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HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL ASPECTS OF MOUNTAIN ECOTOURISM IN KYRGYZSTAN: CHALLENGES AND OUTLOOKS

The Kyrgyz Republic has a storied history of mountaineering and mountain tourism, yet the development of the sector has faced major structural issues since independence. Building better platforms for encouraging mass participation in these forms of sport and training domestic guides and tour operators, as well as improving the regulatory frameworks currently in place with the expertise of the country's senior mountaineers, can empower individuals and small and medium enterprises, enhance environmental-protection measures, and support economic development in underserved and remote regions. This article presents the Soviet-era framework for mountaineering and mountain tourism, traces its evolution and that of key stakeholders and organisations in the sector, and offers policy recommendations for further international investment and cooperation in Kyrgyz eco-tourism.

Key words: Sustainable development, mountaineering, mountain tourism, adventure tourism, skiing, winter tourism, eco-tourism

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КЫРГЫЗСТАНДАГЫ ТОО ЭКОТУРИЗМИНИН ТАРЫХЫЙ ЖАНА МАДАНИЙ АСПЕКТИЛЕРИ: КӨЙГӨЙЛӨР ЖАНА ПЕРСПЕКТИВАЛАР

Кыргыз Республикасы тоо туризмдин жана альпинизмдин кеңири тарыхына ээ, бирок бул тармакты өнүктүрүү мамлекеттүүлүккө ээ болгондон бери негизги структуралык көйгөйлөргө туш болду. Спорттун бул түрлөрүнө массалык катышууну стимулдаштыруу үчүн программага багытталган жакшы базаны куруу, анын ичинде ата мекендик гиддерди жана туроператорлорду даярдоо, ошондой эле өлкөдөгү квалификациялуу альпинисттердин эксперттик топтору менен оперативдүү жана жөнгө салуу механизмдерин өркүндөтүү сыяктуу секторлордо бизнес коомчулук, анын ичинде орто жана чакан ишканалар айлана-чөйрөнү коргоо механизмдерин жана чараларын өркүндөтүп, өлкөнүн начар өнүккөн аймактарында экономикалык өнүгүүнү колдошот. Бул макалада советтик альпинизмдин жана тоо туризмдин тарыхый аспектилери каралып, тоо экотуризм индустриясындагы кызыкчылык топторунун диверсификациясына байкоо жүргүзүү менен, Кыргыз Республикасындагы тоо экотуризми үчүн мындан аркы инвестициялык климатты илгерилетүү боюнча сунуштар сунушталат.

Өзөктүү сөздөр: Туруктуу өнүгүү, альпинизм, тоо туризми, окуялуу туризм, тоодо лыжа тебүү, кышкы туризм, экотуризм.

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ИСТОРИКО-КУЛЬТУРНЫЕ АСПЕКТЫ ГОРНОГО ЭКОТУРИЗМА В КЫРГЫЗСТАНЕ: ВЫЗОВЫ И ПЕРСПЕКТИВЫ

Кыргызская Республика имеет обширную историю горного туризма и альпинизма, но развитие этой отрасли столкнулось с большими структурными проблемами с момента приобретения государственности. В таких секторах, как построение лучшей программно-ориентированной базы для поощрения массового участия в данных видах спорта, включая такие, как профессиональная подготовка отечественных гидов и туроператоров, а также совершенствование операционно-регулятивных механизмов с экспертными группами квалифицированных альпинистов страны, может повысить бизнес сообщество, включая средние и малые предприятия, а также механизмы и меры по охране окружающей среды и поддерживать экономическое развитие в недостаточно развитых регионах страны. В данной статье рассмотрены исторические аспекты советского альпинизма и горного туризма, которые отслеживает его диверсификацию заинтересованных групп в отрасли горного экотуризма, и предлагает рекомендации по продвижению дальнейшего инвестиционного климата по горному экотуризму в Кыргызской Республике.

Ключевые слова: устойчивое развитие, альпинизм, горный туризм, приключенческий туризм, горные лыжи, зимний туризм, экотуризм.

