



MOUNTAIN CULTURES

Celebrating diversity and strengthening identity

Mountains host communities with ancient cultures and traditions, and are places of religious worship, pilgrimage and rituals all over the world.

Mountains are the sources of springs and rivers and have been revered as the home of deities throughout history. In times of drought, the Kikuyu people faced Mount Kenya and asked the God Ngai for rain. The Inca people constructed their temples on the highest peaks over 6 000 metres (m) in the Andes. In China, villages traditionally dedicated a temple to the local mountain deity responsible for clouds and rain.

Mountains have also dotted the landscape of certain religions and legends. Mount Sinai is associated with Moses and is the place where he received the Ten Commandments. Mount Olympus was once regarded as the home of the Greek Gods and Mount Kailash is believed to be the abode of the Hindu Deity Shiva. In Japan, Mount Koyasan hosts the holiest Buddhist monastery complexes in the country.

Mountains are muses for literature, cinema and music, as well as for oral traditions. From the Magic Mountain of Thomas Mann to Chinese poetry like that of Li Bai and of Han Shan (known as Cold Mountain), writers have drawn from mountains and from themes of pastoral life and wilderness. Many film festivals are dedicated to mountains: from Banff and Telluride to Trento and Ushuaia. While these events showcase the best in mountain films, they also provide an opportunity for large gatherings that foster diversity and promote tourism.

Cultural diversity

Mountain areas are home to a large proportion of the world's minority populations. While most of these consist of small numbers of people, some large groups exist, such as the Quechua in the Andes, the Amhara people in Ethiopia, and the Tibetans and Yi in China. Isolation, created by the rugged topographic barriers, has helped create and maintain many diverse cultures relatively intact. Unfortunately, the stability of mountain populations, each with different values and belief systems, is threatened by migration, urbanization and conflict.

Mountains harbour an incredible richness of languages. The Italian Alps are home to a great ethno-cultural diversity with no less than seven autochthonous language minorities. For example, Ladin, an ancient Romance language, is still spoken by about 30 000 people in the Dolomites, the mountain range of the northern Italian Alps. In the Caucasus Mountains, there are over 50 ethnic groups – each with its own traditional architecture, art and clothing – and at least 37 indigenous languages are spoken.

Mountain peoples have long held vital roles in the management of their ecosystems. Over the centuries, they have developed remarkable land-use systems, climate change adaptation approaches,



Mountains and sustainable tourism

Mountains and mountain-protected areas are places of spiritual solace but also of inspiration, recreation and relaxation. From skiing and climbing to viewing mountain gorillas in Rwanda and visiting the rock churches in Ethiopia, mountains offer an array of possibilities to all kinds of tourists. For many in the modern world, Mount Everest symbolizes the highest goal they may strive to attain, whether their pursuit be material or spiritual. The remote area including the southwestern portion of the Tibet Autonomous Region of China, together with the bordering districts of Nepal and India, is the transboundary Kailash Sacred Landscape. It is a religious trail for over one billion in Asia and considered holy by a number of religions, including Hindus, Buddhists, Bon, Jains and Sikhs.

The impacts of tourism on culture and identity in the mountains can bring both possibilities and challenges. The interest expressed by tourists in indigenous traditions and customs can help enhance or restore a certain pride of local communities, especially for those populations who feel marginalized in their own countries. Yet reducing poverty and increasing social equity are still major challenges, as well as ensuring that the economic benefits from tourism remain in local communities. Community-based mountain tourism can ensure a more equitable distribution of income, help maintain local cultures and knowledge, reduce out-migration and provide incentives for the protection of mountain ecosystems, their goods and services.

traditional diets and mountain products that are unique and rich in globally significant biodiversity. Many crops originated in mountains, including maize, potatoes, barley, sorghum, tomatoes and apples. Traditional and indigenous food resources form the bedrock of diversity in the traditional and indigenous food systems of mountain communities in developing countries. These underutilized food resources have often a much higher nutrient content than globally known species or varieties commonly produced and consumed.

Mountain communities' worldviews, often grounded in a deep connection with the land, guide them in their agricultural activities and care of the environment and natural resources. In the Andes, for example, mother nature Pachamama, worshipped by the indigenous peoples, presides over planting and harvesting, embodies mountains and is believed to cause earthquakes. Rituals to honour Pachamama reinforce the relations between human communities and their natural environments, bringing together people from different clans and villages at various points of the agricultural cycle.



