

The International Mountain Research Workshop: Mountain Regions—A Research Subject?

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Official Web Site of the International Year of Mountains (IYM)



FAO, the Task Manager for the International Year of Mountains (IYM), has launched the official IYM web site. This site is accessible in 3 languages at the following addresses:

- English, www.mountains2002.org
- French, www.montagnes2002.org
- Spanish, www.montanas2002.org

The site currently contains basic background information such as the IYM Concept Paper prepared by the Task Manager, a description of the IYM's institutional structure and objectives, and an overview of various international resolutions and other key documents. Existing and potential partner organizations can consult the site's "Guided Tour" to the planning of events, in which they will find an introduction to the IYM's thematic setting (with an annex offering details of thematic clusters), important information on management and funding of IYM and post-2002 activities, and an overview of expected outputs at the global, regional, national, and local levels. Examples of basic building

blocks for the IYM, a list of key publications, and a list of current IYM partners round off the Guided Tour in its present form.

The site also features an attractive postcards section and an overview of new sections to be added in the coming months. These include IYM resources designed to help people; institutions and governments to prepare for the International Year; a mountain library with links to conservation and development databases; an introduction to mountain topics; profiles of mountains worldwide; descriptions of mountain cultures and a gallery of art, downloadable music, book reviews, and poetry; mountain recreation themes and debates; a mountain schoolroom with downloadable material; and regularly updated reports on successful mountain development initiatives worldwide. These features are planned as a lasting contribution to the long-term objective of sustainable mountain development.

An IYM logo has been created and can be viewed on the new web site. In the very near future, this

logo will be available in several formats for downloading from the site. Partners are welcome to use it for awareness raising and noncommercial promotion.

In addition, FAO has issued a press release on the IYM. This document is available at www.fao.org/WAICENT/OIS/PRESS_NE/PRESSENG/2000/pren0042.htm. Finally, as requested by the UN General Assembly Resolution 53/24 dated 10 November 1998, a report on the state of preparations for the IYM has been drawn up for the UN secretary-general; an advance, unedited version of this report can be viewed at www2.mtnforum.org/mtnforum/archives/reportspubs/library/iyemun00a.htm. The report will be presented at the 55th session of the UN General Assembly.

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The International Mountain Research Workshop: Mountain Regions—A Research Subject?

Grenoble, Pôle Européen Universitaire et Scientifique, 4–7 June 2000

Leading up to the World Mountain Forum meeting that took place this June in France, the scientific community from the Grenoble and Chambéry regions organized the International Mountain Research Workshop in Autrans and Grenoble. Among the participants were approximately 70 scientists from 5 continents, representing a diverse array of disciplines in the natural

and social sciences, 2 observers from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and other special guests. Facilitated by the outstanding hospitality of our hosts, the workshop ran for 3 very intense days, with discussions centering on the general but rarely addressed question of exactly what constitutes a mountain in terms of scientific research. These discussions focused on 3 main topics.

The specificity, unifying characteristics, and diversity of mountain regions

Everyone present seemed to agree that the issue that generated the most intense debate was the lack of a single satisfactory definition of a mountain region. (As R. Rajamani put it, "a mountain is like an elephant," referring to the blind man's description of a pillar, a snake, or a

wall, depending on what part of the elephant's body he touched.) Nor is there a unified discipline for the study of mountains. However, the participants thought it possible to devise a conceptual model (synthesized by Bernard Debarbieux) consisting of 2 main axes. The vertical axis would comprise the unique or unifying characteristics of mountains: the altitudinal gradients of temperature, atmosphere, oxygen and carbon dioxide pressure, radiation (specifically UV), potential energy, etc. The horizontal axis would comprise the elements that confer diversity on mountain environments and cultural landscapes around the world, such as latitudinal gradients, location in the developing or developed world, etc. These are the factors that can make daily reality so incredibly different for inhabitants of a village in the Swiss Alps, residents in a shantytown on the outskirts of a metropolis like Bogotá, and nomadic herders on the Tibetan Plateau. Superposition of these two axes defines the unique set of characteristics, problems, and opportunities (something we often overlook) of each particular mountain region. An important conclusion can be derived from this perspective: the most pressing problems identified in different regions (poverty, rural exodus, lack of empowerment, loss of traditional knowledge, land degradation and erosion, loss of diversity, etc) are not unique to mountain areas. But in a mountain context, these problems usually pose challenges of magnified proportions (eg, erosion becomes particularly acute). However, the often extremely creative responses of actors in mountain regions are also fundamental sources of diverse and original perspectives in the search for positive and constructive solutions.

The natural and social dimensions of mountain regions: Challenges for understanding

Discussions at the workshop placed much emphasis on this dual nature

of mountains — “the yin–yang of mountain research,” as P.S. Ramakrishnan put it. In the face of this complexity, the participants argued the need for an approach to mountain research that

- Is integrative by being more problem-oriented than discipline-oriented.
- Is pluralistic and open-ended, incorporating local perspectives and nonscientific (ie, local or traditional) perspectives and knowledge.
- Uses participatory and multiscale strategies.
- Establishes lowland–highland linkages.
- Focuses on policy design.
- Recognizes the diversity and very dynamic nature of mountain cultural landscapes and questions the simplistic view of mountain communities as isolated, “traditional,” and backward-looking societies at the margins of the globalization process.

Mountains—A laboratory for science and society?

There seemed to be a consensus about the importance of mountains in challenging established views in science and society. Mountains can serve as laboratories (or more appropriately, as observatories, as was suggested at the workshop) for environmental change, as strongholds of resistance, as integration axes, and as sources of alternative models of development. When we listen, we find that the voices of change also flow down from the mountains.

The International Mountain Research Workshop was a unique meeting precisely for the reason that it forced participants to challenge and rethink concepts usually taken for granted. On the road to the International Year of Mountains 2002 and in the context of increasing advocacy of the *International Mountain Agenda*, it is important to stop for a moment and critically

examine our notions of mountain environments, mountain inhabitants, mountain research, and mountain priorities. We stopped, opened the black boxes, and out jumped an incredible rainbow of multicolored elephants, mythical beasts, and mountain spirits. Should we attempt to close the boxes again?

Note: The workshop proceedings will be published in late 2000 or early 2001 with the support of the European Commission. For more information, contact Bernard Debarbieux, Directeur du laboratoire TEO, Université Joseph-Fourier, 17 rue Maurice Gignoux, 38031 Grenoble Cedex.
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