I. Introduction

Characterised by the peaks of the Tian-Shan in the north and the Pamir in the south, Kyrgyzstan has rightly earned a reputation as the “Switzerland of Central Asia” for its topography and possibilities for mountaineering and other forms of outdoor tourism. Kyrgyz mountaineers were among the most decorated in the Soviet Union, with dozens of clubs and thousands of participants in outdoor tourism locally. Ascents of the country’s three highest peaks were important objectives in Soviet mountaineering. Today, the economic potential of this industry is vast: considering the uniqueness of the country’s landscapes and nomadic cultural roots, not only does eco-tourism along these lines offer potential employment for thousands of skilled professionals, it can also reinforce the strong existing models of community-based and local tourism in the country. Due to the remoteness of many mountaineering and backpacking destinations, underdeveloped and rural communities can also particularly benefit from greater investment in this industry.

However, substantial issues still exist to realising the touristic potential of Kyrgyzstan’s peaks: limited participation in these forms of sport domestically, a lack of trained guiding personnel, the need for better national standards for safety, and environmental concerns all must be addressed. Modern Kyrgyz mountaineering and outdoor recreation stand on a strong and illustrious foundation left by the Soviet system of training and promoting these forms of sport, but economic hardship has left the number of practitioners diminished. Investment could yield consistent growth, a strong regulatory framework, and important ecological benefits for the country as a whole if done quickly so as to build on the institutional memory remaining from before independence.

II. The Soviet-era framework for outdoor recreation

Both technical mountaineering and backpacking were well-developed and supported in the Kirghiz SSR: for the former, over sixty different mountaineering clubs existed under the auspices of labour unions and educational institutions (Komissarov V. A., personal communication [interview], 20 October 2021). Young Tourists’ Stations and pioneer camps also offered a window for young people to become involved in outdoor recreation through the Komsomol. (Danichkina L., personal communication [interview], 25 May 2022). Although

most clubs were based in Bishkek on account of the greater number of large unions and universities, students and schoolchildren in Issyk-Kul and Fergana still had access to clubs through local state universities or their regional Komsomol apparatus (Kubatov E., personal communication [interview], 27 April 2022). Funding for these organisations came from the institutions that housed them, whether places of work or study, as well as from minimal dues and contributions from private individuals and other enterprises, while instructors and group leaders worked in a volunteer capacity.

All in all, this framework provided established and aspiring Kyrgyz mountaineers with the means to launch expeditions, offer gear and training to young people at minimal prices, and subsidise members travelling to other parts of the Soviet Union for guide training, among other things. Komissarov (2021), the president of the Kyrgyz Mountain Guide Association and a Master of Sport in mountaineering, recalls travelling to the Caucasus for a month to receive his first certification as a guide, paying 12 rubles or 4% of the nominal cost of the fees associated with travel, equipment and instruction (Personal communication [interview], 20 October 2021). Youth mountaineering and backpacking instructor and guide Lyubov Danichkina tells a similar story of completing a 40-day course prior to working at the Frunze Young Tourists' Station (Personal communication [interview], 25 May 2022).

As might be surmised, the accreditation system for instruction in outdoor tourism was rigorous and carefully regulated by republican and all-Union committees on physical culture and sport. This exacting concern for safety and accountability extended not only to those seeking to lead expeditions or teach aspiring mountaineers, but also required substantial documentation from groups attempting ascents or trekking routes— systems of classification existed for terrain types, altitude, and technical considerations (Committee for Physical Culture and Sport of the USSR; Alpinism Federation of the USSR 1985). Participants in backpacking trips of 1st category needed to be 16, for more strenuous routes of 2nd and 3rd category 17, and for mountaineering 18 years old, and as difficulty rose, so did requirements for the number of mountaineers of certain class and experience participating in the expedition (Committee for Physical Culture and Sport of the USSR; Alpinism Federation of the USSR 1985).

As such, Soviet systems for (especially youth) sport and tourism in the mountains can be characterised as ubiquitous – sections and opportunities existed in all regions of the country, at least where there were major institutions of higher education and production bases – accessible – membership was not prohibitively expensive nor open only to certain elements of society – and professional – there were high standards for instruction and vetting of expedition plans, participants' skills, and instruction. This is not to say there were no accidents under the system (perhaps most infamously in Kyrgyzstan, the 1974 Shatayeva expedition disaster on Pik Lenina), but rather that a coherent regulatory framework existed to supplement the proliferation of groups and participants in sport mountaineering.

