

The Mountain Forum: Networking for mountain conservation and development

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Experiences with the creation of a network of networks aimed at linking mountain peoples.

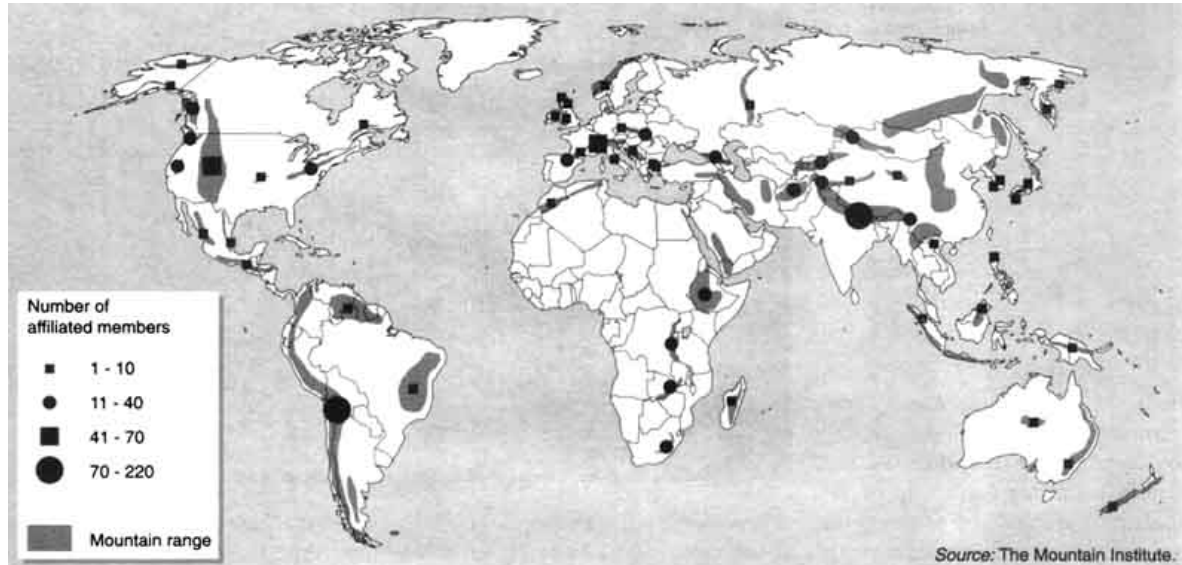


FIGURE 1 Ranges of the Mountain Forum

Mountain peoples and mountain organizations have many common characteristics including isolation from one another and from much of the rest of society.

This article documents the experiences of a new confederation of networks which supports equitable and ecologically sustainable mountain development through participatory learning and communication. The questions addressed include:

- How can an information structure be created that not only connects isolated constituencies, but also provides a forum for different viewpoints from different situations and forms a platform for marginalized groups?
- What factors facilitate or constrain network-building in mountain regions, and why?
- What are the effects of mountain networking on organizational relationships, policy development and social capital?

In the context of these questions, this article introduces the Mountain Forum and summarizes its early evolution to the present time.

THE MOUNTAIN FORUM - A CONFEDERATION OF MOUNTAIN NETWORKS

The Mountain Forum is a network of networks. Its purpose is to provide a forum for the exchange of ideas, to be an advocate for mountain peoples and environments and to foster mutual support among mountain people (TMI, 1995).

Mountain networking on a global scale had its beginnings with a small group of dedicated mountain scholars in the 1970s. This group, which eventually became known as the Mountain Agenda, expanded to include about a dozen institutional advocates during the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. Subsequently, a period of accelerating activity occurred, assisted by intergovernmental leadership and national attention, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) also joined in the collaborative and continually shifting

leadership of the mountain agenda process; the Mountain Forum arose from this activity to provide linkages between the new constituencies (FAO, 1997; Ives, 1997; Byers, 1997).



