Recognizing the Value of Wilderness and Backcountry Experiences Within a Public Land Management Context

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Introduction

As climbers, hikers, backcountry skiers and mountaineers, the members of the Alpine Club of Canada draw on a legacy that is both rich and deep. The vision set out by our founders more than a century ago was clear and inspired:

> *"By virtue of its constitution, the Alpine Club of Canada is a national trust for the defense of our mountain solitudes against the intrusion of steam and electricity and all the vandalisms of this luxurious, utilitarian age; for the keeping free from the grind of commerce, the wooded passes and valleys and alplands of the wilderness.* ***It is the people's right to have primitive access to the remote places of safest retreat from the fever and the fret of the marketplace and the beaten tracts of life****."* (emphasis added)
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> – Elizabeth Parker, ACC Co-founder, Canadian Alpine Journal, 1907

This vision remains relevant today, as we work with land managers across Canada to both protect the places that are precious to us, and ensure that we continue to have responsible access to them.

Public lands, specifically our system of national and provincial parks, represent a heritage asset of enormous value to all Canadians. Ensuring that these special places are well-managed and protected is a an essential obligation, so that future generations may experience the same sense of awe, exhilaration and humility as today's mountain and backcountry travelers do.

At the same time, wilderness and backcountry access poses challenging questions, both for land managers and for organizations like the Alpine Club of Canada:

- What experiences do backcountry enthusiasts seek, and how can these needs best be facilitated and supported within a land management context?
- How can the need for protection of wild places best be reconciled with access?
- To what extent, and in what ways, do backcountry activities need to be "managed" by park authorities?
- For hikers and mountaineers, what obligations does the right of backcountry access bring with it?

This paper attempts to set out various principles and perspectives that guide the Alpine Club of Canada in its backcountry access advocacy efforts. As indicated by the words of Elizabeth Parker, quoted above, these are not new concepts – they have been at the very heart of the Club's vision and philosophy since our founding in the early years of the last century.

How do we define the "backcountry"?

Increasingly, land managers define park areas in relation to the recreational and other uses that either dominate or are permitted therein. Unsurprisingly, a great deal of land management focus is applied to those areas of parkland that must sustain the greatest number of users, where users expect the highest level of amenities, and where the risk to ecological integrity is the most problematic.

Such "front country" areas pose the most complex management challenges, and typically consume the majority of land management resources. Front country visitors and recreational users also typically account for the vast bulk of total park visitation.

Areas that are "off the beaten track", including wilderness, which attract far more limited visitation constitute parkland backcountry.

In a general sense, backcountry areas have specific characteristics: they are undeveloped or "untrammeled" and exist in a more natural state, they have seen little or no physical modification to accommodate users, they offer solitude to travelers, they require users to have specific skills and to be largely self-reliant, and they are best suited to recreation that is primitive and unconfined.

For the purposes of this paper, wilderness or backcountry areas are defined using the criteria set out by the John Muir Trust, as follows:

Wild land is:[1]

- *largely unaffected by human intervention*
- *remote or 'off the beaten track'*
- *rugged or physically challenging and naturally hazardous*
- *grand in scale*

Given the variability of terrain within Canadian parks and public lands, it is reasonable to ask if wilderness or backcountry areas exist in all regions. Some may feel that true "wilderness" can only be found in Canada's Western Mountain parks or those in remote areas of the north – land that is, in the truest sense, untouched. Can wilderness or backcountry exist in near-urban parks, or in those areas where the landscape has been altered by human activities in the past?

The ACC contends that "backcountry" is a relative term, and must be viewed within a local or regional context. When viewed from the standpoint of the user's experience, the concept of "back country" is, to a significant degree, defined experientially – through the sensibilities of the user.

If a user's experience is consistent with the values inherent in back country travel, then, de facto, it occurred in a backcountry locale. In this sense, the concept of "back country" is equally relevant in near-urban parks as well as those locales more traditionally viewed as including significant wilderness.

[1] *Wild Land Criteria*, John Muir Trust, U.K.

