

# No Longer Lonely at the Top

David Taylor    05.07.02 | 2:00 AM

The High Summit, which will link experts huddled at high-altitude sites on five continents for a live Internet videoconference on May 6-11, is being billed as a "global mega event of the year," and "the first transcontinental multimedia conference dedicated to all mountain regions worldwide."

But to understand what that's all about, it's best to start with Lucky Chhetri and Miriam Torres.

Since 1994, Chhetri and her sisters have run a [trekking business](#) in Pokhara, a scenic lakeside town in Nepal's mountains west of Kathmandu. Chhetri, Nepal's first female trekking guide, is used to pioneering. She and her sisters started the first woman-run restaurant in town. When that failed, they opened a lodge and expanded with the trekking service.

Not content to provide the usual tourist fare, they made it a Himalayan outpost of idealism: Chhetri [has trained](#) over 70 Nepalese women to be guides.

[Miriam Torres](#) lives in a distant corner of the Peruvian Andes, in the shadow of one of South America's highest peaks. Her friends say she boots up her computer and checks her e-mail before her first cup of coffee. "Normally, reading [Mountain Forum](#) messages is the first thing I do after arriving at the office," she says. If there are lots of messages, she saves them for the end of the day.

Torres, who directs ecotourism and community projects in Huaraz, wrestles with many of the same problems faced by trek leaders in Nepal. How do you ensure that tourist dollars go to the towns on their path, and not just to the city-based tour agencies or hotels that do the booking? How do you keep tourist traffic from eroding fragile hillsides and denuding upland forests for firewood? In 1994, Torres joined the Mountain Forum, an online resource dedicated to the concerns shared by people in the hills. She was glad to find others like Chhetri.

"What surprised me," Torres says, "is the sense of partnership and support we can get from asking any question, even to members of the Mountain Forum we don't know."

In recent years, people in widely scattered mountains -- from Rai in Nepal to Quechua communities of Peru and the Appalachians in West Virginia -- have found they share a good deal in common. Their concerns -- which include increasing water scarcity, cultural erosion and political intrusions by flatlanders -- form the basis of the High Summit.

Organized as a key event in the U.N.-sponsored [International Year of Mountains](#), the summit has been several years in the planning. Orchestrating the technical side of an Internet broadcast from at least five inaccessible cities around the world, including Kathmandu, has involved many headaches.

"Nepal still does not have the ISDN facility for global videoconferencing," said Gabriel Campbell, director of the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development ([ICIMOD](#)), the host organization in Nepal. Luckily, the conference's hotel venue has a satellite phone hookup that only needs a boost in transmission speed to improve picture and sound quality.

According to Franco Brevini, the [High Summit's](#) scientific adviser in Italy, the biggest problems haven't involved technological snafus but the lack of understanding from lowlanders. "The most serious problem was to try to make them really understand the urgent issues of each continent," Brevini says. Still, he said, "we have a basis for being optimistic."

In addition to the five continental gatherings, organizers expect that more remote mountaineers will participate, although not with real-time video connections, spokeswoman Beth Schommer said. "We're hoping that institutions, schools and municipalities in mountain areas will follow developments and watch the videoconference on the Web," Schommer said.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, mountain communities get sidelined by social attitudes as well as topography. The resulting poverty and environmental destruction help make those areas, like Afghanistan, [fuses for regional](#) and global conflict.

In the 1990s, the Mountain Forum gradually gathered members (it now has almost 3,000) who came to recognize their shared concerns. "It was clear that mountain peoples all over the world share common lifestyles and a combination of subsistence farming, forest products and part-time labor to survive," says ICIMOD's Campbell. "But they are independent, isolated peoples and are not usually aware of each other."

Exchange visits between Himalayans and Andeans involved their own complex logistics.

After a flurry of e-mail, Miriam Torres hosted three Himalayans -- two from Nepal and one from [Sikkim](#), India -- to discuss community-based ecotourism. Lucky Chhetri was one of them. She spoke to ecotourism groups in Lima and visited a project that pioneered using llamas as low-impact transport for trekkers.

They met with tour operators in the historic Inca city of Cuzco. Torres recalls that Chhetri's experience was especially valuable for rural women in Peru to hear. And Chhetri still has vivid memories of her Andean trek to the Inca ruins in the high Ishinca Valley.

"Women were cooking lunch in their beautiful traditional dresses," Chhetri says. "It reminded me of our Nepalese women cooking in their colorful dresses, at the other end of the world."

The range of responses to the Summit is seen in [Kyrgyzstan](#), which proposed the idea of a year of mountains.

Ryspek Usubamatov, director of the Kyrgyzstani center for mountain region development in Bishkek, plans to join the High Summit by e-mail. Usubamatov, who was at the Mountain Forum's first sit-down in Peru three years ago, hopes that other countries' experiences can help Kyrgyzstan.

Samagan Aitymbetov, economic and foreign policy editor at [AKI Press](#), is less optimistic.

Aitymbetov joined the Mountain Forum and found some useful information at first, "but now I am disappointed," he said. "Participants from CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States, a union of former Soviet republics) do not want or cannot take part in the discussions, often because of language barriers."

The High Summit comes nearly halfway through the International Year of Mountains, which will climax in the fall with the 10th anniversary of the 1992 Rio conference on environment and development.

Despite her involvement on the ground, Lucky Chhetri won't be at the table in Kathmandu. "I wish I could," she says. Instead, she'll be leading a trek to Upper Mustang. Torres, though, will be online.