Mountain geography makes communication difficult: Shipton Pass into upper Barun watershed, Nepal

Today, the Mountain Forum consists of a large, loosely held network of many organizations and individuals (Figure 1). In addition to more than 400 registered members, more than 40 mountain networks are linked, both formally and informally, with the Mountain Forum (see Box on page 16).

Formal governance consists of a Mountain Forum Secretariat and Council which meet biennially to review progress and to plan future cooperation. Day-to-day operations, however, are carried out by a loose confederation of organizations. In addition, subregional networks, local networks, parallel networks and individuals cooperate in a wide variety of ways.

Regional nodes, for example, have been established at the International Potato Center (CIP) in Lima, Peru, and at the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) in Kathmandu, Nepal (see the article on page 20). In Europe, subregional nodes are active, and a European regional coordination centre is in an advanced stage of formation. In Africa and North America regional nodes are yet to be formed. The global node of the Mountain Forum is hosted by The Mountain Institute (TMI) an international non-governmental organization with its headquarters in West Virginia, United States. TMI provides means of communication between members of global organizations and also other members with no regional affiliation. Technical support and communications services for all participants are provided by the Information Server Node, also hosted by TMI. Financial support for the forum's core activities is provided by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).

Early development

The Mountain Forum was formally established on 1 June 1996. In August 1997, an evaluation survey was sent to the 416 members registered at that time, a third of whom responded. Since then, additional data have been collected in conjunction with electronic conferences that have been held (see the article on page 31), through discussions with participants, and through the author's own experience in moderating the e-mail discussion lists and interacting with regional nodes.

Sixty-five percent of Mountain Forum participants have had no prior experience with global mountain networking (TMI, 1997a). They are diverse in terms of location, type of work, field of specialization and institutional affiliation. What they share is an interest in

mountains and a willingness to participate in a network which has little, if any, overlap with their more familiar professional or collegial groups.

Electronic conferencing has been an important source of innovation within the Mountain Forum. Three global e-mail conferences have brought attention to experiences and ideas that promote sustainable mountain development and conservation. The themes were Investing in Mountains, Mountain Policy and Law and Community-based Mountain Tourism (Preston, 1997; Mountain Forum, 1997a; Godde, in press).

Professional and organizational changes

The most noticeable contribution of the Mountain Forum to date has been in terms of the professional growth and increased awareness of its participants. Figure 2 summarizes the evaluation responses related to this.

Bebbington, Kopp and Rubinoff (1997), in their conclusions regarding social capital, pluralism and development, highlight the "... very positive role that networks linking people who work in these different institutional spheres can play in making inter-institutional relationships more productive". An evident influence of the forum related to organizational change is the creation of new linkages between mountain organizations, and between people in many other kinds of organization who happen to work in mountain regions or on mountain issues. In addition, a new emphasis on mountain concerns has been adopted within such international bodies as the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the European Union.

