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# Beyond UNCED: A Strategic Plan of Action

Jack Ives

## Introduction: The Mountain Road to Rio

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), or the Earth Summit, convened in Rio de Janeiro, June 2-16, 1992. It was a 20-years-after-Stockholm (1972) UN conference, with Maurice Strong again in the position of Secretary General. However, since Stockholm, "development" has been added as a perceived necessary adjunct to "environment" in the context of "sustainable development."

Over 170 of the world's nations sent delegations, many of them including their heads of state, so that Rio was decidedly an Earth Summit and as such, potentially of crucial importance. However, it has been described as everything from a major turning point in world history to a great disappointment. To discuss UNCED in general goes far beyond the purpose of this presentation. What I will focus on is how the mountain world fits into UNCED and what advantages those of us concerned about the future of mountain people and their environment may gain from UNCED.

First, the Stockholm Conference on the Environment (1972) never mentioned mountains. During the intervening twenty years, while we have seen concerns expressed, programs developed and constituencies established for arid lands, tropical rainforests, oceans, wetlands, the Antarctic, acid rain, the ozone hole, CFCs, and global warming, one would think the world was flat to consider the all but total silence concerning mountains. IUCN, UNESCO MAB, IBP, and IUBS, all developed mountain programs, but consistency was lacking and general awareness of that three-dimensional twenty percent of the world's terrestrial surface did not develop. Despite this, a major alarm flared up about the supposedly rapid collapse of the Himalayan environment. This alarm was tied to the intellectually satisfying hypothesis that rapid increase in subsistence mountain populations since 1950 has led to excessive deforestation. This in turn, in a monsoon climate, has led to landslides, massive soil erosion, and even more catastrophic downstream effects of flooding in up to sixty percent of Bangladesh and much of Gangetic India. The World Bank, in the 1970s prophesized that Nepal would have no accessible forest left by the year AD 2000 and all its topsoil would be contributing to the enlargement of cyclone-prone delta islands in the Bay of Bengal.

This apparent anomaly—no incorporation of mountain environment issues into the UN and other international aid strategies versus a first class alarm about destruction of the Himalaya—is not really inconsistent, especially since the outcry of Himalayan environmental degradation is a piece of journalistic fiction tied to political convenience. All this flourished because of a lack of careful planning backed by well designed mountain research. Through the 1970s and 1980s, therefore, the world's mountains and their peoples were neglected, or else treated as accidental adjuncts of flatland projects. Alternately, they were ruthlessly exploited or treated to ill-conceived development aid with a tendency to cause more harm than good.

During this 20-year period, a very small band of mountain scholars, brought together initially through the International Geographical Union's Commission on Mountain Geocology, under the leadership of the late Professor Carl Troll and UNESCO MAB-Project 6, endeavored to establish an

international research and training program. This program was eventually taken up by United Nations University (UNU), UNESCO, and the International Mountain Society (IMS). An initial bright hope was the establishment in Kathmandu of the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) under the banner of UNESCO-MAB and the German and Swiss Governments. However, a politically controlled constitution and poor leadership dimmed this brightness of hope. However, post-Rio activities may eventually justify that hope. UNU's mountain initiative enabled the establishment of the quarterly journal *Mountain Research and Development* and the IMS in 1981, although a very low funding level has limited their effectiveness.

Thus, when the now growing band of mountain scholars learned of the appointment of Maurice Strong as Secretary General of UNCED, it was realized that an opportunity had arisen for establishing the priority needs of mountains on the World's 21st Century Agenda. This was in part because Maurice Strong had made a personal commitment to the mountain group some years earlier. A two-year effort was launched by an initial group of six mountain scholars, to force a way into the Rio proceedings. This was a combination of UNU, IMS, ICIMOD and especially the Swiss Development Corporation who made a grant of US \$300,000; they took the name Mountain Agenda 1992. Only 18 months lead time was available. Nevertheless, a number of measures were successful:

1. Publication of a 391-page State of the World's Mountains: A global report.
2. Publication of an Appeal for the Mountains,
3. Production of a World Mountain Network newsletter, and
4. International networking, and especially involvement in the 3rd (Geneva) and 4th (New York) UNCED Prepcoms. This led to strong impacts on the content of what became Chapter 13 of *Agenda 21*, the primary UNCED document, debated and approved in Rio. Chapter 13 carries the title: *Managing Fragile Ecosystems: Sustainable Mountain Development* UNCED and Chapter 13: Agenda 21 Chapter 13 highlights two interrelated program areas:
  - A. generating and strengthening knowledge about the ecology and sustainable development of mountain ecosystems;
  - B. promoting integrated watershed development and alternate livelihood opportunities.

The detailed content of Chapter 13, as to be expected, is a mishmash of writing, rewriting, compromise, and attempting the art of the possible. It is sufficiently inclusive and vague to permit any determined mountain group to make tangible progress if it has the will to seize the obvious mandate that the World Body has allotted. No funds are attached, yet MOUNTAINS have finally gained their rightful place of concern amongst those other of the major threatened ecosystems of the world. Considering the neglect of mountains prior to taking the road to Rio, this is significant in itself. However, unless the political will can be mastered to use the Rio mandate for the good of the mountains and their peoples, the effort will have been nothing more than an interesting academic exercise.

