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A Mountain Park for Peace

I've always wanted to set out on some of those great "long walks" elsewhere in the world, the trails that are so temptingly described in this issue of "Country Walking". I've encountered bits of them: the final part of the Inca Trail, where Machu Picchu is suddenly revealed in all its astonishing glory, for example. Or the parts of the John Muir Trail that come through Yosemite, where many years ago I walked and scrambled up to the top of the Half Dome, something which looks impossible when you see the mountain from the valley floor. But I'd love to have the time and fitness, one of these days, to tackle one or two of these long walks properly, to do the whole thing – as I did with the Pennine Way when I was still a teenager. The sense of achievement will be even greater, when you're exploring far-away wilderness areas that are almost entirely new to you.

But there's another initiative taking place with far-away mountains that's worth a bit of notice, too. A year or two ago I was told about an initiative called the Balkans Peace Park Project, and it's an enormously worthwhile initiative. Around the world there are over six hundred environmentally protected areas which straddle international boundaries, and about twenty-five of these are specifically dedicated as "Peace Parks", areas that are not only important ecologically, with agreed protection between and among nations, but where they symbolise reconciliation after a past of struggle and tension. The first Peace Park was created between Sweden and Norway in 1914, and a recent one is the Greater Limpopo Peace Park between South Africa, Mozambique and Zimbabwe. And there is a rather exciting idea, not yet implemented, for a "corridor" Park running through twenty-three European countries along the line of the old Iron Curtain, from the border between Finland and Russia down to the Adriatic.

But the Balkans Project has a particular resonance for us in Europe, who watched so recently the horrific disintegration of that area into conflict. The proposal is for the creation of a trans-national, cross-border, environmentally-protected park in the adjoining mountain areas of Northern Albania, Kosovo/a, and Montenegro. The aim would be to foster and symbolise peace and cooperation, as well as to promote environmental conservation, to stimulate local employment, and to encourage visitors to come to walk and engage in sustainable recreation in the region.

I've never been to these mountains, but everyone tells me they are very beautiful. They have a wild beauty, exceptional flora and fauna, and are almost totally unspoilt. A traditional way of life still exists, and can be sustained. In 2001 a UK Committee was formed, with charitable status, to work closely with individuals and organisations in the Balkans, to help the establishment of the proposed Peace Park. More recently a significant step took place, with six organisations from the three countries involved joining together a Peace Park Coalition, with the blessing of the UN Environment

Programme. A number of international conferences have been held, and there has been some really useful UK-Balkans collaboration. Study visits have taken place, by representatives from the Balkans to the Yorkshire Dales National Park here. Money has been raised and donated by a Yorkshire School to help to repair and improve a school within the proposed Park in Albania. And there's a lot more that can be done – sponsoring individual projects of repair or conservation, helping with training and study visits, and banging the drum internationally for the concept. Further details can be found on the Project's website, www.balkanspeacepark.org.

This is an idea we should all be trying to encourage. I think it was the great F S Smythe who wrote, "War may shake its thunders to the sky, but the hills sleep on". And when war has torn neighbouring nations and communities apart, the hills and wilderness areas that straddle the territories can perhaps help to promote the healing process that has in the end to come. Nowhere could this be more important than in the Balkans, and I hope that the first few steps towards a Peace Park that we've so far seen in this area can indeed be taken further forward so that the idea can become a reality. And I for one will want to put on my boots and head for these hills, to experience them for myself.

Chris Smith
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