This concept was recognized in the Wild Land Criteria set out by the John Muir Trust, as follows:

> *"For many people, wild land is a place where one can escape from the pressures of everyday modern life. It is crucial that large expanses of unspoilt wild land are protected and continue to be openly available and enjoyed by society. Close to population centres, smaller areas of wild land are of increased importance."*[2]

How do we define the "backcountry user" and what experiences do these visitors seek?

Without doubt, Park managers face a daunting task in responding to the needs and expectations of a wide spectrum of users. The vast majority of park visitors, who limit their travels to front country areas, require amenities with considerable environmental impact – roads, parking areas, washrooms and other infrastructure, interpretive programs and activities, and well-developed trails able to accommodate high levels of use with relative safety. Ease of access and safety are key criteria in supporting positive user experiences in front country areas, and success in this endeavour requires a wide range of active interventions and land management measures.

In addressing front country areas that receive high levels of visitation, land managers have developed a range of strategies for accommodating user needs within an ecologically sustainable framework.

Wilderness or backcountry travelers form a very different user group, one with distinct characteristics and needs. For the purposes of this paper, we can define "back country users" as those park visitors who seek to travel and recreate in areas of a park beyond the trail's end – alpine and wilderness areas, or in more near-urban localities, those areas within a park where formal trails and infrastructure do not exist.

The range of backcountry user activities varies with the opportunities provided by terrain, but includes hiking, scrambling and climbing, skiing and mountaineering.

In general, the needs and expectations of front- and back-country contrast sharply. In some cases, the needs of the two groups are incompatible – so that management actions that support the user experience for one group, can compromise and diminish the user experience of the other. Meeting the needs and expectations of the two groups requires a full understanding of the underlying value-drivers linked to each user-group's experience.

It can be assumed that, in general, all park visitors seek experiences with some commonality of outcome – to enjoy time spent in natural surroundings away from their daily life, to recreate, and to have fun with friends and family. Beyond these general outcomes, and with respect to the nature of desired experiences, there is far less commonality.

What differentiates front- and back-country users are the specific value-drivers that underpin a full and satisfying experience, and the experiential elements that best contribute to achieving this outcome.

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[2] *Wild Land Policy*, John Muir Trust, U.K. Clause 5.3

In this, the two groups can be defined in a general sense, as indicated in Table One.

Table One: User Experience Value-Drivers

Front-country user value-drivers	Back-country user value-drivers
Convenience, ease of access.	Physical challenges and difficulty.
A managed or facilitated experience.	A self-directed experience that includes elements of the unknown, without external facilitation or management.
Predictability, safety and physical security.	Self-reliance and self-responsibility, personal management of risk factors.
Observation of nature.	Direct and personal physical involvement and emersion in a natural environment.
A natural experience that is not threatening.	Nature unmodified, where risks are an integral part of the experience.
Travel in natural areas that is limited in terms of duration and distance from amenities.	Longer trips, often of many days, that involve remote areas and where little or no infrastructure is present or desired.
Social interaction.	Reflection and solitude.

Within each user group, neither needs nor desired experiences are uniform. Given this proviso, this contrasting picture of user experience value-drivers is representative generally, and has utility.

In relation to the backcountry visitor, whether a hiker, climber or mountaineer, the desired user experience is highly personal, and self-defined. Key resources that the backcountry user brings to an activity include a high level of personal commitment, self-reliance, technical skills and risk awareness and management.

In return, the backcountry user can experience a range of both general and substantive impacts that are personal and often profound. These include an enhanced capacity for reflection, a greater sense of personal competence, and a sense of accomplishment. Substantive impacts can include increased self-efficacy and inner strength, a greater awareness of surroundings, self and others; a sense of awe and wonder, and of harmony[3].

[3] There is considerable literature on the therapeutic benefits of wilderness experience. One useful compendium is *Studies of the Use of Wilderness for Personal Growth, Therapy, Education, and Leadership Development: an Annotation and Evaluation*, Friese, Pittment and Hendee, University of Idaho Wilderness Research Centre, 1995

Specific research that has attempted to quantify the backcountry or wilderness user experience supports this view of its dimensions. Data are varied, but not contradictory. One study reported that wilderness users cited the following as being the most valued benefits from their backcountry activity[4]:

• physical fitness/exercise	29.7%
• restorative qualities	27%
• enhanced relationship with nature	13.5%
• spiritual benefits/ gaining a sense of peace and serenity	11%

Other studies have found that between 53% and 69% of backcountry and wilderness travelers acknowledge the "spiritual value of their wilderness experience".[5]

What emerges from a review of the relevant literature is an understanding that the backcountry or wilderness traveler often has a profound and intense connection with these places, one that is fundamental to their sense of self. Within the culture of the Alpine Club of Canada, these connections are well understood. For land managers unfamiliar with mountain culture, they may be less clear.