World Heritage mountain sites and mountain protected areas

According to United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 376 of the world's 669 Biosphere Reserves, or 56 percent, contain mountain ecosystems. Many mountains have been designated UNESCO Biosphere and World Heritage sites.

At 5 199 m, Mount Kenya is the second highest peak in Africa. This ancient, extinct volcano was designated a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in 1978 and was made a World Heritage mountain sites in 1997. During the twentieth century, 8 out of 18 glaciers on Mount Kenya vanished, decreasing the ice cover by more than two-thirds.

Mount Huascarán, Peru's highest peak (6 768 m), is located in the Cordillera Blanca, the world's highest and most extensively glacier-covered tropical mountain range. Huascarán National Park was designated a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in 1977 and a World Heritage site in 1985. Glaciers on Mount Huascarán have lost at least 13 km² of ice and about 40 percent of area compared to 37 years ago.

However, there are still mountain areas of significance that are not adequately protected when considered on country, biogeographic realm, biome and ecoregion scales. Poor protection of mountains is of concern given the biodiversity they harbour, the ecosystem services they provide to the world and their vulnerability to climate change.

A Kyrgyz mountain water legend

The Batken province in Kyrgyzstan is a harsh environment, surrounded by rocky mountains with scarce water resources. According to local legend, where water is revered, three kings had a power dispute. The king living upstream blocked the head of an important stream, “Suu Bashy”, cutting off water to everyone downstream. Many years later, a man decided to find the lost Suu Bashy. He went to the place his elders had described in the legend, which was marked by an old tree, and there he discovered the source. Although Islam is the predominant religion in Kyrgyzstan, Kyrgyz people also practice Tengriism, characterized by elements of shamanism, animism and ancestor-worshipping. Water, especially from mountain springs, is one of the main deities of Tengriism, and the Kyrgyz people still practice *emdoos*, a ritual for the purification of a child. Nowadays, the Suu Bashy is considered a sacred place by locals. People come here from downstream villages to worship and thank God for blessing their families with clean water from the mountains.

Mountain producers in the Andes take care of Mother Earth

On the shores of Lake Titicaca, the world’s highest navigable lake, indigenous subsistence farmers continue to employ the sustainable farming methods of their ancestors. Agricultural output in the Altiplano region is low due to impoverished soils and a harsh, arid climate, but the agricultural cycle continues to be at the center the culture and spirituality of the Aymara peoples that inhabit the region. A FAO project on food security in family farmed indigenous lands in the plateau north of La Paz, carried out in Puerto Acosta, Bolivia, aims to strengthen these age-old agricultural practices and the cultural heritage that depends on them. Families benefitted by the project engage in crop rotation of potatoes and tarwi, a local legume which restores nitrogen to the soil and fends off common pests. The community completes the various tasks from sowing to harvest according to the system of communal work known as *ayni*, which involves the entire community. Harvest is preceded by a ritual offering of coca leaves and pure alcohol to the Pachamama, so that she will continue to share her bounty.

Promoting food security among indigenous communities of Bangladesh

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) is mountainous region located in the south east of Bangladesh and consists of three districts: Bandarban, Khagrachari and Rangamati. The region is home to 12 different ethnic groups, in addition to the Bengali, and has a population of about 1.7 million. Each ethnic group retains a distinct language, culture, traditions and justice system. Some areas still suffer from chronic food insecurity and undernutrition. In remote areas, people still practice a traditional system of shifting cultivation called *jum*. Over the past decades, land pressure and environmental shocks have contributed to the shortening of *jum* cycles, decreasing yields and increasing soil erosion. Since 2013, a FAO project has supported more than 9 000 households through distribution of quality agricultural inputs and cash transfers, capacity development activities promoting sustainable agricultural production nutrition education, and basic value chain development. Particular emphasis is given to the use of local seeds and revamping traditional diets through tailored cooking demonstrations using local food and improved traditional recipes. The project’s activities were undertaken in consultation with national and local authorities, as well as in close cooperation with beneficiaries and their traditional institutions following the principles of Free Prior and Informed Consent.