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### *The Cause of Mountains: The Politics of Promoting a Global Agenda*

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# The Cause of Mountains: The Politics of Promoting a Global Agenda

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Gilles Rudaz\*

## Introduction

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, informed us about what issues, at the crossroad of environment and development, had been identified as important by the world community at the end of the twentieth century. A coalition of advocates, whose profiles will be reviewed later, took the opportunity presented by the conference to lobby for the inscription of mountains on the world's environmental agenda. As an outcome of this advocacy, a specific chapter of Agenda 21, the action plan arising from the conference, was devoted to mountains (Chapter 13, "Managing Fragile Ecosystems: Sustainable Mountain Development").<sup>1</sup> This proposal to consider mountains a global issue did not go unchallenged. Indeed, in the preparatory meetings for the conference, the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO) representative, whose institution would ironically be nominated task manager for the implementation of Chapter 13, argued that the content of the mountain chapter was already covered in other chapters of Agenda 21. Moreover, the localized nature of mountains and the great diversity of mountain environments supported opinions contesting the relevance of promoting mountains as a global issue.<sup>2</sup>

Through the case study of mountains, I examine how a major ecosystem is constructed as a global environmental political object, i.e. an "object[s] of international negotiation leading to decisions likely to affect worldwide political

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1. United Nations 1992.
2. Messerli and Ives 1997, 2.

and economic practices."<sup>3</sup> The term "object" invokes the concept that societies organize the world through constructed categories, in order to act upon reality.<sup>4</sup> According to such a perspective, environmental objects are considered not as imposed by nature but constructed by societies.<sup>5</sup> In this article, I look at the way such an object has been framed as "global." In international relations studies, "global" is often conceived as a descriptor rather than a construct. In contrast, based on recent geographical research focusing on the politics of scale,<sup>6</sup> I here consider that global is constructed, contingent, and contested.<sup>7</sup> The construction of an object—and its framing as environmental and as global—is a political act. It is political in the sense that such a construction serves some interests and not others. It implies actors embedded in power relations. As Jasanoff and Martello state: "which issues are defined as meriting the world's attention has everything to do with who has power and resources, including scientific ones, to press for them."<sup>8</sup> While classical international relations studies focus primarily on the identification of the best regime to be delineated in order to solve environmental problems, we need to look at the power and knowledge production embedded in these processes.<sup>9</sup>

Mountains followed the path of many other environmental issues that are increasingly being considered from a global perspective.<sup>10</sup> To study the building of mountains as a global environmental object, I undertake a reconstitution of the history of the inscription of mountains on the world's environmental agenda. I focus on the actors advocating such recognition. My goal is not to demonstrate whether the elaboration of a global mountain agenda is "right" or "wrong." Rather, I argue that this elaboration is contingent, i.e. relevant for certain actors in certain contexts. Therefore, I focus on the context in which the global environmental object is constructed and its relevance to certain perspectives and agendas. Although it could be argued that mountains are truly a global environmental object, or that such recognition led only to a thin regime, the identification of mountains as a global issue has proven to have impacts for certain actors harboring specific agendas and to be a powerful motor for collective action in a globalized world.<sup>11</sup>

The article proceeds as follows. First, I briefly delineate some claims of the global significance of mountains. I also stress the specificity and interest of the mountain case study for understanding the making of a global environmental object. Second, I trace the historical route that led to the inscription of moun-

3. Smouts 2003, 26.

4. Bourdieu 1977. For an overview of the "objectification" of mountains in Western thought, see Debarbieux 2004.

5. Latour 2004; and Castree and Braun 2001.

6. Neumann 2009; Bulkeley 2005; Cox 1998; Swyngedouw 2000; and Herod 2009.

7. Jasanoff and Martello 2004; Luke 2009; and Beck 2000.

8. Jasanoff and Martello 2004, 5.

9. Kütting and Lipschutz 2009.

10. Zimmerer 2006.

11. Debarbieux 2009; and Debarbieux and Rudaz 2010, 245–276.

tains on the world's environmental agenda, i.e. how mountains reached the international negotiation table. Third, I examine the building of a global mountain constituency supporting this agenda. I consider the participation process that brought together actors of various profiles on the normative basis of sustainable mountain development. Finally, I discuss the integration of the voices of mountain communities into the global mountain agenda and the outcomes of such a global framing, showing that these outcomes occur at levels other than simply the global. The conclusion stresses the benefits of looking at the global scale as a construct rather than a descriptor and contends that the framing of mountains as a global issue reveals various forms of globalization.

### **Why Do Mountains Matter?**

A classical way of claiming the global importance of mountains is to stress the physical presence of mountains on the Earth's surface and the portion of the world's population living in them: mountains occupy about 25 percent of the world's land area and they are home to about 12 percent of the world's population.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, these statistics have been produced for the purpose of advocating for the global importance of mountains in the international political arena. The claimed global importance of mountains is highlighted in the very first lines of Chapter 13 of Agenda 21:

Mountains are an important source of water, energy and biological diversity. Furthermore, they are a source of such key resources as minerals, forest products and agricultural products and of recreation. As a major ecosystem representing the complex and interrelated ecology of our planet, mountain environments are essential to the survival of the global ecosystem.<sup>13</sup>

Mountain advocates stress that a large portion of humanity depends on mountains. Half of the human population relies on mountains, according to their projections, although only a little over 10 percent actually live in such areas.<sup>14</sup> This assertion of the global importance of mountains for humanity was carried in the official motto of the International Year of Mountains (2002): "We are all mountain people."

The case of mountains as a global environmental object is interesting for several reasons. First, these are localized geographical features on the surface of the Earth. While the ozone layer or climate change appear to be global issues due to their transboundary nature, the road to global recognition is more arduous for geographically localized objects. For instance, some countries do not have mountains.

