

A Scientific Journal with a Mission: Mountain Research and Development Enhances Its Scope

Theodore Wachs

Mountain Research and Development (MRD), a peer-reviewed, development-oriented journal focusing on the world's mountain regions, is currently in its 26th year of publication. Founded in 1981 under the auspices of the United Nations University (UNU) and the International Mountain Society (IMS) and originally edited, typeset, and printed in Colorado, the journal is today based at the Centre for Development and Environment (CDE), University of Bern, Switzerland. It is still published by UNU and IMS, now the joint copyright holders. But a great deal has changed since 1981.

The Initial Decades

MRD's roots go back to the 1970s, when intellectual inputs from the International Geographical Union's Commission on Mountain Geocology and UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Programme gave a boost to research on the impact of human activities on mountain ecosystems. Creation of a mountain-research journal linked to the UNESCO MAB program was proposed in the middle 1970s. UNU took up the idea, in conjunction with its own research on highland-lowland interactive systems, and provided modest funding, and IMS was hastily incorporated as copublisher in the United States. In the foreword of volume 1, number 1, UNU's rector spoke of the challenge to transcend the goal of becoming a self-satisfying academic journal by "first illustrating the complex nature of human-environmental-resource development problems in mountain lands, and secondly trying to direct the decision-making

process toward real solutions".

When the journal was launched, its main focus was expressed in terms of halting the forces of degradation by providing a sound scientific basis for decision-making "to seek a better balance between mountain environments, human welfare, and development of resources", in the words of its founding editor, Jack D Ives. Those concerns have proved to be prescient indeed, when we consider conflicts, difficult political evolution, and the environmental impacts on resources in mountain regions throughout the world today.

By the late 1990s, Ives was preparing for retirement and began seeking a new home for the journal he had edited first at the University of Colorado and later at the University of California, Davis. He and a group of other distinguished mountain experts were instrumental in putting mountains on the agenda at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, a landmark UN conference unprecedented in its size and the breadth of its concerns. (*Agenda 21*, a major output of the Earth Summit, featured a chapter on sustainable mountain development.) When the UN General Assembly in 1998 designated 2002 as the International Year of Mountains (IYM2002), a new home and an enhanced role for MRD seemed all the more urgent.

A Time of Transition

In 1998, I was responsible for English-language publications as an editor and translator at CDE in the Institute of Geography of the University of Bern. Much of the work done at CDE concerns environmental and development initiatives under mandates from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). I was aware that Ives had been a guest professor at Bern and

was a close friend and intellectual ally of Bern's Bruno Messerli, an internationally renowned geographer. My own boss, Hans Hurni, a former student of Messerli's, was now the driving force in building and expanding CDE. Hurni's great expertise in mountain geography and development, his growing international reputation, and his connections with potential donors made it look quite feasible that CDE could be the new editorial home of MRD under his direction as editor-in-chief.

Hurni asked me to arrange an international workshop to explore options for the future of MRD. It was held in Interlaken, Switzerland, in 1998 and included an international group of scholars and others concerned with mountains. It became gradually clear that Bern could indeed be a new home for MRD and that I—a former teacher and coordinator of the high-school division of an international school, originally trained as a historian and now pursuing a second career—might have a new position as managing editor of an established scholarly journal.

Things moved quickly from that point forward. Switzerland's development agency, SDC, a previous financial supporter of MRD, signaled a strong potential interest in providing substantial new funding in conjunction with its development initiatives in mountain regions. As plans to move the journal to Bern took shape, my job began to take on a new and exciting international dimension. I journeyed to Munich for a conference titled "Mountains 2000 and Beyond" sponsored by the German government and attended by its minister for development. In 1999, I had the unusual experience of traveling to my own country, the United States, as a member of a Swiss delegation to a UN conference. I delivered a brief presentation on the enhanced scope

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Scope continued

and new format of *MRD* at a side event during the annual meeting of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development. That was followed by a trip to Peru to represent the journal at a meeting of the Mountain Forum, an international organization promoting sustainable mountain development that would become part of the newly expanded *MRD* network.

Much of the international activity and enhanced commitment to mountains reflected responses to and preparations for IYM2002. With the journal now set to go to Bern, I faced a personal test in preparing for more than just IYM2002. I would need to draw on my background in history, my editing experience, and my knowledge of environmental and development issues in new ways. I would also need to apply managerial skills in building and coordinating a team responsible for a newly enhanced product.

