

## **The Seventh Meeting of the Inter-Agency Group on Mountains: A Milestone in the Preparations for the International Year of Mountains**

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interagency working group on Agenda 21, Chapter 13 ("Managing Fragile Ecosystems: Sustainable Mountain Development"), also held in Gland, Switzerland, in November 2000.

### Visit to the Center for Nature and Sustainable Development of the Pyrenees

During the week of the meeting, the group had a chance to visit the environmental education and nature conservation center at the heart of the Pyrenees built by Fundació Territori i Paisatge with the support of Caixa Catalunya.

The building is designed to be a reference center for sustainability and bioclimatic architecture. Known as *Les Planes de Son, Centre de Natura i Desenvolupament Sostenible dels Pirineus* (Center for Nature and Sustainable Development of the Pyrenees), the center's aim is to promote global awareness through environmental education and training, to support projects concerned with sustainable development, and

to support conservation and research in mountain areas. Facilities will eventually accommodate up to 98 people and will include classrooms and labs, a documentation center, an auditorium, a planetarium and astronomical observatory, and a Center for Pyrenean Fauna. In the near future, it will host the Mediterranean Mountains Node of the European Mountain Forum (EMF).

### Interaction with local Pyrenean representatives

On 26 October, the local Pyrenean representatives were offered a presentation in Spanish and English by the MF Executive Secretary, Dr Alejandro Camino, about traditional Andean agricultural systems and the contemporary challenges they are facing. This well-received presentation was followed by a Catalan dinner. On 27 October, the group organized a party with the participation of local people, during which the node managers presented dances from different

mountain regions of the world, including India and South and North America. Finally, on the morning of 28 October, the group returned to Barcelona after a week of very productive work, heading back to their respective countries, motivated and full of renewed energy to continue their committed work with the Mountain Forum. To find out more about the Mountain Forum, please visit [www.mtnforum.org](http://www.mtnforum.org).

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## The Seventh Meeting of the Inter-Agency Group on Mountains: A Milestone in the Preparations for the International Year of Mountains



The 7th ad hoc meeting of the Inter-Agency Group on Mountains was held from 13 to 15 November 2000 at the UN European Headquarters, the Palais des Nations, in Geneva. The meeting was convened by FAO as the Lead Agency for the International Year of Mountains (IYM) and was cohosted by the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE).

The meeting was an important operational event in the preparations for the IYM. The objectives of the meeting were as follows:

- To identify common visions and priorities for the IYM.
- To get an overview of planned or ongoing IYM-related initiatives, their timing, and their budgetary requirements.
- To identify important thematic and geographic gaps based on this overview.
- To define institutional responsibilities.
- To discuss the overall financial strategy to be followed for the IYM.
- To discuss the follow-up activities in preparations for the IYM.

The meeting was very well attended: 58 participants from around 40 institutions with mountain expertise were present, includ-

ing UN organizations, NGOs, governments, national IYM committees, donor institutions, research institutions, etc. For the first time, the Inter-Agency Meeting was open to a significant number of new participants. This brought new perspectives and expertise to the group. A professional facilitator assisted throughout the meeting and helped ensure that the work was focused and output-oriented.

The following are some highlights and main outcomes of the meeting:

- Participating institutions showed an overwhelming degree of enthusiasm and commitment to

sustainable mountain development and to many initiatives in a variety of sectors that are already underway. The traditional good spirit within the Mountain Agenda is alive and has received further impetus from the scope of the forthcoming IYM.

- There was clear consensus on 6 overall thematic clusters within which activities in the framework of the IYM should preferably take place: sustainable livelihoods; culture; education and public awareness; biophysical environment; sustainable use; and governance, policy, and peace.
- A huge number of meetings have been announced from all over the world. There is no doubt that all these meetings will make a significant contribution to raising awareness about mountains. However, there is an urgent need to map out these events, put them in a coherent framework, identify overlaps, and facilitate synergies.
- During a very fruitful session on resource mobilization, important thoughts on issues related to funding were shared and discussed among the participants, indicating how progress can be made.

- It is being increasingly recognized that national committees or similar structures are very important in the implementation of the IYM. Presentations by Madagascar, Peru, Italy, and Kyrgyzstan on the structure of their committees and their agenda for the IYM were a highlight of the Geneva meeting. This session provided many ideas about how the establishment of national committees can be further promoted and facilitated.
- Links with the International Year of Ecotourism 2002 were established through the presence of a member of the World Tourism Organization, who also made a presentation.
- Last but not least, participants clearly agreed that FAO should continue to play a strong leading role in coordinating and facilitating preparations and observance of the IYM.

The meeting very clearly revealed that, despite the progress made so far, there is still a long way to go in making preparations for the IYM in terms of establishment of national committees, coordination and facilitation, exchange of infor-

mation, preparation of concrete actions, etc. It has been proposed that task forces related to specific issues and thematic clusters be established. Many participants, on behalf of their institutions, expressed an interest in participating in activities resulting from this. There was overwhelming agreement that the IYM should not be considered merely a period of isolated events but rather as an important step in the long-term process of raising public awareness begun at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 (UNCED). This process will also ensure adequate political, institutional, and financial commitment for concrete action designed to implement sustainable mountain development. It should thus extend well beyond 2002. Let's get all our acts together to make the IYM a successful exercise with a long-term positive impact on mountain communities and their fragile environments!

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## The Tragedy of Khait: A Natural Disaster in Tajikistan

### A remote and hazardous mountain region

Eastern Tajikistan comprises the mountains of the Gissar-Alai, the Pamir Mountains ("Roof of the World"), and the high Pamir Plateau. The region has a long history and fascinating folklore and legends, first brought to the attention of the Western World by Marco Polo and his entrepreneurial uncles. During the 19th century, it was all but inaccessible to travelers from the outside world, save for the

military, often secret, probes of Czarist Russia and Imperial British India, as the "Great Game" led to high adventure and intrigue. With the establishment of the Soviet Union and the incorporation of the Tajik SSR, access from the outside world improved, especially through scientific visits (Sven Hedin, Russian and German scholars). However, as eastern Tajikistan is far from Moscow, bounded by the heavily guarded frontiers of China and Afghanistan, and proximally, initial-

ly by British India and subsequently by Pakistan's Northern Areas, access was carefully controlled, particularly after 1940.

One major exception, however, was the international mountaineering fraternity. Foreign climbing parties were occasionally invited to join Soviet expeditions to attempt the highest summits, politically named Peak Communism, Peak Lenin, and Peak Revolution. In the post-World War II period, an even rarer exception was the invitation of an occa-