12. Data available at <http://www.mountainpartnership.org>, accessed 14 October 2010. For comments on these statistics, see Price and Messerli 2002, 6.

13. United Nations 1992, 109. See also Debarbieux and Price (2008) who show how mountains have been identified as a global common good.

14. Körner and Ohsawa 2005.

Second, mountains are highly diverse. What do the Atlas and the Altai have in common? This question is not limited to natural features but extends also to cultural, social, political, and economic characteristics. Despite their incredible diversity, a definition of mountains based on altitude and local elevation range has been delineated, illustrating the process of framing mountains as a global issue.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, even though Mount Everest surpasses all others in terms of elevation, mountains do not have an emblematic flagship, as tropical rainforests have the Amazon.

Third, although mountains play a considerable role in the imagination of societies,<sup>16</sup> mountains are rarely identified as a political object calling for specific measures.<sup>17</sup> Even though there are notable examples of national mountain laws (e.g. in Switzerland and France) and, more recently, of widely publicized regional mountain conventions (e.g. the International Convention on the Protection of the Alps), there is usually no political agenda for mountains, whether focusing on people or environment.<sup>18</sup> The fact that an agenda has been elaborated at the highest political level, the UN, is therefore even more surprising.

Fourth, mountains are considered not only an ecosystem but a living space inhabited by mountain dwellers. In this respect, the delineation of a global mountain agenda has constantly stressed the importance of integrating mountain people into the process and in the various issues addressed. This perspective may prove more or less successful, but the emphasis itself is an interesting point and makes mountains a good prospective case for examining the process of encouraging the participation of communities in global environmental politics.

Fifth and finally, although oceans, wetlands, and tropical forests are well-examined cases, the identification of mountains by the international community as a global environmental issue is not widely recognized outside of what one might call the international "mountain community."<sup>19</sup> It is overlooked in the global environmental politics literature that mountains have a specific chapter within Agenda 21 (Chapter 13), that priorities regarding sustainable mountain development are stated in the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) Plan of Implementation (Paragraph 42), that UN General Assembly resolutions are devoted to mountains,<sup>20</sup> that mountains even had an International Year (2002),<sup>21</sup> and that they have an International Day (De-

15. Messerli and Ives 1997. In 2000, the World Conservation Monitoring Centre (United Nations Environment Programme) produced a general definition of mountains by merging the two criteria of altitude and slope. For a technical presentation of these criteria, see Kapos et al. 2000.

16. Bernbaum 1998.

17. Mountain Agenda 2002; and Lynch and Maggio 2000.

18. Castelein et al. 2006.

19. Messerli and Ives 1997; Ives and Messerli 1999; Ives 2002; Price and Messerli 2002; Rhoades 2000; and Debarbieux and Price 2008.

20. An overview of UN documentation, is available at <http://www.mountainpartnership.org/issues/resources/keydoc.html>, accessed 14 October 2010.

21. United Nations 1998.

ember 11).<sup>22</sup> As an under-researched case, mountains may offer us some distinct clues about what it takes to make a global environmental object.

## Putting Mountains on the World's Environmental Agenda

Even though mountains have been studied mainly through monographs, there is also a long tradition in geography of comparing mountain environments around the globe. This tradition originates in the groundbreaking work of Alexander von Humboldt.<sup>23</sup> The famous German naturalist notably compared the repartition of plants according to altitude among several mountain ranges worldwide. Based on his field observations, outstanding sketches displaying different mountain ranges on a comparative chart were drawn.<sup>24</sup> In the footsteps of Humboldt, numerous geographers, such as Carl Troll, acquired extended experience in various mountain ranges around the world. This diverse experience stimulated a comparative approach in their research and these geographers exchanged their observations among themselves through a common reference to their field studies. In 1972, the International Geographical Union created the Commission on High-Altitude Geoecology, which would become a few years later the Commission on Mountain Geoecology. As an outcome of the first international conference on the environment, held in Stockholm in 1972, UNESCO launched the Man and Biosphere Program to promote an interdisciplinary approach to conservation and rational use of natural resources. A specific part of the program was devoted to studying the "Impact of Human Activities on Mountain and Tundra Ecosystems" (MAB-6).<sup>25</sup> This program fostered the organization of science devoted to mountains at the global level.

Another major impetus to the mountain problematic was the successive floods occurring in the early 1970s in the plain and delta of the Ganges. Deforestation in the Himalayan uplands due to demographic pressure was thought to be the cause. This claim has been widely disputed, and the simplified set of causal explanations was later denounced as the "Theory of Himalayan environmental degradation."<sup>26</sup> This issue has prompted much research but also, being widely publicized, has drawn international attention to such a mountain problematic.<sup>27</sup> The Himalayas, especially Nepal, were not the fiefdom solely of scientists but also the field of numerous development practitioners from national development aid agencies and NGOs. This led to numerous collaborations between scientists and practitioners.<sup>28</sup> The Himalayan problem was at the core of the "Development of Mountain Environments" conference held in Munich

22. United Nations 2003.

23. Debarbieux and Rudaz 2010, 39–34.

24. An example of a sketch is available at [http://www.humboldt-portal.de/cd/Berghaus\\_Atlas/1\\_5\\_01.jpg](http://www.humboldt-portal.de/cd/Berghaus_Atlas/1_5_01.jpg), accessed 14 October 2010.