### **The Mountain Strategy**

The problems to be faced by any concerned group of mountain scholars, and "Mountain Agenda 1992" can serve as a good example of one such group, are formidable. It is necessary both to obtain support, especially financial, from the establishment, and to criticize that same establishment. Where science, or better scholarship, in our case *mountain scholarship*, must enter the political arena, it is extremely difficult to survive, let alone flourish, if establishment funds are required. A good case is the World Bank that persists in anachronistic economic development policy and environmental window dressing. Such an organization will hardly provide funds to facilitate, for instance, concerted and intelligent attacks on its mega-projects for hydro-electric development stemming from a university-based corps of mountain scholars. So how is a strategy to be developed?

That UNCED, or the World's governing bodies, provided a mountain mandate is eminently clear. The only way ahead that I can visualize is a progressive strengthening of the thinly spread international mountain network. This should include the enlargement of the several regional mountain associations that are currently barely "off-the-ground." These include (1) the African Mountains Association; (2) an Andean Mountains Association; and (3) an embryonic East-Asia Western Pacific Rim mountain

association, due to be launched by Lincoln University, Christchurch, New Zealand in May 1993. There is also an urgent need for the reorganization of ICIMOD and an increasingly close degree of networking and collaboration with the several existing European and North American centers of mountain activity.

To achieve all this, however, will require a small but financially secure international mountain secretariat, or working core. All of this could be achieved and the UNU-IMS link with the quarterly journal and newsletter could play a central role. Nevertheless, this is all infrastructure. What is more important by far is the need for a set of basic working principles, a mountain sustainable development philosophy, an entirely new approach to environment, poverty, minority peoples, accessibility, and the use of resources. It would be counter-productive for one Eurocentric mountain scholar to propose such a set of principles. But I will take that risk on the clear understanding that the following could be one of several lists that need to be debated, modified, amalgamated, and redrafted and, above all worked over by a culturally and economically diverse group of mountain scholars, agency staff, and mountain people.

1. Development' needs to be redefined; we also must recognize that "old" development has largely failed, especially in mountain lands.

2. The needs of the so-called "target" groups need to be fully assessed. More than this, they should not be perceived as "targets" or recipients, but as originators, as people often with an enormous amount of accumulated indigenous environmental knowledge who have something very important to offer. Who should do the assessing?

3. Local mountain minorities must not be viewed as homogenous societies. To begin with, there are females, males, children and a local power structure. Many, apparently well-tuned mountain development projects, have merely served to depress the status of women and children. It must be recognized that women frequently constitute the majority of the working farmers of the mountain world and they usually carry a much greater work load than the men.

4. Mega-projects, especially high dams for hydro-electricity, are rarely examined in terms of their total environmental and socio-economic impacts. They should be. The lessons of Sunderlal Bahuguna amongst others, derived in part from his position as Messenger of the Chipko Movement, and in part from his current courageous resistance to the Tehri Dam, need to be studied with care. Frequently, the publicized benefits of a large dam conceal the extent of drowning of productive land and the displacement of large numbers of subsistence people and the grossly inadequate provisions made for them. Furthermore, the production—the electricity—is for the cities and industries of the lowlands. This is one of many patterns where the mountains and their people are ruthlessly exploited, particularly in the Himalayan setting, for a reservoir that will be filled with silt all too quickly, or possibly destroyed by an earthquake.

The points raised above are all obvious, and have been raised before, but have they ever been incorporated into policy? In conclusion, I would like to return to the great Himalayan catastrophe supposedly in the making: population growth—deforestation soil erosion—flooding and siltation on the plains. This is dealt with extensively in our book: *The Himalayan Dilemma* (Ives and Messerli, 1989) but, four years later it is obvious to me that our case was too simplistic and some elements of it were overstated. Nevertheless, some concerns remain. The very fact that we were motivated to write the book in order to challenge the rampant "theory of Himalayan environmental degradation" justifies reiteration of several points.

An international mountain network of scholars must be prepared to continue to challenge unproven assumptions. We must recognize that mountain lands and mountain peoples are so diverse and complex, that enormous diversity occurs over short horizontal and vertical distances, that even if we focus on the single mountain range of the Himalaya, there is no *one* problem and, therefore, no *one* solution. The giant bureaucracy often tends to find a giant problem and to solve it with a general panacea. The most relevant illustration for this symposium is the all too recent determination to solve the flooding of Bangladesh with a multi-billion dollar two pronged attack: massive river control and extensive Himalayan reforestation. Such would probably destroy Bangladesh. And while reforestation along the

Himalayan range *could* be beneficial, it would only be so if the local people are encouraged to select the tree species to be used, and to decide precisely where they should be planted and maintained (Griffin, 1988).

It remains to be emphasized that the mountain cause has taken a great leap forward in 1992. Nevertheless, it is worth reflecting on the significance of program area A of Chapter 13, Agenda 21: *the need to generate and strengthen knowledge about the ecology and sustainable development of mountain ecosystems*. I read this, in part, as a mandate for sustained, integrated, mountain research and its application, focused to deal with the physical ecology of the mountain landscapes and the dynamic interrelations between mountain peoples and their environments, and between mountain cultures and the impingement of interests from outside the mountains. Without much fuller knowledge it would be better for the "outside" not to interfere, if that were humanly possible. On the other hand, this is not an exclusive academic preserve and gained knowledge must be communicated at all levels so that mountain scholars and their colleagues, the mountain people, can indeed enter the political arena effectively.

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