Mountain Research and Development

Cultural Diversity as an Asset

Research
Perspectives on conservation in Mexico
Himalayan plant trade: typology of economic agents
Communities and enclosures in Ethiopia
Visitor preferences in park management, Spain
Ecological security evaluation in Mongolia
Vegetation succession on Tyndall Glacier, Kenya
the Ethiopian highlands, explaining their cultural treasures at Ethiopian students in a program aiming to raise awareness of the country's cultural diversity and reconnect young people with elders in their communities to acknowledge the value of Solomon Hailemariam).
Volume 25  Number 1   Feb 2005

Development

Language Endangerment and Linguistic Rights in the Himalayas: A Case Study from Nepal
Mark Turin

Culture as an Expression of Ecological Diversity: Integrating Awareness of Cultural Heritage in Ethiopian Schools
Million Belay, Sue Edwards, and Fassil Gebeyehu

Traditional Architecture in Tibet: Linking Issues of Environmental and Cultural Sustainability
William Semple

Diversity of Water Management Systems: Examples from Hmong and Thai Communities in Mae Sa Watershed, Northern Thailand
Andreas Neef, Peter Elstner, Chapika Sangkapitux, Liane Chamsai, Anne Bollen, and Jirawan Kitchaichareon

The Upper Min River Basin: A Key Ethno-cultural Corridor in China
Tu Jian-jun, Chen Yong, Ye Yan-qiong, and Chen Guo-jie

Research

Farmer and Conventional Perspectives on Conservation in Western Mexico
Peter Gerritsen and Freerk Wiersum

A Typology of Economic Agents in the Himalayan Plant Trade
Carsten Smith Olsen and Nirmal Bhattarai

The Role of Communities in Closed Area Management in Ethiopia
Tetera Mengistu, Demel Teketay, Håkan Hultén, and Yonas Yemshaw

Trail Preferences and Visitor Characteristics in Aigüestortes i Estany de Sant Maurici National Park, Spain
Estela I. Farías Torbidoni, H. Ricardo Grau, and Andreu Camps

Evaluation of an Ecological Security Model in Zhalute Banner, Inner Mongolia
Kang Mu-yi, Liu Shuo, Huang Xiao-xia, Dong Shi-kui, and Shi Pei-jun

Glacial Fluctuation and Vegetation Succession on Tyndall Glacier, Mt Kenya
Kazuharu Mizuno

MountainPlatform

WWF International’s Regional Approach to Conserving High-Altitude Wetlands and Lakes in the Himalaya

MRI Newsletter 4: Climate Science in the American West

MountainNotes

Policy Options to Support Transhumance and Biodiversity in European Mountains: A Report on the TRANSHUMOUNT Stakeholder Workshop, Landquart/Zurich, Switzerland, 26–28 May 2004

Integrated Development of Epirus: Fourth NTUA and NTUA Metsovon Interdisciplinary Research Center Interdisciplinary–Interuniversity Conference, 23–26 September 2004, Metsovo, Greece


Mountains at the World Conservation Congress, Bangkok, November 2004

MountainMedia

Review of web sites, CD-ROMs and books

MountainViews

Reflections of an Indigenous Student on the Realities of His People
inside back cover Guidelines for Contributors
Dear Readers,

The last Human Development Report (HDR), entitled Cultural Liberty in Today’s Diverse World (http://hdr.undp.org/2004/), asserts that “states must actively devise multicultural policies to prevent discrimination on cultural grounds—religious, ethnic and linguistic,” and that “expansion of cultural freedoms, not suppression, is the only sustainable option to promote stability, democracy and human development within and across societies.” This is a strong statement, but the HDR offers sufficient examples and analyses showing that diversity is not a threat to national unity, nor the cause of strife or “backwardness,” and certainly not an obstacle to development—on the contrary.

Without falling into natural and/or cultural determinism, the articles in the Development section of this issue of MRD demonstrate how important diversity is in mountainous environments, often arguing that there is a direct link between cultural diversity and biodiversity—a feature of the biophysical world that has arguably become one of the major pillars of sustainable development. Thus, linguist Mark Turin discusses the relevance of language diversity for equitable development in a highly diverse mountain state, Nepal. Tourism specialist Million Belay, botanist Sue Edwards, and marketing specialist Fassil Gebelehu present a national program to enable young students in Ethiopia to understand and bank on their rich cultural heritage. Architect William Semple also shows the value of preserving traditions and how this can benefit the environment in an area that has experienced a muffling of cultural diversity and overuse of timber resources. Agronomist Andreas Neef and co-authors show how diversity of irrigation systems can be the result of communal cultures adapting very fluidly to pressures of all kinds on the micro-scale. Finally, geographer Tu Jian-jun and co-authors present a brief overview of the multiplicity and flexibility of cultures in the “corridor” of the upper Min River basin, thus debunking the myth of backward highland cultural isolation. In MountainViews, MRD presents an essay on cultural identity written from an indigenous perspective.