25. Price 1995.

26. Ives and Messerli 1989, 1.

27. Eckholm 1976.

28. Author's interview with Jean-François Giovanini, Bern, Switzerland, August 2006.

in 1974, at the initiative of the German Agency for International Development (GTZ) and the UNESCO. As highlighted by geographers Jack Ives and Bruno Messerli, two key promoters in placing mountains on the world's agenda, "This [conference] ensured creation of a much larger number of concerned mountain aficionados by linking the UNESCO MAB-6 academics with a more applied group drawn from both the private and public sectors."<sup>29</sup> The collaboration between scientists and international development practitioners is an essential feature of the process that led to the international rise of mountain issues. The two groups established mutually beneficial relations. The development practitioners, eager to make decisions based on scientific information, supported research such as the generous and long-term contribution granted to mountain research by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). On their side, the scientists were eager to see actors applying science. Indeed, the involved scientists were clearly oriented toward applied science and characterized by a strong motivation to connect their expertise with the needs of mountain communities.<sup>30</sup>

A number of initiatives prior to the UNCED (1992) brought worldwide competencies of scientists to address the specificity of mountain environments and societies: the United Nations University program "Highland-Lowland Interactive Systems," initiated in 1978; the International Mountain Society, founded in 1980; and the journal *Mountain Research and Development*, created in 1981. Some regional initiatives, such as the creation of the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region (1983), are also embedded in these international webs surrounding mountain issues. These initiatives often bring the same people into networks, in which scientists and development practitioners occupy a prominent role. Involved actors tend to refer to a sense of community.<sup>31</sup>

Even though the nexus presented above, linking research and development practice around mountain issues, stressed the importance of mountains from a global perspective, the journey to political recognition was not completed. In 1989, Ives stated the need to lobby for mountains:

The Mountain lands, unlike the tropical rainforests, the arid lands, the oceans, Antarctica, the ozone layer, the greenhouse effect, or acid rain, have not yet been able to develop a strong, well-informed constituency. This is urgently needed if there is to be the necessary fuller understanding of mountain dynamics and its effective linkage with the political processes of mountain resource management. The mountains, like the oceans, need their own Jacques Cousteau!<sup>32</sup>

The reference to the famous oceanographer stresses the connection between sciences and politics through scientifically informed advocacy. The UNCED ap-

29. Ives and Messerli 1999, 211.

30. Ives 1989, 340; and Debarbieux and Price 2008.

31. Ives and Messerli 1999, 212.

32. Ives 1989, 291.

peared as a unique opportunity to reach this goal by putting mountains on the world's environmental agenda. Toward this end, actions of advocacy and of sensitization were launched to raise awareness about the importance of mountains. The global recognition of mountains on the international scene was not an end in itself, however, but the beginning of a process. Once mountains were recognized as specific areas, further political actions could be launched:

Then, perhaps, the mountain problems alongside other problems of the next century can be wisely and effectively addressed. This will never come about, however, until the mountain issue is clearly identified and until mountain people, scholars, practitioners and decision makers are working together on a fully international scale. The Earth Summit (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro should prove the best occasion to attract the attention of world leaders and provide our mountains with their proper place on the twenty-first century agenda. One major task is simply to increase awareness of the mountain issue.<sup>33</sup>

In order to better advocate for the cause of mountains in the international arena, the aptly named organization Mountain Agenda was created in 1990. The group is composed of members active in the networks of scientists and development practitioners that were launched with the conference of Munich in 1974. Before even lobbying in the UNCED arena, the first step was to secure a place for mountains in the preparatory meeting.

Access to the international negotiation table is not democratized and some groups are keener than others to have access. UN world conferences on the environment illustrate this fact well.<sup>34</sup> Beyond the content of the agenda itself, lobbying strategies had to be mobilized. "Since the mountain proposal had not come from governments either directly or through a UN Specialized Agency, its entry into Rio preparations had to route through the secretariat and the preparatory committee of governments—the so-called PrepComs."<sup>35</sup> Switzerland, and more specifically its development agency SDC, played a decisive role in supporting lobbying for mountains in the international political arena. With its NGO status, the Mountain Agenda would have spoken in the PrepComs only after the government delegations had finished. In order to have a stronger platform for advocacy, through a national delegation, two Swiss members from the Mountain Agenda—one from academia (Messerli) and one from the development side (Hoegger)—were integrated into the official Swiss Delegation. Their advocacy secured a place for mountains on the UNCED agenda.<sup>36</sup>

The Mountain Agenda's initiatives, which sought to bring its message about the global significance of mountains into the international political arena, show the difficulty of framing mountains as a global issue. Once mountains were inscribed in the UNCED agenda, the first and most important mis-

33. Stone 1992, xvi.

34. Chatterjee and Finger 1994, 91; Carr and Norman 2008; and Clark, Friedman, and Hochstetler 1998.

35. Available at <http://www.mountain-portal.co.uk/text/MtnAgenda.html>, accessed 10 July 2007.

36. Available at <http://www.mountain-portal.co.uk/text/MtnAgenda.html>, accessed 10 July 2007.



sion carried out by the Mountain Agenda was the publication of a book intended “to make an authoritative statement on the environmental status and development potential of the world’s mountains.”<sup>37</sup> Such a statement shows the presence of an “epistemic community”—a network of experts with an “authoritative claim to policy relevant knowledge.”<sup>38</sup> As a communication strategy, the 391-page book *The State of the World’s Mountains*<sup>39</sup> was summarized in a well-illustrated publication entitled *An Appeal for the Mountains*.<sup>40</sup> Both publications were targeted at delegates attending the UNCED. The authors were aware that the book could be improved if they had more time, and that “a more exacting second edition”<sup>41</sup> was needed after the UNCED. But as written in its preface, “for this first edition of a world mountain status report, the political goals outweigh the scientific—the latter need attention after Rio.”<sup>42</sup> The UNCED was undoubtedly a unique political opportunity; the mountain argument could be refined later.

