

# **Implementing the Mountain Agenda: A report from "The Mountain Institute international headquarters"**

The Mountain Institute, USA

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Believing that mountains can serve as inspiration, conscience, and model for community-based conservation in the next millennium, The Mountain Institute, a non-profit scientific and educational organization, is committed to preserving mountain environments and advancing mountain cultures throughout the world. The mandate of Agenda 21, Chapter 13 defines in large part the work of The Mountain Institute.

The Mountain Institute brings nearly a quarter of a century of scientific, field-based experience to address challenges and opportunities facing mountain cultures, communities, and conservation. The Mountain Institute promotes sustainable economic development, and natural heritage resource management by mountain communities in the Himalayas, the Andes, and the Appalachians—the highest, longest and oldest mountain ranges in the world.

These focused field programs are proving effective models whereby environmental conservation is served through community-based economic development and promotion of cultural heritage. Our programs work in partnership with governments, agencies, organizations, and communities, striving to enhance people's ability to move toward their own image of a sustainable future. Most staff members are native to the mountain ranges where they work, with the Institute promoting exchanges of people, ideas and information from region to region. All programs have an ongoing monitoring and evaluation process that feeds into the mountain research agenda. Our programs are place centered, and most easily understood in light of our work in integrated mountain protected area management. Taken by mountain range, The Mountain Institute's programs addressing the Mountain Agenda are as follows.

**In the Himalaya**

The Mountain Institute's pioneering approach to preserving the cultural and natural resources of the eastern Himalaya incorporates a transboundary strategy recognizing the biological and cultural linkages between various parks and protected areas. The centerpiece of our efforts involves multiple governments, agencies, NGO's, and the following protected areas surrounding Mount Everest: Makalu-Barun National Park and Conservation Area, Langtang and Sagarmatha National Parks in Nepal; and Qomolangma Nature Preserve in the Tibet Autonomous Region of China. In helping to create and support various parks and protected areas in the region, The Mountain Institute has been instrumental in encouraging the protection of a contiguous region roughly the size of Switzerland. The Mountain Institute also partners with local and regional organizations to promote biodiversity conservation in the nearby Himalayan state of Sikkim in India, a favorite tourism area featuring Khanchendzonga National Park.

### **Makalu-Barun Conservation Project**

Following several years of coordinated baseline study and participatory management planning, the Government of Nepal officially opened the 2,330 sq. km. Makalu-Barun National Park and Conservation Area in November of 1992. The Mountain Institute has played a key role in facilitating the conception, design, and now the management of the Makalu-Barun. Residents of the Conservation Area are actively organized into user groups utilizing participatory management practices to determine the stewardship of their natural and cultural resources.

- The biologically important lower Barun valley has been designated a Strict Nature Reserve, the first protected area of its type in Nepal, and one of three such areas now within the Makalu-Barun. The area is recognized for its exceptional biological significance. It is home to the rare and endangered snow leopard, whose populations are beginning to increase thanks to the conservation management program.
- Among the many economic initiatives in the Makalu-Barun, the Allo Centre Women's Initiative exemplifies appreciation and encouragement of indigenous craft with the development of income generating activities. Over 100 women at 8 clubs are currently engaged in producing allo cloth from the stinging nettle plant. The sales of allo products have increased dramatically since the clubs formed. There has been an average 4% increase in household income.
- In February of 1993, the Makalu-Barun Project was given special recognition at the IV World Congress on National Parks and Protected Areas in Caracas, Venezuela when Makalu-Barun scientists presented the project together with their colleagues across the border from the Qomolangma Nature Preserve.

### **Qomolangma Nature Preserve**

In the Tibet Autonomous Region of China, The Mountain Institute has assisted government agencies and local NGO's with the planning and establishment of the 35,000 sq. km. Qomolangma Nature Preserve. Through extensive local participation, scientific surveys, and workshops with local leaders, a Master plan for the Preserve was prepared and approved in 1992. This plan includes programs for Preserve Management, Economic Development, preservation of Cultural and Spiritual Heritage, and People and Wildlife.

The Qomolangma Nature Preserve was the first nature preserve in China to include people and their cultural heritage in its preservation agenda and to accept international collaboration in its planning and management. It has now been accorded the recognition of a national park and is proposed for international recognition as a world heritage site. The preserve area includes the exceptional biological diversity of the pristine Kama Valley and the more barren high-altitude desert and vast arid grasslands of the Tibetan Plateau, which receive less than 300 millimeters of annual precipitation. The highest known coniferous forests, the 67,000-acre Lake Peiku, and critical populations of Tibetan wild ass, gazelles, antelope, wolves, snow leopard, Himalayan tar, Tibetan brown bear, and arguli sheep all contribute to the Preserve's environmental diversity. Culturally this is home of the Rongbuk Monastery, the world's highest monastery and year-round human settlement, and the sacred cave of mlarea, founder of Tibetan Buddhism. The approximately 70,000 Tibetan nomads and farmers living within the sparsely populated preserve continue to practice their historic mountain-culture traditions.

