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Times are changing

The Swiss Alpine Club (SAC) was founded in 1863 in Olten with a view to exploring the alpine region. Today, this society faces a drastically changed situation. The virginity of the mountains of those days has yielded to sweeping economic exploitation by tourism, the electric power industry and transportation.

In 1863, wounded national pride may have been a reason for the founding members to want to go along with the formation of the Swiss Alpine Club. It was the Golden Age of mountaineering and most of the alpine peaks were being climbed for the first time. But it was not the Swiss who played the lead in this, but foreigners – more precisely, the English.

«It could soon come to pass that if the general public in Switzerland wants to be well informed about the regions of eternal snow and ice, the accessibility of the glaciers and the rocky summits, it will have to reach for the descriptions of the English mountaineering club.» Or so the saying went.

Mountain climbing: patriotic act

To prevent all this, on 19th April 1863 in the station buffet in Olten, 35 men sat down to found the Swiss Alpine Club whose highest aim was the exploration of the world of the mountains. In addition, the newborn association declared its intention «to serve the preservation of the beauty of our mountains and thereby to inspire and cherish the love of our native land». At first, the SAC was a reservoir of those elite-conscious, bourgeois, confederate Swiss who could afford mountain-climbing and who at the same time thought of it as a patriotic duty.

From the turn of the century, mountain climbing and skiing in Switzerland saw an undreamed of impetus. Out of the somewhat exalted society there developed a mass organisation, and today almost 76,000 men and women belong to the SAC (women, however, since 1980, for only from that time, as the conventional sticking to being a men-only association began to expose the SAC to public ridicule, did the Club open its doors to all).

The building of mountain huts was one of

the great achievements of the SAC, for without accommodation for climbers in the alps, exploration of the mountain world would never have been possible. Since 1863 the Club has covered the Swiss Alps with a network of 153 of its own huts, and although today actual building has reached a degree of saturation, extensions to the existing refuges continues.

SAC and environmental protection

In view of the increasing threat to the world of the mountains from industry and tourism, environmental protection should indeed constitute one of the main preoccupations of the Club. However, a strong conservative lobby within the SAC torpedoes every concerted «green» commitment thereto, even though mountain protection is an old concern of lovers of the alps who, since 1963, have had a Commission for the Protection of the Mountain World and who, in 1969, laid down a «Code of Standards and Guidelines for the preservation of the Alps». But it cannot be claimed that even with these instruments the SAC has been successful in promoting efficient environmental protection. This should now change, for about one year ago the SAC appointed a part-time specialist for the task of safeguarding the mountain world.

While its supporters regarded the creation of this new post as one of the dictates of the hour, some members from French-speaking Switzerland and the Valais objected to it vehemently; they feared that the expert would set himself up as a sort of warden, or bailiff of old, and label the SAC with the image of a vicious, aggressive environmental-protection association. It is not a matter of pure chance that this should be so: the SAC is not just a club of mountain climbers; in its ranks it has also members who earn a living from a



mountain railway or in the tourist trade. So conflicts of interest are already programmed. «But these people, too, should note that we are not necessarily always the dear old SAC – at least not any longer – but also sometimes the angry SAC when it comes to further disfigurement of the alpine landscape», says the new environment officer, Toni Labhart, a geologist. But he by no means thinks of taking an extreme line: «The SAC is a mountain sports club and not a club of environmentalists.»

The SAC and the *Zeitgeist*

Just at its 125-year jubilee the SAC sees itself faced with an abundance of new kinds of games in mountaineering: competitive sports climbing, solo ascents, marathon climbs, speed mountaineering, para-gliding and snow surfing. All these trends in the spirit of the time stand in stark contrast to classic mountain climbing and just as strongly do the traditionalists in the Club resist them, as if the death knell were ringing for true mountaineering. At the moment, these younger sports climbers are being viewed with very little enthusiasm – as mountaineers for whom the gymnastic pleasure in scaling a rock pinnacle is sheer heaven, rather than the sight of the cross on the peak. Ever since the first climbing contests (some of them giving out prize money) have held the stage abroad, the fear of an eventual Alpine Disneyland has gripped the conservative mountain climbers.

On the other hand, Peter Donatsch, SAC Information Chief, fears that the younger generation of climbers could well leave the Club should it, in an attack of crankiness, try to keep competitive climbing off the Swiss rock faces.

Beat Liniger
(Abbr. from «Tages-Anzeiger»,
picture: SAC)