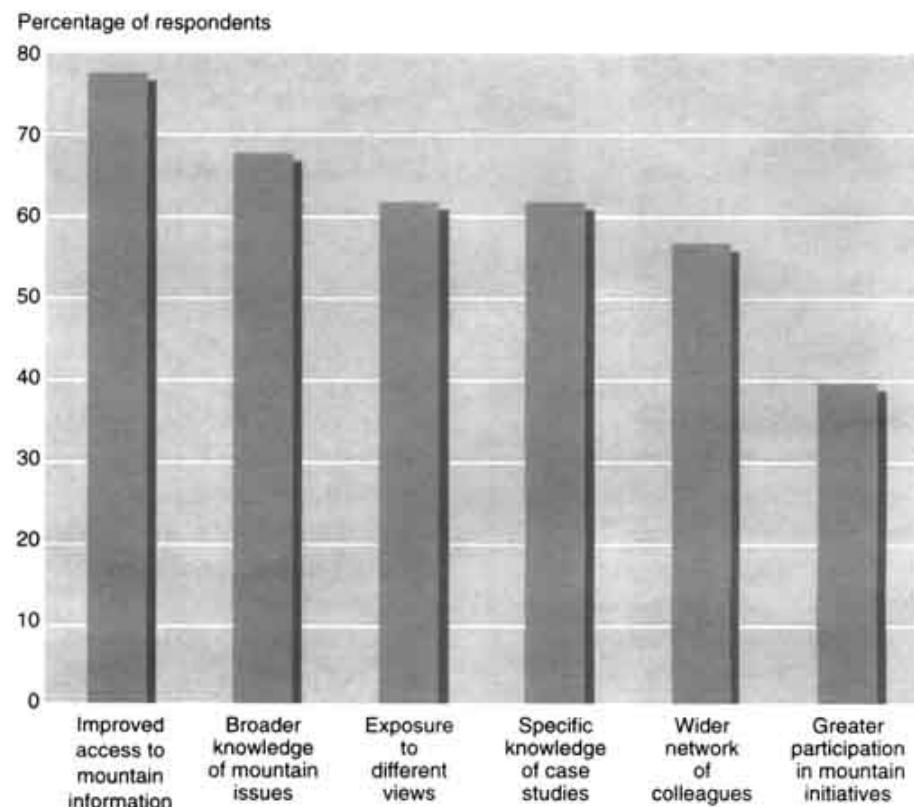


FIGURE 2 Evaluation of impacts of the Mountain Forum related to professional growth

Note: Multiple answers accepted; total responses are greater than 100 percent.

Source: TMI (1997b).

Policy development

Fostering appropriate policies is an important task for a network which has advocacy as one of its primary goals. The adoption of the recommendations of the International NGO Consultation on the Mountain Agenda by the third session of the UN Commission on

Sustainable Development in 1995 was an important first step in policy endorsement by the Mountain Forum group.

Policy development issues have continued to be explored within the Mountain Forum through an electronic conference on Mountain Policy and Law (Mountain Forum, 1997a). This began with the dissemination of information on existing policies and laws pertaining to mountain regions, many of which were unknown outside their own local contexts. The conference participants then discussed the relevance and effects of the policies at the global, international, national and local levels. An example of the benefits of this type of networking is the Partners in Mountain Conservation community group located in KwaZulu-Natal Drakensberg (South Africa), which was able to adapt elements of three separate undertakings to its own local area: the Nepalese Forest Legislation protocols; the management of human waste in the Rocky Mountains, United States; and the Antananarivo Declaration of African Mountains (TMI, 1997b).

Mountain networks¹

GLOBAL

- Mountain Forum and Mountain-Forum e-mail list
- Mountain Protected Areas Network
- FAO Mountain Programme and Interagency Task Force on Agenda 21, Chapter 13
- International Mountain Society and Mountain Research and Development Journal
- International Geographical Union, Commission on Mountain Geoecology and Sustainable Development
- World Mountaineering and Climbing Federation (and its many national affiliates)
- Banff Centre for Mountain Culture

AFRICA

- African Mountain Forum (in the formation process)
- African Mountains Association
- African Mountain Protected Areas Network
- Lesotho Mountain Research Group
- Community Environment Network, South Africa
- MF-Africa e-mail list

ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

- Asia Pacific Mountain Forum and Asia Pacific Mountain Network
- Australasia-Pacific Mountain Forum
- North Central Asia Mountain Forum
- West Asia Mountain Forum
- South East Asia Mountain Forum
- North East Asia Mountain Forum
- Australian Mountain Protected Areas Network
- Australian Institute of Alpine Studies
- Nepal Studies Association and Himalayan Research Bulletin
- Nepal Forum of Environmental Journalists
- Himalayan Explorers Club and HimalayaNet e-mail list
- Kathmandu Environmental Education Project

EUROPE

- European Mountain Forum (in the formation process)
- Carpathians Mountain Forum
- Caucasian Mountain Network and Caucasus Mountain Forum
- Central/Western Middle European Mountain Forum
- Central/Western Middle European Mountain Forum (French Jura)
- Central/Western Middle European Mountain Forum (Czech Sudeten)
- Northern European Mountain Forum
- International Commission for the Protection of the Alps
- CH-Regio

