

E-conference: "Integrating Mountain Culture and Natural Resource Management [MCNRM]"

August 17 - September 14, 2001

Introduction

Growing evidence reveals that the impact of dominant and traditional development strategies contribute to the erosion of cultural practices and social capital in mountain areas. The emerging and growing use of new forms of communication and access to media are further contributing to the marginalisation of mountain culture. It is not a coincidence that the year 2002 will celebrate the International Year of the Mountains and the International Year of Ecotourism. While tourism has contributed to the transformation and economic development of some mountain regions, there is increasing concern about the need to address the accompanying negative impact on the cultural and social fabric of mountain people. The year 2002 provides a unique opportunity to do so and the broad goal of this initiative will be to highlight the urgency of putting into place appropriate policies and practices which can ensure the gains of mountain development are not at an irreversible cost to the rich and diverse culture of mountain communities.

Goal

To highlight the urgency of putting into place appropriate policies and practices, which can ensure that the cost of the gains of sustainable mountain development are not irreversible in terms of the rich and diverse culture of mountain communities in the mountain areas of the countries of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal and Pakistan.

Objectives

Overall Objective

The overall objective is to contribute towards a detailed proposal and plan to be operationalised during the International Year of the Mountains 2002, which will promote awareness and understanding of the urgency to integrate culture with sustainable natural resources management in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal and Pakistan).

Specific Objectives

- To start an ongoing debate on the cost of the interventions in mountain natural resource management on mountain cultures and how they can be integrated into appropriate policies and practices
- To bring together important issues to be addressed, positive experiences and to showcase innovative approaches
- To provide concrete policy recommendations on what academic and mountain research and institutions must focus on; what donors should look forward to support; how local innovations can be more widely used, modified where possible or necessary and mainstreamed; and what new approaches for community based programmes can be followed

Theme

Culture in all its forms plays a critical role in how people manage their lives, their relationships with each other and the environments in which they live. In mountain regions throughout the world, traditional cultures and conservation have evolved together. The beliefs and behaviours of human communities primarily drive sustainable natural resource management, and local cultures are strengthened by intimate connection to the natural environment that sustains them. Healthy mountain ecosystems, communities and cultures are inseparable, building over time a 'vocabulary of place' where sacred beliefs are inextricably bound to daily life routine and the practice of natural resource management. The cultural aspects of human lives, whether in physical manifestations as buildings and landscapes or non-physical forms like language, traditions and beliefs, have both inherent and functional value.

Mountain cultures and rituals, through the centuries, have developed as responses to change. Tradition is the mechanism that prevents people from changing cultures but tradition need not be synonymous with culture - it is an umbrella phrase for elements that lay down concrete rules that people wish to denote as unchanging and not to be challenged. In reality, cultures have always changed and been in transition. Hence, any culture is as strong as its ability to respond and accommodate to change without disintegration, fundamentalist cultures that resist change have disintegrated in the end and this is historical fact. Culture is not a treasure that is fragile and needs guarding against change. That is rather a traditionalist view. Culture is a lot stronger than information technology, for example, and it will rise to absorb it and frame it in its own image. If culture does not serve humanity, humanity will in the end change it, no matter how long it takes.

In a situation of dramatic environmental and economic change, there is a growing recognition that a greater appreciation of culture can play a critical role in determining the type and rate of change. The role of culture in the lives of mountain peoples and the relationship of their culture with the management of their environments must be recognised and valued. While the modern world may be poorer for a scientific rationalism that separates objective and sacred knowledge, traditional mountain cultures make no such distinctions, ritual and religion being intrinsic to the daily business of living.

Key Aspects of Culture in Relation to Natural Resources Management

Both spatial and temporal dimensions may be associated with cultural and spiritual beliefs regarding landscape features. The relationship that sacred mountains have with the surrounding landscape has strong implications for resource conservation, such mountains frequently being exceptionally comprehensive ecosystems. Of all sacred elements that may be present in a landscape, a mountain is generally the most comprehensive in terms of the ecology being protected by its sacredness, the sacred site being linked through cultural or spiritual beliefs to the protection of other landscape elements not actually on the mountain.

Sacred mountain sites have resulted in communities maintaining and preserving the natural resources in often-pristine conditions, and in fact the cultural and inspirational value of mountains has played a vital role in the establishment of natural parks. It is a most effective tool for galvanising public support of the conservation of wilderness areas. Indigenous communities have long realised the value of the high diversity and natural resources within mountains and that mountains are natural resources that nurture.