*The State of the World’s Mountains* offers an overview of the situation of mountains in some of the major mountain ranges around the regions of the world (Africa, Alps, Himalaya, Andes, Former Soviet Union, Appalachians). Although the authors intended this regional approach to illustrate a broader picture of the mountain problematic, it wound up undermining the global frame of reference they sought to create. The targeted readership did not look beyond the case studies. Indeed, when the book was distributed, the intended readers, the national delegates at the UN, searched for information on their own country. The front cover of *An Appeal for the Mountains* corroborates such a perspective. Aiming at highlighting the powerful relationship between nature and societies in mountains, the cover displayed a picture of the landslide that devastated the Peruvian town of Yungay on 31 May 1970, killing 18,000 inhabitants. But here also the intended readership did not appreciate the emblematic value of the picture and saw a localized event—a regional or a national matter at the most.<sup>43</sup>

This communication strategy through publications has continued since the UNCED. According to its purpose of raising awareness about the global significance of mountains, the Mountain Agenda has produced a series of brochures dealing with important issues regarding sustainable mountain development. These publications are notably targeted to the various meetings of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD).<sup>44</sup> In its pref-

37. Stone 1992, xiv.

38. Haas 1992, 3.

39. Stone 1992.

40. Mountain Agenda 1992.

41. Stone 1992, xv.

42. Stone 1992, xv.

43. Author’s interview with Bruno Messerli, Bern, Switzerland, July 2006.

44. The themes of the publications are the global importance of mountains (1992, 1997), water (1998), tourism (1999), forests (2000), energy and transport (2001), policies (2002). The publications are available at [http://www.cde.unibe.ch/Research/MA\\_Pubmed\\_Re.asp](http://www.cde.unibe.ch/Research/MA_Pubmed_Re.asp), accessed 14 October 2010.

ace, *The State of the World's Mountains* called for "a more exacting second edition" to follow.<sup>45</sup> With the Rio+5 CSD meeting in sight,<sup>46</sup> a new book entitled *Mountains of the World: A Global Priority*<sup>47</sup> was published in 1997. In contrast to the regional approach of the first book, *Mountains of the World* is organized according to thematic issues particularly relevant to mountains, such as religious significance, conflicts, biodiversity, and water. This book was groundbreaking in framing a global mountain problematic. Another interesting communication tool was the inclusion of a map displaying "Mountains and Highlands of the World." Aiming at further lobbying for the cause of mountains in the international arena, this publication strategy was largely realized thanks to Swiss financial support through the SDC.

The goals of the Mountain Agenda have been to create the issue and maintain it on the global environmental agenda. Clearly, these political goals target the UN and more precisely the CSD, which is in charge of the follow-up to the UNCED. However, Mountain Agenda has been forced to reduce its activities since 2002, when the SDC withdrew its funding. Funding was withdrawn in part for reasons internal to the Swiss administration, but also because the task of advocating for the cause of mountains in the international arena was taken over by the newly established Mountain Partnership, which I will review in the following section.

## Building a Constituency

Once mountains had been recognized as a global issue and securely placed on the world's agenda, mountain advocates shifted the focus of their advocacy to another domain: participation. The mountain case shows the advocates' constant willingness to broaden the circle of involved actors. This willingness is motivated by the desire to achieve tangible actions on the ground with the help of as many partners as possible and to gain legitimacy through endorsement by the broadest possible constituency. An agenda is truly global not only in terms of its scope, but also of its support.

As highlighted in the previous section, the project of writing a mountain chapter emerged late in the UNCED process, at PrepCom 3 (August-September 1991). Written in a hurry, the mountain agenda in its first formulation could not benefit from the input of many stakeholders.<sup>48</sup> "Therefore, the mountain community felt a strong need to come together to build consensus toward concerted action on the mountain agenda."<sup>49</sup> As the UN agency in charge of the follow-up to Chapter 13 of Agenda 21, in 1994 the FAO held at its Rome headquarters a meeting of NGO representatives to review the mountain agenda.

45. Stone 1992, xv.

46. Messerli and Ives 1997, 1.

47. Messerli and Ives 1997.

48. Price and Messerli 2002, 7.

49. Mountain Institute 1995, 2.

An expected outcome of the meeting was “to establish connections among mountain peoples, decision-makers, development agencies, and scholars at all levels.”<sup>50</sup> The idea to organize an International NGO Consultation on the mountain agenda emerged as a consensus from the meeting in Rome.<sup>51</sup> The Consultation, held in February 1995 in Lima, Peru, was led by the Mountain Institute, a non-profit organization based in West Virginia, at the request of the FAO and Switzerland. The meeting brought together 110 mountain NGO leaders and interagency and governmental representatives from nearly 40 countries. The objectives were two-fold: to “develop consensus on prioritized action plan to implement the [M]ountain [A]genda” and to “create an ongoing forum of mountain NGOs for information-sharing and mutual learning.”<sup>52</sup> Both goals stressed the need to build a constituency.<sup>53</sup>

This need for a constituency felt compelling after the UNCED. Indeed, no one could report to the CSD, for the Rio+3 follow-up in 1995, about the progress of the mountain chapter of Agenda 21.<sup>54</sup> The first target actor of the Consultation, therefore, was clearly the CSD. Coming out of the Lima meeting with an agenda endorsed by a broad coalition of NGOs supported a common aim: clarifying and adding some contents to Chapter 13. It also lent legitimacy to the mountain agenda. This assertion is illustrated in the CSD report of April 1995: “Chapter 13 of Agenda is recognized, not only by Governments and by inter-governmental organizations, but also by the international mountain NGO community, as the basic plan for action for the mountain agenda.”<sup>55</sup>