Revamping the Journal

Editing *MRD* in its new home posed numerous challenges. Hurni set the tone and orchestrated the brainstorming that led to innovative dimensions. The journal would have a new layout and a wholly new “Development” section with color photographs, focusing on sustainable mountain development. We also planned new sections featuring reports on mountain issues and statements by partners in our international mountain network (who would also be making small financial contributions). Expectations would be high. With major new funding, donors would have to be satisfied; previous and, we hoped, new subscribers would want to see the high quality of peer-reviewed research maintained; we would need to secure and retain good referees for peer-reviewed articles; we would have to build a network of like-minded partners who could submit contributions and also help to finance the journal; and we would need to retain and expand a base of institutional subscribers in developing countries who would receive free subscriptions courtesy of our donors.

I believe that the undertaking would have been virtually impossible outside an

academic institution. From the time of the initial discussions at the workshop in Interlaken, it had always been clear that the quality and the mission of *MRD* would best be ensured by locating it at a high-level research institution. CDE’s staff of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary specialists, with wide-ranging knowledge and skills, is available to the journal’s editorial team. Above all, CDE’s experience in designing and implementing projects and environmental initiatives throughout the developing world, combined with Hans Hurni’s dynamic direction and great expertise, contributes in no small measure to a journal focused heavily on sustainable mountain development.

Initial unsolicited reactions after “our” first issue in the new format appeared in spring 2000 were enough to confirm that we had passed our biggest test to date. “Congratulations on a nice first issue”, said a distinguished geographer. “Good balance, excellent layout, and high standards”, commented the director of an academic geographic alliance, and an author praised us for “wonderful use of the graphics I provided”. Was this the most important hurdle? Possibly; had we not cleared it, our prospects would have been uncertain, and we might not have had the chance to confront the ensuing challenges that continue to try us as well as inspire us.

Challenges are also opportunities. My work in the position of *MRD*’s managing editor has been a source of more than professional growth. It has been a chance to build a team and watch it learn and flourish; to take personal responsibility and pride in interactions with dedicated colleagues and a worldwide network of

stimulating people and organizations; and to feel fulfillment in helping to promote learning and development in parts of the world where access to resources like our journal would normally not be available.

The Journal and the Council of Science Editors Task Force

Membership in CSE is the most recent professional affiliation in my career. At the CSE annual meeting in Atlanta last year, I was naturally drawn to the newly created Task Force on Science Journals, Poverty, and Human Development, and I attended its initial organizational session. Later, an opportunity to comment on a draft “statement of principles” concerning how scientific-journal editors could help to attain the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) convinced me that I could make a contribution here while learning from and interacting with other editors. For a start, what a great coincidence that the theme of volume 26, number 1 of *MRD* (February 2006) is “The Millennium Development Goals in Mountains”, with a lead article



examining the question of whether the MDGs will alleviate poverty in the mountains!

Reading through the draft statement, I found assertions and proposals that were inspiring simply because they were so familiar. How so? “Journals should incorporate global issues into their mission statement”, said the draft. Well, what about a journal that is part of a global network that includes such partners as the Food and Agriculture Organization, WWF International, and international organizations in the developing world and focuses on sustainable development worldwide? “More should be done to send back issues, which are currently languishing in warehouses, to readers who could use them”, said the draft. Well, what about a journal that made sure every existing back issue went to a developing country and

currently sends each new issue to almost 600 institutions in the developing world free of charge? “Journals should actively solicit publications and referee reports from developing countries”, said the draft. Well, what about a journal that regularly solicits and receives contributions from authors in developing countries—and provides support through clear instructions about how to make material more scientifically convincing, creates and redoes graphics at its editorial office for authors without access to the necessary technology, and undertakes extensive editing to support nonnative speakers of English?

At the March 2006 convention of the Association of American Geographers (AAG) in Chicago, I featured our recent issue on the MDGs at a panel discussion I chaired on writing for scientific journals, and I arranged for MRD to join the AAG’s

Developing Areas Specialty Group. This should dovetail nicely with collaboration in the framework of CSE’s new Task Force. In brief: I am thrilled that CSE has taken the initiative represented by its Task Force on Science Journals, Poverty, and Human Development. I feel completely at home with it, and my own experience tells me that this is a direction that can only enhance CSE’s overall mission and purpose. I look forward enthusiastically to further work with other editors to promote and expand this initiative. 🔥

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