

Alpine Transport Policy

Citizen mobilization in the Alpine Valley of Chamonix.

The United Nations decision to decree the year 2002 the International Year for the Mountains did not necessarily mobilize residents of the Chamonix Valley, who live in the shades of Mont Blanc, because they probably did not know about it in the first place. Besides, local authorities boycotted the official opening for all the demonstrations, held in Chambery at the beginning of February.

However, when the French and Italian governments announced at the beginning of the year that the Mont Blanc tunnel would be opened to all road traffic on a progressive basis, it was seen as a major event not only by local citizens, but equally by the whole of the Alpine Arc. Such had been the case when a fire broke out in the tunnel on 24 March, 1999, causing 39 deaths and interrupting traffic for three years.

This remarkable mobilization on behalf of the local population, reinforced by valley councillors, seemed to me to be most relevant to one of the workshop sub-themes - the role of local citizens in the decision-making process.

Having lived in the valley for more than ten years now and as former director of E.N.S.A. (the National Ski and Mountaineering School), I have now taken on responsibilities within several associations dealing with the mountains, leisure prospects and transport therein, such as the CAF (French Alpine Club), or the National Federation of Associations of Transport Users (FNAUT) which asked me to take care of a national network of associations campaigning for durable mountain transport policies.

Therefore, in the context of a study of goods transportation and citizen mobilization and in the light of the tunnel fire, I have devoted a chapter to what is happening in the Chamonix valley.

It has been shaped around three points in keeping with the aims of the workshop organizers. They are :

- 1) The statement : a breathtaking valley that is becoming more and more asphyxiated.
- 2) Ten years of mobilization with ARSMB.
- 3) A feeling of helplessness despite new perspectives from a widened public debate.

I. The observation : mountain valleys are becoming more and more asphyxiated.

An excellent analysis of the situation was made in an Official Report in 1997 : "International Transport in the mountains - how to find a way out." Far from improving, the situation has simply deteriorated and it has worsened despite

the three accidents which sadly took place in the Mont Blanc, Gothard and Tauern tunnels.

Local residents, who have to put up with an increasing amount of pollution, are beginning to react vigorously in most of the Alps, supported by associations that have been created on the spot, followed by national and European federations that have to confront economic and political lobbies.

I 1. International transport in the mountains is a problem in itself.

For more than a decade now a wealth of material has been written to highlight two phenomena :

* International goods transportation is increasing at a constant speed, especially across mountain ranges (the Alps and Pyrenees in particular), and despite a great deal of fine talk, road transport is expanding.

More than 80% of goods transported in France are carried by road, while rail and water transport share the rest. In 2001, the volume of goods delivered by train went down by almost 10% despite an announcement that figures would double within ten years.

Only countries such as Switzerland, and to a lesser extent, Austria, endowed with a sense of determination to solve political and environmental problems, are capable of going against the current despite huge amounts of pressure.

* People are gradually realizing that we need to protect our natural and especially our mountain environment. The mountains are gaining in importance as they are growing more and more popular amongst people in search of fresh air, space and excitement.

After the Niagara falls and Mount Fuji, Chamonix, in the heart of the Alps, is the the third most popular tourist spot and this accounts for the urgent need for conservation and promises to limit pollution, including transit traffic control in view of the green-house effect and a change in the climate.

I. 2. Chamonix valley to be used as an Alpine Arc laboratory.

The physical and human characteristics of Chamonix represent alpine valleys in general. Twenty kilometres long, the capital of climbing, made up of several villages, this narrow, enclosed valley stretching from an altitude of 820 metres in Servoz to 1250 metres in Argentière, is overlooked by the 4810 metre roof of Western Europe, by all the peaks of the Mont Blanc mass if and by many glaciers in continual movement.

One point to be made about the weather concerns a severe and frequent temperature inversion, especially from October to April and a reduction in the capacity to dispose of all kinds of pollutants, contrary to other valleys which are less influenced by the relief of their topography and the effect of

freezing water flowing from the glaciers. Apart from the foehn coming from Italy, winds are usually light daytime breezes lifting in the middle of the day.