III. The development of post-independence outdoor recreation

Unfortunately, due to the dependence of these organisations on official interest in promoting outdoor recreation and sport, the collapse of the Soviet Union and independence of the Kyrgyz Republic represented a massive blow to the sector. Considered a military form of sport, state support for mountaineering had been motivated by defence concerns as well as an interest in the development of sport, as Soviet special forces frequently recruited or trained mountaineers (Kubatov E., personal communication [interview], 27 April 2022). The number of practitioners and clubs plummeted: of the sixty operational clubs and mountaineering sections in the mid-1980s, perhaps three were still in operation after a few years of independence. While the Kyrgyz Alpinism Federation was founded in 1994 as a successor to

the republican chapter of the national Alpinism Federation of the USSR, the lack of supporting organisations – or, indeed, any clubs outside of Bishkek – limited its effectiveness.

This can be ascribed principally to two factors: firstly, mountaineering's aforementioned significance as a "military sport" in the Soviet Union did not carry over to the newly independent Kyrgyz state, with much less need for a substantial military. Secondly, the financial situation was dire: even beyond the economic crises of the mid-'90s that throttled development in most former Soviet republics, Kyrgyzstan did not have significant resource-extraction infrastructure to augment state revenues, unlike Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, or Uzbekistan. This combination resulted in an immediate and crucial lack of funding for even those tourism or outdoor-sport entities which survived the collapse of the Soviet Union itself (Kubatov E., personal communication [interview], 27 April 2022). Thus, for the first decade of Kyrgyzstan's independence, official support and frameworks for mountaineering and outdoor sport existed at a level far below that of 1991 and the preceding years. The Kyrgyz Alpinism Federation, built largely on the core membership of the Soviet-era club from the Polytechnic Institute, remained the principal operational sport-mountaineering organisation (Moskin, personal communication [interview], 23 April 2022). Gubaev (2005) notes that at the time of writing, four mountaineering sections existed, all based in Bishkek, of which the Polytechnic Institute section was the largest with around fifty members.

Moskin further cites the prohibitive cost of equipment as a reason for critically low numbers of domestic alpinists. He began outdoor tourism backpacking and trekking, and progressed to technical mountaineering in 2004 thanks to the renowned Kyrgyz mountaineer Aleksandr Gubaev, who spent a substantial amount of his own time and money helping instruct and provide gear to novice mountaineers (Personal communication [interview], 23 April 2022). After his tragic death on K-2 later that year, members of the Federation have continued to try to make gear and training available for interested individuals, but there has nonetheless been a marked demographic shift: whereas in the early 2000s, many new alpinists were studying in university or had recently graduated, most new members of clubs now are in their thirties and forties, with substantially greater financial stability (Kubatov E., personal communication [interview], 27 April 2022, and Moskin I., personal communication [interview], 23 April 2022).

IV. The emergence of commercial tourism in Kyrgyzstan

Simultaneously, independence and economic liberalisation had dramatically reshaped the landscape for the tourism sector. Previously, international tourism had been conducted through either the Kyrgyz branch of the Soviet joint-stock company Intourist or, for young people, through the Komsomol's Bureau for International Youth Tourism "Sputnik", which, in addition to organising international tourism, also organised trips for Kyrgyz citizens within their own republic (Bureau of International Youth Tourism "Sputnik", 1987-1989). While both Intourist and Sputnik began the privatisation process under perestroika, Sputnik struggled to become profitable in the absence of official funding for its activities, and by the end of 1994 had ceased operation entirely in the Kyrgyz Republic (Bureau of International Youth Tourism "Sputnik", 1994). The existence and work of "Sputnik" is relevant because the initial wave of tour companies and agencies that came into being in the late 1990s (most from 1997 onwards) were geared much more explicitly towards international tourists, with pricing structures to match. Thus, for schoolchildren especially, organised support for outdoor tourism was largely absent until they reached university age and perhaps had the opportunity to join the Kyrgyz Alpinism Federation or, by the early 2000s, a nascent trekking or backpacking club in Bishkek (Moskin I., personal communication [interview], 23 April 2022).

