

Martin Kettle on the heights of regional inaction

Slippery Slopes

Regional consciousness doesn't come naturally to the British. Yet regional thinking is unquestionably one of the most important dimensions of the emerging Europe. It has many sources. The single market has encouraged a regional approach to economic infrastructure. Politically, regionalism is being greatly stimulated by the ending of the cold war and the national democratic revival in the East.

But perhaps the greatest stimulus to the new regional consciousness is ecological. It has become impossible to think constructively about the big environmental problems of the continent without treating them as regional problems.

As tens of thousands of people jet off for ski-ing holidays this month, it is time to start thinking about the Alps in just such terms. Writing in 1894, Sir Leslie Stephen famously described the Alps as 'the playground of Europe'. Today, nearly a century later, that playground is in danger of destruction.

The Alps are a unique European environment, extending across seven countries. The bulk of lowland Europe is also directly dependent upon Alpine water and Alpine hydro-electricity.

There was a time when the Alps supported a range of economic activities in fairly small-scale communities. But the indigenous Alpine population has been in decline for 150 years and the diverse agricultural and small-industrial economy of the region is a thing of the past. Today the resident population is small, some 12m, but the annual tourist population is at least 10 times that and rising fast.

The problem for the Alps today is that the area has been reconstructed for the sole purpose of tourism and, specifically, for the activity of downhill ski-ing. There is nothing wrong with ski-ing, of course, but the development has occurred in a thoughtless and dangerous way which is creating unacceptable pressures on the preservation of the Alps for the future.

The heart of the problem is

that the Alps have been compelled to become a single-commodity colony of lowland Europe. That commodity is, as Sara Parkin memorably described it at the last Green Party conference, 'industrial ski-ing'. As is obvious from the colour supplements at this time of year, the pressure to consume this product is ferocious.

In order to produce industrial ski-ing, forests have been ripped up, pasture land has been obliterated, rivers have been diverted and valleys have been concreted-over. On the upper slopes there are now more than 40,000 ski-runs in the Alps, mostly dug out and engineered from woodland for the benefit of tourists. Ski-runs cannot exist in isolation. They require ski-lifts and high-altitude restaurant and hotel services too.

And with ski-ing also come ski-resorts, which means the building of small cities to accommodate the highly seasonal trade. Aesthetically, these resorts bear little relation to the older vernacular picture-postcard architecture of the Alps. They look much like any other new towns anywhere, except that they are largely deserted for most of the year. Roads are blasted through mountains and along valleys to service them.

All of which has made the

Alps economically vulnerable to the same problem that haunts any Third-World economy which is dependent on a single seasonal crop. A warm winter in the Alps is now the equivalent of a harvest failure. It can even mean destitution. Western Europe's current credit squeeze, which has meant a fall in demand for winter holidays of up to 25% this year in Britain, spells bad news for the Alpine economy, however much respite it may offer for the poor old Alps themselves.

Roads are now the biggest single problem of the lower Alps. Anyone who has ever experienced the traffic jams in Savoie or Piedmont, often accompanied by bad driving conditions, will know of the inability of Alpine roads to absorb the domestic car-driving tripper or tourist.

But the tourist isn't the only problem here. The Alps are also a major barrier between some of Europe's most important producers and markets. A stupendous and growing tonnage of lorries is now daily concentrated on to the handful of high-speed Alpine road crossings. Such things are problems everywhere in Europe, but because of the special atmospheric and gradient problems of the Alps, the destructive impact on the ozone layer is even

greater there than on such legendary crawls as the M25, the Munich-Salzburg *autobahn* or Paris *peripherique*.

In the last year, although not a feature of British media coverage, the main motorway routes through the Alps have provoked bitter protests as local people fought to protect their amazing mountain environment from overloaded roads.

After years of living amid inadequately-planned motorway development, inhabitants of the Austrian Tirol succeeded during the summer in persuading their government to impose controls on heavy-lorry use of the Brenner motorway, which links Bava-

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ria and Austria with northern Italy. The result was a vast protest of mainly Italian lorry-drivers which blocked the Brenner for days. So far the Austrians have held firm, but the issue is still unresolved.

Further west, the Swiss government has also had to respond to residents' hostility to heavy road-haulage expansion on the St Gotthard and the Simplon. The Swiss have discussed a plan to impose an outright ban on heavy lorries in two years' time. At this stage, it is a shot across the transports' bows. But no wonder Switzerland has just voted to maintain its citizen army.

It can't be left to the Swiss or the Austrians to fight these battles alone. The Alps belong to Europe as a whole. They are in danger. There are many available options for diversifying both the Alpine economy in general and the tourist economy in particular. Problems caused by excessive reliance on motorways, by industrial pollution and by inadequate controls over land development can all be dealt with too. But not piecemeal. They'll only be solved effectively by treating the Alps as the precious European region which they truly are.