At Pau university, research was carried out by mountain environment experts in 4 valleys affected by international goods traffic (the Aspe and Biriadou valleys in the Pyrenees, Maurienne and Chamonix in the Alps) and, taking our valley as a basis, the following results were obtained :

- in the Asp valley dispersion capacity is doubled.
- in Maurienne it is five times greater than in Chamonix
- in Biriadou valley (St Jean de Luz- A63) = 15 times more

It is therefore not unusual in winter at La Flégère, 1800m high, on a south-facing slope of the valley, to record a temperature of nearly 0°C whereas down below in the valley at an altitude of 1035 metres it is -10°C with a permanent blanket of fog or bluish-grey mist thick with pollutants produced in equal amounts by both urban heating and road vehicles.

This pollution is increased because of heavy lorries to three or four times the amount in areas around Les Houches and the Vigie junction, where the ramp begins its approach to the tunnel .

A word about the number of people living here : the valley has been somewhat crowded for generations with roughly 15,000 residents to which can be added 40 to 80,000 tourists and day-trippers who come here either for winter sports or during the four months of the summer season.

Pollution is caused by various factors and the tunnel is not the only culprit. Landscapes can be spoilt by building construction; our quality of life can be spoilt by the wear and tear of too many tourists and by a change in the climate caused by receding glaciers. There can be problems linked to security, public health and noise.

The solutions exist but if they are to be put into practice the local inhabitants must react, for more and more of them are looking for a place to settle down that provides the features of a beauty spot and lives up to their lifestyle aspirations.

II. The ARSMB - the symbol of mobilization by the people of Chamonix.

II.1. A ten year struggle to control pollution.

The Association for the Respect of Mont Blanc was formed in 1991 by people whose jobs are related to the mountains (two consecutive presidents belong to the Chamonix Guide Company), by residents living alongside the N 205 dual carriageway, by second home-owners in the valley, and in collaboration with other sister associations and local councillors.

From the beginning it upheld that if the tunnel had to be doubled in size, then all issues affecting human beings and the environment should be given priority. It went on to advocate not only the development of rail transport but also ways of improving the quality of life in the Arve Valley.

Shortly afterwards, when the public authorities abandoned (at least officially) the idea of a second tube, a sharp increase in the volume of heavy goods vehicles forced the association to adopt a new stance and to undertake new initiatives.

When the tunnel opened in 1965, the number of trucks passing through the tunnel ranged from 3 to 400 - essentially to service the Arve and Aosta valleys. Whereas, twenty-five years later the number increased to more than 2,000 lorries a day, the majority of which are T.I.R. (International Road Transportation) vehicles. Nevertheless, the seven-metre-wide tunnel without pavements was not suitable for articulated lorries. At the time of the disaster, there were as many as 3,000 lorries passing through it a day.

Forty years ago, how could it have been possible to envisage a mountain tunnel for road traffic, requiring a ramp involving an approximately 800-metre change in altitude on a ramp with a 7% gradient in certain parts, and which meant burning at least 50 tons of diesel-oil a day, an unbearable noise for those living nearby because of sound reverberation on the slopes and a permanent risk for other road-users ?

From 1997 onwards, the ARSMB proceeded to intensify its efforts to alert public opinion and to lobby officials, in order to ban international trucks from the valley once and for all.

"Our objective is that all international road traffic should disappear by the year 2002 or so." Such was the message sent in October 97 and May 98 when more than 1000 people and other nature-friendly pressure groups demonstrated on their bikes, thereby obstructing the road from Le Fayet to Chamonix.

Then, there was the disastrous accident on 24 March, 1999, and in deep respect towards the families of the 39 people who died in the fire, we certainly were not able to rejoice at the fact that the aims I have just described would be forced into action. We still remain dissatisfied because three years later, despite extensive repair work which is supposed to ensure that the tunnel fulfils safety requirements, the issue has not been solved for the Mont Blanc or elsewhere.

II. 2. The year 2002 - anything can be done when Mont Blanc is at stake.

The principal theme of the ARSMB General Assembly, held on the 22 February, 2002, was : "2002 - the international year of the mountains - will it mean hope or despair for our valley ?" and it concluded with "United we win and win we shall !"

