

Protection of the environment and tourism : the limits of growth

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The Limits of Growth

In the Swiss statistics on exports, tourism takes third place. No doubt, it benefits from our famous landscape. But is it always to the latter's advantage? Hans Weiss, administrator of the Swiss Foundation for the Care and Protection of the Environment, weights up the pros and cons.

As the post-war economic boom set in, tourism, too, experienced an incredible expansion. Outwardly, this showed itself in building growth which, relatively speaking, surpassed the development of many urban agglomerations, and which changed purely peasant villages and many traditional resorts to an unrecognizable degree. Between 1951 and 1967, 44 mountain railways were constructed in Switzerland, leading to altitudes of over 2500m above sea-level. This means that fifty times more railways were licenced than between 1900 and 1950. Today, the total number of all aerial cableways, chair and ski lifts stand at around 1600. If you join up the various installations in a straight line, the transport distance would lead from Zurich to Istanbul.

Underrated consequences

Around 1970, when the first signs of saturation appeared, most of the resorts from the lakes in the Ticino to Central Switzerland and from the Engadine to the Lake of Geneva were already engaged in the often desperate fight against the spirits which, in parts, they had called themselves.

One tried to win the race against time by a temporary ban on building and by creating the legal bases, of which the lack had suddenly become noticeable.

Certainly, the unexpected rise of tourism, seen historically, is not really surprising. In former times, travelling was the privilege of a small upper strata, today it has

become available to large sections of our service and leisure society. Tourism has also contributed markedly to the economic uplift of those regions threatened by emigration and exchange of country for town. But the consequences to nature and environment were all too often underestimated, relevant warnings disregarded or even ignored. On the other hand, the advantages of the development were often hugely overestimated. The sellers of agricultural land did hardly benefit from the sales, but also speculators and outside undertakings. Where development was too rapid, the local population had no time to adjust to the changed circumstances. Whatever came from outside was either rejected radically or imitated uncritically. In the end, there was neither enough time nor sufficient space for the development of the local infrastructure and identity. The building orders were often too big for the local tradesmen, and outside constructors had to be called in. After the building boom, relatively few permanent jobs remained. And if a young couple decided not to emigrate, they often found no home in the village because everything had been let to holiday-makers, and the ground was far too expensive to have one's own house built.

On the purely technical level, too, bad planning has been registered. So for instance, certain areas were opened and developed for winter sports, which, with hind-

sight, were found completely unsuitable. With large construction machineries and even with explosives, the natural vegetation and the terrain, often thousands of years old, had to be altered and «corrected», with the result that in exposed regions, erosion has taken place. The wounds caused by this can't be healed permanently, and even where fertilization is successful, the scars will remain visible for generations.

In conclusion: The development of tourism was necessary and could not be stopped, but many serious operations were unnecessary. With careful planning, the development could have been without environmental and economic disadvantages.