In the Research section, several authors also address the value of cultural multiplicity: Peter Gerritsen and Freerk Wiersum discuss the importance of Mexican farmers’ perspectives on conservation for the preservation of biodiversity (vs the traditional conservationist perspective). Carsten Smith Olsen and Nirmal Bhattarai offer a typology as a means to systematize the debate on economic and social aspects of an important opportunity in the Himalaya—plant trade. Tefera Mengistu and co-authors present the results of a participatory study of the perceived costs and benefits of area enclosure for environmental protection. And Estela Farias Torbidoni and co-authors discuss ways of integrating the diversity of visitor preferences to optimize park management. The final two papers in this issue tackle other aspects of sustainable development: Kang Mu-yi and co-authors present a model to evaluate “ecological security” in a farming and pastoral area that has suffered from overuse in Mongolia, while Kazuhiuru Mizuno analyzes the influence of glacial fluctuation on vegetation succession on Mt Kenya, whose glaciers face the threat of disappearance in the coming decades.

Though this issue of MRD can hardly claim to represent even a fraction of the cultural diversity that exists in the world’s mountains, we hope our readers will enjoy its plurality.

Hans Hurni, Editor-in-Chief
Anne Zimmermann, Assistant Editor
The Hindu Kush–Himalayan region: a language “mega center”

The Hindu Kush–Himalayan region (HKH), which extends for 3500 km from Afghanistan in the west to Myanmar in the east, sustains over 150 million people and is home to great linguistic diversity and many of Asia’s most endangered languages. Moving across the region, Afghanistan boasts 45 living languages, Bangladesh 38, Bhutan 24, China 202, India 387, Myanmar 107, Nepal 121, and Pakistan 69. The HKH is known as one of the 10 biodiversity “mega centers” of the world. But this stretch of mountainous Asia is also home to one-sixth of all human languages, so the area should be thought of as a linguistic “mega center” as well.

Preserving linguistic diversity

Why should development workers and scholars be concerned with the extinction of endangered languages? After all, 96% of the world’s population speak 4% of the world’s languages, and over 1500 languages have fewer than 1000 speakers. Some monolingual English speakers would have us believe that linguistic diversity is incompatible with the juggernaut of inevitable progress that requires interoperability and smooth international communications across national boundaries. This is simply not the case, particularly in areas such as the Himalaya, where many people are functionally tri- or quadri-lingual, speaking an ethnic or tribal mother tongue inside the home, a different language in the local market town, conversing in the national language at school or in dealings with the administration, and often using an international language (or two) in dealings with the outside world. The monolingualism of much of the First World is as provincial as it is historically anomalous.

While the origin of the extraordinary diversity of human languages is intertwined with the evolution of cognition and culture, the spread of modern language families is a direct result of histori-
cal population movements and migrations across continents and the colonization of new geographical and environmental zones. Human languages are not evenly distributed across the world: there are relatively few in Europe compared to an abundance in the Pacific. The Himalayan region is home to great linguistic diversity, in part because the mountains have in the past been a natural barrier to mobility and communication (Figure 1).

The need to prevent language death
There are 4 solid reasons for supporting, preserving, and documenting endangered languages. First, each and every language is a celebration of the rich cultural diversity of our planet; second, each language is an expression of a unique ethnic, social, regional or cultural identity and world view; third, language is the repository of the history and beliefs of a people; and finally, every language encodes a particular subset of fragile human knowledge about agriculture, botany, medicine, and ecology.

Mother tongues are comprised of far more than grammar and words. For example, Thangmi (known in Nepali as Thami), a Tibeto-Burman language spoken by an ethnic community of around 30,000 people in eastern Nepal, is a mine of unique indigenous terms for local flora and fauna that have medical and ritual value. Much of this local knowledge is falling into disuse as fluency in Nepali, the national language, increases. When children cease to speak their mother tongue, the oral transmission of specific ethnobotanical and medical knowledge also comes to an end.

