

Members of International Mountaineering and  
Climbing Federation (UIAA)

UIAA Board

UIAA President

By this letter we would like to critically consider UIAA work from a viewpoint of a small federation. We are sure that other UIAA members are of a similar opinion. By uniting our efforts we are likely to make UIAA a better organization, which is more appropriate to interests of its members. The Latvian Alpinist Association (LAS) is ready to listen to and summarize your opinions to prepare a single position for the forthcoming UIAA General Assembly.

LAS has been a member of UIAA for 18 years already. During this period about 20000 CHF have been paid as membership fees. For some it may seem a trifle sum; however, for us it is equal to 2-5 year budget, depending on the allocated financing. In reminders for timely settlement of membership payments UIAA reminds us that should we fail to execute payment, we will be denied the voting right at the conference, access to UIAA home page member area and the right to be elected to UIAA executive institutions. It is all we acquire by paying membership fees and, you may trust us – a small federation does not need anything of the above: we do not have funding to attend conferences; UIAA home page member area does not contain any unique or secret information that might change things. Wherewith a question arises: does UIAA serve the interests of its members? Or does it implement the purposes of its own (or purposes set by the rich federations), not taking into account the needs of its members?

One of UIAA purposes is to unite all mountain climbers and mountain lovers in a single family. In fact it has split the Latvian Alpinist Association into two: *for* and *against* membership in the organization. The first ones consider that LAS must be a member of UIAA and participation in UIAA marks out LAS among other organizations. The latter emphasize that UIAA is not able to offer anything to Latvian mountain climbers and paying UIAA membership fees is just a waste of money for LAS.

Meanwhile LAS is a member of UIAA, so we decided to have a critical review of activity of UIAA and its commissions. We would like to offer alternatives for UIAA development. As already mentioned, it is a viewpoint of a small federation; we think that other UIAA members may be of a similar opinion. For those, who lack patience to read this evaluation along, we offer our vision of what UIAA should do.

1. Move from big projects to projects affecting each mountaineer (inter alia, financially) by particular results.
2. Concentrate on educational projects and elaboration of methodological materials.
3. Show its activity on a broader scale clarifying/justifying its work.
4. Communicate more actively with its members.

Recently several federations have already criticized UIAA activity; if UIAA does not focus on its members it will lose the support (in 2009 24 out of 70 federations defaulted their financial (membership fees) liabilities).

Now, about the commissions and their work. The number of areas commissions want to cover is growing by every year notwithstanding the limited budget. Wherewith the opportunities to achieve particular results are decreasing and the activity seems vague. The evaluation is based on information available in UIAA home page; up to now it has been the only means of communication between UIAA and its members.

**Safety Commission** - last year's greatest achievement was technical safety standard for belay devices. UIAA home page, however, does not provide information about the number of accidents due belay devices breakdown. In our opinion accidents mainly occur due to incorrect choice or application of belay devices and the developed standard would not change the situation. The number of belay devices has considerably been growing over the last few years. Consequently the Commission should spend more time on summarization and systematization of equipment methodology, since there are other organizations for development of standards, for which the function is imposed by legislative enactments. Around year 2000 UIAA published several methodological materials, but now its activity in this area is nearly equal to zero. Although such descriptions are published by individual magazines UIAA expert examination would make a significant contribution to increase of safety.

**Mountaineering Commission** - our attention was attracted by two sections: Training Standards and the new Mountain Ethics Declaration.

"The great achievement" - Mountain Ethics Declaration is another paperwork describing things, which every rational mountaineer will implement voluntarily and self-evidently. Otherwise-minded will not read it anyway. The question is: what is that unique property of the document that attracts such immense attention; are UIAA actions directed towards real activity or production of paperwork? We may produce tens of declarations like this one, but they are not likely to make the world better.

Training Standards undoubtedly are a very useful initiative. Unfortunately, only 18 federations out of about 80 have managed to implement the standard provided opportunities. UIAA Board has voted for recommending UIAA Training Standards as minimum requirement that is particularly beneficial for the small federations. There is just one issue: whether the small federations have sufficient resources, both financial and human, for implementation of these Standards. Probably UIAA should work at assistance programs for implementation of the Standards. In 2009 UIAA jointly with the Petzl Foundation implemented a project in Nepal and is going to expand it in India next year. We understand that the Petzl Foundation has a major role in the choice of countries; however, there are many more countries with limited financial resources, which need assistance. Probably UIAA should work at development of regional centers, where representatives of many countries, inter alia, from Europe, could perfect themselves. Everyone cannot become a guide, everyone cannot afford a guide. No matter people will go on climbing mountains, therefore training, regardless of official certificates, must be UIAA priority since it will facilitate mountaineer safety.

**The Youth Commission** has developed regulations for organization of camps. The question arises: is it the youth commission or the camp commission? UIAA should probably focus on summarization of methodology for involvement of youth in mountaineering activities. At present the Commission seems to do nothing but award of Global youth summit title to various Federation-organized events. Is it the purpose of the Commission?

**Ice Climbing** – the final UIAA sports pillar. Strange to say, but the more UIAA is striving to develop this section, the sooner ice climbers will establish their own federation, like Sport climbing and Ski mountaineering sections have already done.

UIAA is planning a new development direction “Hut management and the exchange of information on technology.” Probably UIAA should work at development of such system, which would enable UIAA members get discounts in mountain huts; it would have a direct effect on motivation to be an UIAA member. At present, by supporting mountain huts (which provide their service at a high price and often forbid to put up tents next to them) UIAA imposes restrictions on its advertised free access to mountains or enables only the paying mountaineers to enjoy the pleasure. UIAA should support cancellation of all restrictions that hinder free access to mountains (including a free opportunity to put up tents). Besides, if a mountaineer executes all UIAA developed declarations his or her impact on the environment is minimal and does not do any harm.

Another ambitious plan is to maintain the traditional route database to protect the routes from installation of bolts. As well UIAA might set a target to summarize all mountain routes worldwide to protect them from dry-tooling. The idea as such is not bad, but the necessary resources and the prospective result may not live up to expectations.

Recently UIAA has been much criticized for communication with its members. We have not received a reply to our previous suggestions for improvement of UIAA activity either.

We are not trying to say that what UIAA does is bad. Many of the criticized issues actually are good and welcome, however, they do not have any influence on members of our federation or they are unavailable to us. Thus there is no justification, why the federation should sponsor UIAA. If we invested UIAA membership fees in our organization we would considerably develop mountaineering in our country. What UIAA might provide for national federations is training possibilities. Unfortunately, it is the weakest section of UIAA work.

We think that UIAA may have a significant role in relations among various federations; it can influence safety in the mountains, but it must overestimate its priorities. If your federation is of a similar opinion we should unite to change the organization and to make it serve our common interests!

Yours faithfully,



Normunds Reinbergs,  
President  
Latvian Alpinist Association