As for international tourism, other firms handling cultural tourism as well as adventure

tourism and guiding had begun to coalesce as cooperatives in the last few years of the Soviet Union's existence, and several groups survived the transition to a full market economy and Kyrgyz independence (Danichkina, 2022). These initial enterprises, whether based in Bishkek, Issyk-Kul, or Osh, tended to be run by professional mountaineers who had begun working in that capacity under the old, more restrictive system for accreditation. Some additional firms were founded starting in 1997 and 1998, again by former club leaders and other highly qualified alpinists. However, again due to the economic turmoil of the next decade, it was not until the early 2000s that the number of tour providers began to grow substantially.

By the early to mid-2000s, both the government and individual tour providers had begun to realise the magnificent potential Kyrgyzstan possesses for mountain tourism. In an article posthumously published in *Turizm Kyrgyzstana* in 2005, Aleksandr Gubaev compares the potential of Kyrgyz mountain tourism to that of Switzerland and Mount McKinley (now Denali) in Alaska. Considering that Kyrgyzstan boasts three 7000m peaks (Pik Pobedy, Pik Lenina, and Khan-Tengri) and vastly more overall summits and routes but that only a thousand mountaineers visited Kyrgyzstan in 2003-4, compared to 2000 mountaineers and ten times that number of tourists visiting Denali, is both indicative of the country's potential and an indictment of then-current policy (Gubaev, 2005). The issues identified in this inaugural issue are those of accessibility and safety. Compared to the Alps or American Rockies, infrastructure remained substantially underdeveloped. While focusing on community-based tourism and substituting yurts for mountain lodges helped to build the "Kyrgyz brand", roads and air travel remain unavoidable necessities (Raeva 2005, Komissarov 2005). As far as safety was concerned, the professional mountaineers-cum-tour-operators of the time were concerned about lacklustre efforts towards regulation of the industry. Several other issues– that of streamlining the visa process, increasing the number of tour operators, and better establishing fora for inter-business cooperation – have been resolved or at least alleviated in the past fifteen years. However, problems of coordination, infrastructure, and personnel have doggedly persisted.

V. The modern period: key problems in development

At present, the key barriers to the growth of commercial mountain tourism in Kyrgyzstan from the private side are a lack of trained personnel, poor safety standards and mountain-rescue capabilities, and environmental concerns. From the government side, a substantial dearth of funds and an obtuse and grossly inadequate regulatory framework hinder development. Solving each is critical to the realisation of Kyrgyzstan's potential for eco- and mountain tourism and reaping the economic benefits this can provide, particularly in rural and underdeveloped areas.

While the COVID-19 pandemic and global travel restrictions were devastating for the 2020 and 2021 tourist seasons in Kyrgyzstan and the number of incoming tourists fell by half or more, the sector has proven resilient, largely on the back of greatly increased domestic tourism during that time period (Destination Karakol, personal communication [interview], November 2021; Kubatov E., personal communication [interview], 27 April 2022). In addition to saving local tour operators from insolvency, this has important consequences for interlinked issues with training of personnel and solving ecological issues– namely, a popularisation of domestic tourism encourages tour operators to design products for the Kyrgyz domestic market, increases visibility of issues surrounding pollution of natural spaces and the effects of climate change, and increases the number of people participating in outdoor recreation. This last point is most critical, since it helps raise engagement on a government level with the tourism industry, increases awareness and use of protected outdoor spaces, is more likely to prompt the introduction of a stronger regulatory framework, and will increase the number of people seeking further instruction in mountain sports, potentially prompting some to become guides or seek

employment in the tourist sector.

Indeed, the critical lack of personnel stems from several key issues. Firstly, Kyrgyzstan and the entire post-Soviet space struggle with a lack of internationally-recognised training programmes and schools for guiding all manner of outdoor sport excursions and tours. While on the surface this is paradoxical, given the strong legacy of Soviet-era mountaineering, it is unsurprising in practise, largely due to a lack of attention from the government and incompatible or poor standards for certifying practitioners (Danichkina L., personal communication [interview], 25 May 2022).