Consumption or respect for nature

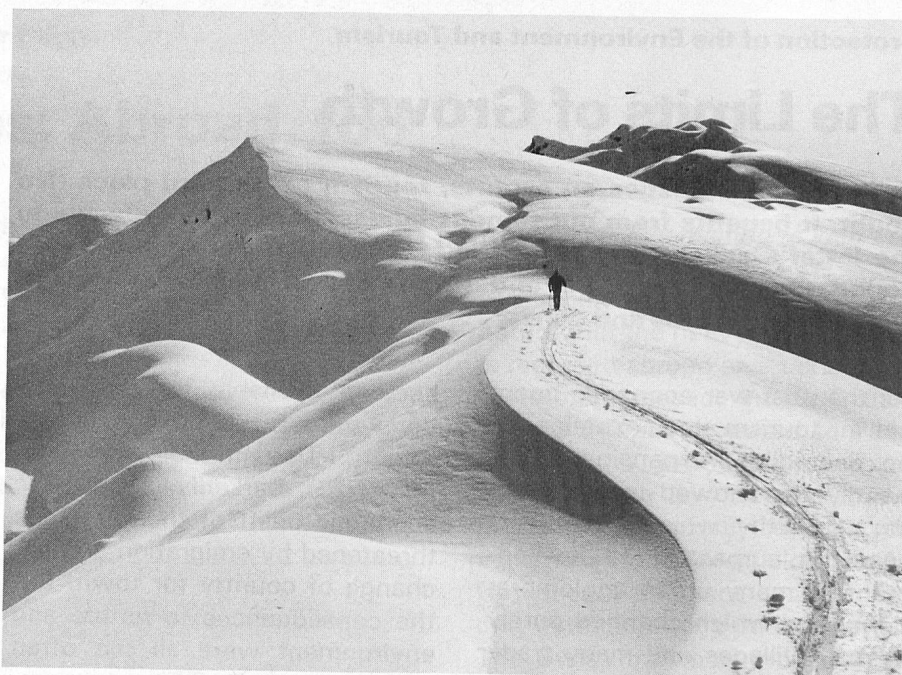
Today, building activities are retrogressive, and stagnation in the number of overnight stays has been registered. It is regrettable that in this process, very often the wrong people have been affected, i.e. the economically weak fringe areas and the small-scale industries. But at the same time, it is proof that the warnings issued earlier were justified and that having ignored them has had dire consequences – development was given free rein far too long.

It would be illusory to believe that the problems of the protection of the environment were now going to be solved by themselves. For in the meantime, a strong leisure industry has grown up and knows how to fill the marketing gap re «nature». Publicity which exploits remaining reed shores and lonely field-paths as impressive backgrounds for handy disposable grills, outboard engines and fast motorbikes, throws an involuntary but glaring light on the threat to our living-space, when the call «back to nature» can be enjoyed and experienced only through consumption.

Yet there are also positive developments: active holidays on a farm, the revival of hiking and other unmotorized leisure activities. These can certainly not be dismissed with the fashionable term «nostalgia»; the yearning for neglected values which one cannot consume, is both understandable and justified. In many places, touristic offers are now more related to the protection of the environment. More and more communes make their building zones smaller and consider ecological aspects in planning. And the realization that Switzerland is too small to satisfy the demand for second homes for half of Europe is beginning to gain ground.

Renewed danger

The race between the hitherto unbroken quantitative growth and the preservation of the unaugmentable, rapidly decreasing natural values, which have been further diminished by the con-



Virgin mountain landscape: For how long?

(Photo: H. Weiss)

struction of power works, factories and roads, has not yet been won. The increasing damage to forests is an alarming signal. We are aware today that if, thanks to quick and effective action, we can escape once more,

we can afford further growth of tourism only if it is not at the expense of the environment. Only then can our country still be attractive for its own inhabitants and foreign visitors after the year 2000. ●

Talking to Claude Nicollier

Profession: Astronaut

Claude Nicollier will be the first Swiss citizen in space. The start will presumably take place in September next year. Nicollier's spacecraft will have the spacelab (inhabited space laboratory) on board, whose programme has been drawn up by ESA, the European Space Agency, and NASA

Nicollier is not very tall, slim, 41 and has deep-blue eyes. «Sky-blue» eyes, an omen to become an astronaut? «I don't think so», he says with a smile. Claude Nicollier is pleasant, open and full of his job; he loves talking about his work. «It is phantastic to have the privilege to live at this moment», he declares. Astronaut is an un-

sual profession – above all for a Swiss. It has been known officially for one year that Nicollier will fly on board a spacecraft for an EOM mission (for the observation of the environment in space).

The first steps

Few only can be said to be astronauts, and it is not enough to have

the wish to be one. Nicollier has been preparing himself for this flight for many years. He studied physics in Lausanne and astrophysics in Geneva. Then he qualified as pilot with Swissair. He is also a military pilot and used to flying «Hunters» and «Tigers». This was a crucial fact in choosing him as an astronaut. «I have always been interested in space travel, but I never imagined that one day there would be astronauts other than Americans and Russians. As soon as I knew that

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