



The true accessibility of mountaineering: The case of the High Himalaya



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ABSTRACT

Each year, hiking, trekking and mountain climbing, broadly defined as mountaineering, are becoming more popular. Among the key factors determining a travel destination in recent years is the level of tourist accessibility. To improve the current level of tourist accessibility, it is necessary to know all the factors that may affect it. This paper focuses on the true accessibility of mountaineering and presents a conceptual framework for assessing it. Access to places for mountaineering is more complicated than for simple tourist destinations that only require the availability of transport and in situ services. For mountaineering, *true accessibility* consists of two factors: (1) *destination accessibility* (the transport system and in situ services) and (2) *real access*, which includes such factors as social, economic, weather and psychophysical environments, as well as the presence of mountaineering activities, all of which can have a positive or negative influence on the opportunity to engage in a given pursuit. This means the conditions must be such that real contact with the tourist attraction can take place. Examples of current accessibility conditions in the Himalaya are used to illustrate all part of the conceptual framework. A more comprehensive understanding of the different aspects of mountaineering accessibility offers important insight for tourists planning mountaineering activities and local mountain communities developing supporting infrastructure and services.

MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

The comprehensive conceptual framework of mountaineering accessibility presented in this article offers an important tool for:

- authorities and/or residents of mountain communities to assess their local conditions and make informed choices about their own future: they may facilitate accessibility for mountaineering (e.g., Annapurna Conservation Area Project) or remain in isolation from this kind of activity (e.g., Bhutan);
- mountaineers, whose improved understanding of accessibility will increase their chances of a successful summit bids and help improve the safety of their trips.

1. Introduction

According to many researchers, local attractions are considered the main goals of tourist trips (Goodall & Bergsma, 1990; Mill & Morrison, 1992; Buhalis, 2000; Kozak & Baloglu, 2010; Radicchi, 2013; Żemła, 2014). Mountains, with their remote and majestic beauty, are among the most popular destination for tourism. In fact, mountain regions have consistently been identified as second in global popularity after coastal regions (Mieczkowski, 1995; Beedie & Hudson, 2003; Ryan, 2003).

Mountain areas have excellent tourism products, defined as a bundle of activities, services and benefits. This bundle consists of five components: attractions at the destination, facilities, accessibility, images and price (Medlik & Middleton, 1973; Goodall & Bergsma,

1990; Go & Govers, 1999; Candela & Figini, 2012). Other key factors determining travel destinations are the availability of things to do and see, the costs related to these activities, the local climate and availability of accommodation (Kale & Weir, 1986; Lee & Josiam, 2004). More often than not, people who decide to partake in mountain activities focus not only on the attractiveness of a mountainous region itself, but also on the ease of access to it. However, to correctly understand the accessibility of mountaineering, it is crucial to recognize all of the factors involved in real access.

The objective of this study is to develop a comprehensive conceptual framework for examining accessibility to mountain activities that accurately represents true accessibility of the place by integrating all of the relevant factors. The framework is developed based on articles published in academic tourism journals and mountaineering-focused

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literature (e.g., American Alpine Journal, Alpinist) and my own mountaineering experience. I have led (or co-led with Marek Zoladek) twenty-five expeditions in various mountain ranges of the world, including the Himalaya, Andes, Alaskan Range, Rocky Mountains, European Alps and the Southern Alps in New Zealand. Components of the conceptual framework will be illustrated with examples from the Himalaya.

2. Background

This section provides an introduction to the meaning of the mountaineering and highlights its tremendous potential for tourism. I will also show that a detailed understanding of mountaineering accessibility is crucial for guiding the economic and social development of mountain regions.

2.1. Mountaineering

The meaning of the term mountaineering (German: *Bergsteigen*; Spanish: *Montañismo*) has evolved during last decades (Collister, 1984; Whitlock, Van Romer & Becker, 1991; Dredge, 1999; Beedie & Hudson, 2003; Pomfret, 2006; Rotillon, 2006; Ion, 2010). Today, mountaineering has been subdivided, re-invented and redefined (Beedie & Hudson, 2003). At the beginning of the 20th century, mountaineering was treated as a kind of elite activity and was based on the ideal of an unmediated encounter between man and mountain, without any artificial aids and without the benefit of a guide (Holt, 2008). Recently, the boundaries between mountaineering and tourism are increasingly blurred in mountains throughout the world. Due to diversification, commodification and commercialization, mountaineering is becoming more mass tourism than elite (Johnston & Edwards, 1994; Beedie & Hudson, 2003). While some scholars identify mountaineering-related activities as climbing (rock and ice) and trekking up mountains (Whitlock, Van Romer & Becker, 1991), others are also adding backpacking, hiking, skiing, via ferrata and wilderness activities (Pomfret, 2006), and still others state that mountaineering activities also include indoor climbing, sport climbing and bouldering (Coalter, Dimeo, Morrow & Taylor, 2010). In this paper, the term mountaineering has been adopted from Beedie and Hudson (2003), who subdivided it into climbing (which now refers to adventure climbing or sports climbing) and trekking (hill walking in 'exotic' places).