### **Langtang Ecotourism Project**

Langtang National Park and its surrounding Buffer Zone is the newest site for Mountain Institute activity in Nepal. Unlike the newly designated areas mentioned above, the Langtang National Park has a long record of conservation management, offering The Mountain Institute an opportunity to test its community-based participatory approach within an established park context. Located only about 35 kilometers northeast of the capital city of Kathmandu, Langtang provides relatively easy access to the 8,000 to 9,000 foreign trekkers that visit annually, providing additional income to the mountain people living in and around the park.

There are about 45 villages within the Park, and altogether, approximately 16,200 people in and around the Park depend upon its resources for fuel, timber, fodder, and pasture land as well as medicinal herbs, wild edibles, and aromatic herbs. Langtang is home to a wide spectrum of plant and animal species of which some 1,000 plants, 160 birds and 30 mammal species have been identified.

While project planning is taking place throughout the park, our project's skill development, training, and institutional support is centered on the Helambu region and the sacred Gosainkund Lakes. Our work in Langtang involves activities to strengthen the capabilities of other groups-non-governmental organizations, governments, and the private sector-to deliver community-based biodiversity conservation programming. In this project, the socio-economic benefits of ecotourism are seen as incentives to local people to conserve the natural and cultural heritage of the region, particularly the rich biological diversity which not only attracts tourists (and their rupees) but provides many of life's necessities to local residents.

With Langtang National Park's varied scenery, strong religious and cultural traditions, multiple attractions, easy accessibility, and its peoples' familiarity with tourist needs and interests, the region holds great promise for various forms of ecotourism development. They include interactive cultural treks and home- stays, religious and nature studies, lessons in arts and handicraft production, festival tours, visits to historic holy sites, rock and mountain climbing, and soaring.

### **Sikkim Ecotourism and Biodiversity Project**

The biological and cultural diversity of the Himalayan state of Sikkim in India make it a very attractive destination for both international and domestic tourists. With the simplification of entry procedures, numbers of visitors have been increasing; over 90,000 domestic and 6,000 international tourists visited Sikkim in 1994. Government and private sectors are, however, eager to embrace policies that minimize the environmental and social problems which would ultimately destroy the resource which attracts tourists.

The Sikkim Biodiversity and Ecotourism project seeks to enhance indigenous capacity and generate economic incentives to conserve natural and cultural heritage at key nature tourism sites. The project works with stakeholders to support community-based enterprise development approaches for the conservation of Sikkim's unique biological diversity; to improve the capacity of non-government organizations (NGOs), the private sector and local communities to effectively participate in biodiversity conservation; to strengthen community management of ecotourism resources at the project sites; and to develop tourism in a way which would provide widespread economic incentives for participants to conserve the natural resources on which it depends.

The primary focus of the project is nature-based destinations in West Sikkim. These include Sikkim's major trekking route, Yuksom-Dzongri in Khanchendzonga National Park and Kecheopalri Lake, one of Sikkim's most sacred and popular lakes. Recently opened to tourism, West Sikkim contains the world's third highest mountain peak (Khanchendzonga) revered as the

protective deity of Sikkim, and renowned for its verdant forests which contain a large variety of rhododendrons, orchids, as well as other flowering and animal species. Cultural diversity is also high with a number of groups -- Lepcha, Bhutia and Nepali ethnic groups -- as well as Tibetan refugees living in the area.

Project implementation began in 1996, and is a joint effort of the G.B. Pant Institute of Himalayan Environment and Development-India and The Mountain Institute, in collaboration with the Travel Agents Association of Sikkim (TAAS), The Green Circle (a Sikkimese non-government organization) and local communities. As with any project built upon stakeholder participation, the design continues to evolve but maintains its focus on developing positive linkages between biodiversity conservation and economic development.

### **In the Andes: Huascarán National Park, Peru**

The 3,400 sq. km. Huascarán National Park in north-central Peru includes most of the Cordillera Blanca, the highest range in the Peruvian Andes with more than 60 peaks in excess of 5,700m. With the cessation of the Shining Path rebel activity in the region, foreign and national visitation to the area has grown from 22,000 in 1989 to 91,000 in 1995 with little commensurate infrastructure, trained personnel, and management capability. At the invitation of the Ministry of Agriculture, in 1995 The Mountain Institute began the work of strengthening multiple sectors in the region.

In less than one year, the project is dramatically ahead of schedule, with outputs in workshop, training, and fund leveraging far beyond those originally envisioned. For example, more than 800 stakeholders from the government, NGO, private sector, and local communities were involved in the development of a participatory Ecotourism Management Plan between September-November 1995, the first such plan of its kind in Peru. The plan was formally approved by the government in two weeks, an unprecedented event given that no protected area plans had been approved during the preceding three years. Following the success of the planning process and the commitment of funds from the national and regional governments, The Mountain Institute is now assisting in the development of proposals to finance implementation of the Ecotourism Management Plan's conservation and community development activities in the park's buffer zone.

