

Student Writing Awards
Freshmen Composition

Fort Lewis College

Year 2008

How can you change this world for the
better?

Amber E. Brisson
Fort Lewis College, aebrisson@fortlewis.edu

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November 29, 2008

How Can You Change This World for the Better?

A weathered mountain goat balances atop a rock looking down upon the mountain valley which has been home to his herd as long as his animal instincts can recall. He glances at the puddles of water from disappearing glaciers and notices another group of humans climbing a difficult crevice to reach the seemingly impossible peak of Mount Everest. The aged goat is perplexed by the increased presence of humans and their wasteful habits, and wonders whether they will be a threat to his lifelong habitat or not. Extreme sports such as mountain and rock climbing, kayaking, mountain biking, flying small airplanes, off-road vehicles, white water rafting and sky surfing are often perceived as outlets beneficial to citizens of first world countries where risk is not a habitual part of everyday life. It is a common perception that the participation in these extreme sports is valuable for physical, spiritual, emotional, and cultural reasons. However, the perspective of local/native people and wildlife is one that has not been taken into account when considering the implications of extreme sports. It is a perspective that will affect the lives of all humans and all wildlife if not fully discussed. This paper will address the environmental impact of extreme sports, risk-taking, and adventure racing, and the growing encroachment upon wilderness areas in relation to fuel use, erosion, pollution, and waste disposal.

Throughout first world nations, extreme sports and risk taking activities are professed as advantageous to those participating in ways both spiritual, emotional, physical, and cultural. In

the article, *Rush Hour* by Jessica Dulong, she demonstrates the common perception that risk and extreme sports are beneficial,

“Taking physical risks is good for you. Whether you’re piloting a single-engine plane, careening through rapids, or dangling from a cliff, successfully navigating risky situations teaches you about yourself, increases your self-confidence, and helps you better manage life’s inevitable uncertainties” (Dulong 2).

Dulong exemplifies the common perception being challenged in this essay, that although physical risks may be beneficial to an individual, the affects of those actions reverberate throughout the local environment and economy. In the book, *A Phenomenology of Tourist Experiences*, author Eric Cohen identifies five categories of tourists and reasons why they travel. The five categories are, first a recreational mode of travel, second a diversionary mode of travel, third the culturally experiential mode of tourism, fourth a spiritually experimental mode of travel, and fifth an existential mode of travel (qtd. by Eric Cohen in Rosen 154). All of these cited reasons for travel and tourism are beneficial to the individual tourist/person participating in extreme sports, yet they do not take into account the benefit or burden placed upon the local people and their environment. Specifically these categories address the reasons for travel but do not address their affects especially related to fuel use and its contribution to global warming. “Modern tourism is dependent on greater transportation ability; it requires both large, claustrophobic cities and the means to escape them” (Rosen 151). In this quote, Rosen recognizes the fact that travel requires transportation which in modern times uses petroleum, an element which contributes to global warming, but she does not identify this as a problem. The Bureau of Transport and Regional Economics predicts that, “carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases from domestic aviation will reach nearly 110,000 gigagrams by 2020—one of the fastest growing contributors to transport-related emissions” (Gillian 9). Travel by airplane is

one of the most common forms of transportation for tourists and those participating in extreme sports. During the search for cultural, spiritual, recreational and diversion from normal life, the tourists and extremists do not acknowledge the fact that through their pursuit of new land or untouched wilderness, they are inadvertently affecting the wellbeing of these areas through their methods of transportation.

Elizabeth Rosen quoting James Ullman author of *The Age of Mountaineering* in her article, *Somalis Don't Climb Mountains*, acknowledges, “the deep and growing need of us all to offset the pressures and strains of modern living by some measure of contact with the simplicity and beauty of the natural world” (151). In this quote, Ullman recognizes that it is the environment and wilderness areas in their undisturbed state which attracts people in the first place, but he does not offer ways to enjoy these environments without causing harm to local biodiversity or the wilderness’ pristine state. An example of environmental degradation caused by tourism and extreme sports exists at Mount Everest, an ever increasing popular mountain climbing destination. In the year 1963, Barry Bishop an experienced mountain climber called the base camp at Everest, “the world’s highest junk yard” (Bishop & Naumann 323). Almost fifty years ago, this incredible mountain had been trashed by the growing numbers of climbers and tourists whose ethics emphasized summiting over environmental concerns. Sir Edmond Hillary, a famous mountaineer, discusses the attitude which leads to the types of waste disposal problems that exist on Mount Everest, “The accepted practice was, and still is, to dispose of trash in crevasses and to discard oxygen bottles at the point they become empty. An "out of sight, out of mind" mentality is prevalent; since trash is out of sight to the general public on high mountains, it is out of mind to the climbers that produce it” (Bishop & Naumann 323). It is precisely the attitude that ‘this is not my problem because it does not affect me personally’ which

contributes to environmental degradation in areas popularly frequented by recreational users. In an article called *Wildlife Responses and Visitor Perceptions*, authors Audrey Taylor and Richard Knight performed surveys of wilderness area visitors and found that, “generally, recreationists held members of other user groups responsible for stress or negative impacts to wildlife rather than holding members of their own recreational user group responsible” (Knight & Taylor 957). This quote illustrates a crucial problem for environmentalists in identifying a way to allow people to enjoy their extreme recreational activities but in ways which minimize the negative impact on the environment.

Extreme sports, adventure racing, and activities which involve great risk often take place in wilderness areas, and they are detrimental to the environment because of waste produced, transportation, and consumption of non-renewable resources. All of these aspects contribute to the effects of global warming and the disappearance of wilderness areas. The ideas discussed in this paper clarify the misconception that extreme sports are separate from what happens in our environment. This is an issue which if it not fully addressed will produce repercussions which affect every woman, man, child, animal and plant on our delicate planet Earth. The community participating in extreme sports is just one example of human impact on the environment, but they are a group which consistently frequents areas of wilderness. Imagine how much easier preserving wilderness and wildlife would be if people participating in extreme sports start considering the environmental impact of their actions. Then consider the possibilities if those ethics transferred into their daily lives. If we don't make changes in the way we view our world, and the way we inhabit it, life will certainly not continue as we know it, and the seemingly unlimited amount of resources will continue to dwindle if not die out completely. As author Jessica Dulong put it, “In adventure situations, you have to be conscious about the choices

you're making, or you will die" (Dulong 2). Dulong is referring to decisions which a person makes while participating in a risky extreme sport, but the same sentiment applies to the environment. If we as a people on this planet are not conscious about the decisions we make on our damaged planet, we will die. A change as large as the one addressed in this paper, will not come easily as many people throughout the world cling to beliefs, traditions, values, religions, and governments which do not acknowledge the idea of our dying planet. Specific traditions such as cutting down trees to decorate and then throw away after a month, or the family who rides their jet skis every summer are ingrained culturally and will present the greatest challenge. This paradoxical change will come at great costs to people throughout the world, but can also be achieved through the thoughtful actions of millions of individual citizens. Consider your daily actions and the impact picking up trash on your favorite trail, carpooling, or enjoying the great outdoors with wildlife in mind could have if practiced countrywide or even worldwide. What steps will you take today to sustain tomorrow?

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