Language and ecology: an intimate relationship
Linguistic diversity is an integral component in ecological stability and the fabric of cultural life, and we should remember that the evolution of a species or a language takes much longer than its extinction. Languages, like species, adapt to and reflect their environment. The Thangmi language, spoken in a highly mountainous region where topography is challenging, has 4 semantically distinct verbs that are translated into English as “to come:”

- yusa, “to come from above (down the mountain),”
- wangsa, “to come from below (or up the mountain),”
- kyelsa, “to come from level or around a natural obstacle,” and
- rasa, “to come from unspecified or unknown direction.”

Language thus mirrors ecology, and ecology reflects the linguistic and cultural forms of a people inhabiting a specific niche. The languages and cultures of millions of indigenous peoples in the Himalaya are in part endangered because their traditional habitats and ecological niches are now under threat.

Recent scholarship on language endangerment points to an intriguing correlation: language diversity appears to be inversely related to latitude, and areas rich in languages also tend to be rich in ecology and species. Both biodiversity and linguistic diversity are concentrated between the tropics and in inaccessible environments, such as the Himalaya, while diversity of all forms tails off in deserts. Around the world then, there is a high level of co-occurrence of flora, fauna, and languages, and humid tropical climates as well as forested areas are especially favorable to biological and linguistic diversification.

Language and education in Nepal: the mother tongue debate
During Panchayat rule in Nepal, which ended in 1990, the state promoted the doctrine of “one nation, one culture, one language,” and the national education policy of that era was largely intolerant of indigenous and minority languages. Since 1990 though, Nepal has come a long way in acknowledging diversity: Article 4 of Part 1 of the Constitution of the Kingdom contains important legislative guarantees which state that Nepal is a “multi-ethnic, multi-lingual” nation. Article 18 even states that “each community shall have the right to operate schools up to the primary level in its own mother tongue for imparting education to its children,” even though this provision remains essentially inactive at present. This constitutional guarantee is very much in line with con-

“It concerns me that our ancestral language is on the wane and will likely not be spoken by the next generation, but it upsets me far more to think that as our speech is dying, no one will think to translate into Nepali the knowledge that our forefathers collected in order that our grandchildren may know what we have known.” (Rana Bahadur Thangmi, a local shaman and village leader, in an interview with the author)
Education in local languages: a developmental priority

As John Daniel, Assistant Director-General for Education in UNESCO, writes:

Years of research have shown that children who begin their education in their mother tongue make a better start, and continue to perform better, than those for whom school starts with a new language. The same applies to adults seeking to become literate.

This is particularly important because about 476 million of the world’s illiterate people speak minority languages and live in countries where children are for the most part not taught in their mother tongue (Figure 2).

Education in local languages: a developmental priority

As John Daniel, Assistant Director-General for Education in UNESCO, writes:

Years of research have shown that children who begin their education in their mother tongue make a better start, and continue to perform better, than those for whom school starts with a new language. The same applies to adults seeking to become literate.

This is particularly important because about 476 million of the world’s illiterate people speak minority languages and live in countries where children are for the most part not taught in their mother tongue (Figure 2).

Language and gender: the central role of women

Across the HKH, disaggregated census data demonstrate that mountain women retain fluency in their ethnic mother tongue longer than men. While men from disadvantaged mountain areas commonly engage in trade with other communities or seek wage labor in local centers and neighboring states, thereby learning regional lingua francas and foreign languages, women are still in many cases the natural resource managers of a community. Whether collecting firewood and forest products, fetching water, working the fields or raising children, women in remote Himalayan villages have cause to use their ethnic language in daily life.

In terms of educational and linguistic planning, Nepal is now taking steps to ensure that rural primary schools are staffed by more local women teachers who can explain words and concepts using the mother tongue of the students as a medium to help them transition to functional bilingualism. Part of this movement requires a change of mindset: dispensing with the prevailing belief that Nepal’s indigenous unwritten languages are backward, primitive and somehow shameful, and moving to embrace ethnic languages as symbols of diversity and indigenous knowledge. NFDIN is leading by example through training 200 local women to work in their own communities.

Language and conflict: Maoists, politics and Sanskrit

The deployment of “language” in public arenas, whether ethnic or national, can quickly become very politicized. The clamoring of linguistic minorities in Nepal for education in their mother tongue is as much about basic linguistic rights as it is a call for national recognition and participation in the governance of the modern
nation state. Ethnic and linguistic differences are also quick to be invoked in times of conflict.