Nonetheless, advances have been made in Kyrgyzstan in the last fifteen years. In 2003, Dr. Komissarov spent substantial time with several leaders of the International Federation of Mountain Guides Associations (IFMGA) while on an expedition to K2, and upon returning began to build the framework for an internationally-recognised guide association and school in Kyrgyzstan (Danichkina, 2022). Over the course of the next three years, with assistance from IFMGA and Helvetas Kyrgyzstan, the Kyrgyz Mountain Guides Association (KMGA) took shape and was registered in 2007 (Komissarov, Borobyov and Danichkin, 2022). KMGA achieved candidate status with IFMGA in 2010, then full membership in 2016.

The Swiss development foundation Helvetas has operated in Kyrgyzstan since the country's independence, and since 2014 has been involved in promoting winter tourism in Kyrgyzstan, training ski instructors through the Winter Sport Project and consulting on the modernisation of ski bases and safety protocols for backcountry skiing and ski-touring, principally in Issyl-Kul oblast (Helvetas Kyrgyzstan, personal communication [interview], 18 October 2021). Further development of this theme, including more direct support for small and medium enterprises in the Karakol tourism cluster and additional training programmes for guides are included in the new Winter Tourism Kyrgyzstan project which launched this year (Helvetas Kyrgyzstan, 2022; Helvetas Kyrgyzstan, personal communication [interview], 18 October 2021). Step by step, frameworks are being put in place to enable the training of guides to internationally-recognised standards, providing tour operators with experienced sportspeople whose qualifications can be measured even in the absence of official requirements for the industry.

Nonetheless, the existence of guiding programmes does not guarantee there will be guides. As documented, overall membership in mountaineering organisations and clubs is still far below its peak in the 1980s, and both the small number and geographical concentration of those clubs in the capital provide serious barriers to many participants— they simply do not exist at a professional level outside of Bishkek (Moskin I., personal communication [interview], 23 April 2022; Kubatov E., personal communication [interview], 27 April 2022). Thus, for the roughly 4.6 million Kyrgyz citizens living outside of Chui Oblast and Bishkek, there are substantial barriers to participation in the sport and raising their own qualifications and experience to a sufficient level to become guides (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2022).

Although KMGA, as one of only three accredited guiding institutions in Asia, has graduates from much of the former Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, Iran, and other countries, the number of Kyrgyz nationals has remained depressingly low (Komissarov V., personal communication [interview], 20 October 2021). In Komissarov's own words, he "opened the school to teach mountaineers how to guide, not to teach people how to mountaineer. Candidates need to come in with experience, with an understanding of how to operate safely in the high mountains, before I can teach them to also ensure the safety of clients" (Personal communication [interview], 20 October 2021). The demographic shift in novice mountaineers training with the Politekh club from university students to mid-career professionals Moskin describes is particularly relevant here: unless students seeking involvement in the tourism

industry are also able to train their practical and technical skills prior to needing to choose a career, developing a pool of individuals who are qualified mountaineers and climbers as well as interested in becoming guides will be extremely difficult (Moskin I., personal communication [interview], 23 April 2022).

With regards to alpine and backcountry skiing, the situation is better. Due to the existence of over a dozen well-maintained ski resorts in the country, many more young Kyrgyz people have had the opportunity to reach a basic level of competency and then become involved in off-piste skiing and ski-touring. Infrastructure enabling skiers to take advantage of the cluster surrounding the excellent Karakol ski base is substantially better than that leading to the more remote regions of the country that boast the best mountaineering, making this form of sport and tourism more accessible to students (Giden M., personal communication [interview], 21 November 2021). Geographical inequalities persist, however: the vast preponderance of groomed slopes and resorts are in the Chui valley and in Karakol, again making it much more difficult for the population of Naryn and the southern oblasts to train (Kubatov E., personal communication [interview], 27 April 2022). Conversely, the amount of investment required to construct a new ski resort is substantially greater than that needed to open a mountaineering club.

