



Mountaineers wrap this glacier in a protective fleece – but it won't hide the increasing costs of climate change.

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What a cover up

SWITZERLAND It's an ominous sign of things to come when ski companies have to protect glaciers from global warming.

Swiss environmentalists have dismissed an experimental project to wrap a glacier in a 3,000m² insulating polyester blanket to protect it from the effects of global warming as "short-termist".

The outcry comes as ski resort operators in Andermatt (a town located in the German-speaking canton of Uri) have begun covering the Gurschen glacier with specially designed plastic material as part of a plan to reduce its summer time melt rate.

At a public launch of the £45,000 project, Greenpeace Switzerland unveiled banners reading: "Fight climate change not the symptoms."

Spokesperson Wangpo Tethong explained why the group had staged its protest: "Climate change is having a big impact – not only for biodiversity but also economically. But this is a helpless, short-term solution."

Adrian Stiefel of WWF Switzerland echoed his concern: "We have to reduce CO₂ emissions, and so [the project's

backers] should be supporting energy efficiency. There is a big car park here – encouraging tourists to use public transport instead would help."

Urs Elmiger, of cable car company Sportbahnen which is co-funding the scheme, concedes the strategy is unproven, but he argues that it is the cheapest way to protect the glacier for the immediate future. **Sam Wild**

FRAGILE MOUNTAINS

- Skiing has a negative impact on alpine ecosystems. Pollution from road transport, ground compaction through snow machine use and disturbance of wild animals by off-piste skiers are all a problem.
- More than 100 million tourists visit the Alps every year (7-10 per cent of all global tourism figures).
- The Gurschen glacier has retreated by more than 20 metres in 15 years. Since 1850, the Swiss Alps have lost more than 100 glaciers.

Safety first (and second)

How compensation culture is hitting British nature.

When the claims culture features in the Queen's Speech, you know things must be getting serious. While tales of massive payouts for toes stubbed on dodgy pavements do still seem to be an urban myth, there is no doubt that dubious claims are on the increase. What's more, the vast majority are settled out of court, which makes it difficult to know how high the cost of compensation has become.

Escalating costs

A recent study by the Environmental Law Foundation shows that recreation in the UK's outdoors is very safe and the direct cost of claims for wildlife charities is still low. Nevertheless, the indirect costs do pose a serious threat to nature conservation. At least one charity's personal accident insurance premium recently rose threefold in a single year and this escalating expense is now coupled with a costly commitment to far more professional risk management. The increased diligence helps explain the low level of public injury in conservation, but it consumes staff time and generates risk-avoidance work.

This is expensive – one wildlife charity now spends more than half a million pounds each year just keeping woodland footpaths clear of overhanging vegetation – and it also damages habitat. Dead branches on park and street trees are becoming a rarity, depriving birds such as tawny owls of natural nesting sites. Fear of crime is sweeping undergrowth away. Meadows no longer mean butterflies and wildflowers, they mean hay fever, while open water – well what can the conservationists be thinking of?

We all have barmy anecdotes to quote: kids wearing gloves

for picking daisies; horse chestnut trees felled for fear of 'death by conker'. There is an even more serious side to this claims culture, however. Encouraging public access and working with volunteers are two cornerstones of 21st century nature conservation, but those responsible are starting ask themselves why they should take on 'high risk' projects involving young children, young offenders or people with physical or learning difficulties. The voluntary sector is expected to deliver the Government's social inclusion agenda, but Whitehall fails to acknowledge the true cost.

Here's mud in your eye

Adventurous exploration is a vital part of growing up – we all need the opportunity to climb trees, catch tadpoles or muddy ourselves from time to time. Even the chief executive of the CBI condemns the cotton wool culture, because risk taking helps to shape successful entrepreneurs. We need to turn this madness on its head.

Wild landscapes provide great opportunities for exploration, and the UK's conservation charities are learning to manage the associated risk. There is an emerging public backlash against 'safe and sterile' and a growing appetite for nature in our daily lives. For conservation charities, this could be the moment to start building membership among those who prefer a landscape filled with frogs, fungi and conkers, precisely because of all the risks involved.

Conkers can be a danger in the wrong circumstances.



Derek Middleton/FLPA

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