positive, a designation order could be issued shortly afterwards, and Northern Ireland could have its first national park in 2008.

However, not all the local population are convinced that a national park will bring more benefits than restrictions. In particular, parts of the farming community worry that designation will restrict future development and will dictate changes in farming practices, obliging them to allow public access to privately owned land. The working party is tackling these issues, and the hope is that, in 2008, Mourne will have the national park that it has long been looking for.

* BARRY FERGUSON is currently Countryside Services Manager for the Mourne Heritage Trust and has spent the last nine years dividing his time between conservation work in the UK and southern Madagascar.
AN ongoing exchange programme between Parks Victoria in Australia and Parks Canada has given Canadian rangers Jane Brewer, Frank Burrows, Brian Catto, Robin Heinz, Merv Mills and Jeff Weir the opportunity to gain an insight into park management practices at various national parks in Australia.

As the Canadians return home this month (May), six of their counterparts from Parks Victoria will fly out to Canada to spend six months covering the peak summer holiday and fire periods as a continuation of the conservation exchange.

Mark Stone, Parks Victoria chief executive, said: "Through this programme we have been able to discuss global park management issues, share solutions and establish worldwide professional networks in a very hands-on way."

The following report on the exchange programme was written by JANE BREWER, Communications Officer at Gros Morne National Park, Newfoundland.

NEEDLESS to say, I consider it quite an honour to be part of the first exchange group. It is turning out to be an amazing and unforgettable professional development experience.

My first project was to write the text for new interpretation signs that Parks Victoria is building at one of its cultural heritage properties. The story turned out to be that of the 1803 Collins settlement site, Britain's first colony in Victoria. I was thrilled to be given the opportunity to research this chapter of the state's history.

Sydney, in New South Wales, had been founded in 1788 as a place for convicts. By 1802 the colony's Governor, Phillip Gidley King, was concerned that standards of morality and behaviour were not improving. He wrote to the authorities in England that repeated arrivals of convicts gave Sydney no chance to reform. King's letter worked. The British government decided to send the next boatload of prisoners to Port Phillip, and not to Sydney. It appointed Lieutenant Colonel David Collins, a naval officer, to oversee the details involved in establishing a new settlement.

In October 1803, Collins and his party of convicts, free settlers, marines and civil officers sailed into Port Phillip. The colony he was to start there, however, was very short-lived. By the end of May 1804, Collins relocated it to Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania) due to many difficulties encountered, including the lack of fresh water and fertile soil.

My next challenge was to be found in Melbourne, working as part of a communications and marketing team to produce a video and create a corporate presentation that profiled Parks Victoria's involvement with two of this year's premier international sporting events - the XVIII Commonwealth Games and the Volvo World Ocean Yacht Race.

We are focusing part of the project on the influence that Parks Victoria has had on setting high...
FOCUS ON RANGERS

environmental management standards for the events — a very appropriate role for a national parks agency. It’s clear that the public expects us to lead by example in this area because they want us to ensure that the health of these special places is sustained well into the future.

As responsible stewards, park agencies around the world strive to respect and balance the needs of many different kinds of user groups. Through management planning processes, we create the partnerships that help us to find ways to say ‘yes’ to peoples’ needs, provided the need to protect the land and its resources is the first priority. Heritage protection is also often best achieved by using scientific study to evaluate possible directions and to determine the best options.

I am taking advantage of every opportunity to learn about Australian programmes that do not exist in Canada... yet. One in particular is called Healthy Parks, Healthy People.

This is an excellent programme that seems successful in balancing the concepts of recreation and conservation. Parks Victoria works closely with health providers to encourage use of parks because it can be shown that experiencing nature, taking part in recreation in the outdoors, is good for our health — body and soul.

The programme is based on the idea that maintaining the health of our special places, while providing a range of excellent visitor opportunities, contributes to the environmental health of the parks and to the physical and mental wellbeing of all citizens.

I have spent a good deal of my time in Australia talking about the Canadian park experience too — so much so that Tourism Victoria recently invited me to speak to its staff about sustainable tourism and the experience back home.

There is no shortage of material. Sustainable tourism is an area where Parks Canada has set very high standards internationally. It is also one where efforts in Newfoundland and Labrador are seen as best practice.

Nationally, the Agency and the Tourism Industry Association of Canada have collaborated on establishing a Sustainable Tourism Accord, and on developing a Code of Ethics for operators.

The tourism industry in Newfoundland and Labrador has shown a great deal of leadership in this area. Sustainable tourism has been on the agenda in our province for over a decade, and we are well on the road to evolving it from principle to practice.

The 1994 signing of the Viking Trail Tourism Accord saw communities on Newfoundland’s Northern Peninsula come together with industry, land managers and funding agencies to choose appropriate paths of development and to determine a vision of how we wanted tourism to work for us.

