

by Jane Ross and Thomas Hofer



IMPORTANCE OF MOUNTAINS

Mountains are essential to our health and well-being. They provide most of the world's freshwater, harbour an extraordinary variety of plants and animals, and are precious reservoirs of biological diversity for food, medicine, timber and recreation. Mountains are also home to at least one in ten people, with diverse cultures that are rich in traditions, knowledge and languages.

Yet, mountain ecosystems are more fragile than lowlands. The growing demand for water, the consequences of global climate change, the growth in tourism, the effects of armed conflict and the pressures of industry, mining and agriculture threaten the extraordinary web of life that mountains support. These threats are causing rapid, and in cases irreversible, changes to mountain environments and to mountain people, already amongst the world's poorest and hungriest.

FAO ACTIVITIES

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) is pooling its collective expertise, experience and skills to address mountain-specific problems and strengthen cooperation to find solutions for poverty, hunger and environmental degradation in mountain areas, in line with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Activities to promote sustainable mountain development around the world involve four main areas of focus: normative work; field programme; contribution to global partnerships, processes and initiatives, and communications and advocacy.

This work benefits from, and is complemented by, strong in-house collaboration at headquarters, the regional offices, as well as many country offices. It is also enhanced by strong cooperation maintained with

a large partnership, including sister UN agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), universities and research institutions.

NORMATIVE WORK

Normative work covers such topics as Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development in Mountains (SARD-M), watershed management, policy and law, and mountain products, and focuses on information generation and dissemination, the development of methods, approaches and guidelines, networking and capacity building.

FIELD PROGRAMME

FAO's field programme support to countries is typically through capacity-building, institutional strengthening and pilot field activities, as well as assistance with project identification, formulation and technical backstopping. Projects are currently underway in Cuba, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Poland and Tajikistan. Projects were recently completed in Armenia and North Korea. Projects are also to be initiated in the Fouta Djallon Highlands of West Africa and in Turkey.



Photo by T. Hofer, FAO



Photo by A. Mihich, FAO

Improving lives and environments in mountains around the world



Photo by T. Hofer, FAO

GLOBAL PARTNERSHIPS

FAO's contribution to such global partnerships, processes and initiatives as the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MEA), the International Consortium on Landslides and the Mountain Research Initiative (MRI) is helping increase knowledge and facilitate action for sustainable mountain development around the world. In addition, FAO brings its wide range of expertise to the Mountain Partnership — a global alliance of countries, intergovernmental organizations, civil society, non-governmental organizations and the private sector in five regions. FAO is a founding member of the Mountain Partnership and hosts the Secretariat to support it.

COMMUNICATION AND OUTREACH

FAO's role in communications and advocacy for mountains has included its lead role in the implementation of the International Year of Mountains (2002), which was dedicated to protecting mountain ecosystems and improving the well-being of mountain people. During the Year, FAO prepared and implemented a global communications campaign and supported the development of 78 national committees to promote country-level action. Many of these mechanisms continue today. Since 2003, FAO has also acted as lead coordinating agency for UN International Mountain Day, which is celebrated on 11 December every year to highlight the global importance of mountain ecosystems and promote ongoing attention to the unique needs of mountain communities.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Mountains are barometers of climate change. As the world heats up, mountain glaciers — the source of water for many of the world's river systems and people — are melting at unprecedented rates, while rare plants and animals struggle to survive over ever diminishing areas. Mountain people, already among the world's most disadvantaged, face greater hardships. Understanding how climate change affects mountains, and learning how to manage and mitigate any negative effects, is vital for all of us, wherever we live.

INTERNATIONAL MOUNTAIN DAY 2007

The theme "Facing Change: Climate Change in Mountain Areas" has been chosen for International Mountain Day in 2007. This special day provides an opportunity to highlight the incidence and implications of climate change in mountains amongst a wide audience — governments, intergovernmental organizations, civil society, media and the general public — and to promote support and partnerships for advocacy, research, education and action on the ground.



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RELATED LINKS:

FAO Sustainable Mountain Development: www.fao.org/mnts/index_en.asp | **Mountain Partnership:** www.mountainpartnership.org

FAO Forests and Water Programme: www.fao.org/forestry/site/forestsandwater/en | **International Mountain Day:** www.fao.org/mnts/intl_mountain_day_en.asp