Last but not least amongst reasons for a small number of qualified practitioners is the relative unpopularity of these sports, even controlling for access. Part of this is financial, as previously discussed, but Kubatov holds that most Kyrgyz nationals simply are not familiar with the country's illustrious history as a mountaineering and ski destination, home to training locations for the Soviet combined teams in most alpine sports (Kubatov E., personal communication [interview], 27 April 2022). This cultural amnesia is not new: in the early 2000s, Gubaev and Agafonov, among others, attempted to organise a Kyrgyz national expedition to Mount Everest, as only one Kyrgyz citizen, Dmitriy Grekov, had previously summited alongside a Kazakh national expedition in 1997 (Gubaev, 2005). However, due to difficulties in financing the expedition and Gubaev's death before the goal could be realised, not until last year was this achievement repeated by Kubatov, who became the first ethnic Kyrgyz mountaineer to summit, finally placing the country's mountaineering history back in the public eye (Kubatov E., personal communication [interview], 27 April 2022). As new President of the Kyrgyz Alpinism and Sport Climbing Federation, one of his primary goals is to secure Olympic licenses for the next Olympiad (both summer and winter Games) and use this in addition to his own name recognition to continue generating publicity surrounding these forms of sport.

Of particular relevance from a policy standpoint is the disconnect between tourism-focused programmes in institutions of higher education and the actual requirements of the sector. While over 1600 students were enrolled in tourism programmes at 16 institutions in 2021 as per the Ministry of Education and Science of the Kyrgyz Republic, the requirements and focuses of these programmes are too general and include little to no practical instruction in the operation and guiding of either ethnocultural or mountain tours (Komissarov, Raimbekova, Kenjematova, and Turova, 2021). Thus a situation arises where graduates possessing the necessary foreign-language and general business skills to work in the industry have neither practical experience nor connections to tour operators, while guides and professional sportspeople may be sorely lacking in language capabilities. Better coordination is needed between local and national tourism associations and advocacy groups—for example, the Kyrgyz Association of Tour Operators (KATO) or the Karakol Destination Management Organisation (Destination Karakol) for that cluster—and universities with programmes in tourism, preferably including practical internships or mandatory sport components as part of the curriculum or

graduation requirements.

With regards to safety and mountain-rescue capabilities, these too have declined if not fallen almost entirely by the wayside since independence. This poses a threat to the overall health of the industry not only because of the direct risks associated with poor standards and capacity, but also because of its knock-on effects on the number of tourists willing to undertake an expedition to Kyrgyzstan (Komissarov 2021). Komissarov has maintained the nonprofit organisation “Mountain Rescue” in Bishkek since 2010, but this is run entirely on a volunteer basis: no governmental mountain rescue outfit exists, and there are no helicopters capable of conducting high-altitude rescues currently operational in Kyrgyzstan (Komissarov V., personal communication [interview], 20 October 2021; Danichkina L., personal communication [interview], 25 May 2022). Indeed, in this regard capabilities now are actually lower than they were two decades ago. Given the lack of a strong regulatory framework or established minimum standards for porters, tour companies are themselves responsible for vetting those they hire (Komissarov and Diggins, 2021). While a national standard exists for guides, it is not always rigorously enforced and establishment of additional minimum requirements in line with international standards is critical (Komissarov and Diggins, 2021). This is especially pertinent in the case of Pik Lenina, as its reputation as the easiest 7000m peak and the consequently higher number of potentially unprepared tourists attempting its summit adds risk to the equation: certain parallels can be drawn with the increased death toll as commercialisation of Everest as continued and how this has needlessly endangered Sherpa mountaineers (Kubatov E., personal communication [interview], 27 April 2022). As one option for simultaneously reducing the deficit of guides and making ascending to Pik Lenina in particular safer, Komissarov and Taylor (2019) suggest the training of willing and qualified mountaineers specifically as guides for that ascent, where— in lieu of a broader programme of preparation handling all and sundry concerns— the focus is on the specifics of the Pik Lenina route.