The strong link between environmental conservation and spiritual beliefs should be taken into account during resource management planning processes. Thus, local people must be involved in natural resource management decisions so that their cultural understanding of and linkages to land use traditions can benefit conservation practices and policies. Mountain cultural diversity

is a strong and valid basis for sustainable use and conservation of mountain resources and for any assurance of long-term success, policies and programmes directed toward preservation, development and sustainable use of mountain environments must take into account cultural, spiritual and religious factors. The link between spirituality and conservation will be strongest when genuine partnerships are forged between religious and spiritual leaders who can first identify and set conditions for resource management, and regulatory and legislative authorities who can help provide technical, scientific and policy expertise. Involving cultural and religious leaders helps strengthen both natural resource management and cultural integrity and survival.

Both indigenous and non-indigenous people often accord heightened value to the natural resources within sacred mountains or near sacred sites. This has implications for how people will use, develop and conserve these resources. The affinity and value people have for such sites offers local communities the opportunity to attract outsiders and investment in locally driven conservation and development programmes. The spiritual and cultural value of mountains, particularly as places of renewal and inspiration, has played a key role in the genesis of contemporary environmental movements and continues to motivate people in modern as well as traditional societies to take actions to protect wilderness areas and the environment in general.

During the e-conference the following aspects would receive primary attention:

- a. Mountain tourism, especially domestic tourism, risks and opportunities of globalisation, roles and perceptions of different stakeholders
- b. The significance of mountain tourism in changing mountain lifestyle and how such change affects mountain natural resource management
- c. Ecological democracy – investigate the role of cultural aspects in governance, including role of women in decision-making
- d. Intersection of cultural issues with regard to diversity and preservation of cultures and identity, documenting cultural practices on natural resource management
- e. Sacred mountain sites – inventory of cultural practices and sites using innovative participatory learning tools to document knowledge, sites, practices
- f. Raise awareness of and the level of debate about cultural aspects in mountain development and natural resource management
- g. Cultural identities as risk factors in natural resource management planning in mountain areas – clarify issues, create awareness, build multiple perspectives
- h. Challenge the mainstream understanding about beliefs and cultural aspects of natural resource management in mountain areas
- i. The significance of gender in integrating culture and natural resource management

Broad areas for discussion

- a. Conceptualising "Culture" and "Natural Resources Management"
- b. Cultures Under Threat
- c. Ethical Issues
- d. Characteristics of Local Cultural Ecologies
- e. Identifying and Building on Cultural Ecologies

Expected Outputs

- a. Synopsis of relevant key issues discussed during the e-conference in a synthesis report

- b. Compilation of promising case studies, examples or innovative approaches
- c. A collection of reference material on-line – bibliography and websites
- d. An advocacy tool (report) for bringing about change at policy level

Website

The registration form and some relevant papers are available on the MCNRM website at: <http://www.icimod.org/iym2002/culture/mcnrm.htm>.

A bibliography and collection of relevant website are also available. All proceedings will be posted on the website.

Language

The e-conference will be in English but supporting documentation in regional languages will be accepted. Help is required in translating such documents into English and translating the final synthesis report into regional languages.

Call for Papers (July 20 - August 10)

Interested persons can contribute papers at any time until the deadline. Topics may or may not be selected from the several aspects and areas listed above, but should be directly relevant to the main theme.

How to subscribe

To join in the discussion, please send an email to: majordomo@icimod.org.np with “subscribe mcnrm” in the body of the message.

E- conference registration

The registration form is available at: http://www.icimod.org/iym2002/culture/reg_form.htm

Organizers

International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD)

The International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) is committed to alleviating poverty and conserving the environment in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region. The Centre's eco-regional focus covers the mountain areas of eight countries – Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal and Pakistan.

ICIMOD's mission is to help promote the development of an economically and environmentally sound mountain ecosystem and to improve the living standards of mountain people. ICIMOD recognises that mountain people, as marginalised and isolated communities, are particularly vulnerable to external influences that affect the integrity of their cultural heritage and tradition. They need to be provided with opportunities for equitable social and economic development that sustains livelihoods in harmony with the mountain environment.

