**THE SWAT PROJECT**

Summary of the four stages

Geographic background

The northern part of the Swat region – the mythical Uddiyana of Buddhist literature – includes the southernmost extension of the mountain range known as the Hindu Raj. For more than 60 years Italian archaeologists (initially led by Professor Giuseppe Tucci), have been exploring its densely populated central plateau, and it is thanks to their ongoing and increasingly successful research that the area has been revealed as one of the most interesting centres of Gandharan Graeco-Buddhist art.

The relative proximity of the Swat to the major cities of Pakistan’s plain, together with recent plans to build new fast roads to open up the region, will on the one hand soon increase tourism in the area, with obvious short-term advantages for the local economy: on the other hand, however, they may carry the risk of a disorderly and aggressive human presence that would lead to an irreversible degradation of the special alpine environment whose timber tree forests led to the region being known as ‘the Switzerland of the Indian sub-continent’. Already a fortunately limited area of those valleys shows the negative signs of haphazard and insensitive occupation brought by new waves of internal mass tourism. In the longer term, only the creation of a National Park can lay the foundations for the **respectful** conservation and enhancement of the area’s natural and cultural heritage: a park that can coherently interweave the ecological and scenic qualities of the northern valleys and the valuable architectural and archaeological heritage that still adorns the hilly slopes of the central Swat.

The proposed road map to achieve this goal is divided into four stages:

1. the training of a group of local youths with the potential to become reliable trekking guides (effectively they would be sentinels with responsibility for territorial integrity) as well as to cooperate with us in producing a printed guidebook to excursions, demanding trekkings and climbing in their area. It is hoped that this carefully prepared guidebook, with a strong emphasis on responsibility and respect, will have a positive influence on future tourism policies and become a **potent implement** to persuade the national authorities to create the park on receiving our feasibility study for the project. In September 2018 Mountain Wilderness and ISMEO successfully completed this first stage; a course in **Environment-Friendly Mountaineering** was completed by 21 local students, thanks to funding contributed by MIBAC ( Italian Ministry of Culture), Mountain Partnership/FAO, private companies (Epitech, Innovet, SCARPA), supporting members and the proposing associations;
2. The identification and description of possible trekking itineraries and testing of the climbing potential of the key mountains in the area (up to 6000 metres). Exploration of the excursion/trekking itineraries will begin in August 2019: it will be completed by small groups comprising equal numbers of members or supporters of Mountain Wilderness, members of European Mountaineering Clubs and graduated trainees of our previous course, who would also act as guides, general assistants and organizers. The exploration process will include the identification of access routes to the major summits and descriptions of the ascent itineraries, which will be assigned to two minor expeditions mostly self-financed by their own clubs. The mapping of the whole area will be revised and perfected.
3. Collation of the material produced under point b) and production of a printed guidebook in English and Urdu. This guidebook should be seen by the recently trained local youths as a project in which they are eminent closely involved, increasing their self- estime; it will also show the itineraries for exploring the “romantic” remains of Buddhist monuments hidden among the southern hills.
4. Preparation of the “National Park” project to be submitted to the Pakistani government for approval and implementation. This will be entrusted to eminent Italian experts, assisted by qualified Pakistani nationals.

As can be seen from the above, the objectives of this project are not only cultural and ecological; they also embrace humanitarian and identity aspects, thanks to the active and continuous involvement of the mountain valleys communities.

It must not be forgotten that the Swat region is the birthplace of Malala Yousufzai, the courageous young girl who risked her life to campaign for female emancipation in Pakistan. It therefore seems appropriate to include a starkly symbolic proposal to combine stage 2 or 3 of the Swat project with a programme to train **a group of young local girls** as guides for nature-oriented/cultural excursions. The course would aim to train the trainees to manage excursions around the hilly areas of the central Swat region to explore the fascinating remains of Buddhist monuments and enjoy the scenery; the excursions would sometimes include overnight camping and the employment of porters. The course would comprise lessons in the history of ancient pre-Islamic and Islamic art, the management of all stages of mini-treks, local popular traditions, regional flora and fauna, eco-friendly behaviour, and a basic knowledge of first aid. Practical experience in the techniques for negotiating rocky cliffs and moderately inaccessible slopes would also be offered.

The cost of this course is not included in the above budget.