Environmental concerns are also critical as related to better understanding the effects of climate change on Kyrgyz alpine environments— glacier ecosystems, delicate alpine meadows or transition zones, or the shrinking habitat of the snow leopard that gives its name to the most prestigious award in Soviet and Kyrgyz mountaineering. While protected areas certainly do exist, research into climate change and conservation is extremely limited due to almost nonexistent funding on a national level. Some research groups, such as the Mountain Societies Research Institute with the University of Central Asia in Naryn, do conduct policy research, especially as pertinent to water rights and distribution across Central Asia, but physical research in mountainous areas is rarely conducted.

Given the inaccessibility of many regions of interest and the physically punishing demands of working and operating there for long periods of time, both professional and commercial mountaineers have an important role to play in conservation. Moskin describes how local mountaineers have often been among the main actors in implementing and supporting international conservation projects, yet they have not necessarily taken the initiative locally (Personal communication [interview], 23 April 2022). However, when it comes to a different environmental concern— direct pollution— more damage is immediately visible.

From a mountaineering standpoint, the most affected areas are the South Ingilchek Glacier— where the base camp for Pik Pobedy and Khan Tengri sits— and Achyk-Tash valley, which serves the same function for Pik Lenina (Komissarov, Taylor, and Turova, 2022). Both here and at higher camps along the most favoured routes, garbage strewn along the way is a serious issue which has been a coordination problem amongst tour operators for some time. They cite the creation of separate associations of tour operators specifically operating on Pik

Lenina as a major factor in the improvement of the situation for the campsites and plots maintained by those organisations, but the overall situation has worsened due to the increasing number of tourists pitching their own camps (Komissarov, Taylor, and Turova, 2022). At higher altitudes, where no permanent installations exist, the situation is worse still.

The proposal the authors of this article make is to prohibit camping in non-designated areas and create stronger regimens for the enforcement of waste-disposal regulations, whether enforced by the Association of Lenin Peak Tour Operators (ALPTO) or the government via establishment of a natural park (Komissarov, Taylor, and Turova, 2022). Regardless of the solution chosen, it is clear that the mere designation of areas as protected has not controlled the issue— simply walk into any of the other natural parks or biosphere reserves of Kyrgyzstan and trash is still visible strewn along the sides of roads and trails. More comprehensive overhauls of regulation in this area as well as effective enforcement methods will be required as tourism rebounds post-pandemic.

Attaining state support for any of these initiatives is likely to be a challenge: for fifteen years Komissarov, Danichkin, Borobyov, and other authors have identified a lack of attention as a roadblock in various publications and at conferences on both mountaineering and development. Nonetheless, and despite inclusion in the last three National Development Strategies as a key area in growing tourism overall, neither regulatory overhauls in accreditation and standards for personnel nor infrastructure investment have been forthcoming in significant amounts. Kubatov explains, “Unfortunately, we don’t receive support from the government, and I don’t expect support. . . because first of all we have to demonstrate our capabilities.” In his view, working with other domestic and international businesses to secure financing for capital investment (new indoor climbing gyms, gear for training mountaineers and skiers) builds relationships between sectors of the economy, provides green incentives for investment in a local and sustainable source of growth, and, in time, provides sport organisations and tour operators alike with a stronger platform from which to demand change from the government (Kubatov E., personal communication [interview], 27 April 2022). Additionally, greater profitability of the sector and international attention generated make it more advantageous for the state to support individuals and organisations proven to drive growth.

In the meantime, however, a substantial funding deficit still exists between the ambitions of tour operators and sport organisations in Kyrgyzstan and their means. While private investment and the rebound of the global tourism industry may well cover part of this gap, development will be substantially faster with additional financial and technical support from international development organisations and funds. Of the projects mentioned as driving the industry forwards, nearly all were supported in some capacity, if only advisory, by one or more of Helvetas, UNDP, and USAID. The establishment of permanent guide-accreditation programmes in Kyrgyzstan through KMGGA and the Winter Sport Project have helped already to fill the need for trained professionals to lead tours, while investment in KATO and regional associations such as Destination Karakol have proven to increase accountability and advocacy with local government on behalf of operators. Extending these models, as Destination Karakol is already attempting to do in Jalal-Abad Oblast, hastens the process of establishing common standards for provision of goods and services in a safe manner as well as helping individual tour providers offset some of the costs associated with byzantine regulatory requirements and reporting structures.

