

UNU and Sustainable Mountain Development

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UNU and Sustainable Mountain Development



UNU Headquarters building in Tokyo, Japan.
(Photo courtesy of UNU)

The United Nations University (UNU) is an international community of scholars engaged in research, postgraduate training, and knowledge dissemination to advance the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations. UNU undertakes multidisciplinary research on pressing global problems, provides advanced training through workshops and postgraduate fellowships, and disseminates knowledge by way of conferences, publications, and other means of communication. These activities are undertaken through a multidisciplinary network of UNU research and training centers and programs, and of institutions and individual scholars worldwide.

Background of the UNU's activities

The UNU has been involved in mountain-related issues since the formulation of its project on "Highland-Lowland Interactive Systems" in 1978 (later renamed as "Moun-

tain Ecology and Sustainable Development"). This project, coordinated for UNU by Professors Jack D. Ives and Bruno Messerli, brought together scholars, students, practitioners, and policy-makers to focus on pressing environmental and development problems primarily in the mountain regions of Asia, South America, and Africa. These research activities, often facilitating new understanding of controversial issues, provided a major incentive for inclusion of Chapter 13 in Agenda 21. Since the adoption of Agenda 21, UNU has been actively participating in the Inter-Agency Group for Chapter 13, coordinated by FAO. The publication *Mountains of the World: A Global Priority* (edited by Bruno Messerli and Jack D. Ives) in 1997 further contributed to much needed worldwide awareness of mountain issues. The founding of the quarterly journal *Mountain Research and Development* in 1981 was supported by UNU—the University became co-publisher with the International Mountain Society (IMS). Under the editorship of Jack and Pauline Ives, over the last twenty years, the journal became the primary vehicle for publication of the results of mountain scholarship and for the analysis of development issues. Starting with Volume 20, MRD, in a new format and with revised editorial policy, is being edited at the Centre for Development and Environment (CDE, University of Berne, Switzerland). A reformulated IMS (also in Berne) is continuing its original association.

UNU also focuses closely on mountains in several related activities. For example, the UNU project "People, Land Management and Environmental Change" (PLEC) has focused on several mountain regions in developing countries of Asia and Africa in order to develop practices that promote conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity in managed ecosystems. A recently developed program on managing land

degradation in dry areas similarly focuses on land degradation and biodiversity conservation efforts in selected mountain ecosystems.

Why mountains ?

One of the most significant decisions regarding mountains since the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 was taken in November 1998 when the United Nations General Assembly designated the year 2002 as the International Year of Mountains. This significant recognition of the importance of sustainable development of the world's mountain regions was a source of satisfaction to the global mountain community, which had been working toward this goal.

Mountains occupy 24% of the earth's terrestrial surface and provide the life-support base for about 10% of humankind. They provide more than half of all available fresh water, together with many other vital resources, such as timber and other forest products, minerals, hydropower, and access to grazing by domestic animals. They are highly significant in harboring many sacred places for all the world's major religions and for many minor ones. When their attraction for tourism is added, it is clear that, directly or indirectly, they affect the lives of more than half the world's human population. Mountains contain some of the world's most important centers of biodiversity and cultural diversity. Their mismanagement can cause not only enormous in situ losses but also extend serious downstream environmental disturbance to the more densely populated lowlands. Many mountain regions are also centers of severe political tension and the locale for a disproportionate level of military conflict. Given these characteristics, it is imperative that mountains receive a much greater and more coordinated degree of attention than has been the case in

the past. This is why UNU has supported an acceleration in mountain research and in assessment of environmental and development issues. These efforts are being reinforced now that the UN General Assembly has itself recognized the importance of the world's mountains to the extent of declaring 2002 as the "International Year of Mountains".

UNU's role in mountain ecosystems

UNU, in partnership with IMS and CDE at the University of Berne, Switzerland, is currently assembling a working group to launch a comprehensive program on sustainable mountain development. This program will be operated through the network of institutions supervised by UNU/CDE, with its focal point in Berne.

Through high-quality, multidisciplinary research, UNU will help to enhance understanding of the world's different mountain systems, focusing on global change, the pressures to which mountains are exposed, including the consequences for different resources (human, natural, economic), and the responses of different social groups and mountain societies. By identifying the potentials of social systems embedded in specific economic environments, by considering their dynamics, and by adhering to existing innovative solutions, UNU will also contribute to mitigation of mountain problems.

UNU will also enable local research institutions to develop partnerships with other institutions in their countries and abroad, thereby developing their competence and capacities, while UNU itself will function as a coordination and information center for mountain research for the international scientific community.

Through its activities and partnerships, UNU will contribute to the development of local institu-

tions and societies at large, particularly in developing and transition countries. This will be done by strengthening their relations with national and international research communities, network agendas, and development cooperation agencies, by introducing up-to-date methodologies to address mountain problems, and by development of strategic and applied research to help these institutions find sustainable solutions in their local contexts.

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