In Nepal, the violent conflict between Maoist rebels and government forces, which has claimed over 10,000 lives since 1996, has tapped into the pre-existing concerns of ethnic and linguistic minorities. Some analysts even argue that the marginalization of Nepal’s disadvantaged and ethnic groups is one of the root causes of the Maoist insurgency. The Maoists have been very adept at co-opting indigenous peoples and their outstanding grievances into their overall political struggle for a constituent assembly and radical communist reforms. In their 40-point demands, the Maoist leadership address the basic rights of indigenous peoples and their mother tongues, arguing for local autonomy for communities where ethnic peoples are dominant and the provision of education in the mother tongue through secondary school.

The Maoist ideologues and linguistic activists are united against another common cause: the teaching of Sanskrit in Nepali schools. Sanskrit, the liturgical and classical language of India, to which modern spoken languages such as Hindi and Nepali are related, is intimately associated with issues such as caste, Hinduism, and highly structured learning. It is also a language that has no mother tongue “speakers” in Nepal, and is perceived by almost all indigenous people as the linguistic embodiment of a hegemonic heritage that they do not share.

**Sustainable futures: promotion of diversity at all levels**

The preservation of a language in its fullest sense entails the maintenance of the speech community. Reversing language death therefore requires the preservation of the culture and habitat in which a language is spoken. While many of the languages spoken as mother tongues in the Himalaya today will likely only survive, if at all, as second languages in the coming years, that is in itself no small feat. Supporting minority languages and halting linguistic decline must become an integral element in securing the sustainable livelihoods of diverse mountain peoples. Integrated development programs that focus on the vulnerability of marginalized peoples in the HKH should introduce a component of support for the languages and livelihoods that are presently under threat.
Signs of hope: projects underway in Nepal and the Himalaya

To date, there are no active projects on languages and livelihoods in the HKH that interweave biological and cultural diversity with the aim of building sustainable futures for disadvantaged mountain communities. The Culture, Equity, Gender and Governance Program (CEGG) at ICIMOD, which promotes the equality and empowerment of vulnerable mountain peoples for enhanced social security and reduced conflict, is planning to introduce a layer of project support for linguistic and cultural diversity to areas previously focused on biological and ecological diversity. As one way of reaching out to the grassroots and addressing the multilingual base of its constituents, ICIMOD produced a brochure on the International Year of Mountains (IYM) in 4 languages of the HKH: Chinese, English, Hindi and Nepali. ICIMOD also has a welcome sign in 8 regional languages (Figure 4).

The British Department for International Development (DFID), through its Enabling State Program (ESP), has recently provided a 3-year grant to the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) to support the empowerment of Nepal’s marginalized ethnic groups. Entitled the Janajati (indigenous ethnic group) Empowerment Program (JEP), the project has the explicit purpose of increasing the participation of Nepal’s disadvantaged ethnic peoples in socioeconomic and political processes at central and district levels. Focusing on local capacity building and strengthening civil society networks, JEP proposes to preserve and further develop Nepal’s ethnic languages and help advocate for linguistic rights.

Language revitalization campaigns aim to increase the prestige, wealth and

“If during the next century we lose more than half of our languages, we also seriously undermine our chances for life on Earth. From this perspective, fostering the health and vigor of ecosystems is one and the same goal as fostering the health and vigor of human societies, their cultures, and their languages. We need an integrated biocultural approach to the planet’s environmental crisis.” (UNESCO 2003: 44)
Development

power of speakers of endangered mother tongues, to give the language a strong presence in the education system and to provide the language with a written form to encourage literacy and improve access to electronic technology. Linguistic diversity is, after all, the human store of historically acquired knowledge about how to use and maintain some of the world’s most vulnerable and biologically diverse environments (Figure 5). Biocultural development projects need to involve and mobilize communities to build positive values for indigenous languages.

FIGURE 5 The result of a major effort to map biocultural diversity: an online map of the “Indigenous and traditional peoples in the global 200 ecoregions.” (Source: WWF and Terralingua 2000; map available at: http://www.terralingua.org/Images/WWFmap.JPG; reproduced with kind permission of Terralingua)

AUTHOR
Mark Turin
Visiting Scientist, Culture, Equity, Gender and Governance Program (CEGG), International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), GPO Box 3226, Kathmandu, Nepal.
mt272@cornell.edu

Mark Turin teaches linguistic anthropology and visual anthropology at Cambridge, and is a research associate at Cornell University. He is also Co-Director of Digital Himalaya, a pilot project to develop digital collection, storage, and distribution strategies for multimedia anthropological information from the Himalayan region, which can be found online at www.digitalhimalaya.com.

FURTHER READING