

**MOUNTAIN WILDERNESS INTERNATIONAL – IsIAO**  
**(Istituto Italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente)**

Almost one meter of snow fell on the entire Afghan Hindu Kush range during the night of September 25<sup>th</sup> 2006. This meant the end of summer and of all mountaineering activity at high altitude. But at that time, both instructors and trainees of the second Course of **Environment-Friendly Mountaineering** organized by Mountain Wilderness International and IsIAO (Italian Institute for African and Oriental Studies) were already far away. Far away and happy, because their training among seracs, crevasses and dizzily steep slopes of the glaciers leading towards the pyramid peak of beautiful Kishni Khan (6800 meters) had been carried out under a permanently blue sky and almost perfect conditions of the mountain, which is very tough anyway.

The Course was funded almost entirely by the Italian Cooperation for Development (but some important contributions were made also by UNEP, WWF and by the Aga Khan Foundation). It was graced by perfect weather conditions and can be considered a great success from every point of view; both for the immediate good results achieved and for the positive message such results will spread within Afghanistan and even more beyond its frontiers.

It will be remembered that already in the summer of 2003 Mountain Wilderness International challenged the sceptic attitude of many by carrying out successfully an important initiative called **OXUS MISSION – Mountains for Peace**. A team of mountaineers belonging to our Association mostly from Italy but also from France, Slovenia, Switzerland, Spain, climbed the highest peak of Afghanistan, Mount Noshaq (7492 meters), thus re-opening, after 25 years of oblivion, the fascinating peaks of this wretched country to adventure tourism and mountaineering. However, the OXUS Mission was meant only as a first step of a wider project of a cultural and humanitarian nature, offering young Afghans and particularly the people living in the mountain areas the possibility to acquire – thanks to special training courses – the skills necessary to host in a near future mountaineers, hikers and tourists wishing to experience a close contact with a wild and unpolluted nature. According to circumstances they would offer their services as liaison officers, reliable trekking organizers, specialized high altitude porters, guides for wild animal watching, rangers of the National Mountain Parks being created. All such tasks require a specific knowledge of mountaineering techniques, environment protection, first aid action, the practical organization of an expedition etc.

As an immediate follow-up, last year (2005) Mountain Wilderness organized a first experimental Course of **Environment-Friendly Mountaineering** in the Panjshir mountains of Afghanistan, a “basic” theoretical and practical course for a limited group of young Afghans (both male and female) with no previous experience in mountaineering. This initiative materialised thanks to the financial support of USAID, AKDN (Aga Khan Development Network) and UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme), as they fully realised its value, in order to give a more positive view of the country in the whole world, and to enhance in the local inhabitants the hope of a better future.

The Course was attended by 22 young Afghans (among them two girls). Eight of them were former mujaheddins ready to “exchange their Kalashnikov for an ice axe”, as some journalists put it jokingly.

This year’s Course was intended mainly for young Afghans having already a basic knowledge of mountaineering techniques. It was, therefore, more specific and advanced. Among the trainees were again three brave girls. The school camp was set up right at the mouth of the Northern Kishni Khan glacier at 4200 meters. From base camp it took a good hour on easy but strenuous moraines to reach the spectacular upper glacial amphitheatre, where the practical exercises were carried out every day. During two weeks of intensive work trainees were able to improve their skill climbing on rock and steep ice; they learned to move in safety along crevassed glaciers, place and remove fixed ropes without leaving traces; they also performed exercises of rescue and self-rescue operations, map and compass reading, removal of garbage (left behind in the 60ies and 70ies by expeditions and, alas! still visible to-day), etc. Some of the trainees were even able to climb (obviously roped to an instructor) a not particularly high but technically very difficult virgin peak: the Koh-i Tokan of 5200 meters.

The Mission was led by Carlo Alberto Pinelli, a well known explorer of the Hindu Kush with thorough knowledge of the past and present Afghan culture. The responsibility for logistics and teaching were the task of Giorgio Mallucci. The other instructors were Enrico Bonino, Gilberto Merlante, Elisabetta Galli. Furthermore, a doctor, Patrizia Panzironi and three TV technicians were members of the party. Like the first course of 2005, another basic course for young people with no mountaineering experience at all will be held next June. It will be funded by the Italian Cooperation.

Obviously, teaching theory and practice of how to go to the mountains is not a priority, having in mind the general conditions of to-day’s Afghanistan. It would, however, be a mistake to consider such activity as ill-timed, useless or even offensive, given the serious emergencies the country still faces. In fact, exactly because such initiatives are “marginal”, they have a special symbolic significance, a part from the practical one, and they have positive repercussions both within the country and abroad, also thanks to their mediatic “appeal”. In May last year, many young men and women coming from Kabul and the mountain villages applied with enthusiasm for admission when we performed the selection for our Courses (one advanced, one basic). This means that Afghanistan is not only stricken by the severe emergencies and difficulties. Although the majority of the population may be disappointed of the government, the widespread corruption, some brutal actions performed by the American Army and frightened by the growing terrorism, they strongly wish to re-emerge to a peaceful, normal life, recovering the values of self-esteem and hope thanks to such “marginal” activities, as happens in the other civilized countries. To revive in the near future the adventure tourism in the Afghan Hindu Kush is not Utopia. As a matter of fact, the Northern mountain areas are totally free from risks such as religious fanaticism, political instability and attacks by bandits. These valleys could also be reached quite easily from Tajikistan, thus avoiding the risks that may occur by travelling through Kabul. The people living in the Hindu Kush area are extremely poor but kind. They used to enjoy some economic advantages thanks to

adventure tourism, and now they are anxiously waiting for the return of foreign groups to their villages, ready to welcome them.

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