According to the above, high-mountain areas are no longer restricted to experienced mountaineers (Messerli & Ives, 1997; Nepal, 2008; Mu & Nepal, 2015) and numerous studies have shown that the growth rate of mountain-based adventure tourism has sped up dramatically in recent decades (Zurick, 1992; Nepal, 2000; Marek & Wiczorek, 2015). There are three main aspects that have contributed to this trend: evolution of mountaineering techniques, increasing physical capabilities of mountaineers and the commercialization of mountaineering (Apollo, 2014a). The size of tourist traffic in high-mountain areas can be estimated by checking how many people belong to mountain clubs or similar societies. The UIAA (French: Union Internationale des Associations d'Alpinisme, English: International Mountaineering and Climbing Federation), the international governing body of climbing and mountaineering, has a global presence on five continents with 86 member associations in 62 countries representing over 3 million people (Table 1). However, the real number of mountaineers is likely much larger. The number of mountaineers in the U.S., for example, is estimated at 2,571,000 people (Outdoor Foundation, 2016), which is 150 times higher than the number of members of the American Alpine Club (16,500 people). The situation is similar in Poland where Jodłowski (2011) estimates the real number of climbers between 50,000 and 80,000 people, which is 15–25 times higher than the number of Polish Mountaineering Association members (3,170 people). Without any doubt these numbers highlight the tremendous potential of mountaineers for tourism. However, to capitalize on this potential, proper access to the destinations needs to be established.

Table 1

Number of climbers according to the UIAA members for 2015.
Source: UIAA, 2016.

No	Country	Name of the federation associated with UIAA	Members number
1.	Germany	Deutscher Alpenverein	1,131,658
2.	Austria	Verband Alpiner Vereine Österreichs	650,000
3.	Italy	Club Alpino Italiano	307,069
		Unit Member International	No data
		Skyrunning Federation	
		Alpenverein Südtirol (AVS)	62,640
4.	Spain	Federación Española de Deportes de Montaña y Escalada (FEDME)	108,145
		Centre Excursionista de Catalunya	4,400
		Euskal Mendizale Federazioa - Basque Mountaineering Federation	30,788
		Federació d'Entitats Excursionistes de Catalunya (FEEC)	38,324
5.	Switzerland	Schweizer Alpen-Club SAC	142,787
6.	France	Federación Española de Deportes de Montaña y Escalada (FEDME)	82,815
7.	Netherlands	Royal Dutch Mountaineering and Climbing Club	58,697
8.	Slovenia	Alpine Association of Slovenia	54,574
9.	United Kingdom	British Mountaineering Council	52,602
		The Alpine Club	1,529
10.	Japan	Japan Mountaineering Association	43,000
11.	Turkey	Türkiye Dağcılık Federasyonu - Turkish Mountaineering Federation	19,990
		Zirve Mountaineering Club	1,750
12.	Norway	Norwegian Alpine Club - Norsk Tindeklub	657
		Norges Klatreforbund - The Norwegian Climbing Federation	19,860
13.	Iran	I.R. Iran Mountaineering and Sport Climbing Federation	20,000
14.	USA	The American Alpine Club	16,500
		Alaskan Alpine Club	69
15.	China	Chinese Mountaineering Association	13,500
35.	Poland	Polish Mountaineering Association	3,170
	TOTAL		3,010,053

2.2. Destination accessibility

According to Middleton (1994), accessibility to *typical* destination includes the components of infrastructure (roads, airports, railways, seaports), equipment (size, speed and range of public transport vehicles), operational factors (routes operated, frequency of services, prices) and government regulations regarding transportation (cf. Burns, 1979; Prideaux, 2000; Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Candela & Figini, 2012). Numerous papers have also shown that the quality of accessibility (satisfaction with the chosen destination) (Pyo, Mihalik & Uysal, 1989; Selby & Morgan, 1996) is a more important consideration than the real accessibility of a place. This is because transport systems and in situ services are at least at a decent level in much of the world today.

Access to high-altitude regions is much more complex than for other tourism destinations. More sophisticated forms of (adventure) tourism, such as mountaineering, have additional factors with regards to accessibility (or inaccessibility) in comparison to those typically discussed in literature on accessibility to a tourist destination. A mountaineer choosing mountain regions for activities also focuses on several serious restrictions that are related to *external factors* that include elements independent of the mountaineer himself (e.g., ban of activity due to military conflict, faith or gender restrictions), as well as the *internal factors* that directly relate to the skills and abilities of the mountaineer. Among these elements, some are more tangible (e.g., obtaining a permit from the administration, financial abilities), while others are more intangible (e.g., adequate technical and psychophysical skills). These restrictions describe what mountaineers must overcome

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