> *"Wildness is something of great import in a world of rapid, and in many cases poorly planned and unchecked, techno/industrial growth. We must hold on to it, not for ecological reasons alone, but we must recognize it for what it is: our spiritual home. In the words of John Muir: "Going to the mountains is going home...."*[6]

The cultural significance of backcountry and wilderness access

While we live in an era dominated by the reductive and rational lens of science, it is necessary to take note of the cultural dimension of backcountry and wilderness access, including its inherent relationship to the evolution of contemporary wilderness conservation ethics.

In this regard, literature and philosophy provide a rich thread, and one particularly relevant in a North American and Canadian context. From the writings of nineteenth century Transcendentalists such as Thoreau, Emerson and Whitman, to more contemporary voices like John Muir, Edward Abby, Aldo Leopold and a host of others, the role of backcountry and wilderness experience in self-realization, and personal development is defined most eloquently.

In many ways, the emergence of contemporary wilderness conservation ethics grew from this personal and experiential foundation. Science came to these matters somewhat later. In essence, awareness of the need to take responsibility for, and limit, human impacts on wilderness emerged as a consequence of the impacts of wilderness and backcountry experiences on individuals.

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[4] *The Wilderness Experience and Spirituality: What Recent Research Tells Us*, Paul Heintzman, The Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance, Vol. 74, 2003

[5] Ibid

[6] *Mountaineering: The Heroic Expression of Our Age*, Mikel Vause, Personal, Societal, and Ecological Values of Wilderness: Sixth World Wilderness Congress Proceedings on Research, Management, and Allocation, Volume II, United States Department of Agriculture, U.S. Forestry Service, 2000

In the Canadian context, the role of wilderness in development of a national character is undeniable – wilderness has a continuing and significant role in defining our nation and what it means to be "Canadian". It may be that the particular nature of this relationship is so fundamental as be taken for granted. The following comments, by Amy Krause, provide useful insights:

> *"In my experience, the idea of wilderness has become culturally iconic in parts of Canada and the United States. I won't speak so much for other places as my experience is limited, but I can say that in my travels overseas, I have never been to a place that held "uninhabited" and uncultivated lands in such high esteem.*
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> *"Wilderness, or the idea of it, may be largely constructed - especially if you take into account the experiences of Native Americans, First Nations, Metis, and Inuit peoples - but it occupies an important role in the minds of people here.*
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> *"I recall distinctly having a conversation with a retired couple on a train in Britain about ten years ago. When they discovered I was from Canada, he said to me, "I was in Canada years ago. I remember riding the train from Toronto to Vancouver and all across the country there were just vast tracts of nothing... nothing at all. How can you call it a country when there is nothing there?"*
>
> *"In his mind, the history of the people who live in a place make the country. In my mind, the fact there were places where people weren't, made the country... Somehow, I don't think the idea of wilderness - or at least its cultural importance - was the same in his mind as it was in mine."*[7]

This broader cultural perspective is useful to gaining an understanding the dimensions of the wilderness and backcountry experience for the individual.

Park management approaches supporting the backcountry user experience

The management of public parklands involves a wide array of priorities from ecological conservation, to provision of positive user experiences. This task is complicated by the array of desired experiences that users have. Wilderness and backcountry users represent a sub-set of users with particular needs and expectations.

A common perceived challenge for land managers seeking to meet the needs of wilderness and backcountry users lies in achieving this while also addressing ecological conservation goals. This task is not made easier by the prevalence of scientific management as a keystone of resource management.

[7] Amy Krause, interview published by Planeta.com, the global journal of practical ecotourism.

