

## **Making the mountains glad - or mad?**

### **UIAA general assembly, Bressanone (Brixen) Italy, October 2016**

“The UIAA has a responsibility to preserve alpinism for the next generation.” This was the challenge Reinhold Messner laid down to delegates at the world climbing’s general assembly in Bressanone, Italy. First the UIAA had to define alpinism, and then defend its values, Messner said. But is the International Climbing and Mountaineering Federation really up to the job?

Peter Farkas, UIAA vice-president, put his finger on one part of the problem as he presented the federation’s strategic plan for 2017-20: “Some [national associations] want us to do nothing but sport, some federations want us to do *anything but* sport.”

Messner’s challenge, Farkas’s dilemma, German scepticism that the federation’s plans for the future amount to a barely costed “wish list”, bolt clippers or adventurers, for a former Fleet Street political correspondent a UIAA general assembly appears to have more than a whiff of the party conference, like Labour or the Tories gathered in Blackpool, plotting and manoeuvring around seemingly incompatible agendas.

Yet we stay together, falling back on the time-honoured cliché that our party or federation is “a broad church”; we may differ on strategy or even on fairly basic principles (clean climbing for example), but scratch a bit deeper and we’re all family. So it was at Bressanone. There were federations represented whose perceptions of climbing and the UIAA would make Alpine Club stalwarts weep. Yet somehow you recognise a bond; we are all energised by mountains, however differently that energy is expressed.

The 2016 UIAA General Assembly took place in Bressanone (Brixen), Südtirol, from 12-16 October, organised with the Alpenverein Südtirol and the Club Alpino Italiano. More than 100 delegates from all continents, except Antarctica, attended, including Doug Scott, Anne Arran and Steve Long for the BMC and myself for the AC. Concurrent at the same venue was the annual International Mountain Summit (IMS), a programme of lectures, films and discussion like a scaled-down Kendal Mountain Festival.

The conjunction of the assembly with the mountain summit was refreshing. For the most part UIAA assemblies don’t set the pulse racing. As needs must with AGMs, they are heavy with budget sums and reports from commissions - access, safety, medical, training standards, mountain protection etc - where the productive ‘fieldwork’ is done. However the presence of the IMS meant UIAA delegates were rubbing shoulders with a younger, boisterous crowd filling the corridors and bars, drawn by the likes of Ueli Steck, Hansjörg Auer, Michaela Gerg and Messner himself.

Südtirol is Reinhold Messner’s home turf and for several days the mountain messiah seemed ever present. He addressed us during a visit to Sigmundskron Castle near Bolzano - principal of his six mountain museums - then on receiving honorary membership of the UIAA and again after a screening of *Tragedy on Mount Kenya*. (Intense and beautifully shot, the film marks Messner’s debut as a director. Watch out for the AC’s own John Temple in a key support role.)

Messner's advocacy of traditional alpinism will find few dissenters in the Alpine Club; indeed it is very much our own credo. Going into the mountains should mean going into a wild world, where one is responsible for one's own actions and safety. But for this to be possible certain mountain areas have to be kept clean of all artificial intrusions - no bivouacs, no fixed routes, no bolts.

"The UIAA should fight for this possibility to exist in 500 years time," Messner said. "Climbing is becoming more and more an artificial activity like piste skiing. There is no danger there. Climbing indoors, like skiing, is a beautiful sport but it is not alpinism. It came out of alpinism and became something else. Today 90 per cent of 'rock' climbers never touch rock, they climb on plastic."

Messner said that sometimes he felt a "lonely fighter" for the values of alpinism and wild places. But perhaps that is self-absorption and he should look around more. Listening to Messner was Doug Scott, chair of a group whose detailed recommendations on the 'Preservation of Natural Rock for Adventure Climbing' are now UIAA policy; also present were young activists from the Norwegian Alpine Club keen to ensure clean climbing remains the norm on Norway's great walls. Tore Røysheim said the NAC wanted to be "constructive, not fanatic" and suggested including ethics in basic climbing training and persuading the tourist industry that keeping nature as pure as possible, rather than via ferrata and bolts, was in their own long-term interest.

I found all this emphasis on the spirit of alpinism and keeping the mountains wild rather encouraging. But then I'm an optimist. Messner and Scott are listened to with awed reverence but what seems lacking is effective follow-up. How many national associations have studied Scott's recommendations on conserving natural rock and then acted on them, to say, keep a crag bolt-free or veto a via ferrata?

On the fringe of the assembly there was the now familiar agonizing over the UIAA's relationship with the IFSC (International Federation of Sports Climbing) and also a meeting on the possibility of forming a European Mountain Association, primarily to monitor and lobby Brussels legislators. There was unease that this might further undermine the UIAA (as if the predations of the IFSC weren't bad enough). The German and Austrian associations hope to have a Euro-group in being by April 2017 but much remains unclear.

Other items to note: Frits Vrijlandt was re-elected as UIAA president and now starts his second four-year term - "a steady pair of hands" is the phrase that comes to mind - and five more national associations were welcomed on board, from Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Albania, Guatemala and Morocco.

Last but not least I'm happy to report that the UIAA's Mountain Protection Award - US\$5,000 - went to Mountain Wilderness France for a project clearing mountains along the French-Italian border of obsolete structures and sundry eyesores, notably abandoned ski infrastructure, cables, barbed wire, WW2 shells and other "wartime memorabilia".

Mountain Wilderness's goal is to improve the experience for mountaineers while also

protecting the environment. As a member of the UIAA's Mountain Protection Commission, which makes the award, I applauded the simplicity of this project. It perfectly encapsulates John Muir's dictum: "Do something for wildness and make the mountains glad." From Muir to Messner, hopefully that joyous message got through at Bressanone.

***Stephen Goodwin***

***Edenhall, Cumbria, 27 October 2017***