Alpine Water Resources: A Report on the Sixth National Conference on Alpine Research, 7 September 2001, University of Lucerne, Switzerland

Author: Stillhardt, Brigitta

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Approximately 100 participants attended the 1-day conference on “Use of Water Resources in the Alps: Conflicts and Solutions” organized by the Swiss Interacademic Commission for Alpine Studies (ICAS) and the Swiss Committee of the International Human Dimensions Program on Global Environmental Change (IHDP). The aim of the conference was to

- Show the state of the art of Swiss research on social science aspects of water use.
- Promote cooperation and coordination between social scientists and natural scientists.
- Demonstrate how the social sciences can be integrated more efficiently in current and future research on water resources.

These objectives required the presence of participants from many different areas of specialization: government and legal officials; aca-
water resources are increasing issues. Conflicts over the use of water resources and the improvement of water quality are such fundamental, cross-disciplinary, and cross-boundary problems. The hydrological data presented in the paper entitled “Switzerland as a Water Tower: A Hydrological Paradise” are particularly striking when set against world statistics and data collected in a country as dry as Eritrea, for example (see Table 1). What is therefore needed is high-quality and understandable information that can be used to support decision making at the local, regional, national, and international levels.

Following presentation of the keynote papers, participants worked in 4 groups on the following topics: (1) perception and evaluation of water; (2) legal framework, ownership, and public policy; (3) economy and consumption; (4) decision-making processes. There was little time for questions after the presentations, which did, however, offer a great deal of important information. The step from disciplinary activities conducted in parallel to truly interdisciplinary work has yet to be taken. Only one of the papers presented in the workshop session I attended convincingly showed what it means to use an interdisciplinary approach. The paper focused on legal aspects.

Despite the presence of speakers from a variety of disciplines, the podium debate in the afternoon was not very stimulating. Though the speakers’ individual statements would have offered enough material for debate, the discussion eventually got bogged down in issues related only to financial and procedural problems. As a result, there was no time for a discussion of visions and questions about the orientation of future research approaches to alpine water resources. This last aspect—mentioned explicitly in the program—was considered briefly only at the very end of the day.

To conclude, in the words of one speaker: In the Alps—especially in Switzerland—we have a very dense monitoring network and a longstanding research tradition that has yielded high-quality results. Instead of trying to define new research themes or disciplinary approaches, we should now aim to assume our responsibility to international research. We need to work together to process hydrological knowledge and data from the Swiss Alps, applying an inter- and transdisciplinary approach. Our goal should now be to develop an exemplary comprehension of the “Swiss Alps Model” and make it available to regions with similar hydrological conditions worldwide.

The next event organized by ICAS will be a workshop entitled “The Alps from the Perspective of Young Scientists.” It is scheduled to take place in Chur, Switzerland, on 14–15 March 2002, and will be open to the public. Additional information and registration forms are available at www.alpinestudies.unibe.ch/philalp.html.

Brigitta Stillhardt
Centre for Development and Environment, Institute of Geography, University of Berne, Hallerstrasse 12, 3012 Berne, Switzerland. bst@giub.unibe.ch

### TABLE 1

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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Per capita amount of water available annually in Switzerland: 5,840,000 L (16,000 L per day per person)</td>
<td>Average amount of water used in rural areas in Eritrea: often less than 10 L per day per household</td>
<td>Approximately 1 billion people do not have access to safe drinking water</td>
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<tr>
<td>97% of available water leaves Switzerland unused</td>
<td>Ratio of runoff to precipitation in semiarid areas: 0.2</td>
<td>Approximately ½ billion people do not have enough drinking water</td>
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<td>Ratio of runoff to precipitation in the Swiss Alps: 0.8</td>
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<td>It is anticipated that water shortages will affect 3 billion people by 2025</td>
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