introduction

The E–conference

The e–conference on 'Integrating Mountain Culture and Natural Resource Management' was one of the many ongoing planning events for the 'International Year of the Mountains 2002' (IYM 2002). This e–conference was made possible through a planning grant received from the Ford Foundation, New Delhi, India. The International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) and The Mountain Institute (TMI) worked closely on the e–conference.

Culture: An Introduction

Culture in all its forms plays a critical role in how people manage their lives, their relationships with each other, and the environments in which they live. In mountain regions throughout the world, traditional cultures and conservation have evolved together. The beliefs and behaviour of human communities primarily drive sustainable natural resource management, and local cultures are strengthened by intimate connection to the natural environment that sustains them. Healthy mountain ecosystems, communities, and cultures are inseparable, building over time a 'vocabulary of place' where sacred beliefs are inextricably bound to daily routines and the practice of natural resource management. The cultural aspects of human lives, whether in physical manifestations such as buildings and landscapes or non–physical forms like language, traditions, and beliefs, have both inherent and functional values.

Mountain cultures and rituals, through the centuries, have developed as responses to change. Tradition is the mechanism that prevents people from changing cultures, but tradition need not be synonymous with culture — it is an umbrella phrase for elements that lay down concrete rules that people wish to denote as unchanging and free from challenge. In reality, cultures have always changed and been in transition. Hence, any culture is as strong as its ability to respond and accommodate to change without disintegration, fundamentalist cultures that resist change have disintegrated in the end and this is historical fact. Culture is not a treasure that is fragile and needs guarding against change; that is rather a traditionalist view. Culture is a lot stronger than information technology, for example, and it will rise to absorb it and frame it in its own image. If culture does not serve humanity, humanity will in the end change it, no matter how long it takes.

In a situation of dramatic environmental and economic change, there is a growing recognition that a greater appreciation of culture can play a critical role in determining the type and rate of change. The role of culture in the lives of mountain peoples and

the relationship of their culture with the management of their environment must be recognised and valued. While the modern world may be poorer for a scientific rationalism that separates objective and sacred knowledge, traditional mountain cultures make no such distinction, ritual and religion being intrinsic to the daily business of living.

Objectives of the E–conference

Overall Objective

The overall objective of the e–conference was to solicit contributions for a detailed proposal and plan to put into operation during the International Year of the Mountains 2002 to promote awareness and understanding of the urgency to integrate culture with sustainable natural resource management in the Hindu Kush–Himalayan region (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal, and Pakistan).

Specific Objectives

1. To start an ongoing debate on the cost of interventions in mountain natural resource management on mountain cultures and how such interventions can be integrated into appropriate policies and practices.

2. To draw attention to important issues, positive experiences, and innovative approaches.

3. To recommend important topics for academic and mountain research institutions that could lead to improved policies for mountain development; where donors could best give their support; which local innovations can be used more widely and modifications necessary and possible with a view to bringing them into the main stream; and to recommend new approaches for community–based programmes.

Organisations

The main organisers of the e-conference were the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) and The Mountain Institute (TMI).

A Coordinating Committee was established with individuals from these organisations.

The Moderation Process

The purpose of moderation was not to censor participants' opinions, but to regulate the flow of responses so that the volume of material posted at any given time was manageable and relevant to the theme of the discussion. Some messages received were rich in ideas and content but were not sufficiently articulate, hence these were edited. Moderation enabled this and also helped glean out any personal remarks that were not meant for all participants.
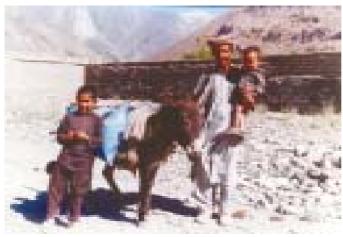
Some things don't change!

After conflict, traditional cultures still survive: Afghan men in Kabul take a break from their post–war struggles to watch a traditional horse race *(from the film 'Impact of War on Afghanistan's Environment').*

Some do!

Coping with change. Pastures fenced in, this nomad exchanged his real horse for a metal one. *(from the film 'A Man Called Nomad').*

Some intimidate!

It's a man's world Chitral, Pakistan. The mother of this family from Upper Chitral was too shy to have her photograph taken, and moved away, as the shutter clicked *(U. Sherchan/ICIMOD).*

Limitations and Constraints

Though the e–conference was seen to be successful, it had its shortcomings.

Limitations

a. **Budget:** The amount allocated for the conference (US$2000) was insufficient to cover the costs of the researcher, the four guest moderators, and miscellaneous expenses like stationery. (This is a recurrent problem with e-conferences, which are seen as quick inexpensive way of covering issues that need wide coverage. The problems are that participants who do not contribute financially may feel free to drop out at will. The situation of cyberspace rather than confined space means commitment is difficult ot ensure. This is a pity when on the content side, as much goes into an e-conference as any other kind and administrative matters have the added pressures of different time zones. and so on Ed.)

b. **Time:** The e–conference was divided into four broad themes over a four–week period. Owing to the scope of the topic and the wide range of discussions, the four weeks allotted seemed insufficient.

Constraints during the Conference

a. While the e–conference was being held, the attack on the the twin towers in New York (September 11, 2001) took place, and this, naturally, destroyed the ambience as many participants were affected by this disturbing event.
b. The guest moderators were experts in each of their themes. However, because their schedules were tight, correspondence with them was inconsistent and posting of contributions was delayed, creating a time lag on some occasions.
c. The ICIMOD mail server had some technical problems which disrupted the flow of contributions.
d. The e–conference had 126 subscribers, of whom 80 were registered, but the majority of participants remained passive. Only twenty–two participants actually contributed.

A Kalash girl, Chitral *(U. Sherchan/ICIMOD)*

A Tibetan nomad bride in her richly embellished traditional wedding head–dress *(from the film 'A Man Called Nomad').*