- Man and the Biosphere (Russian Federation and CIS)
- International Association of Academies of Science, CIS Mountain Research Programme (in the formation process)
- MF-Europe e-mail list

LATIN AMERICA

- Latin American Mountain Forum and MF-LAC e-mail list
- Consortium for the sustainable development of the Andean ecoregion (CONDESAN) and Info Andina
- Andean Mountains Association
- Red de los Andes Centrales-Perú
- Selvas de Montaña
- Asociación para Desarrollo Campesino, Red de Páramos
- Red Latinoamericana de Estrategias hacia la Sostenibilidad
- MF-Discuss e-mail list (Andean Paramos)
- Latin American Protected Areas e-mail list

NORTH AMERICA

- North American Mountain Forum (in the formation process)
- The Corridor (Southern Appalachian Culture and Natural Heritage Forum)
- Appalachian Restoration Campaign/Heartwood
- Southern Appalachian Forest Coalition
- Rocky Mountain Institute
- MF-N America e-mail list

¹ This is a list of mountain networks only. It does not attempt to list the many organizations involved in sustainable mountain development. Contact information for these networks is available from the Mountain Forum Moderator, The Mountain Institute, PO Box 907, Franklin, West Virginia 26807, USA.

Tel.: +1 304 358 2401;

fax: +1 304 358 2400;

e-mail: mfmod@mtnforum.org;

Web site: <http://www.mtnforum.org/>



High-altitude pastures south of Huascaran National Park, Peru

After almost two years of operation, an attempt has been made to evaluate the progress of the Mountain Forum using the information system indicators developed by Lawrence (1995) for a study in the Philippines. The Table lists these indicators and how the forum may be rated against them. It is doing well in terms of credibility, diversity of information sources and linkages between sources. Improvement is needed in the use of indigenous

knowledge, in access by users, and in meeting the growing demands of the expanding mountain community.

Information system indicators

Indicator	Mountain Forum status
Use of indigenous knowledge	Highly valued, more needed
Amount of information	Growing, more needed
Access by users	Growing, but still a challenge
Diversity of sources	High
Relevance	High, but multiple objectives
Democratic control	Internet: high; traditional: uneven
Complementarity of information sources	More needed
Satisfied demand	Growing, not satisfied
Credibility	High
Linkages between information sources	High
Direction of information flow	High, multidirectional

METHODS FOR MOUNTAIN NETWORKING

Progress in mountain networking can be measured at many levels - the extent to which isolated communities can be involved in direct exchanges, progress at the individual or household level, etc. When policy-makers communicate with government decision-makers and practitioners in the field, with participants of universities and research programmes, and with non-affiliated individuals, better policy environment will be developed, which in turn enables community action.

The mountain networks that are most effective involve a significant number of organizations and individuals with a strong, long-term field presence, either as mountain inhabitants or as development or conservation professionals - that is, the local stakeholders. For example, the Caucasian Mountain Network comprises organizations working directly in Georgian mountain communities and serves to link members with each other, and with a variety of outside participants. Likewise, the Mountain Protected Areas Network serves primarily to connect managers and conservation professionals working in their own local mountain regions (Hamilton, in press).

When communications have been established between existing networks they can complement each other and yet serve their individual mandates more effectively. An example is the European Mountain Forum (now in the final stages of formation), which plans to meet the needs of at least six already existing subregional networks, while maintaining close interaction with the global Mountain Forum.

The success of networking is evident in the creation of new linkages and focal points within organizations. FAO's designation as Task Manager for the mountain chapter of Agenda 21, for example, led to a significant increase in mountain networking.

The use of several forms of information exchange is needed to reach participants with varying levels of technological capability. At the regional level, the Mountain Forum communicates with members by way of workshops, a printed bulletin, documentation

centres, training opportunities, radio outreach, e-mail discussion lists and Web page archives. The Mountain Forum's Global Information Server Node offers a range of Internet-based services, including discussion led by a moderator, e-mail conferences, a calendar of events and an on-line mountain library of case studies, best practices, policy recommendations and key reference materials. Printed materials include a bulletin (published jointly with regional nodes), a membership directory and proceedings of the e-mail conferences.

