

The Asia Pacific Mountain Network: Sharing information for sustainable mountain development

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Mountain people and those who work or study in highland regions frequently have little or no way of obtaining the information they need or of sharing their concerns and experiences with those in similar locations elsewhere.

The Asia Pacific Mountain Network (APMN) was established to provide a means of communication that would foster the well-being of mountain communities, their way of life and their economic viability. It is a network of organizations and individuals who are attempting to use electronic information technologies and communication methodologies to share knowledge and news, not only within and between mountain communities but also with intermediaries who in turn can deliver information to those who have no access to modern systems.

As part of the UNCED follow-up process, the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) organized the first of a series of regional conferences in Kathmandu, Nepal in December 1994. Over 60 policy-makers and practitioners from mountain areas in Asia and the Pacific met to discuss the state of mountain development in the region. The participants adopted a declaration on the Sustainable Development of Mountain Areas of Asia (SUDEMAA) Call to Action. This initiative aimed at placing the well-being of mountain areas high on national agendas throughout the region and also recommended the establishment of communication networks. ICIMOD was selected as the central facilitator and APMN was formally launched in October 1995. Its objective is to link governmental agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), individuals and communities throughout the Asia and the Pacific region.

In view of the immense geographical area, six subregional networks were established: the Hindu Kush-Himalayas, West Asia, North Central Asia, North East Asia, South East Asia and Australasia Pacific. In each subregion focal points were selected, primarily from research or academic institutions. ICIMOD, as the central facilitator of APMN, serves as Coordinator for the entire network as well as the subregional focus for the Hindu Kush-Himalayas.

APMN aims to strengthen collaboration among member countries and to improve their capabilities in using information technology. The mode of operation is basically threefold:

- Sharing information by publication of the APMN Bulletin;
- Promoting subregional consultations and/or other means of communications;
- Exchange visits by participants within and between subregions.

Internet tools such as e-mail and World Wide Web pages were adopted by the network as a means of exchanging ideas among those with electronic access.

When the Mountain Forum was set up early in 1996, APMN was already functioning in the Asia and the Pacific region and its aims were consistent with those of the Mountain Forum. Therefore, it was agreed that APMN would retain its distinct identity but would also assume responsibility for the Asia and the Pacific node of the Mountain Forum.

To date, the impact of the network in the Asia and the Pacific region has been significant. It provides various on-line services such as discussion lists, electronic conferences and an on-line library (<http://www.mtnforum.org>). An Asia and the Pacific Web page has been posted on the World Wide Web (<http://www.south-asia.com/icimod/AP.htm>). APMN also has archival storage information on sustainable mountain development specific to the region, and the Web page is regularly revised by the APMN secretariat.

To meet the needs of network partners with no means of access, electronic information is downloaded selectively and included in the APMN bulletin which is published biannually.



The Asia Pacific Mountain Network helps provide local people with needed knowledge, including market information. In the photo, a weaver in Nepal

APMN has also organized workshops and seminars, where organizations and individuals discuss mutual concerns about sustainable mountain development. Study visits and exchanges of participants have augmented mutual understanding in communities from Australasia to the extreme west of Asia.

The challenges that lie ahead are to ensure that the latest information technology developments are fully incorporated into the communication system. Great efforts must be made to reach out to the partners who are not yet on-line and to assess ways in which available information can be provided to benefit people at the grassroots level.