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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

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in duration from 15 to 25 years. Throughout the time back to the middle ages there are 'clusters of cold winters' and 'clusters of warm winters' grouped in a certain pattern, but unfortunately not a very regular one. Between now and the months of May and June the Swiss will keep their fingers crossed hoping that the fatal combination of heavy rain periods with periods of melt down of alpine snow will not occur as it did in 1566. Besides the tragic loss of lives in snow avalanches this year, the Swiss tourist industry claims to have suffered a loss of income of approx. 600 million Franks. On top of all this the big question remains unanswered for the Swiss and all mankind; namely, have the extreme conditions just experienced on both sides of the globe been partly caused by environmental pollution or the so called 'green house effect'?! What do you think?

President's Message

In my message last month, I summarised the results of the first section (Statistics) of a questionnaire, responded to by Swiss abroad organisations from around the world. Following are some further results which were collated from the other sections dealt with in the questionnaire:

2. Problems

Basically, three main areas exist where it was found that many clubs had the same problems in common. Firstly, the older age of the majority of club and committee members, especially because few successive members are joining, and there is sometimes a reluctance to 'hand-over' long held positions to others. As a result, several negative impacts have been created: restricted mobility (especially evenings) of older people; lack of motivation and energy to generate new members or activities etc; diminishing funds, resulting in 'cheap' functions less attractive to younger people; and a lack of motivated people for administrative jobs, such as organising functions or newsletters.

Secondly, often a lack of administrative records was found, which could cause the eventual downfall of a club. Many lack satisfactory membership lists, resulting in a lack of

communication (eg newsletters) with members, and non-payment of renewal subscriptions, causing loss of members. Several clubs have no official rules, and others do not establish or foster any contact at all with their embassy.

The third problem area is a lack of interest from 2nd or 3rd generation 'Swiss', who are, after all, fully integrated in the 'foreign' country, so are not motivated to take part in Swiss Club activities, let alone play an active part in running their Club.

3. Ideas and Recommendations

Swiss organisations from around the world also provided a lot of suggestions for Clubs to use:

Membership - increase and renew subs using personal contact. Include young people (members' children), by giving them some responsibilities, and try to establish a 'Youth Section'.

Rules - Redefine the goals of the Club through consultation, changing and updating rules to reflect today's society, conditions and members.

Subscriptions - Should be affordable and appropriate for members, instead encourage voluntary donations.

Club Bulletin - Create a logo, as a symbol to identify with. Produce a regular newsletter/bulletin, and encourage members to participate in it.

Advertising - Publish articles about Clubs in local papers; include club events in community flyers; invite 'public figures' to important functions; and make functions open to local non-Swiss, making them welcome!

Club Activities - *I will talk about this large section next time*

4. Clubs into the Future

The Swiss Abroad Council finally dismissed the report. They concluded that no two clubs were the same and it was not possible to 'describe' a typical Swiss Club, so were not able to deliver any broad solutions for improvements. It was then decided that where possible, parent organisations (which is the NZ Swiss Society in our case) choose/elect one person to be responsible for liaising between the Secretariat and local clubs. This person should have good knowledge of current events in Switzerland and issues affecting Swiss abroad, and be able to inform clubs

and members.

My conclusion:

It seems that after the questionnaire results were collated, the report was put into the 'too hard basket'! By being dismissed, the conclusion of the Council was simply that we now have a list of ideas to implement.

However, we can see that although we do share some of the problems clubs in other countries have, our Society and Clubs are very healthy and secure, and in good hands.

Many fundraising and function suggestions were put forward from other countries, and I will tell you about these next time. In the meantime, I wish everyone a safe and happy Easter. Have a good month everyone,

With kindest regards, Beatrice

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