In Chamonix it is believed that the year 2002 will play a decisive role in determining whether international trucks are allowed through the tunnel or not, and in fact not only here but through all mountain valleys. This is partly due to the fact that the presidential and legislative elections have altered the situation - never has the political climate been so unpredictable.

Prior to this particular year, bearing in mind that the tunnel would have to be used by certain types of traffic, and as a result of the agreement that light vehicles, including coaches and under-19-ton lorries, should be allowed through so as not to jeopardize the local economies, the ARSMB proceeded to change its strategy.

Lawyers managed to defend our cause on various proceedings - the Grenoble Administrative Court, the Council of State, the Bonneville Law Court - partly thanks to the help of more than 500 donators who answered a subscription request in spring 2000, and partly due to a Federation partner - the FNAUT (The National Federation for Transport-user Associations). This particular organization is a consumer association, and it replaced the ARSMB in order to carry before the law courts issues arising from the failure to respect rules and regulations of the public trade code when repair work in the tunnel was being allocated.

Steps were taken to bring the media into play, together with the national administrations, the European Commission of Transportation and the Environment in Brussels and the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. Support from Geneva County Council and the Alp Action Foundation (via Prince Sadreddin Aga Khan) was greatly appreciated by councillors and the local population.

Many meetings were held in the summer, 2001, mainly with those in charge of national and international associations (Greenpeace, Mountain Wilderness) and with our neighbours in Maurienne and the Aosta Valley (despite misunderstandings).

An international petition to ban T.I.R. trucks across the Mont Blanc was signed by more than 200,000 people, and in addition to this campaign there were posters, tracts, stickers, newspaper articles and television news flashes.

In the summer of 2001, in order to show their solidarity with all mountain regions, 125 signatory associations distributed a "Mont Blanc-Maurienne-Aspe Valley" manifesto. It put forward the following proposals :

- 1)- immediate steps should be taken in Maurienne.
- 2)- Mont Blanc Tunnel should be closed to heavy vehicles.
- 3)- road construction should be stopped in the Aspe Valley.
- 4)- a durable transport and local development policy.

The ARSMB took part in the referendum on 19 August 2001, organized by the Communes of Chamonix, les Houches and Servoz. It received more votes than the Spring municipal elections and,

as was expected, 97% of the population answered "No!" to the following question :

" Do you think that the passage of international transport trucks crossing the Chamonix valley by road, via the Mont Blanc tunnel, is compatible with the preservation and conservation of the local natural and ecological features, and with the health and security of the local population and tourists?"

Although this public enquiry was declared illegal by the Haute Savoie Prefect ,the media gave it wide publicity. Other communities such as Courmayeur, the Southern Alps etc. followed our example.

People began to mobilize on the spot - in front of the Ministry of Transportation in Paris, March, 2001 (with the surprise "welcome" by an army of policemen). Then on 6 October 2001, in a festive mood at St Michel de Maurienne, more than a thousand people managed to interrupt traffic through this narrow valley (road and motorway) and were saluted by freight-train drivers using the Frejus Tunnel.

At the same time the transport minister, Jean-Claude GAYSSOT, thought of inviting ARSMB leaders, association partners and local councillors (separately, however) to meetings where government plans to reopen the tunnel could be discussed - "alibi-meetings" as far as the ARSMB was concerned.

Scheduled for late November, the opening of the tunnel was postponed week after week with different scenarios in mind(e.g. the alternative mode). Finally, on 9 March,2002 private cars alone were allowed through followed by coaches and a small number of under-19-ton lorries on 8 April. Needless to say, hundreds of members of the ARSMB made sure operations went according to plan!

It is likely the local population will be out demonstrating again on the following dates, announced despite contradictions by a government finishing its time in office, pressurized by Mr BERLUSCONI and his minister of transport, Pietro LUNARDI, i.e. 13 May for three and four-axle trucks and 25 June for all heavy goods vehicles.

With support from 141 associations from nine countries under the slogan "If we succeed with Mont Blanc, we'll win in all alpine valleys elsewhere",the ARSMB hopes to mobilize both the councillors of PASSY, SERVOZ, LES HOUCHEs, CHAMONIX and COURMAYEUR and the loyal residents of the valley for the last round of the battle.