Role of the Internet

It would be impossible to overstate the importance of the Internet in the implementation of the Mountain Forum, and for global networking in general. While in one sense the Internet is the domain of a new technologically elite group, its services have become available to many less well-equipped users. It has also proved to be a powerful medium in the promotion of democratic thought and action. In particular, e-mail gateways (where a single computer is the hub for a larger off-line network) are vital to the Mountain Forum's outreach. Efforts are made to design e-mail and Web services which are accessible both to users with a minimum level of technology as well as to users who must pay by the byte or by the minute for their access. The coordinator of the Caucasian Mountain Network writes the following about the use of the Internet in his region: "I would say, the Mountain Forum was a discovery for most of the Caucasian environmental organizations.... The Mountain Forum information services show that the Internet and information technology is not only a [self-contained] communication mechanism. They are more important as a gateway for grassroots NGOs and local communities to build strong worldwide networks and 'give a hand' to each other" (TMI, 1997b).

Communication difficulties

Among the many concerns that face the Mountain Forum are how to minimize the duplication of effort, how to serve users with differing languages and how to accommodate important stakeholders who are not on-line.

Designing a communication system that avoids duplication of effort is particularly challenging for an organization that is as loosely structured as the Mountain Forum. When the number of contributing organizations and individuals increases, these flows of information will multiply rapidly. However, the Mountain Forum as a venue for much of this information may also reduce some duplication in some respects.

In any global organization, the choice of language of operation is a critical issue. The Mountain Forum has not found a satisfying solution to what is really an equity issue for mountain NGOs and populations, most of whom have English only as a second or third language, if at all. The de facto language for global Mountain Forum communications is English, although the moderator group can correspond in French, German and Spanish also (one e-mail discussion list is entirely run in Spanish). Regional and subregional networks communicate in their own languages. The advent of free automatic translators on the Internet has already proved useful to the e-mail networks, expanding their range of languages to include Italian and Portuguese.

Several key stakeholders are absent from the Mountain Forum roster, and from mountain networks in general. One important group that is not represented is the mining, timber and hydropower sector. It is hoped that this will eventually be included and will become more receptive to equitable and ecologically sustainable development while not allowing its economic power to dominate. Nevertheless, dialogue on a sustainable future for mountain regions must include representatives from extractive industries, and from business and government interests, as well as influential development agencies.

At the other end of the spectrum is another, even more critical, group of absent stakeholders. These are still-isolated mountain populations, who have neither e-mail nor collegial connections with any mountain network and sometimes only speak a language

that is unique to themselves. Vigorous efforts have been made to provide linkages for such groups wherever possible, through grassroots organizations, NGOs and other mountain inhabitants who do have electronic connections. This latter group now makes up 25 percent of the membership base (Mountain Forum, 1998).

CONCLUSION

The extent to which mountain networking and the Mountain Forum prove to be sustainable will depend on their continued effectiveness. Many mountain networks, especially those that connect NGOs and policy-makers, are still very new. The enthusiasm for networking is unlikely to diminish, and results should become increasingly visible as communication is established between once-isolated mountain regions.

The Mountain Forum itself is still in an experimental phase. The governance structure, the nature of the implementing organizations and the contributions of participants are being developed and have the potential to bring profound changes, both positive and negative, to the network. How the Mountain Forum will be perceived in a few years' time will depend heavily on the make-up of institutional partners, and how willing they are to learn to work within the original mandates of openness, democracy and transparency. A balanced representation of South and North, NGO and intergovernmental, male and female participants will be critical to the future success. A broadening of the funding base will also be necessary to meet the expanding needs of the mountain community, and to provide the much-needed support to local and subregional networks.

Mountain networks around the world are experiencing a challenging period of growth. Participants have embraced opportunities for communication from their own homes to mountain ranges worldwide, and the organizations that implement them have striven to keep pace with their demands. The confederation of networks which makes up the Mountain Forum has the potential, collectively, to change the face of mountain development and conservation in many positive ways.

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