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The Swat Project, first results



“The Swat Project” is a Mountain Wilderness International (MWI) project that aims to promote the creation of a national park in the valleys of the Swat River (Pakistani Hindu Kush). The project is supported by Mountain Wilderness Pakistan and local governments. Mountain Wilderness Catalunya joined the project in autumn 2018. The project will include the archaeological advice of UAB researchers.

Swat is a valley of great natural beauty with mountains that reach 6,000 meters. The region was taken over by the Taliban at the end of 2007, who imposed the Sharia law, until Pakistani government control was reestablished in mid-2009. Today, despite the problems arising from the long years of armed conflict, it has become in a safe and welcoming area for visitors and strangers.

The economic and tourist development of the area is inevitable, but it must be prevented from running amok to keep the valleys and mountains protected: that is why a figure of administrative protection is being studied since unbridled anthropization would cause irreversible damage to these alpine environments. MWI is committed to the national park (Swat could become Pakistan's 15th national park).

In 2017, MWInternational took on the challenge of activating this proposal, from a perspective of “sustainable tourism” and mountain tourism, especially committed to the environment. But the defence of the environment must be made compatible with the improvement of the quality of life of the locals, without falling into “extractive” practices, but ensuring that the tourist dimension represents a qualitative increase in the economy: undoubtedly fruitful experiences such as those experienced in the Alps, in the Rockies, in Patagonia...

The first action, four years ago, consisted of archaeological^[1] discovery work and the initial training of local people as mountain companions. The second phase, 2019, with direct participation of MW-Catalunya activists, had the objective of mapping, opening trekking routes and the expedition to Thalo Zom (last unexplored 6000m peak in the area). These mountaineering routes have been incorporated into the mountain offering circuits, always linked to sustainability aspects. COVID allowed only one mini campaign in 2021.

In 2022, the first Introduction to Hiking and Mountain Monitoring Course was held for Pakistani young women: "Girls in action: empowerment of women through meaningful training"^[2]. It is necessary to dimension this training within the framework of a society where, on the street, "burqa" is part of traditional women's clothing. In this same campaign, explorations of the great northern faces of the Swat peaks began, which ensure first-class activity for difficult mountaineering, both on rock and ice, representing an economic asset for high-level sports tourism.

The exploration of a trekking was also carried out between Gilgit Baltistan, following the Hundrap valley to cross the Dardarili pass (4,834 meters above sea level) and enter the Swat following the valley to the Ushu river. This tour, followed for the first time by a Pakistani-European expedition, is of great interest as it is a tour of the ancient pilgrims of Gandharan Buddhism. It is important to note that this exploration was carried out by a mixed international team of 5 female mountaineers and 4 men, being the first time that a group of Europeans and Pakistanis crossed the Dardarili.

In 2023, the exploration has continued: it has been possible to climb all the steps of the sources of the Ushu River, some of them completely unknown, the glaciers in the area have been explored, obtaining data on glacial retreat, as well as the parts high in the valleys that lead to the Palogah, Mankial, Palesar or Sirri Darra passes. The campaign has had the participation of around twenty activists from local delegations from Italy, Germany, France, and Spain. and, obviously, from Catalonia and Pakistan.

The main result is that the first hiking map of the Swat valleys is about to be published, at a scale of 1:100,000 directed by cartographer Remo Nardini based on data provided by MW activists. The collection of information, right now, is enough to begin the work of writing the Guide to the Swat Mountains, which is planned to be published in Urdu and English. As a result, also, the dissemination that is being done of the archaeological work of the ISMEO^[3]. On the other hand, the training work for mountain guides and companions is generating important synergies between visitors and locals; a new training edition for young people is planned. But much more important is the already planned new edition of the course for girls scheduled for February 2024.

The assessment is therefore very positive, the difficult conditions under which we have worked have forged a fabric of cooperation with the locals and especially with the administration, who have especially expressed their support. From the coordination with MWPakistan we will present proposals for the continuity of the project, already for 2024.

To highlight the importance of the project leadership of Dr. Carlo Alberto Pinelli, archaeologist and filmmaker, professor at UNISOB^[4], renowned mountaineer^[5] and founding member of Mountain Wilderness^[6].

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References

- [1] Swat was one of the main centers of Buddhist thought and the home of the last Gandharan Buddhists who lasted until the 11th century. The "Swat Museum" is a very important reference, it was rebuilt after the destruction of the Taliban wars and opened again to the public in 2014. It is an exceptional interpretation space of the relationship between Gandaharan and Greco-Roman sculpture.
- [2] This course has had the support of the Institut català de les dones de la Generalitat de Catalunya. It is important to highlight this project that promotes the training and empowerment of women in a highly masculinized sector, and the preservation of the integrity, the natural heritage of the people of this region of Pakistan, etc.
- [3] Associazione Internazionale di Studi sul Mediterraneo e l'Oriente
- [4] Università degli Studi Suor Orsola Benincasa (Naples)
- [5] Carlo Alberto "Betto" Pinelli was a member of the group of 4 people that on August 24, 1959, reached, for the first time, the summit of Sarghrar (7,340 meters above sea level), the fourth highest peak of the Hindu Kush.
- [6] In November 1987, the Club Alpino Accadémico Italiano and the Sella Foundation presented in Biella (Italy) the Mountain Wilderness proposal (Alpinists from all over the world in defence of high mountains) to determine the state of degradation of the mountain environment and the threats existing. Climbers from all nations participated in the debates and as a result of the work, a final document was drafted, the Biella Thesis, which established the birth of the association, its objectives and purposes.

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