It was an effort that has helped lead to higher levels of employment in the region, and to the creation of much of the infrastructure that both visitors and residents enjoy today.

A success story has been the establishment of the Gros Morne Institute for Sustainable Tourism. Its creation came about as a result of a very high level of collaboration among tourism industry partners.

Established through the support of Hospitality Newfoundland and Labrador — on behalf of the tourism industry in Atlantic Canada — along with Parks Canada, the Canadian Tourism Commission and ACOA, the Institute is helping operators to learn more about how they can improve their environmental performance, and how they can create more memorable visits by taking better advantage of community resources.

This is cutting-edge practice being offered by internationally recognised instructors and people are coming to Gros Morne from across Canada to learn about it.

NPJB May 2006

Rangers Katarina Skorvankova and Jan Sebest study historical documents relating to the Hodkovce trees.

slovakia

HISTORIC TREES RESTORED

by KATARINA SKORVANKOVA,
Slovak Ranger Association

FIVE members of the Slovak Ranger Association have completed a project to restore one of the country’s oldest surviving avenues of trees at Hodkovce village in eastern Slovakia.

Containing lime, maple and pine trees planted in the 1770s, the avenue — one of the key attractions on a new educational footpath starting in the village — borders woodland planted as part of an 18th century park lying between a castle and historic manor house. It had remained neglected since its last private owners abandoned it in 1942.

The project financed by a €1,750 grant from environmental group, Kontoorange, involved the rangers in researching the area’s history, tree maintenance, path clearance and the provision of an information panel.

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FOCUS ON RANGERS

SCOTLAND WELCOMES
5TH IRF CONGRESS

by TONY WILSON
Chair, Scottish Countryside Rangers' Association

THIS June sees the 5th IRF World Congress arrive at Stirling University in Scotland. As I write this the number of delegates stands at over 250 from 38 countries and, with registrations still coming in, this looks as if it will be the biggest — and I'd like to think the best — congress yet.

Scotland has always been a world leader when it comes to environmental protection. John Muir, the founder of the American National Park system, was born in Dunbar in 1838 before his family emigrated to the USA (see NPIB, Issue 17). A century and a half later, another important step in the field of environmental protection, the International Ranger Federation (IRF), was conceived in Scotland.

In 1991 the Scottish Countryside Rangers' Association (SCRA) held its annual conference on the banks of Loch Lomond. This was to be an exciting and innovative event, differing from its forerunners by being the first to invite Rangers from different countries to share their experiences and techniques. This meeting of like-minded people from all over the world led to the idea of an organisation which would promote the best ideals and practices around the world.

That event had shown that practitioners from all the countries involved faced the same problems and challenges. An organisation which could promote the exchange of information and the sharing of best practice would be a valuable asset to them. The following year the IRF was formally created at Losehill Hall in England's Peak District National Park.

Fifteen years on, the world's Rangers are coming home to Scotland.

Previous IRF congresses have been held at Zakopane in Poland, San José in Costa Rica, Kruger in South Africa and latterly Wilson's Promontory in Australia. They have established themselves as the major international forum for Rangers and all those engaged in practical environmental management.

Resolutions from the congress feed directly into organisations such as the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, The World Council on Protected Areas and other similar bodies. The resolutions from the Australian congress, for example, were taken to and adopted by the 10th World Congress on Protected Areas held at Durban in September 2003.

The title for this congress is People and Place, the Natural Connection and will explore the links between people and their natural and cultural heritage. It will identify the benefits that can be achieved by taking a holistic approach to managing our environment, both to the resource to be protected and to the people living in and visiting it. An important element will be the inclusion of the views of local people when managing their environment.

The congress will also deliver the stated aims of the Federation:
• To further the professional standards of Rangers throughout the world;
• To share knowledge and resources;
• To establish global communications between Ranger organisations;
• To foster professional exchanges between Rangers.

The fact that this event attracts participants from all over the world offers a unique opportunity to review problems and opportunities from a fresh perspective. This chance to share experiences and solutions is very much appreciated by all who participate.

The 2006 World Congress will be a gathering of some of the world's leading practitioners who offer practical, tried and tested solutions and can demonstrate best ways forward. We hope to raise the standard of knowledge, disseminate best practice and identify positive solutions to the problems that Rangers and other Countryside Managers face as they try to balance the needs of greater access, conservation and local people's aspirations in a way which benefits all.

The congress will be hosted by the Scottish Countryside Rangers' Association (SCRA), one of the three founder members of the IRF. * Further information and on line booking can be found on the IRF website at: www.ranger-irfc.com/scotcover2006.htm