

Comment: Forests and Floods: Drowning in Fiction or Thriving on Facts?

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Comment

Forests and Floods: Drowning in Fiction or Thriving on Facts?

Forest Perspectives 2. Bangkok, Thailand, and Bogor Barat, Indonesia: FAO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific and Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), 2005. 30 pp. Available free of charge from www.fao.org/world/regional/rap/ and www.cifor.cgiar.org. ISBN 979-3361-64-6.

This brief booklet represents a long-awaited and vital turning point in the reactions of international and national agencies to the “theory of Himalayan environmental degradation” (THED) and related myths that have been used as a basis for forest policy and watershed management for more than half a century. The fact that it is co-published by FAO makes it especially appropriate. The commitment of FAO is not surprising, considering that this giant of the UN family of institutions actively encouraged the “intrusion” of a number of mountain academics into its establishment of the Mountain Focal Point following the inclusion of Chapter 13 (Mountains) into *Agenda 21* during the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992.

The often-quoted 1979 World Bank prediction that “by AD 2000 no accessible forests will remain [in Nepal]” was representative of the catastrophe complex of the period. This view was not only reflected and extended by prominent ecologist environmentalists (eg Myers 1986), but also by powerful central government agencies in India, China, Pakistan, and Thailand. It has remained a standard news media item to the present. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, for instance, went a step further and stipulated that deforestation in the Himalaya was causing the world sea level to rise (21 March 2000). Far

more serious, however, have been the logging bans that were imposed over vast areas by the governments of China, India, and Thailand. There is no doubt that the myth of THED is very much alive and is used for what may be inferred as highly dubious political reasons, with mountain minority peoples bearing much of the pain. Blaikie and Muldavin (2004) extend this discourse on the political convenience of THED to recent watershed management decisions in India and China.

The booklet under review explains that Hamilton issued some of the first challenges to the then FAO and World Bank forestry assumptions as long ago as 1985. He referred to the “4 Ms” (myth, misunderstanding, misinterpretation, and misinformation). Thompson et al (1986) produced a hilariously funny yet deadly serious *Uncertainty on a Himalayan Scale*. The Mohonk Mountain Conference of 1986, organized and chaired by Ives, with Maurice Strong as Honorary Chairman, brought together this mushrooming assault on THED (Ives and Ives 1987). This, in turn, led to the influential *Himalayan Dilemma* (Ives and Messerli 1989), *Himalayan Perceptions* (Ives 2004), and *Floods in Bangladesh* (Hofer and Messerli 2006). Thompson (1995), Forsyth (1996), and Blaikie and Muldavin (2004) have categorized this growing reaction to THED in academia as “the Mohonk Process.” In this context, it is significant that the “process” has seemingly penetrated one of the major UN agencies with the publication of the booklet under review. And the fact that it has received relatively extensive attention in *The Economist* ([Anonymous] 2005) bodes well for more balanced future discussion beyond academia.

The booklet understandably, and perhaps appropriately, does not propose an outright rejection of THED—that is clearly not its purpose. Nevertheless, it does firmly

state the need for serious reconsideration of the forestry–flooding issue, and effectively and authoritatively shaves off several of the frequently employed pro-THED arguments. For instance:

- While losses due to flooding have greatly increased over the last hundred years, these are due to the huge increases in population and infrastructure on the floodplains of the great Asian rivers (Ganges, Brahmaputra, Yangtze, Mekong, etc);
- There is no reliable data base indicating that the physical extent of flooding has increased since the 19th century;
- Floods have vital positive as well as negative impacts;
- “Large-scale reforestation programs, the adoption of soil and water conservation technologies in agriculture, logging bans, and the resettlement of upland people to lowland areas will **not** significantly reduce the incidence and severity of catastrophic floods” (p 25, emphasis in original).
- “Importantly, the habit of blaming upland inhabitants for catastrophic floods of whole river basins must be abandoned” (p 25).

The concluding chapter (*Making Rational Policy Decisions*) urges that the most effective approaches to reducing damage caused by catastrophic floods require a strong focus on downstream areas and floodplains. While this may appear far too “genteel” for mountain academics, it must be remembered that this is a high-level political arena. I believe that FAO has taken a major stand, and I hope that this will generate discussion within the national political contexts. But as Michael Thompson explained in a personal communication in November 2003, as myths are identified for what they are, vested interests will be tempted to refurbish them, or invent others to replace them. In the context of

the Himalaya and the Andes, one fledgling myth, already pushed to initial trial flights, is that global warming is not only leading to elimination of all the snow and ice in the Andes and Himalaya but—through the generation of glacial lake outburst floods (jökulhlaup)—will destroy hundreds of millions of lives and cause billions of dollars in infrastructure damage during the present century. As with THED, there is an element of reality in these notions; but the gross exaggeration, in the long run, may do more harm than good.

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A Tribute

Special Award for MRD Regional Editor

Alton C. Byers is MRD's Regional Editor for North America. The following notice is adapted from a TMI press release posted on the Mountain Forum discussion list on 21 February 2006. –Ed.

Dr. Alton C. Byers, Director of Research and Education at The Mountain Institute, received the prestigious David Brower Conservation Award from The American Alpine Club at its annual meeting in Attatash, New Hampshire on 10 February 2006. The award was created in 1991 to emphasize The American Alpine Club's commitment to preserving mountain regions worldwide, and is given annually to a person who has made important contributions to the protection of mountain environments and whose active personal role deserves public recognition.

David Brower (1912–2000) was an active alpinist and member of the famed 10th Mountain Division with over 70 first ascents of mountains in the American west, and was twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for his work in conservation.

Byers is a mountain geographer who has worked for more than 30 years to protect mountain ecosystems and improve the livelihoods of mountain people in the US, China, Nepal, India, Mongolia, Africa, South America, and the Caribbean. His current interests include the conservation of the world's alpine ecosystems, impacts of climate change and glacier recession on people's lives and livelihoods in high mountain regions, and co-editing a new mountain geography textbook.

Speaking on Byers' work in the Everest region of Nepal, Peter Ackroyd, Chairman of The American Alpine Club's International Conservation Committee, said: "From my involvement with Alton on the

Mount Everest Alpine Conservation and Restoration project I can say that he is passionately concerned with using his knowledge and skills to protect and restore mountain environments. He also strongly believes that the education, involvement, and commitment of the local population is key for the success of any project, and the Khumbu Alpine Conservation Council [a 23-member managing council of local Sherpa people established in 2003] is a testament to his ability to inspire a community to take control."

The Mountain Institute is an international conservation and community development organization headquartered in Washington, DC with offices in Elkins, West Virginia; Nepal; China; and Peru.

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