### *Mountain Forum: Broadening the Participation*

This willingness to open the debate led to the creation in 1996 of the Mountain Forum. With the motto “a global network for mountain communities, environment and sustainable development,”<sup>56</sup> this open constituency has two functions: to offer mutual support and information-sharing among mountain stakeholders and to conduct advocacy for “the mountain agenda at relevant fora at national-, regional-, and global-level meetings in order to guarantee that mountains are considered.”<sup>57</sup>

The facilitation of information exchange among its members is at the core of the Mountain Forum’s activity. This mission is based on the assumption that information is “perhaps the most powerful force shaping the world today” and “a critical tool for empowerment and a catalyst for social change,” as well as on “the belief that one of the most pressing needs in advancing the mountain

50. Messerli and Ives 1997, vii.

51. Mountain Institute 1995; Ives 1995, 349, Denniston 1995.

52. Mountain Institute 1995, 2. See Annex VII for prioritized action recommendations.

53. Ives 2002.

54. Author’s interview with Jane Pratt, Orem, USA, March 2007.

55. United Nations Economic and Social Council 1995, pt. 94.

56. Available at [www.mtnforum.org](http://www.mtnforum.org), accessed on 14 October 2010.

57. Initial Organizing Committee of the Mountain Forum 1995, 4.

agenda is sharing information.”<sup>58</sup> Currently, 5550 individuals from 130 countries and 592 organizations from 77 countries are members of the Mountain Forum.<sup>59</sup> Despite this willingness to broaden and extend participation, the membership of the Mountain Forum shows a clear predominance of researchers. The 2009 annual report indicates that most of the individual members are affiliated with a university or a research institution (40.5 percent), while for the organizational membership this figure drops to 13 percent.<sup>60</sup>

### *Mountain Partnership: Bringing All Actors In*

Continuing in the spirit of involving as many actors as possible, which led to the creation of the Mountain Forum, the 2002 WSSD saw the creation of a major new instrument in the promotion of mountains as a global issue. The *International Partnership for Sustainable Development in Mountain Regions*, commonly called the Mountain Partnership, was launched at the WSSD. Paragraph 42 of the WSSD Plan of Implementation is devoted to mountains. The WSSD stressed formal forms of international cooperation<sup>61</sup> and, in particular, multistakeholder partnerships as mechanisms for sustainable development.<sup>62</sup>

The previous sections have shown that a global mountain constituency had already been in place since the mid-1990s. Therefore, the Mountain Partnership did not start from scratch. Moreover, it captured “the momentum created during the International Year of Mountains in 2002, when national committees were formed in 78 countries to raise awareness about mountain issues and initiated concrete activities to improve mountain livelihoods and environments.”<sup>63</sup> The Mountain Partnership was a response to the need expressed during the WSSD preparatory session to improve cooperation.<sup>64</sup> The idea was to formalize partnerships among mountain stakeholders through an umbrella alliance. Its membership includes 50 countries, 16 intergovernmental organizations, and 105 major groups and NGOs.<sup>65</sup> If Chapter 13 of Agenda 21 states as a first objective the production of knowledge on mountain ecosystems, the Mountain Partnership “addresses the second, and perhaps more challenging, priority of actually improving livelihoods, conservation and stewardship

58. Initial Organizing Committee of the Mountain Forum 1995, 4–5.

59. Data available at <http://www.mtnforum.org>, accessed on 14 October 2010.

60. Mountain Forum 2009, 34–35.

61. Vogler 2003.

62. Glasbergen, Biermann, and Mol 2007. Partnerships for sustainable development are defined as “voluntary, multi-stakeholder initiatives aimed at implementing sustainable development” (available at <http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/partnerships/partnerships.htm>, accessed 14 October 2010). In UN terminology, these are referred to as Type 2 Partnerships. If the Type 1 partnership involves governments, Type 2 integrates also local authorities, NGOs, IGOs, and the private sectors.

63. Mountain Partnership no date.

64. Mountain Partnership 2003, 5.

65. Available at [http://www.mountainpartnership.org/members/members\\_en.asp](http://www.mountainpartnership.org/members/members_en.asp), accessed on 14 October 2010.

throughout the world's mountains landscape."<sup>66</sup> As originally framed in Agenda 21, this second objective has a clearer focus on mountain people. A Mountain Partnership Consortium was launched in March 2010 by key global and regional mountain organizations and donors, to support the work of the Mountain Partnership by further ensuring synergies between organizations promoting sustainable mountain development and by pursuing advocacy work at the global level, especially in view of the Rio+20 Conference.

### *An Incomplete Constituency?*

The French National Association of Elected Representatives from Mountainous Areas (ANEM) was concerned about the initiative regarding the international rise of the mountain issue. If the ANEM had reasons to be happy about the inscription of mountains on the international agenda, they were less satisfied about the process that led to this outcome, i.e. the non-integration of the mountain communities' representatives in its development. The organization was disappointed that, in the UNCED and its follow-up, the associations representing the mountain populations had not been brought in. They perceived the Rio Earth Summit as mainly an intergovernmental affair, which joined big environmental organizations and scientists. This assertion echoes some analyses regarding global environmental politics: "International regimes are the stuff of states, inter-state institutions and certain privileged non-state actors who provide experts in the epistemic communities that form around particular issue areas."<sup>67</sup>

The ANEM wanted to find a way to pass along its message at the international level. With this purpose, the organization established the Forum Mondial de la Montagne,<sup>68</sup> held in June 2000 in Chambéry, France. This event, which brought together 900 participants from 70 countries, was presented as the "first meeting of the world's mountain people."<sup>69</sup> The Forum Mondial de la Montagne was conceived as an opportunity to bring back the mountain people in the arena and to expand the circle beyond scientists and environmental organizations:

It was impossible for the elected representatives, the representatives of the population, and the economic but also cultural or associative actors of the

66. Mountain Partnership 2003, 5.

67. Ford 2003, 122. The key role played by epistemic communities, defined as networks of experts with an "authoritative claim to policy relevant knowledge," is now well documented (Haas 1992). This approach has been criticized for not taking into account the diversity within the community (Forsyth 2003).