### **In the Appalachians: Spruce Knob Mountain Center**

The Mountain Institute operates the four hundred acre Spruce Knob Mountain Center in Pendleton County, West Virginia, one of the highest research and training facilities in the Appalachians at an altitude of 4000'. Over 20,000 visitors have participated in The Mountain Institute programming at the Center. Programs utilizing the property and surrounding Monongahela National Forest

have provided seasonal employment for local West Virginians in eco-tourism and experiential education for school groups, families, professionals, university students and a variety of environmental and educational organizations.

Building on a twenty-four year history of mountain education and using the unique biological and geological assets of the region, The Mountain Institute is now launching a major initiative to enhance the Center's capacity as an international mountain research, training, and conference facility. Recent discussions with universities, research laboratories, and local NGO's are forging a new vision of the Center as a regional and global resource. Spruce Knob Mountain Center has been host to a variety of international workshops and conferences including two gatherings leading to the formation of the Mountain Forum.

The people of "The Mountain State," as West Virginia are known face challenges similar to those faced by mountain peoples in other countries. Out-migration of young people threatens the cultural and economic integrity of smaller West Virginia communities. To stem the tide of out-migration, The Mountain Institute has worked for 14 years, with the most promising young leaders from across the state, preparing them for successful and meaningful careers; instilling an appreciation of their Appalachian heritage; and encouraging and supporting their transition back to work in West Virginia. We have assisted over 1400 students from "The Mountain State" in their search to create a better future.

### **Global Initiatives: The Mountain Forum**

The Mountain Institute is one of several partner organizations involved in the formation of the Mountain Forum. Growing out of a shared community concern for effective follow-up activity to support Chapter 13 of Agenda 21, and building on many years of dedicated work by researchers, NGO's, and agencies working to address the mountain problematique, the Mountain Forum provides a home for information, relationship building and shared communications on mountain conservation and development.

Participating in the creation of this open, democratic, and decentralized bridge between diverse groups was a facilitation and logistical challenge for The Mountain Institute. The fast action needed to respond to the call for organizing was balanced by a dedication to open participatory processes. The collective efforts of many people and organizations have resulted in the creation of a new, well organized and growing constituency for the mountains of the world.

In April of 1994 at the UN FAO ad Hoc Meeting on the Mountain Agenda, in response to the FAO's request, The Mountain Institute stepped forward to provide an organizing focal point to begin a participatory process to review the

Mountain Agenda and provide recommendations to the UN CSD at their Third Session in April of 1995.

Moving quickly in response to the time constraints, a participatory planning meeting-the NGO Workshop on the Mountain Agenda-was convened by The Mountain Institute in July 1994 at the Institute's Spruce Knob Mountain Center in West Virginia. Thirty NGO leaders from all parts of the world gathered to plan the International NGO Consultation on the Mountain Agenda.

In February 1995, The Mountain Institute and CGIAR's International Potato Center jointly convened the Mountain Agenda Consultation in Lima, Peru, gathering some 110 mountain NGO leaders and interagency and government representatives from nearly 40 countries. The meeting developed a consensus prioritized action plan for recommendation to the UN Commission on Sustainable Development and created the Mountain Forum for information sharing and mutual learning.

The Mountain Institute then convened the Meeting of the Initial Organizing Committee of the Mountain Forum at our Spruce Knob Mountain Center in West Virginia in September 1995. Again using a participatory process, thirty people from five continents gathered for the purpose mandated by the Lima Consultation: to further elaborate the objectives and initial activities of the Mountain Forum as an ongoing mechanism for exchange of information and mutual support for equitable and ecologically sustainable mountain development.

In early 1996, with generous support from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, in conjunction with the International Center for Integrated Mountain Development and the International Potato Center, The Mountain Institute began to create the electronic networking services to support the goals of sharing and learning set forth by the Lima Consultation. Today, based out of its rural Appalachian Mountain headquarters, The Mountain Institute brings state of the art telecommunications technology and expertise to the task of connecting mountain people and concerned groups. The Forum offers electronic discussion lists and an on-line resource base of papers, announcements, and a calendar of events. All resources are accessible through the use of a World Wide Web site and associated communications tools including simple electronic mail. To date the Mountain Forum has 180 members of which 77% have electronic access.

The success of the Forum is evidenced by the quality and quantity of online electronic participation in the recent electronic conference, "Paying for Mountains" held July 9-August 9, 1996. Over 200 subscribers participated in this conference. Their contributions are synthesized in a report which will form part of the recommendations made on Agenda 21, Chapter 13 when it is reviewed by the special session of the UN General Assembly in 1997.

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## Notes to readers

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