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Editorial

Living with extremes....

January and February of 1999 have brought extreme weather conditions to New Zealand, as well as Switzerland.

Drought conditions have plagued us in many parts of New Zealand, with the worst conditions in Central Otago culminating in large areas falling victim to devastating scrub fires. In contrast we had extreme rainfall in the far north of the North Island causing flooding and destruction.

At the same time our antipodes in Europe have suffered the consequences of the heaviest snow falls in

centuries.

In Switzerland for example they are talking of the worst avalanche situation experienced this century. According to a documentary heard on Swiss Radio International there was only one occasion in February 1951 that rivaled this year's conditions. And in that year the extreme avalanche danger was only experienced along the southern slopes of the Alps in Canton of Tessin. The worst of the avalanches in that year buried the center of Airolo, the town with the "Gotthard" tunnel entrance. 90 people were killed in those days, mostly soldiers on military duties swept away and buried inside their barracks.

A similar situation occurred apparently in December 1808 when many

people died in the Bernese Oberland again in places like Grindelwald, near the lake of Brienz, also in Central Switzerland and in the Canton of Grison. Whereas in that year there was only one wave of heavy snowfall, this year there were four of these waves experienced. Professor Pfister, a meteorologist says this winter's abnormal weather conditions in the Alps have been caused by north-westerly pressure sites related to a persistent anticyclone over south-western and western Europe. With early written documentation, Swiss weather experts have now discovered that the same conditions experienced this year, were responsible for the greatest natural disaster ever to befall Switzerland in February 1566. It is known, and this is the fear right now, that the extreme 'snow-situation' which existed in February 1566 was the cause of the disastrous flood during May/June/July 1566. While it is not clear how much damage the avalanches, and mud slides of 1566 caused, it is known that during April and May more rain fell than usual. The very wet conditions combined with the melt-down of huge amounts of snow from the upper regions of the country caused the worst flooding ever experienced before. Fortunately such a disastrous occurrence has never occurred again to this day. The first flood in May 1566 caused lake levels all over Switzerland to rise and to spill over. The second wave of rain in the low-lands with accompanying melt-down of snow in the upper regions, together with thunderstorm activities finally caused what is known to have been the worst flooding in the past 500 years. According to documentation most if not all the bridges in northern Switzerland were washed away. As for combating avalanche risks in past centuries, mountain people relied for their safety on heavily wooded slopes above their villages. These forests called 'Bannwälder' were not allowed to be cut down and as experience was gained most of the villages became established below the 'Bannwälder' in so called safe areas. But of course in times of extreme weather conditions even the safest locations can become vulnerable.

Research by meteorologists has shown that there is a certain cycle of winter-weather-patterns stretching

SWISS SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND

PATRON: Mr Walter Simmen, Chargé d' Affaires of Switzerland

PRESIDENT/TREASURER: Beatrice Leuenberger, 44 Montgomery Crescent,
Hamilton, Ph.(07) 843-7971 Fax (07) 843-7941

VICE PRESIDENT: Bert Flühler, 1 Bettina Rd. Hamilton, Ph. (07) 855-4308

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DELEGATES TO THE SWISS ABROAD CONFERENCE IN SWITZERLAND

DELEGATE: Heinz Leuenberger, 33 Russell Terrace,
Putaruru, Ph/Fax (07) 883-8537

DEPUTY DELEGATE: Marie-Therese Melville-Schöpfer, P.O Box 79-294,
Royal Heights, Auckland 1230, Ph. (09) 833-4029

COORDINATOR IN NZ FOR THE SWISS ABROAD YOUTH EXCHANGE SCHEME

Mrs. Nicole Helsdon, 58 A Marellen Drive, Red Beach / Orewa,
Ph. (09) 426-0927

EDITOR: Rinaldo Rust, 242 Te Pahu Rd. R.D.5.

Hamilton, Ph/Fax (07) 871-9946 E-Mail: rinaldorust@xtra.co.nz

CLUB REPRESENTATIVES

AUCKLAND

SECRETARY: Albert Ryter, 32 Sunrise Ave. Mairangi Bay,
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HONORARY CONSUL: Peter Deutschle, P.O. Box 90-209, Auckland Mail Centre
Ph./Fax (09) 366-0403. Email: deutschle@clear.net.nz