68. The French denomination, rather than its English name World Mountain Forum, is used here to avoid any confusion with the organization called Mountain Forum, presented in the previous section.

69. Available at <http://www.mountainpeople.org/en/histoire/questions.php>, accessed 14 October 2010.

mountains to let the experts, whatever their competencies, determine by themselves the orientations desirable for our territories.<sup>70</sup>

Another major source of ANEM's concern was that the global mountain agenda was mainly interpreted in environmental terms. Many mountain peoples' lobbies perceived environmentalist perspectives on mountain resources as a meddling of exogenous stakeholders in mountain communities' affairs, or more radically as "green colonialism." To counterbalance this perspective, the Forum Mondial de la Montagne intended "to make recognized the social, economic and cultural issue that mountains represent."<sup>71</sup>

*World Mountain People Association: Raising the Voices of Mountain People*

Since its first formulation, the Forum Mondial de la Montagne aimed at setting up a World Mountain People Association (WMPA) to represent the interests of mountain people. In September 2002, the "second meeting of the world's mountain people," held in Quito, Ecuador, led to the creation of such an organization. The association has a presence in more than 70 countries on four continents.<sup>72</sup> It is organized into regional or national organizations grouped by major regions: Europe, Andean America, Central and Eastern Africa, Central Asia, Himalayas, and South-East Asia. WMPA membership is mainly composed of mountain communities' local and regional elected representatives, NGOs involved in development projects in mountain areas, and researchers working with mountain communities.

The goals of the WMPA are three-fold. First, it makes heard the voices of mountain people in the political arena at the international, regional, and national levels. Second, it promotes exchanges of experiences and cooperation between mountain territories. Finally, it supports the local initiatives of its members. The core message of the WMPA is the self-determination of mountain communities. It reaffirms the rights of mountain people concerning the governance of their territories: "Our alliance should enable very different people to come together on a common project that is very dear to them: taking the destiny of their country in hand."<sup>73</sup> Pierre Rémy, General Secretary of the ANEM, who played a leading role in the creation of the WMPA, underlined the idea that the cement of such a community was its desire for self-determination: "The first thing that unites all people living in the mountains is that they should govern their mountain regions. This is probably one of the most foremost factors for es-

70. French National Association of Elected Representatives from Mountain Areas 2000, 4. Translation from French by the author.

71. French National Association of Elected Representatives from Mountain Areas 2000, 4. Translation from French by the author.

72. Available at <http://www.mountainpeople.org/en/histoire/questions.php>, accessed 14 October 2010.

73. World Mountain People Association 2003, 3.

tablishing cooperation between all mountain people of the world."<sup>74</sup> As the level of decision-making moves to the international level and globalization also affects remote mountain communities, the WMPA emphasizes the need to be represented in such a context: "Allowing mountain people to speak in this time of globalization firstly requires global representation."<sup>75</sup>

The WMPA emerged as a new organization in a constellation of networks already in place. Some were glad that previously missing elected representatives joined the fight for the mountain cause.<sup>76</sup> But for the majority of mountain advocates, the Forum Mondial de la Montagne and the WMPA were initiatives that took no account of the advocacy work previously carried out for more than a decade or of all the organizations actively involved in such work.<sup>77</sup> This explains why Switzerland, which was decisive in the establishment of the three mountain networks discussed previously, was less keen on supporting the WMPA. Pierre Rémy, the "father" of the WMPA, recognized this fact and put the responsibility on the scientists with whom he had worked for not having informed him about all these initiatives.<sup>78</sup> Despite all these arguments, many of which are communication problems, things settled down with time and through the discovery of shared interests. Today, the WMPA is a member of the Mountain Partnership and of the Mountain Forum.

## Discussion

### *The Key Feature of Mountain People*

All of these networks share the normative basis of sustainable mountain development and the claim of stewardship of mountain environments and resources by mountain communities. Mountain people have been a central concern and a central feature of the global agenda for mountains. This is the case for various reasons. First, the well-being of mountain communities has always been a sincere concern of the advocates of the cause of mountains at the global level. This concern explains the presence of a subchapter titled "alternative livelihoods" in Chapter 13 of Agenda 21 intending to improve the standards of living of mountain populations. While mountain people were not absent from Chapter 13, its rephrasing after the international NGO consultation on the mountain agenda placed a much clearer emphasis on mountain dwellers. Second, mountain communities have been identified as the key players in the implementation of the mountain agenda<sup>79</sup> or, more broadly, in the achievement of sustainable mountain development. Considered as stewards of the resources found in mountain

74. Rémy 2003, 63.

75. World Mountain People Association 2005, 1.

76. Author's interview with Jane Pratt, Orem, Utah, USA, March 2007.

77. Author's interview with Bruno Messerli, Bern, Switzerland, July 2006.

78. Author's interview with Pierre Rémy, Paris, France, February 2006.

79. Ives 2002.



**Table 1**

Summary of the Main Institutions in the Promotion of Mountains as a Global Issue

<i>Organization</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Goal</i>	<i>Profile</i>
Mountain Agenda	1990	"to enhance the position of mountains on the global development and environment agenda" through "policy support, advocacy and sensitization"	"informal group of people, drawn from the academic and development cooperation communities worldwide, who have a professional interest in sustainable mountain development"
Mountain Forum	1996	"to promote global action toward equitable and ecologically sustainable mountain development and conservation through information sharing, mutual support and advocacy"	"global network of individuals and organizations concerned with the well being of mountain people, their environments and cultures"
Mountain Partnership	2002	to tap "the wealth and diversity of resources, information, knowledge, and expertise of its members to support positive change in mountain areas"	"voluntary alliance of partners" (states, intergovernmental agencies & major groups) "dedicated to improving the lives of mountain people and protecting mountain environments around the world"
World Mountain People Association	2002	"to make the voice of the mountain people and the expression of their desires heard"	elected representatives, NGOs and experts "to better represent 'the lifeblood of the mountains'"