It has been noted that the concept of "scientific management" brings with it inherent challenges:

> *"the phrase is problematic – science deals with objective scientific facts, while management concerns values, and values are traditionally excluded from science. Phrased differently, management is done to achieve some goal, to accomplish some end that can, and will, be judged in value terms: as good or bad, right or wrong, beautiful or ugly, etc. At some level, scientific management conflates facts and values, often trying to transform difficult value issues into technical matters".*[8]

Such insight is needed if land managers are to develop backcountry and wilderness use policies that gain the support of users. Management plans that are developed on the basis of ecosystem science without parallel efforts to understand and address values-based, user-experience goals will reflect a dysfunctional paradigm, one where the assumption of conflict between competing priorities is inherent.

The ACC has laid out principles that recognize the need to consider both ecology and access in a more holistic way:

> *"We believe that access to mountain environments is essential to the full development of the human spirit, and that such access should not be unduly constrained, except where it is essential for the protection of these environments."*[9]

This principle assumes that ecological conservation and rights of backcountry access are compatible outcomes, except in very specific and well-defined circumstances. In practice, this might involve seasonal closures of areas due to animal breeding, or to minimize the risk of animal/human conflict. Or it might involve re-routing a trail away from an area of particular ecological sensitivity. Implicit in the principle is the assumption that access restrictions can and should be avoided unless there exists a specific and compelling need for action to the contrary.

This approach to land management is an emerging theme in park management plans, particularly within the National Park system.

The 2010 Yoho National Park Management Plan recognizes the importance of park visitors "seeking wilderness experiences consistent with wild settings, isolation and self-reliance". This begins with a clear definition of the backcountry or wilderness user experience:

> *"Visitors who seek "Immersion in Mountain Wilderness" have an inherent affinity for nature or have gained experience and comfort through repeated outdoor adventure over time. These 'authentic experiencers' become immersed physically and perceptually in the natural environment, leaving behind at the trailhead the built human environment that characterizes daily life.*

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[8] *Facts, Values and Decisionmaking in Recreation Resource Management*, Thomas A. More, USDA Forest Service

[9] *ACC Statement of Environmental Values and Principles*, 2007

Their carefully planned, intensely personal experiences may include long, challenging day hikes such as the Iceline, guided glacier travel on the Wapta Icefields, or lengthy, unguided backpacking trips into remote areas.

These visitors already have a strong connection to the park, and this connection will be maintained through the provision of off-site trip planning information and unobtrusive assistance, and when desired, contact with certified guides. They themselves will be encouraged to deepen their connection to place, as ambassadors or stewards, passing on their passion for Yoho to friends, family and colleagues."[10]

Further, the same plan sets out, as a goal, the following:

"Provide remote, un-crowded "Step into the Wild" and "Immersion in Mountain Wilderness" experiences that allow visitors to experience solitude and physical challenge requiring self-reliance. These opportunities are becoming increasingly rare in the southern Canadian Rockies."[11]

A similar approach can be found in the recent management plan for Banff National Park, found in Appendix One.

What these plans lay out is a clear understanding that the best method for supporting the backcountry or wilderness user experience is by managing it in an indirect and supportive manner. Further, where services are provided to this group, this should be done in an unobtrusive way. This perspective is wholly consistent with that put forward by wilderness access advocates.

"Whilst always remaining freely and openly available, wild land should not be 'tamed' by way-markers or by path improvements that serve only to speed up access. There is a need for self-reliance in wild land which should be accepted on its own terms. The sensitive, low-key maintenance of existing paths can prevent excessive wear and erosion of surrounding habitats and minimize visual intrusion."[12]

In practical terms, when park authorities consider how best to support the backcountry users' experience within an ecologically-sound land management framework, the following principles are suggested:

1) **Assume that backcountry use is compatible with ecological goals** Unless there is substantive and specific evidence to the contrary, land managers should assume that existing patterns of backcountry use are consistent with conservation principles. In most cases, backcountry activities will have occurred in a locality for a great many years, and impact patterns may well be quite stable. Full and proper analysis is required to determine if this level of impact has significance at an ecosystem level.

