

A [sample entry](#) from the

Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature

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Edited by

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See also: Devils Tower, *Mato Tipi*, or Bear's Lodge; Manifest Destiny; National Parks and Monuments (United States); Nature Religion in the United States.

Mountaineering

Mountaineering can be generally addressed as an encounter of humans and nature, as a relationship between human and mountain. Although this relationship can take on quite different qualities – from domination to sacralization – there is an implicit tendency to personalize and thus to ontologize the mountain as an individual entity. The climbing of a mountain has always been part of religious devotion, but it is only in early modern times that *overcoming* the difficulties related to high mountain walking became a symbol either of controlling the power of nature or of connecting spiritually with the transcendent realms high mountain areas stand for. A watershed in this regard was Petrarca's climbing the Mont Ventoux (France) on 26 April 1336, which he described as an overwhelming experience that felt like being carried from space into time. He was the first in recorded Western history to have climbed a mountain for the mere longing to see the land from above and – as he told in his report – from a new perspective.

"Mountain," like "nature" in general, is not a neutral term. Its aesthetic perception is fundamentally prefigured by mental dispositions and ideas that generate the object of experience in the first place. The mountains can be personalized as enemies, representing the dangerous and threatening aspects of nature that humans are about to conquer in a risky fight, or as a revelator of spiritual wisdom. The latter personalization talks of mountains as "father" or "mother" that care for their children on their spiritual path. Often mountaineering connects both forms of relationship.

The dominating aspect of climbing is of paramount importance for the Western relationship to mountains. This can be proven by a cornucopia of documents from the sixteenth century through today. But one has to point at the ambivalence of this engagement with mountains. On the one hand nature is the degraded "wild," and the mountains symbolize the purest and most powerful manifestations of nature's threatening that man struggles to overcome (one may think, for instance, of the mythical

descriptions of expeditions to K2, Mount Everest, or the Eiger north face). On the other hand climbing a mountain means to overcome the dangers and weaknesses *inside* a person, thus mountaineering is a means to transgress the borders of bodily exhaustion in order to gain a fuller awareness of one's own psychical or spiritual capacities. Reinhold Messner, who climbed each 8000 meter peak and experienced a lot of emotionally touching situations (like cutting off his dead brother from the rope), time and again makes sure that climbing is a way to the inner self. Here, outer domination is mirrored by an internal conflict. This sheds light on the discussion of Messner's meeting the "Yeti" or "Big Foot." Whether or not this giant animal exists in the Himalayas, this story is definitely a transference of "the hero's journey" (on which the climber meets the "dragon") from internal into material realms.

Another aspect of mountaineering is its being depicted as revelation. Romantic authors often describe their meeting with mountains as an epiphany of nature's sacred dimensions. Many nineteenth-century authors both from North America and from Europe could be mentioned here, from Johann Wolfgang Goethe and Novalis to Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. In this perspective, the mountain reveals the living beauty of nature and initiates a feeling of universal connectedness in the human climbing it. In modern environmentalism and the U.S. National Park movement, it was especially the mountains that (contradictorily) symbolized both the unconquered wilderness and the American project of universal salvation.

In the last three decades, mountaineering has been closely related to new developments within the "outdoor" scene. Although the disparate free-climbing movement is difficult to address generally and many climbers are not interested in ecological or even spiritual aspects of their sport, there is an undeniable relation between deep-ecological activities and the romanticized picture of free-climbing. A number of mountain climber-intellectuals are drawn to deep ecology because of spiritual experiences they have made outdoors, many of them being influenced by Arne Naess' earliest environmental philosophy. Naess himself was an experienced climber and the first to ascend Tirich Mir (7690 meters; 25,230 feet), the highest peak in the Hindu Kush, in 1950.

Founders of internationally successful outdoor and climbing companies participate in grassroots deep ecological activities not only for advertisement reasons, but also as a consequence of their personal experiences that are often spiritually colored. This is true in particular for Doug Thompkins (founder of "The North Face" and "Esprit"), who funded the "Foundation for Deep Ecology," the "EcoForestry Institute," and the "El Pumalin Bosque Foundation," which ambitiously supports the idea of Pumalin National Park in Chile ("Pumalin" means "where Pumas live"). Yvonne Chouinard (founder of "Patagonia"

Messner on Everest and Cosmos

Reinhold Messner and Peter Habeler were the first two climbers to ascend Mount Everest without the use of oxygen. In his report of the expedition Messner wrote:

I have not come here to ascend Everest at any price. I wished to get to know it, in all its might, difficulty, and severity. And I was resolute to renounce the peak, should I not be able to climb it without a breathing mask: With that modern oxygen apparatus one simulates at the Everest a level of 6,000 meters. But to experience that level, I need not go to Everest. To acknowledge, to sense, and to feel the Everest's power, I have to climb it without technical tricks. Only then I know what a man undergoes there, which new dimensions will open before him, and if he can arrive at a new relationship to the cosmos (1978: 162).

Finally standing at the peak of Everest, Messner described his feelings thus:

Standing in the diffuse light, with the wind in the back, I suddenly have a feeling of all-inclusiveness (*Allgefhl*) – not the feeling of success and of being stronger than all those who came here before us, not a feeling of reaching the ultimate point, not omnipotence. Just a touch of happiness deep inside my head and breast. The peak that suddenly seemed to me like a resting place. As if I hadn't expected a resting place up

here. At the sight of those steep, sharp ridges beneath us [we experience] the imagination that later we really would have come too late. Everything we say to each other now, we say in mere embarrassment. I don't think any more. While in a trance-like state I get the tape out of the backpack, switch it on, and try to speak a few reasonable sentences, my eyes are immediately filled with tears. "Now we are at Everest's peak; it is so cold that we cannot take photos," I later start the conversation with the tape recorder switched on. But right away crying again shakes me. I neither can talk nor think, but I feel this deep emotional commotion which throws me into a new balance. Only a few meters below the peak the exhaustion would have been the same, also the anxiety and the pain suffered; such a burst open of emotions, though, is only possible at the peak.

Everything that is, everything I am, is marked by the knowledge that I reached the final destination. The peak – at least temporarily – as naïve, intuitive answer to the question of being (1978: 180).

Kocku von Stuckrad

Further Reading

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and "Black Diamond") spends a fixed part of the company's budget on grassroots environmental projects, many with a biocentric, radical environmental approach. Reinhold Messner (affiliated with "Salewa") is a member of the European Parliament for the Green Party; and "Jack Wolfskin" (founded by the German Wolfgang Dausien) supports environmental projects around the world. Many of those brands explicitly refer to U.S. climbing romanticism (especially Yosemite Park), even when such relations are artificial, like in the "Think Pink" case, which was founded in Italy.

Kocku von Stuckrad

Further Reading

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See also: Deep Ecology; Earth First! and the Earth Liberation Front; Fly Fishing; Naess, Arne; Radical Environmentalism; Rock Climbing; Sacred Mountains; Surfing.

Mountains and Rivers Sutra by Japanese Soto Zen Master Dogen Kigen (1200–1253)

The Sanskrit term *sutra* has been reserved throughout the Buddhist tradition for what is taught by a Buddha. Its use in the title of this text immediately suggests the extraordinary nature of Dogen's 1240 address to a monastic assembly, written as a powerful attempt to combine the broad rhetorical sweep and spiritual depth of Chinese