

# Himalayan perceptions: Environmental change and the well-being of mountain peoples

Fifteen years ago, the Himalayan Dilemma buried the most popular environmental paradigm of the 80s. What will it take for policy-makers to get the message?

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Perceptions of environmental change affecting the Himalayan region have undergone extensive revision over the last thirty years. During the first half of this period it had been widely assumed that environmental collapse was imminent due to exponential increase in pressure on the natural resources driven by rapid population growth and deepening poverty. One of the many statements of imminent catastrophe was issued by the World Bank in 1979<sup>1</sup>, predicting that by the year 2000 all accessible forest in Nepal would be eliminated. Although the linkage of human poverty and natural disaster continues to attract serious debate, the catastrophist paradigm has been discredited by an avalanche of research, not to mention the passage of time during which the heralded disaster has failed to materialize. This has opened the way for a more realistic appraisal of the actual dynamics of change in the region.

The publication of *The Himalayan Dilemma* (Ives and Messerli 1989)<sup>2</sup> fifteen years ago derived from an international conference on the 'Himalaya-Ganges Problem' held at Mohonk Mountain House, New York State, in May 1986. The conference had been called to investigate the validity of the prevailing Himalayan environmental paradigm of the 1970s and 1980s that came to be known as the *Theory of Himalayan Environmental Degradation*. In brief, the Theory proposed that increased devastating flooding on the Ganges and Brahmaputra lowlands was a direct response to extensive deforestation in the Himalaya. The deforestation was presumed to result from a rapid growth in the mountain subsistence farming populations dependent on the forests for fodder and fuel and for conversion to terraced agriculture. As steep mountain slopes were denuded of forest cover, it was assumed that the heavy monsoon rains caused accelerated soil erosion, numerous landslides, and increased runoff and

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sediment transfer onto the plains. This was further assumed to induce a progressive increase in flooding of Gangetic India and Bangladesh, putting at risk the lives of several hundred million people.

The 1986 deliberations were frequently heated, but a consensus was reached to the effect that the Theory lacked scientific substantiation. This was reflected in the 1989 book; we stressed, however, that a great deal of more focused and more rigorous

empirical research was required in order to substantiate the many issues that had been raised. *The Himalayan Dilemma*, while effectively contesting many unproven assumptions that collectively formed the Theory, could be seen as essentially an attempt to prove a series of negatives. Nevertheless, the academic response to the book was generally positive and it is still quoted in almost every scholarly publication on the Himalayan region. Forsyth (1996)<sup>3</sup> credited the Mohonk Conference with achieving the first major environmental paradigm shift and, along with Thompson (1995)<sup>4</sup>, referred to the unfolding discourse as *The Mohonk Process*.

Despite the positive reception on the part of academics, the perceptions generated by the Mohonk Process had little impact on environmental policies. Regional authorities, for example, to this day maintain embargoes on logging in the mountains based on the justification that extensive deforestation was causing seri-

**Himalayan Perspectives returns to the enormously popular development paradigm that Ives dubbed the 'Theory of Himalayan Degradation'. According to this seductive construct, poverty and overpopulation in the Himalayas was leading to degradation of highland forests, erosion, and downstream flooding. In the 'Himalayan Dilemma', Ives and Messerli exposed this "Theory" as a dangerous collection of assumptions and misrepresentations. While most scholars in the field promptly conceded Ives and Messerli's points, the Theory has somehow survived as the guiding myth of development planners and many government agencies. In his new book, Ives returns to drive a stake through the heart of this revenant. His book not only reviews the research that, over the past 15 years, has confirmed the arguments of the 'Himalayan Dilemma'; it also takes a close look at all those destructive factors that were overlooked by the conveniently simplistic 'Theory of Himalayan Environmental Degradation': government mismanagement, oppression of mountain minorities, armed conflict, and inappropriate tourism development. ➔**

## **PUBLICATION PREVIEW**

ous flooding and major dislocations downstream.

Since 1989, and partly as an outcome of the Mohonk Conference, a vast amount of related environmental research has been undertaken; its publication, however, has been scattered widely throughout the literature. The new book, therefore, attempts to bring together and analyze the more recent studies in the context of the earlier work that led up to the 1989 publication. It presents a final rejection of the earlier environmental paradigm; this becomes the more important considering the inappropriate environmental and developmental policy decisions to which the region is still subjected. Furthermore, the inept and sustained focus of much of the government legislation has served to paint the poor mountain minority people as the prime cause of environmental degradation and so deflect attention from the real problems.

*Himalayan Perceptions* has two primary aims: one is to follow through on the academic discourse, to examine the results of the post-1989 research, and thus to update *The Himalayan Dilemma*; the second is to assess the problems that threaten the stability of the region as the new century unfolds. As a corollary to this, some of the reasons why scholarly research has had little, or no, inherent impact on environmental policy making are discussed. In particular, the perpetration of disaster scenarios by the news media is explored because it is believed that this is one of the reasons why the public at large still accepts the notion of impending environmental catastrophe.

The region discussed here extends well beyond the limits of the Himalaya *sensu stricto* (the 2,500 kilometre arc from Nanga Parbat, above the middle Indus Gorge in the northwest, to Namche Barwa, above the Yarlungsangpo–Brahmaputra Gorge in the east). Coverage is extended to include the Karakorum, Hindu Kush, and Pamir mountains in the northwest, and the Hengduan Mountains of Yunnan, the mountains of Northern Thailand, and the Chittagong Hill Tracts, in the southeast. The United Nations University (UNU) mountain research project, from its initiation in 1978, has investigated test areas throughout this broader region, and the new book represents a contribution that concludes the quarter century of UNU effort.