Source: Centre for Development and Environment, "Mountain Agenda," available at [http://www.cde.unibe.ch/Research/MA\\_Re.asp](http://www.cde.unibe.ch/Research/MA_Re.asp), accessed 14 October 2010; Mountain Forum, "About Us," available at <http://mtnforum.org/au/index.cfm>, accessed 14 October 2010; Mountain Partnership, "Welcome to the Mountain Partnership," available at <http://www.mountainpartnership.org>, accessed 14 October 2010; and World Mountain People Association, "The WMPA in Five Questions," available at <http://www.mountainpeople.org/en/histoire/questions.php>, accessed 14 October 2010.

areas, mountain people are conceived as being able to fulfill local, national, and international objectives.<sup>80</sup>

These claims about the specific contributions of mountain communities to the implementation of sustainable mountain development called for their participation. Since its first formulation, the global mountain agenda identified

80. The WMPA Charter is very explicit in that regard. Available at <http://www.mountainpeople.org/en/histoire/charte.php>, accessed 14 October 2010.



"the effective participation of and empowerment of mountain people"<sup>81</sup> as a key factor in achieving sustainable mountain development. It appears that the recognition "that mountain people, rather than being part of the problem, are part of the solution"<sup>82</sup> has been accepted, at least at the international level. Such perspectives on the stewardship of mountain resources by mountain communities call for decentralized management and decision-making.<sup>83</sup>

Despite this willingness, we face a paradox: initiatives advocate for mountain people while the voices of those concerned can hardly be heard. In a critique of the global mountain advocacy movement, Rhoades congratulates the epistemic mountain community for placing mountains on the global environmental agenda, but reminds us that it is "unfinished business" and argues that "the voices of mountain people are largely silent in the present mountain movement."<sup>84</sup> This comment was made before the creation of the Mountain Partnership and the World Mountain People Association, which are attempts to fill this gap. The trouble encountered in mobilizing mountain communities raises the question of whether this proposed global perspective makes sense for mountain peoples. The first impediment is that the global scale appears to be of little relevance for local and regional mountain actors. A prominent advocate of the cause of mountains at the European level, who participated in a session organized by the Mountain Institute for the purpose of establishing the Mountain Forum, stated that the global level made little sense for her.<sup>85</sup> The second impediment is related to the difficulty of constructing a mountain identity, in which people identify, position, and label themselves as "mountain people." Indeed, not all communities living in mountains refer to themselves as mountain people.<sup>86</sup> Therefore, as the WMPA itself states, this community of mountain people needs to be "constructed."<sup>87</sup>

### *Outcomes*

To those questioning the relevance of considering mountains a global issue, one could point to the outcomes arising from this globalization of mountain issues. Many of the mountain initiatives have focused on information exchanges among mountain actors throughout the world. Such exchanges seem to meet a real need. For instance, the Head of the Department of Agricultural Policy and Rural Development of the mountainous Republic of Dagestan (Russia) stated: "There is a lack of adequate information on sustainable mountain development at the regional level. By being a member of Mountain Forum, I am able to find

81. United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development 1995, pt.190.

82. Ives 1989, 339.

83. Mountain Institute 1995, 8.

84. Rhoades 2000.

85. Author's interview with Annie Benarus, Pietra Neamt, Romania, October 2007.

86. Debarbieux and Rudaz 2010, 81–98.

87. WMPA aims "to construct the community of mountain men and women." World Mountain People Association 2003, 2.

very valuable sources which I use in my practice.<sup>88</sup> Nevertheless, the outcomes of such exchanges are hard to evaluate, as they are not documented. Also, the benefits are not detailed by those who acknowledge them.

Given the historical background discussed previously, it is not surprising that scientists appear to have benefited the most from this globalization of mountain issues. Indeed, they played a decisive role in securing the place of mountains on the international agenda. Mountain research was already coordinated at the international level in the mid-1970s through the MAB-6 program and increased with time. Numerous research projects were funded, benefiting from the impetus that came with recognition of the global importance of mountains. For instance, in 2001, the Mountain Research Initiative, a multidisciplinary scientific organization that addresses global change issues in mountain regions around the world, was created.

As previously stated, it is uncommon for states to recognize the specificity of mountain environments and communities.<sup>89</sup> National governments do not appear eager to develop specific mountain policies, given that mountains are often identified as stores of resources that are considered to belong to the nation and as homes to certain populations that some states are eager not to recognize. The ultimate goal of the international recognition of mountains is to be assured of the support of the states in their domestic policies. The global mountain agenda legitimizes and gives a "footing" for mountain stakeholders carrying out projects labeled as sustainable mountain development to address their governments.<sup>90</sup> Indeed, because mountains are addressed through sector-specific policies,<sup>91</sup> mountain advocates have difficulty identifying interlocutors in national administrations. Which government agency is willing to hear about mountain issues? The Forest Service? The Department of Agriculture? With a mountain agenda endorsed by the international community and by a global coalition, an advocate is harder to dismiss. In this context, we have seen that the UNCED was conceived as a unique opportunity and that the CSD has been a central target for transnational mountain networks. Once mountains gained a place on the international agenda, mountain actors had a leverage tool for accountability politics toward their governments. As pointed out by Tage Michaelsen, former FAO task manager chair: "These are of value as internationally negotiated documents, which can be quoted and used as evidence of international support for programs on sustainable mountain development."<sup>92</sup> This "footing" argument has been valid mostly for NGOs, but it may also be useful for mountain communities. Mountain communities, being on the periphery of nations and often politically marginalized, could seize this international recognition and the subsequent transnational networks to reaffirm the specificity of their territories and