The Mountain Institute (TMI)

The Mountain Institute (TMI) is a non-profit scientific and educational organisation committed to the preservation of mountain environments and advancement of mountain cultures around the world. TMI is deeply committed to conserving mountain environments and cultures while helping

improve mountain people's livelihoods through community based conservation and enterprise programmes.

TMI's Sacred Mountains Initiative addresses the spiritual and emotional relationship between cultures and their mountains, which forms the basis for decisions affecting their environments. TMI believes that culture and conservation evolve together over time. Sustainable natural resource management is driven by the beliefs and behaviours of human communities; local cultures are strengthened by their intimate connections to the natural environment that sustains them and that healthy mountain ecosystems, communities and cultures are inseparable.

Mountains harbor centuries-old cultural traditions and many mountain cultures are relatively undisturbed by global scale economic or social forces. Promoting indigenous culture as a means to conserve both their own heritage and that of their surrounding environments is a hallmark of TMI's programming. Thus, new enterprises built on traditional handicraft techniques in the Makalu-Barun area of Nepal have opened avenues for local crafters to market their wares and sustain their livelihoods. Similarly, apprenticeship programs linking young devotees with skilled masters supplements the restoration of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and sacred texts in the Qomolungma Nature Preserve, helping keep alive traditional wisdom. Over the past five years, TMI has established successful mountain tourism programmes throughout its areas of operation that build upon the strengths and assets of mountain communities and environments with a particular focus on natural and cultural heritage.

The King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation (KMTNC)

The King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation (KMTNC) is an autonomous, non-profit, and non-governmental organization working to conserve nature and natural resources in Nepal.

The overall mission and objectives of KMTNC are: "to conserve, manage and promote nature in all its diversity balancing human needs with the environment on a sustainable basis for posterity ensuring maximum community participation with due cognizance of the linkages between economics, environment and ethics through a process in which people are both the principal actors and beneficiaries."

The Trust has successfully undertaken over 100 small and large projects on nature conservation, biodiversity protection, natural resource management and sustainable development programs in three geographical regions: (1) the Mountain Environment Program which focuses on the mid-hills and high mountain regions of Nepal with the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) and the Manaslu Conservation Area Project (MCAP); (2) the Terai Environment Program, and (3) Kathmandu Valley. The Trust's experience over the years has shown that conservation efforts cannot be successful, much less sustainable, unless it addresses the needs and aspirations of the people. The Trust's experience over the years has shown that conservation efforts cannot be successful, much less sustainable, unless it addresses the needs and aspirations of the people.

E-conference Coordinating Committee

- *ICIMOD* – (1) Sangeeta Pandey, Documentation Officer/Web Person & E-conference Coordinator/Technical Moderator (mcnrm-mod@icimod.org.np), 2. Vijay Ratan Khadgi, E-conference Researcher (vijay@icimod.org.np), and (3) Anupam Bhatia, Coordinator, Participatory Natural Resource Management Programme (anupam@icimod.org.np),
- *TMI* – (4) Nandita Jain, Senior Programme Coordinator (n.jain@mountain.org), and
- *KMTNC* – (5) Ganga Jang Thapa, Senior Programme Coordinator (gjt@kmtnc.org.np)

References on the Web

The following papers, as well as bibliographies, are available on the website (see above):

1. Integrating Culture into Natural Resource Management: A Thematic Essay, by Kenneth D. Croes
2. Sacred Mountains: Implications for Protected Area Management, by Edwin Bernbaum
3. Cultural Diversity in the Mountains: Issues of Integration and Marginality in Sustainable Development, by Manjari Mehta
4. Mountain Agenda: Environmentally Sustainable and Equitable Development Opportunities, by Elizabeth Byers
5. Conserving Diversity in Mountain Environments: Biological and Cultural Approaches, by Jeffrey A. McNeely
6. Culture, Biodiversity and Assets: Some Basic Ideas, by E. Walter Coward, Jr.
7. From Science to Ritual: An Andean Narrative, by Frederique Apffel-Marglin
8. Culture, People and Nature in Context of central Himalayas in India, by Dr. P. C. Joshi
9. Sacred Mountain Forests and Biodiversity, by P.S. Ramakrishnan
10. Challenging the Mainstream Understanding about Beliefs and Cultural Aspects of Natural Resource Management in Mountain Areas, by Girma Taddese