

More lessons from the Pyrenees (8) – participation in outdoor activities

Description



Young People descending the GR11 from the Colladeta Plana Fonda to the Valle de Pineta after a night of camping. The photo shows only part of the column. We reckoned there were only 200 young people – and maybe two adults! Photo Credit Louise Brimelow

Last year in the Pyrenees, after a couple of hours walking west from Bujaruelo along the GR11 we came across a large – 50 plus – group of young people packing up camp after a night of very heavy rain. I was struck at the time that you would be very unlikely to see such a sight in Scotland. This year, on the Spanish side, we came across three large groups of young people who had been camping in wild places up in the mountains.



Another group, descending into the Valle de Pineta after a night out in the wild coire above the Circo de Pineta

In Scotland, I don't think this could ever happen because of concerns about safety. Added to this there are all the vested interests who, for whatever reason, want to keep wild land to themselves. They would argue such large groups are an affront to the wild land experience, disturb wild land and do all sorts of damage to the natural environment.

Its true, as we passed the group of Young People in the first photo, the birds did disappear temporarily but the sound of bird song was replaced by human singing. The Young People appeared to be having a good time and there was no sign of uniforms to suggest they were part of some neo-fascist youth movement!

I was impressed. Two of the three groups we saw had had to carry their camping kit up over 3,000 ft, equivalent to backpacking up a Munro from sea-level and camping on the summit. Not that many people do that in Scotland. Maybe that's because they don't get the experience of doing so when they are young?



Camp below the Viados Hut

The base for these expeditions appear to be temporary camps set up in the mountains – we saw two such camps. At the Viados Hut, not far above the camp in the photo above, we came across the smallest group, this time of primary age children, lounging under a tree outside the hut. My partner, who is a primary teacher, immediately observed they were remarkably quiet and we realised they were having a siesta in the heat of the day. There was a higher ratio of young adults than in the other groups, but most appeared around 20. In the early evening the group disappeared off up the hill.

In none of these cases did we find any traces of the overnight camps



A paved track has been constructed to support the number of people walking up the Ordesa Canyon

Another thing that struck me in the Ordesa National Park was the number and diversity of people walking up to the Cola de Cabado (pony tail) waterfalls at the head of the canyon in the heat of the day. There were 100s. Its a ten mile round trip, with around 400m of ascent and takes at least 4 hours. The nearest equivalent we have is probably people walking up Ben Nevis or maybe Ben Lomond.



The Cola de Cabado. The Goriz Hut is beyond the cliffs above. Photos Credit Louise Brimelow.

You could view the sheer number of visitors as destroying the experience but then how do you select the people who should be allowed to go? My response was rather different, isn't it amazing that so many people are prepared to walk so far? I wondered whether this willingness to walk is somehow connected to those mass expeditions of young people

The contrast between what is happening on the ground in the Ordesa Monte Perdido National Park and the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park is striking. In the Lomond and Trossachs most of the outdoor centres have been closed due to austerity, while the camping byelaws have turned youth expeditions into an exercise in bureaucracy rather than enjoyment. As a result, people vote with their feet.



While

ostensibly the rules about overnight camping and other activities are very strict in the Pyrenean National Parks and Parco Natural, beneath the no camping signs the small print explains how tents can be put up at dusk as long as they are taken down at dawn.

Within these rules camping appears to be supported and facilitated, whether for large organised groups or the general public.



Tents around the Goriz mountain hut above the Ordesa canyon and below Monte Perdido

We counted 60 or so tents dotted across the hillside above the Goriz Hut, an area just as sensitive as the loch shores in the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park, where the numbers allowed to camp in each permit area are strictly limited and the total number of places outside formal campsites across miles of loch shore is less than 300.



Goriz Hut – note people queuing outside the toilet block for campers on the left!

What's more, while the LLTNPA has been trying to play divide and rule between campers and other visitors, claiming campers impact on other visitors ability to enjoy the area, in Spain it appears all visitors are treated alike. The Goriz Hut, which has limited capacity, has two meal sittings and guess what, many of the campers buy a meal there or a drink from the bar. The hut has an external toilet block for use by campers and has laid on an outside tap to provide water (since the underlying rock is limestone water would otherwise be a problem). The infrastructure of the hut and the way its managed are designed to benefit everyone, not just one group.

While the Loch Lomond and National Park Authority has, as a result of the International Year of Young People, given young people a voice on its Board ([see here](#)), this will turn out to be tokenism unless it results in more young people being supported to experience the great outdoors. The Young People involved could learn from places like Spain.

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