

Celebrating International Year of the Mountains 2002

The United Nations declared 2002 the International Year of the Mountains (IYM) to increase awareness of the need to protect fragile mountain ecosystems and improve the well-being of mountain people, many of whom are among the world's most impoverished and food insecure.

The IYM evolved from the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, where mountains became the focus of Chapter 13 of Agenda 21. The United Nations designated the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) as task manager for coordinating the implementation of Chapter 13 and lead agency for the IYM. The partners of FAOs for the IYM include the: United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), United Nations University, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, United Nations Development Programme, International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development,

Mountain Forum and the Mountain Institute.

From 29 October to 1 November, more than 600 delegates from 60 countries participated in the Bishkek Global Mountain Summit in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, the culminating global event of the IYM. The government of Kyrgyzstan organised the Summit with support from UNEP and other partners. At the Summit, the governments of Italy and Switzerland committed support to enable the International Year of the Mountains Coordination Unit at FAO to continue its work in 2003. This support will allow the unit to help other countries develop national strategic plans for the sustainable development of their mountains, as well as mountain-friendly policies and laws. Another key outcome of the Summit was the Bishkek Mountain Platform, which builds on the many substantial declarations developed at other major global events on mountains. The purpose of the Platform is to provide guidance to governments

and others on how to improve the livelihoods of mountain people, to protect mountain ecosystems and to use mountain resources more wisely.

As the year came to a close, FAO reflected on the achievements that came about as a result of the activities that focused on celebrating the IYM. One of the most significant achievements is a change in the people's understanding and attitude towards mountain ecosystems and issues due to a global awareness-raising campaign. This in turn has led to a growing concern about the effects of climate change and unsustainable development on both mountain ecosystems and mountain communities. Another major achievement is the rise in national commitment to sustainable mountain development. Thanks to the efforts of the 77 national committees that led the observance of the Year, real change in mountains is now a priority in countries around the world. Finally, the Year has strengthened the partnership for sustainable mountain development that has evolved since the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. The International Partnership for Sustainable Development in Mountain Regions was launched on 2 September at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa. It was launched by FAO together with the UNEP and the Government of Switzerland, on behalf of 15 member countries of the International Year of Mountains Focus Group. Already, 30 countries, 15 inter-governmental organizations and 14 major groups have signed on to the Partnership.

FAO also recognised that many countries don't have the institutional environments, expertise, financial resources, information and knowledge to undertake sustainable mountain development. To overcome these barriers to action, FAO will be helping countries strengthen their institutional and human capabilities to lead and undertake sustainable mountain development beyond 2002.



Photo by Hugh Lowrie

Giant's Castle Nature Reserve, South Africa



Mt. Guiting-Guiting Natural Park, Sibuyan, Philippines

In addition, FAO will help to link those who need assistance with those who are able to provide it. There is a need to improve the way efforts are coordinated by better connecting countries, donors, providers of development services and programmes, non-governmental organisations, UN agencies, civil society and private sector.

The UN is also debating a draft resolution to guide FAO's and its partners' priorities and roles in the follow-up to the IYM. One possible outcome of the resolution is the designation of 11 December as International Mountain Day.

The International Year of the Mountains in 2002 was a real catalyst for change. It increased global

awareness of how important mountains are to life on earth. It stimulated the establishment of national committees in 78 countries that are actively promoting mountain development. And it built, expanded and strengthened alliances through the creation of the International Partnership for Sustainable Development in Mountain Regions.

The challenges facing mountains and mountain communities remain as big as mountains themselves. Fortunately the IYM has provided the opportunities to shape and implement lasting solutions to mountain problems. Today, a growing network of partners - from governments to UN agencies, major groups and the private sector - are working together to ensure long-term action that will improve the lives of mountain people, protect fragile mountain ecosystems and promote peace and stability in mountain regions. ■

Source:

International Year of the Mountains website (<http://www.mountains2002.org/home.html>)

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