

Sustainable Mountain Development—Getting the Facts Right

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Sustainable Mountain Development—Getting the Facts Right

By Jack D. Ives. Lalitpur, Nepal: Himalayan Association for the Advancement of Science, 2013. xv + 293 pp. US\$ 55.00. ISBN 978-9-937-26195-1.

One could expect from a book entitled *Sustainable Mountain Development* something like a textbook, a state of knowledge available on this topic, or even a sum of detailed experiences and a selection of best practices. But that is definitely not what this book is about. Under this general title, Jack Ives gives us a very personal account of mountain research, international events, and advocacy for the last half century.

The account is personal in many ways. For one thing, it traces the very singular geographical and professional itinerary of a scientist particularly active during the second half of the last century. First, we follow Ives from his home town—Grimsby, Lincolnshire, England—to Montreal and McGill University in the late 1950s, where he joined a research center specializing in arctic environments. Then we follow him from the University of Colorado's Boulder campus to the Winter Palace located above Chiang Mai, where he had dinner with the king and queen of Thailand; and from the International Geographical Congress held in London in 1964 in a Cold War atmosphere to the corridors of the United Nations Headquarters in New York City during the International Year of Mountains in 2002. We also share his memories of fieldtrips in the Caucasus, Andes, and Altai, and an interesting set of pictures he collected and stored over the last 50 years.

The book is also full of portraits of people who have played a decisive role in Ives's personal intellectual

and geographical trajectory. From one page to the next, we meet Carl Troll, whom Ives compared at first glance to "one of Rommel's World War II panzer tank commanders" (p 9); Maurice Strong, who played a decisive role in promoting a global mountain agenda due to his mandate as United Nations Under-Secretary-General; Walther Manshard, Vice-Rector of the United Nations University, to whom the book is especially dedicated; and, last but not least, Bruno Messerli, with whom Ives has built "a thirty-year partnership and close friendship" (p 4). The book is also filled with many other people, each of them associated to a specific step of Ives's career in one context or another. An impressive set of personal photographs pays tribute to many of them, providing interesting testimony of field trips and academic events where Ives interacted with each of them. But among those to whom Ives pays tribute are also the "mountain people": Too often seen and described as "ignorant peasants in the need of being shown the way" (p 265), Ives would like these people to be "recognized as essential parts of any agenda aiming at attaining a comfortable inhabitable Planet Earth" (p 265). Ives's personal itinerary, as displayed in this book, is indeed full of interesting people who make Ives's mountains very lively, whether these people are attached to mountains on a daily living basis or for institutional and professional reasons.

But this book is not only, and not even mainly, a memoir of a leading scientist in mountain research. It also provides a personal analysis of many events and institutions related to mountain science. Ives invites us to attend scientific conferences such as the International Mountain Conferences held at Mohonk Mountain House in 1982 and 1986, as well as global conferences such as the Rio Earth Summit of 1992; to be part of scientific programs such as the UNESCO Man and Biosphere Mountain Project; to follow the birth

and rise of scientific journals such as *Arctic and Alpine Research* and *Mountain Research and Development*; to witness negotiations within the International Geographical Union's Mountain Commission; and many more. These analyses cannot be compared to what an anthropologist or a sociologist of science would do, but they are highly valuable coming from someone who played such a decisive role here and there and is perfectly at ease in describing how scientific and political issues are combined with individual beliefs and behaviors.

Last but not least, if Ives's book is indeed a personal account of mountain research and scientific and political encounters, it is also much more. Ives constantly addresses major environmental issues in mountain regions, from deforestation to glacier melting, from poverty to social marginalization. He reminds us that from the 1980s up to the present he has stuck to careful research on these topics, but he also reminds us that this deontology sometimes implied the need to "challenge the presumptions of dominant international authorities" (p 113). As a matter of fact, he recalls how his personal involvement in the critic of dominant analysis of Himalayan deforestation and floods in the Ganges plain and delta led to the publication of *The Himalayan Dilemma* (Ives and Messerli 1989). Attentive to how present-day environmental issues are echoed in newspapers, the Internet, and the international arena, he reformulates his critique of "the melodramatic reactions to potential mountain hazards" (p 253) and of "outrageous and alarmist exaggerations, even to the point of deliberate falsification" (p 261). His willingness to stick to facts and keep away from ideology is well expressed in the subtitle of the book: *Getting the Facts Right*. Here lies the tour de force of this book: Ives manages to deliver clear and accurate information on

mountain ecosystems and livelihoods, and to promote sustainable development around the world, through a personal journey through time and space, without falling into the multiple traps—such as excessive subjectivity or the temptation of embellishing the past—that always

threaten the writing of personal narratives.

REFERENCE

Ives JD, Messerli B. 1989. *The Himalayan Dilemma: Reconciling Development and Conservation*. London, United Kingdom: Routledge.

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