Public meetings were held at the beginning of May to persuade people to attend the 13 May demonstrations despite presidential election results, which do not seem to reassure the Green Party - the only political group that really would like to see entirely new transport policies.

III - A feeling of helplessness despite experience gained from an extended public debate.

III.1. The debate has widened to include the Alpine Arc and Europe.

For more than a year links have been forged with other environment-friendly associations and groups promoting acceptable methods of transport and dealing with the whole of the Alpine Arc. Below are the most important groups :

* the CIPRA (International Commission for the the protection of the Alps) is the oldest and the most well-known. It includes the seven countries involved in these issues with fairly active national representations. Above all it organizes a Summer Academy, the purpose of which is to set up a network of people and institutions from widely differing geographical areas overlapping national boundaries.

"Europe is ill because of its transport policies", is the title of a recent article published in its bimonthly bulletin.

* Pro Mont-Blanc, ex-CIAM, (International Committee for the Protection of Mont Blanc) - a non-governmental organization including dozens of associations and organizations from Switzerland, Italy and France whose objective is to protect our natural environment especially in the Mont Blanc region.

It has amongst other things decreed a certain number of recommendations and when the local councillors refused a "Mont Blanc National Park", it proposed that the area should be added to the world heritage of mankind. Within the "international year of the mountains" framework, it instigated the publication of a grey/black paper on Mont Blanc with a chapter on transport.

* the FEMB (Mont Blanc European Federation) was set up more recently by 13 associations based in the Arve, Aosta, Valais and Genevois Valleys.

It "intends to carry out actions to promote long-lasting policies which will protect Mont Blanc, the valleys around it, the people living or staying there, their health and their lifestyle".

It chose to tackle seven issues, but top priority was given to transport. The group's activity seems to have slowed down ever since its founding president, Eric LASSERRE, retired from the group when the election campaign results made him opposition councillor to the outgoing mayor, Michel CHARLET.

ITE (Initiative Transports Europe). Since 1995 it has been endeavouring to set up a limited network of associations for alternative transport policies in mountain areas.

In order to give the "Alpine Convention" publicity and as a branch of "Alps Initiative", it is currently trying, despite limited funds, to set up an information centre available to all associations dealing with problems arising from European transport in the mountains.

T and E (European Federation for Transport and the Environment) sees itself as "a European organization overseeing non-governmental organizations working with transport and the environment so as to make transport more environment-friendly".

Its headquarters are in Brussels and it is developing a programme called "Freight, from road to rail", which consists in proposing a number of measures destined to make goods transportation more long-lasting chiefly by encouraging those means of transport that damage the environment the least."

If "Espace Mont Blanc" is added to the list, with no legal characteristics and its "Cross-frontier Conference", which replaced the "International Park" project but for which the Transport commission held no meeting, one notices that in the world of the environment and transport, strength is not gathered through diversity and that actions should concentrate on teaming up with the ARSMB and on bringing our cause into the limelight.

III.2) Will a national network of associations be the solution ?

_____ In 1997 a collection of works was published under the title "International Mountain Transport - how to find a way out." and the federative text it was based on had been inspired "by measures taken to limit the international transportation of goods on the road". They had already been applied in Austria and Switzerland, thereby favouring rail transport (rail and combined-transport).

Five years later, the federations and associations, who compiled the document, feel that it is necessary to bring the study up to date and this time they would like to refer to "the way the people of Chamonix have refused to accept the transit of heavy goods vehicles through Mont Blanc tunnel".

New recommendations have therefore been issued by the ARSMB, CIRRA-France, the federation of the French Alpine Clubs, the FNAUT, Mountain Wilderness France and the Touristic Union of Friends of Nature. That is to say :

-to build goods transportation policies across the Alps, the Pyrenees and the Vosges, on the principles and guidelines indicated by the law 99.533 of 25 June 1999, (multi-modal schemes collective transport services), and by the Alpine Convention and its Transport Protocol and the European Commission White Paper (European transport policies by the year 2010 or so - a choice must be made).

