

Of the Mountains, for the Mountains: Professor Bruno Messerli (1931–2019)

“Better knowledge is necessary to reduce the constraints and to increase the potential of mountain ecosystems and the surrounding lowlands and plains. In this sense, ICIMOD has to stimulate research activity in the Hindu Kush–Himalayas, but it also has to see that the results are available, applicable, and—finally—that they are applied.”

Bruno Messerli, at the First Symposium of ICIMOD, December 1983

Professor Bruno Messerli, one of the founding fathers, former Program Advisory Committee Chair, Vice-Chair of the Board of Governors, as well as a life-long champion of the cause of the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), passed away on 4 February 2019. Not only was Professor Messerli instrumental in the conceptualization of ICIMOD as an institution, he was also a driving force in its formation. His research work on the Hindu Kush–Himalaya (HKH) since the 1980s laid the foundation for much of the work that ICIMOD has undertaken for the last 3 decades and continues until this day.

Throughout his career, the late Swiss geographer was a strong proponent, advocate, and a formidable voice for mountain issues. He devoted his entire life to the pursuit of knowledge and awareness for healthy mountain environments. Professor Messerli continues to be widely credited for being the key actor behind the inclusion of the “Managing Fragile Ecosystems: Sustainable Mountain Development” or also commonly referred to as the “Mountain Chapter” or “Mountain Agenda” (Chapter 13) in *Agenda 21*, the United Nations’ action plan for sustainable environmental

development, unveiled at the 1992 Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro.

Since his early days as a researcher at the University of Bern in the late 1950s, Messerli worked extensively on mountains and mountain environments—from the Alps in Europe to the Atlas in North Africa. After becoming a full professor in 1969, he continued his work further afield in other parts of Africa, Asia, and South America. Mountain ecosystems, cooperation around mountain resources, and the betterment of mountain populations always remained at the center of all his work, regardless of geographic location.

Messerli’s works and career, especially his efforts towards ensuring the inclusion of the “Mountain Agenda”, helped in bringing attention to mountains at the international level. His role as chair of the mountain component of the UNESCO-Man and Biosphere (MAB) Program, as coordinator of the Mountain Program of the United Nations, and as president of the International Geographic Union (IGU) from 1996–2000, further helped in ensuring that mountain environments continued to be relevant in global discussions. The declaration of the International Year of Mountains in 2002 and the establishment of the Mountain Partnership are also largely thanks to Messerli’s efforts.

Closer to home, Messerli’s contributions to the HKH region as well as to ICIMOD are invaluable. His research and work with ICIMOD in its nascent days were groundbreaking and set the context for much of ICIMOD’s and others’ research. Bruno’s book in collaboration with Jack Ives, *The Himalayan Dilemma* (1989), is without doubt a seminal work for the region. In it, he and Jack debunked the long established *Theory of Himalayan Environmental Degradation*, which was alarmist about rapid natural deterioration and geohazards, and suggested that uncontrolled population growth, poverty, and

malnutrition was pushing the region towards environmental and socioeconomic collapse.

In his proposal for ICIMOD’s program on “Combating the Impacts of Climate Change on Biodiversity in the Himalayas”, he suggested focussing on various factors causing loss of biodiversity in our region. He developed “north–south transects” and a landscape approach as a research method for ICIMOD and partners, whereby researchers are stationed in various areas in order to acquire information on the loss of biodiversity of a particular region.

Even up until recently, Messerli worked actively for and continuously contributed to the betterment of mountains. In 2007 he established the idea that mountains serve as important water towers for the world and humanity, highlighting the linkages between upstream and downstream communities in the HKH region. In his 2012 paper “Global Change and the World’s Mountains” (MRD 32.S1), Messerli again helped set the agenda for greater regional cooperation around mountains and mountain environments.

Today, both his scientific contributions and his vision of greater regional cooperation around mountains and people continue to be an important dimension and foundation for a lot of ICIMOD’s research and work. His passing is thus a major loss for the people of the HKH and for ICIMOD. We are however certain that his contributions, achievements, inspiration, and legacy will continue to live on for a long time to come.

The list of awards and recognition presented to Messerli over the course of his life is extensive. Some of them include:

- Global 500 Award of the United Nations Environment Program (1988)
- The Marcel Benoist Prize (1990)
- The FAO Medal for the UN (2002)

- Gold Medal of King Albert I Memorial Foundation (2002)
- The Founder's Medal of the Royal Geographical Society (2002)

Bruno Messerli was born on 17 September 1931 and passed away on 4 February 2019.

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