*Himalayan Perceptions* attempts to analyze the manner in which the perceptions of the Himalayan region have evolved over the last three decades. It explores how the simplistic environmental alarm arose and why it held sway for so long. Without

doubt, the environmental problems assumed to be threatening the region in the 1970s and 1980s were causing widespread concern and affected the way in which international aid was manipulated. Over the last fifteen years it has become increasingly clear that the more dominant causes of instability are socio-economic, administrative, political, and the spread of violence and terrorism. The continued debilitating poverty is regarded, at least in part, as a consequence of mismanagement in its broadest sense. Therefore, in addition to assessing how the environmental discourse has played out since 1989, issues involving poverty, oppression of the mountain peoples, unequal access to resources, insurgency, and military conflict are presented. The importance of tourism is also addressed because it is a major force that has both positive and negative aspects and is now menaced in many places by the growing political tensions and violence in the region.

I have tried to write in the spirit of the United Nations General Assembly of 1997 (Rio-Plus-Five), convened in order to evaluate the progress achieved in the five years following the 1992 Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit (UNCED), and of the UN designation of 2002 as the International Year of Mountains (IYM). Since the primary goal of IYM is 'sustainable mountain development', it is considered that prospects for achieving this goal, at least within the Himalayan region, will be limited by the degree to which the problems can be correctly defined. If progress has been made towards producing a more accurate definition then the writing of the book will have been well worthwhile.

There are eleven chapters. Chapter One, entitled *The Myth of Himalayan Environmental Degradation*, provides an overview of how the Himalayan region has been perceived over the last thirty years and of how research has progressively influenced, or failed to influence, efforts to obtain regional 'sustainable development'. It includes a restatement of the *Theory of Himalayan Environmental Degradation* that was widely publicized by Erik Eckholm's book *Losing Ground* (1976)<sup>5</sup>. This is followed by a review of the later Himalayan environmental research, in effect, a synthesis of the first of the book's main themes. Chapter Two is an outline of the region under discussion – the Himalaya, defined very broadly. Chapter Three examines the discourse on the status of Himalayan forests; it contrasts the more humid eastern and central Himalaya with the increasingly drier conditions as one moves progressively toward the northwest

into Northern Pakistan and Tajikistan. Chapter Four, *Geomorphology of agricultural landscapes*, addresses the complex relationships between land-cover type, especially agricultural terrace types and their management, precipitation, soil erosion, and downstream effects. Chapter Five, entitled *Flooding in Bangladesh: causes and perceptions of causes*, questions the relationships between land-use/land-cover changes in the Himalaya and flood plain responses. Drawing on extensive recent work by Thomas Hofer and Bruno Messerli<sup>6</sup>, amongst other studies, it concludes emphatically that the primary cause of flooding in Bangladesh, and by extension in northeast India, is heavy monsoonal rainfall across Bangladesh and adjacent areas of lowland India.

The first five chapters, therefore, expose the *Theory of Himalayan Environmental Degradation* as an insupportable mental construct that should be totally eliminated as a basis for environmental and developmental policy making. The following five chapters turn attention to some of the actual problems that require far more rigorous attention by governments of the region and by foreign aid and development agencies in general.

The major physical hazards that pose a challenge to sustainable development in the Himalayas are the concern of Chapter Six; these include earthquakes, landslides, and torrential rainstorms. Opportunity is taken to introduce the controversy concerning construction of the Tehri Dam in relation to seismic hazard assessments, and the exaggerated claims of the dangers posed by the likelihood of catastrophic outburst of glacial lakes. Chapter Seven attempts to assess the development and importance of tourism, its positive and negative aspects, and the dangers inherent in excessive local dependency on a single development endeavour. Chapter Eight reviews the devastation being caused by accelerating violence – warfare, guerrilla activity, and unconscionable repression of mountain minority peoples. Topics range from actual warfare, as on the Siachen Glacier, Nepal's Maoist Insurgency, Bhutan's human rights abuses perpetrated on its Lhotsampa Hindu minority, Nagalim, and the oppression resulting from the imposition of mega-projects, such as the Tehri and Kaptai dams. Chapter Nine presents an overview of rural change and the challenges facing attempts to decentralize control over access to natural resources. The role of exaggeration – deliberate or unwitting distortion of events that are exasperated by news media reports – is examined in Chapter Ten. Individual case studies are presented, several of which are



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shown as examples of distortions, even deliberate falsehoods, based in part on my experience in the field. The concluding chapter is styled: *Redefining the dilemma; is there a way out?*

The book frames the main conclusion that the *Theory of Himalayan Environmental Degradation* is not only a fallacy, but also an unfortunate impediment to identification of the real obstacles to sustainable development. These include administrative incompetence, corruption, greed, oppression of mountain minority peoples, political in-fighting, and even military and political competition for control of resources and strategic locations. The well-being of the 70–90 million mountain people has been largely neglected and so they are left with little alternative but to exert increasing pressure on whatever natural resources that are accessible, whether legally or illegally.

I have tried to make each chapter as self-contained as possible. This has led to a considerable amount of repetition. However, I believe this approach will be most beneficial for the reader who has not had direct experience of the Himalaya. None of the topics has received an exhaustive treatment. Rather, by selecting a series

of issues I have tried to keep the task within reasonable limits while ensuring a broad view of this vast and complex mountain region and the challenges facing its diverse mountain peoples who deserve far better treatment than they have so far received. Without their direct involvement sustainable mountain development will remain a bureaucratic pipe dream. ■

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### ANNOUNCEMENT

The Himalayan Journal of Sciences will hold a symposium to discuss issues raised by Jack Ives' forthcoming book, *Himalayan Perspectives* in Sept 2004. The event will be open to the public. Further details will be published on our Web site and in Mountain Forum.