

Editorial

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Dear Readers,

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimates that about 271 million people living in mountains are vulnerable to food insecurity. Geographic isolation, harsh climate conditions and fragile ecosystems make agricultural production, marketing and development in mountains more difficult than in the lowlands. Providing sustainable and adequate food supply is a great challenge in Asian mountain regions, as only about 2 % of the land is considered highly suitable for agriculture. But food security is not the only issue: mountain agriculture is multifunctional. It is the source of important secondary benefits, providing a wide range of goods and services to society as a whole, particularly in relation to biodiversity, landscapes, water, risk prevention, specific niche products, and culture.

Articles in the Development section of this issue illustrate that taking small steps towards environmentally, socially and economically sound agriculture is a pragmatic way of promoting sustainability. A program in Mongolia is currently improving herders' livelihoods by forming community herder groups and establishing multilevel pasture co-management teams. In Vietnam, a promising participatory role play game illustrates how farmers can understand sustainability better by working through various management scenarios at the symbolic level. Using local resources to produce feed supplement for livestock is a concrete, simple and sustainable measure to improve productivity in Pakistan. If combined with sound economic reflection, bio-prospecting can also pave the way for income-generating activities, illustrated here in a central Himalayan hill region in India. Monitoring of adoption rates in Bhutan indicates that farmers seem to adopt new crops faster if low levels of investment and risk are combined with high benefits due to savings in labor costs. Finally, a study of the impact of development programs in northern Thailand shows that it is vital for implementing agencies to measure their assumptions, interests, and cultures carefully against the concerns of neglected minorities if they are to avoid failure.

One article in the Research section covers a method for combining traditional and modern knowledge to improve the use and management of rangelands in northwestern Pakistan, while another advocates the growing of white clover to improve pastures and halt soil degradation in northeastern Pakistan. A stakeholder analysis of medicinal plant collection shows the sensitivity and complexity of conserving an important source of income in Nepal. Mapping of the habitat of an endangered mammal in northern Nepal is a further tool in the attempt to deal with the conflict between conservation and use of natural resources: such mapping helps to determine where intervention is necessary to protect a species in an area used for transhumant pastoralism. Another article, focusing on conservation of culture-based resource use, inventories the diversity of traditional uses of bamboo species in Yunnan, many of which are endemic to this province. Finally, climate change and its impact on the distribution of tree species on the Tibetan Plateau are examined. Mountain ecosystems are highly sensitive to climatic variation; observing trends and developing bioclimatic models can contribute to perceptions of the potential impact of global warming on natural resources at an early stage.

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