

## **Bruno Messerli, 17 September 1931–4 February 2019**

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**Bruno Messerli,  
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In February, we said goodbye to a dear friend and mentor, an exceptional scientist who was capable of moving metaphorical mountains at all levels of action from the local to the global. We will remember Bruno Messerli as an inspiring teacher and researcher who led the way by asking extremely relevant questions. His enthusiasm and openness to new ideas and initiatives were legendary. Bruno was always a forward-looking person with a very broad horizon.

Among the many threads that can be traced in Bruno's working life, his engagement with mountain issues is certainly the most pronounced. The primordial place of mountains in Bruno's research orientation was based on his conviction of the importance of mountains in terms of global environment and development and on his love and admiration for these unique landscapes and their inhabitants.

Bruno Messerli's work first dealt with the traces of the Ice Age in Switzerland, Spain, North Africa, and the Sahel. Later, his work extended to Ethiopia, Kenya, the Himalayas, the mountains of Central Asia (then part of the Soviet Union), and, finally, the Andes.

While working as a geomorphologist and paleoclimatologist, Bruno recognized early on the pertinent role played by humans in shaping and managing mountain ecosystems. He realized how rapidly mountain landscapes were changing in the 20th century and how dependent we humans are on mountain ecosystem services. In the early 1970s, he initiated the Swiss contribution to the Man and the Biosphere (MaB) Programme of UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), together with

colleagues at his lifetime home base, the Institute of Geography of the University of Bern (GIUB). The Swiss component of UNESCO's MaB-6 project, *Impact of Human Activities on Mountain Ecosystems*, looked at the socioeconomic dynamics and environmental carrying capacity of the Swiss Alps and compared it with other mountain systems in Europe and beyond. Because it was conceived as a fundamentally interdisciplinary and integrative project, MaB-6 brought together a significant number of Swiss research institutions. In particular, Bruno was able to engage all departments of the GIUB to work together on a case study in the commune of Grindelwald, and he was instrumental in unifying, for the first time, the whole institute behind the same research endeavor: together they developed an innovative research approach and analytical framework called the MaB Scheme. The Grindelwald Case Study was a foundation stone for the institute's reputation as a center of competence in mountain research.

Bruno became—or in fact always was—an inspiring motivator for the cause of mountains and mountain people on the international stage. He had a flair for bringing together the right people at the right moment and in the best of all possible contexts. Together with Jack Ives, he led the *Highland–Lowland Interactive Systems* project of the United Nations University, initiated in 1978 by the United Nations University's vice-rector at the time, Walter Manshard. Bruno supported Jack Ives in creating the International Mountain Society in 1980 and the international peer-reviewed journal *Mountain Research and Development* (MRD) in 1981. In 1981 Bruno also chaired the international conference on stability and instability of mountain ecosystems at the GIUB, and with UNESCO, Germany, and Switzerland, he helped establish the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development in 1983. Bruno attended both workshops organized

by Jack Ives at Mohonk (USA) in 1982 and 1986, where mountain topics were brought to an international level, and was a key figure in regional workshops on sustainable mountain development in Africa and Latin America.

Insights and energy from this conference work fed into a contribution to the Earth Summit—the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1992, where Bruno helped define Chapter 13 of Agenda 21 on *Managing Fragile Ecosystems—Sustainable Mountain Development*, adopted at the 1992 UNCED.

Over the years, Bruno Messerli's engagement for mountain matters was increasingly acknowledged by the political world in Switzerland and honored by mandates from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. This donor interest benefited the GIUB at large as well as its spin-offs, in particular the Centre for Development and Environment, which has been running programs in many mountain regions of the world since 1988 and has hosted the editorial office of MRD since 2000.

Bruno upheld his personal commitment to the cause of mountains after having taken on the responsibility as vice-president of the International Geographical Union (IGU) from 1992 to 1996. After retiring from GIUB in 1996, Bruno was president of the IGU from 1996 to 2000, giving particular attention to the IGU Commission on Mountain Geoecology. For the international community, he inspired a series of Mountain Agenda brochures that were produced at Centre for Development and Environment, first in 1992 for UNCED, and again annually from 1997 to 2002 for the United Nations General Assembly Special Sessions on environment and development. This engagement culminated in the International Year of Mountains: in 2002 Bruno was involved in the Rio+10 follow-up

World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa, in an international mountain conference held in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, and in the launch of an International Mountain Day on 11 December, celebrated every year since 2002. In his later retirement years Bruno attended numerous events in many countries worldwide, seconded by his wife, Beatrice. He was an excellent conference speaker and ambassador for sustainable mountain development, and he supported preparation of the Rio+20 UN

Conference on Sustainable Development, again held in Rio de Janeiro in 2012.

Much beyond his lifetime dedication to the cause of mountains, he will remain in our memory as a great personality. The fruit of what Bruno was able to sow, together with a small group of like-minded people and committed mountain personalities, can now be harvested in many mountain regions worldwide.

The MRD team and the mountain research community will sorely miss you, Bruno!

#### AUTHORS

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