88. Available at <http://www.mountainforum.org/au/testim.cfm#t1>, accessed 14 October 2010.

89. Mountain Agenda 2002; Castelein et al. 2006.

90. Author's interview with Jane Pratt, Orem, USA, March 2007.

91. Sène and McGuire 1997.

92. Quoted in Ives 1995, 350.

societies and revive a mountain-specific agenda at the domestic level. The Mountain Environment Protection Society, the first environmental NGO in the Islamic Republic of Iran, created in 1993, took the opportunity of the International Year of Mountains to promote legislation on mountains.

This article has focused on organizations with a global agenda for mountains, yet other regional and local organizations also benefited from the globalization of mountain issues. Some organizations capitalized on it to gain visibility and to position themselves as political actors. Some have even been created through the impetus of the International Year of Mountains, such as the Akwapim Mountain Women's Forum in Ghana.

Finally, the identification of mountains as a global issue has been a driver of transnational and international cooperation among mountain actors. The contracting parties of the Alpine Convention were very eager to use the International Year of Mountains to promote the Alpine model in other mountain regions of the world.<sup>93</sup> An Alliance of Central Asian Mountain Communities was created in 2003 on the model of its "sister organization" the Alliance in the Alps, with the goal of promoting sustainable mountain development at the local level. The Aosta Valley (Italy) launched a decentralized cooperative initiative with the mountainous region of Chtouka Ait Baha (Morocco) to promote agricultural products. These initiatives are built upon a shared reference to a common environment, namely mountains, which is the catalyst for collective action.

## Conclusion: Mountains in a Globalized World

Given the diversity of mountains, their localized nature, and the fact that they are rarely considered in nations' agendas, it has been a *tour de force* to frame mountains as a global environmental political object.

This article stresses the need to look beyond the global level. Indeed, looking at mountains as a global environmental object through the narrow perspective of the global level impedes the possibility of looking at the impacts such a designation has at other levels. Moreover, considering "global" not as a descriptor but as a contingent notion allow us to focus on the specific interests of actors in framing an issue as global.

This article began with a discussion of the relevance of considering mountains in a global perspective, i.e. taking the global scale as a reference scale to discuss mountain issues. For the epistemic community that initiated the agenda, it made sense to think about mountains at the global scale according to the similarities they observed among mountain environments, societies, and problems throughout the mountain ranges around the world. Based on that conviction and defining mountains as a global issue, they pushed mountains as

93. Ministers of the Contracting Parties of the Alpine Convention 2002.

a political object at the global level. The historical retrospective developed in this article has shown that the mountain advocates have been eager to take advantage of the UN framework such as the UNCED, WSSD, and even the UN International Year and Day to advance their agendas. They have pursued over time the advocacy of their cause through UN resolutions and CSD meetings. The Earth Summit 2012, or “Rio plus 20,” will represent a major milestone in that regard.

The organizations and initiatives reviewed in this article are contingent on this process of framing mountains as global and on the subsequent political claim for specific measures for these areas. I have referred to this process as the globalization of mountain issues. But in this case we also encounter other modalities of globalization, this time in its contemporary sense as the integration of economies, societies, and cultures in a world-system. With the example of the WMMPA, we saw a political response to the globalization from above—the identification of an issue in the international political arena—by an emerging globalization from below, through contestations from local stakeholders.<sup>94</sup> The networks reviewed in this article showed that there are worldwide exchanges among actors around mountain issues. These relations are an expression of a contemporaneous globalized world characterized by worldwide connections among actors. Finally, the various organizations pushing for a global mountain agenda have not limited themselves to promoting the global significance of mountains, but have all been interested in globalization as a socio-economic phenomenon threatening the balance of mountain communities and environments. From an action-oriented perspective, the projection of mountain issues onto the international political arena appears to be motivated more by the willingness to help local mountain communities to face the effects of socio-economic globalization than by a desire to really act at the global level.

If the historical retrospective developed in this article appears as a one-sided story stressing the elaboration of a global agenda for mountains, it is because I have found only marginal oppositions to such an agenda. These few expressions of opposition focused on the relevance of the framing of mountains at the global scale, the relevance of the global level to address mountain issues, and the participatory process that led to the international recognition of mountains. The fact that there were few contestations could be interpreted as indifference. For instance, the United Nations resolution proclaiming 2002 as the International Year of Mountains was one of the less debated resolutions on international years.<sup>95</sup> Without attempting to provide a comprehensive explanation, the cultural and religious aura of mountains might have played a role in such support.<sup>96</sup> Nevertheless, despite some hope for a hypothetical United Nations Convention on Mountains, which would definitely secure mountains on

94. Moghadan 2005, 30.

95. United Nations 1998.

96. Bernbaum 1998.

the world's agenda,<sup>97</sup> the danger lies not only in challenging contestations but perhaps even more in indifference, where mountains would move again off the radar. Indeed, a major concern of mountain advocates is that policies are developed and implemented in an undifferentiated manner throughout national territories, whether highlands or lowlands. For those who are concerned that the twenty-first century world will become homogenous, or "flat," the mountain cause must be pursued to give this world some relief.

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97. The representative of the SDC expressed such expectation during the international conference "Global Change and the World's Mountains" (Perth, UK, 29 September 2010).

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