[10] Yoho National Park Management Plan – 2010, Pg. 36
[11] Yoho National Park Management Plan - 2010
[12] *Wild Land Policy*, John Muir Trust, U.K., Clause 6.8

2) **Address specific problems with specific solutions** Where analysis indicates that backcountry activities are resulting in specific ecological impacts that must be addressed, ensure that solutions are well-focused on the problem itself. Localized issues are best addressed with localized measures, for instance by the rerouting of trails away from animal feeding areas or sites of particular ecological value and sensitivity. It is inappropriate to restrict access to large areas of backcountry when less intrusive, site-specific measures would suffice. Remediation measures should always be based on sound science and be site- and problem-focused rather than more general in nature.

3) **Be prepared to "do nothing"** In most instances, backcountry users are "self managing" in that they understand and apply ethically-based principles in their backcountry activities, such as "leave no trace" practices. As a result, land managers should always consider that the most appropriate approach to supporting backcountry users may be non-intervention, or the limited provision of unobtrusive assistance (i.e., provision of maps and trip planning services).

4) **Set ecological objectives within a values framework** Access restrictions should always be considered within a values framework, including the values derived by backcountry users. In this context, access restrictions will always have negative impacts, and these should be recognized and considered.

5) **Apply *Smart Regulation* principles** Governments have increasingly moved towards a smart regulation model that begins with a disciplined analysis of a given issue, and seeks to identify all available options for addressing the issue, including non-regulatory measures. The objective of smart regulation is to resolve issues at the "least cost" to all parties, by employing the least intrusive and restrictive option that will deliver the required results. Regulation always has costs – these range from impacts on those affected by regulation directly, to the ongoing costs of compliance monitoring and enforcement for authorities. When a non-regulatory option is available, it will likely represent the "least cost" option for all involved.

6) **Engage backcountry users in the development and implementation of solutions** Backcountry users offer knowledge that will enhance land management decision-making and allow development of more focused and specific management measures. Simply put, their knowledge of backcountry areas is often profound, and this knowledge needs to be brought into the decision-making process. In addition, backcountry users have strong personal connection to the places they travel through, and this can serve as a valuable resource for land managers in implementing plans that gain backcountry user support. As noted in recent National Park management plans, backcountry enthusiasts can serve as ambassadors or stewards of the backcountry.

What should land managers expect from backcountry users?

While the Alpine Club of Canada believes that access to backcountry and wilderness areas is a right, it is also recognized that this right brings with it specific responsibilities. These have been stated as follows[13]:

- *We will act to ensure that our activities in the mountains are carried out in accordance with our values. We will utilize "leave no trace" practices. We will act on our individual and collective responsibility to ensure that this standard of practice is met.*

- *We will act as stewards of the mountains, seeking to reduce human impacts that threaten the integrity and sustainability of mountain environments.*

- *We will act to increase our knowledge and understanding of mountain environments, and our impacts upon them, so as to inform and guide our mountain practices and stewardship efforts.*

Land managers charged with ensuring the ecological integrity of backcountry and wilderness areas should consider backcountry users as valuable allies and partners. As indicated by ACC policies, the responsibilities that flow from the right of access to the backcountry are clear and significant, and land managers should engage backcountry users on this basis.

In order for such a partnership to have depth and meaning, land managers will need to ensure that backcountry user groups are brought into the management planning process at an early point, and that their participation is substantive and meaningful. In practice, this requires involvement in the setting of research goals, the analysis of user impact data, and in the identification and analysis of remediation strategies and measures.

This can only take place within an open, transparent and collaborative process where the value and validity of backcountry visitors' experiences are understood and accepted by land managers.

If implemented properly, such a process will engage backcountry users and provide a venue where their insights and knowledge can be fully utilized. Perhaps more importantly, it will provide a solid basis upon which backcountry users can share in the ownership of the resulting backcountry and wilderness management regime, and contribute to its future success.

[13] The full text of the ACC *Statement of Environmental Values and Principles*, 2007, can be found in Appendix Two.

Appendix One:
Five Types of Engagement for Visitor Experience

(excerpt from *Banff National Park Management Plan*, June 2010)

The "***virtual experience***" is targeted to people with an interest in mountain ecosystems, culture, history and recreation, anywhere in the world within reach of technology. For these people, Parks Canada will provide brief, intense, visual and/or auditory experiences of mountain life, delivered through electronic or print media. For reluctant travellers, these experiences may *be* the visit; for others, they may be instrumental at the imagining/wishing stage of the trip cycle and may provoke a subsequent visit.

