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# Editorial

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*Dear Readers,*

*Grassland is one of the 4 major categories of world vegetation, along with forest, savanna, and desert. In mountains, grasslands are the most prominent category, at least between the upper forest line and the lower periglacial limit higher up. In addition to this natural form of vegetation, grassland has also been artificially introduced in previously forested mountain areas by humans engaged in pastoral farming economies.*

*Despite the multifunctional significance of mountain grassland and pastureland, it is difficult to obtain global data on its extent, composition, and quality. Up to now, conservation efforts have focused primarily on mountain forests; grassland and pasture issues have received virtually no attention by comparison. There is too little understanding of the cultural significance of mountain grasslands and pasturelands, and the overwhelming importance of pastoralism as a source of mountain livelihood has been neglected. In regions such as Tibet and Central Asia, because of the predominant extent of this altitudinal belt, grasslands are the fundamental pillars of local livelihood.*

*Experts agree that it is increasingly important to focus on grassland issues in terms of (1) conservation of biologically highly diverse, stable, and attractive plant communities; (2) maintenance of a healthy, unpolluted source of animal feed for future generations; (3) retention of a long-established, ecologically adapted cultural heritage for multiple uses; (4) assurance of supplies of soil and water for downslope communities; and (5) maintenance of an important integral part of many hillslope agricultural systems.*

*Current threats to grassland areas include overstocking and degradation of grazing areas as well as transformation of pastures into cultivated land. The impacts of global change on these fragile areas have not yet been comprehensively investigated. What is needed to counterbalance these threats? New policies, as illustrated in the article by Tony Banks et al on grassland management in western China, are certainly necessary. In addition, reevaluation of long-established systems such as silvopastoralism in Turkey's mountainous Mediterranean region, as undertaken here by Uçkun Geray and Sezgin Özden; integrated approaches and policies, as recommended by Eva Ludi in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan; and reconciliation of conservation and sustainable use, as discussed by Kevan Zunckel in relation to the Maloti–Drakensberg Transfrontier Conservation and Development Program, are also important. Other authors in this issue focus on aspects of grasslands or pasturelands in the Italian Alps, Ethiopia, China, the Spanish Pyrenees, the Central Himalaya, Bolivia, and New Zealand. In addition, the MountainNotes section reports on the European Grassland Federation; a Global Mountain Biodiversity Assessment workshop focusing on links between diversity and grazing; and the Grasslands Protected Areas Task Force of the World Conservation Union–World Commission on Protected Areas.*

*We hope that this issue will make* MRD *readers and the wider public more aware of the significance of the world's mountain grasslands.*

*Hans Hurni, Editor-in-Chief*
*Susanne Wymann von Dach, Assistant Editor*

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