Pressingly, time is somewhat limited to capitalise on the unique foundations Kyrgyzstan already possesses for mountaineering and outdoor tourism. Due to the challenges of the last three decades, the people in many ways best suited to help define the standards and approaches for the next generation of professionals are those trained in the Soviet Union, and many are

already ageing to a point where it has become more difficult for them to be the public advocates they were. While the sector has its younger proponents and inheritors of the Kyrgyz alpine tradition, such as Kubatov, maintaining the legacy of the sport and ensuring that commercial concerns do not overshadow the country's unique history in alpine sport and its formerly vibrant sport-mountaineering community will require decisive action both domestically and internationally.

VI. Policy solutions

Remediation of these structural barriers to the development of Kyrgyz adventure and mountain tourism will depend on both expansion of existing initiatives and frameworks and implementation of new programmes. While some of these recommendations depend on the cooperation or assent of the Kyrgyz government, initiatives that focus on supporting the private sector at a smaller scale are both easier to implement and more likely to yield short-term results. The author recommends the following:

1. Developing professional education and qualification mechanisms:

- Investing in new mountaineering clubs both in Bishkek and other regions of the country, with particular focus on youth and students. This includes subsidising of gear, implementing programmes to bring national and international trainers to more remote regions, and potentially building climbing gyms whose revenue streams can also support the development of the sport.

- Establishing internship programmes pairing students studying tourism with tour operators and associations locally. These would ideally place students in local businesses, giving students a grounding in the practical aspects of business administration, tourism logistics, and guiding and businesses additional administrative capacity during the peak summer months. Further specialisation within the “tourism” major or concentration would also benefit graduates, but would require national-level changes.

- Founding a policy research centre specifically on sustainable tourism, likely under the auspices of the American University of Central Asia (AUCA) or University of Central Asia (UCA), which have existing policy research offices dealing with other aspects of sustainable development. Better statistical data on the industry and case studies on the effectiveness of targeted investment, combined with the greater responsiveness of regional tourism associations such as Destination Karakol, could substantially boost awareness of investment opportunities and assist international organisations in selecting groups for support.

- Creating English for practical purposes and other language classes (German, Chinese, or French) specifically for guides, focusing on necessary technical and safety vocabulary.

2. Strengthening safety and accreditation requirements for adventure and mountain tourism:

- Modernising standards for guides, porters, and other personnel involved in risk management and service at high altitude or in dangerous environments. This is at heart as simple as updating existing standards to match international norms, as already recommended by government working groups on tourism.

- Strengthening environmental-impact and waste-management practises for protected areas and where providers operate. This should be paired with a concerted effort to clean trash already present in these spaces and better enforcement of existing fines for harming the environment.

- Either opening an official mountain rescue division under the Ministry of Emergency Situations or further empowering the foundation “Mountain Rescue” operated since 2010 by V. Komissarov. Tour operators should also be required to have trained medical personnel present to evaluate and care for their clients on categorical ascents. Of critical importance are

helicopters capable of medical evacuation from base camps, if not higher, as these have not existed in Kyrgyzstan for some years.

VII. Conclusion

Despite the damaging effects of the pandemic and many false starts over the last decades, adventure tourism in Kyrgyzstan is primed to become an engine of sustainable growth and investment in all regions of the country. The strong organisational and institutional foundations laid by Kyrgyz mountaineers during the Soviet period still informs the principal civil-society and advocacy groups in the country, and the groundwork already exists for the training of additional personnel and rapid expansion of the industry. If sustained international investment and expert support can be obtained, Kyrgyzstan stands to realise the potential identified over the past twenty years for the country to rival the Alps or Rockies in access to incredible mountain terrain and reliable services, also empowering local organisations and benefiting underdeveloped communities. The country's sport and commercial organisations can also be a source of pressure on the government to revise its regulatory frameworks for the industry to increase its efficiency while holding it to higher environmental and safety standards.

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