Travellers who journey through the park without stopping are targeted for "***drive through awareness***". To date, these visitors have been largely ignored. Given their significant volume on transportation routes, however, they present a tremendous opportunity for connection to place and environmental stewardship. For this group, a drive along the Trans-Canada or other highways – complete with wildlife fencing, overpasses, underpasses and complementary signage – will offer a contrasting experience to that outside the park. Although their experience will still be primarily visual, subtle interpretation will promote understanding of and support for this ever-protected panorama and encouragement for a return or a longer stay.

Those who prefer to stay close to civilization and park communities represent the second-largest visitor segment and make the most use of park programs, facilities and services. They may come for a day or spend a few days in the park as part of a longer vacation or conference visit. For visitors stopping to snap a picture, have a picnic, go for a short stroll, downhill ski, or take in a festival or special event, the stage will be set for a deeper connection to place. Meaning and value will be added to this "***view from the edge***" experience through entertaining programming with heritage themes and through provision of media that bring the wilderness to the hotel room, day lodge, campsite or gathering place. This will be particularly appealing for those seeking hassle-free travel, rejuvenation and relaxation, or freedom and excitement in outdoor settings.

"***A step into the wild***" experience is for visitors who stay in the park with a primary focus on experiencing the place, but who seldom venture far, physically or perceptually, from civilization. They may visit attractions or take advantage of commercial guiding and transportation services to venture further from the road in relative safety. This smaller visitor segment has more time for personal reflection, in-depth learning and possibilities of memorable moments with wildlife. Their park experience will give them renewal, a sense of freedom and authentic connection to nature and mountain culture. Special care will be taken in the development and maintenance of facilities and services that support this level of experience, as meeting the needs of this type of visitor will not only serve them, but will also go far in establishing a standard of service excellence for all levels of experience that stop in the park.

Visitors who seek "***Rocky Mountain wilderness adventure***" have an inherent affinity for nature or an interest in adventure, challenge and discovery in mountain settings. These visitors become immersed physically and/or perceptually. Their carefully planned, intensely personal experiences may include long day-hikes, outfitted horse travel in remote valleys, expedition travel or lengthy, unguided backpacking trips. Their already strong connection to the park will be maintained through the provision of off-site trip planning information and unobtrusive assistance, and, when desired, contact with certified guides. They will be encouraged to deepen their relationship with the park as ambassadors or stewards.

Appendix Two:
Alpine Club of Canada Statement of Environmental Values and Principles (2007)

As Canada's national mountain organization, the Alpine Club of Canada (ACC) promotes mountaineering[14] while being committed to conservation of mountain environments[15]. As ACC members we recognize that access to the mountains obligates us to understand and protect these unique environments. To this end, we, ACC members, are guided by the following environmental values and principles of action.

Our Values

Leadership: We believe that we must act as stewards of the integrity of mountain environments and seek the knowledge and understanding required to do so effectively and responsibly.

Responsibility: We believe that we are accountable for our impacts on the mountain environments we travel through.

Human Development: We believe that access to mountain environments is essential to the full development of the human spirit, and that such access should not be unduly constrained, except where it is essential for the protection of these environments.

Sustainability: We believe that future generations should have access to similar experiences and personal challenges as those we seek in the mountains, and that we have an obligation to protect their interests.

Culture: We believe that communities and cultures that live within mountain environments deserve our understanding and respect.

Our Principles of Action

- We will act to ensure that our activities in the mountains are carried out in accordance with our values. We will utilize "leave no trace" practices. We will act on our individual and collective responsibility to ensure that this standard of practice is met.

- We will act as stewards of the mountains, seeking to reduce human impacts that threaten the integrity and sustainability of mountain environments.

- We will act to increase our knowledge and understanding of mountain environments, and our impacts upon them, so as to inform and guide our mountain practices and stewardship efforts.

[14] "Mountaineering" refers to a range of activities including rock climbing, mountain climbing, ski mountaineering, ice climbing, scrambling, bouldering, hiking and trekking.
[15] "Mountain environments" include alpine, mountain and other relevant areas.