- to establish short, medium and long-term objectives for new a transport policy and its infrastructures (i.e. by increasing the possibilities offered by the existing railway line network, by building the LGV (High Speed Line) Lyon-Turin within the agreed time limits (2012), by developing the idea of a railway line crossing the middle of the Pyrenees mountains.

- to control and therefore "banning HGV vehicles across mountain valleys that that deserve to be preserved and conserved (cf Chamonix valley, and the Mercantour and Aspe Valleys).

- to use different modes of transport in moderation within a long-lasting development framework.

The FNAUT - National Federation of Transport Users - created in June 1978 following four "transport user conventions" - is above all a consumer association comprising 150 groups, which means more than 30,000 people, for surprisingly different reasons:

- public urban transport, rail and road passengers, pedestrian associations, cyclists, handicapped people, road accident victims, road rage militants, road, motorway and airport opponents.

It has recently been involved in promoting another kind of goods transportation policies as opposed to road-only defenders of a quality urban lifestyle people living near to crowded main roads.

It has recently been involved in an alternative form of road only, goods transportation policy, thereby favouring means of transport that respect the environment the most and as such, it has committed itself to joining the ARSMB, especially where legal matters are concerned.

Finally, bearing in mind the constitution network of associations endeavouring to deal with mountain transport, it has just signed a convention with Alps Initiative to create an "RPLP- Alliance - a heavy goods vehicle tax depending on the facilities offered " in France. Based on the Swiss example it is linked to the RILI association for Europe, the headquarters of which are in Berlin.

Having been put in charge of this assembly of thirty or so associations, I had to organize a certain number of information meetings within it. I did so in liaison with Ian GÜRKE, Alps Initiative Secretary, Renate ZAUNER, ITE President, and Géraldine BOUCHERON, from "Réagir" in Maurienne.

Generally speaking, as Heike Agte, the RPLP Association for Europe secretary, wrote, something must be done "for fresher air, less noise and correct prices to cover goods transport costs".

As a final attempt in our country to combine all these initiatives, there was the submission of a case to the court by the National Commission of Public Debate created by the law, 2 February, 15, otherwise known as the Barnier Law, to reinforce consideration paid towards the environment while important development projects went underway.

Commissioned to establish a dialogue in anticipation of these important projects, it was recently subjected to severe criticism because of the procedures adopted for plans made for a third airport outside Paris for the year 2030 or so, because the site chosen was Chaulnes, a hundred kilometres north of Paris.

Despite these reserves, it is important that the case for Mont Blanc, and alpine rail links in general, should be dealt with on a national scale as was suggested by one hundred or so federations, associations and railway unions under the voice of one single federation - France Nature Environment (FNE) recognized as being extremely useful to the public in the field of Conservation and which has just created a coordinate group called "long-lasting alpine transportation".

The promulgation of a new law called "of local democracy" (Journal officiel, 2 February 2002) should go along with the idea residents partaking in local activities. On the other hand, recent results of the presidential elections are distressing, even though the worst has been avoided. We shall have to wait until after the legislative elections and until a new government has been installed before we know whether we shall have our say or not.

In the meanwhile and in conclusion it seems that we will have to rely on ourselves alone and therefore on our own participation when plans are put into action ... for we have had enough of deceiving announcements, misleading promises, non-existent projects such as the LGV Lyon-Turin rail link - the current economic situation won't make budgeting the project any easier.

Alternative transport policies are fine by us but beforehand we want concrete projects at a local level.

- a two to three year moratorium on the return of HGV's over 19 tons so that the present situation and international road transit prospects can be studied in retrospect.

- an application of the principal "pay as you pollute", thanks to the adapted RILI tax law. Realistic modifications for existing constructions - the Tonkin line between Evian and St Gingolph - a modification of the Frejus tunnel.

- more efficient public transport facilities to take cars off mountain valley roads. But what does it mean if the Aosta Valley failed to carry out measures ?

- and why not this very attractive (although costly) train-train project running from Servoz to Vallorcine based on the existing railway line. In the 90s, SNCF had planned to abolish the line completely.

I would just like to end with a maxim popular amongst mountaineers "WHERE THERE IS A WILL, THERE IS A WAY"