

# Las montañas y la promesa del ecoturismo

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**It is a privilege to be here with you today** to discuss issues related to ecotourism in mountain areas.

As you know, FAO was invited by the United Nations General Assembly to lead the UN system's support to the International Year of Mountains. We are honoured to do this. We see it as an extension of our responsibility as task manager for implementing **Chapter 13 of the Earth Summit's Agenda 21**, which is dedicated to mountain issues. Furthermore, we believe that sustainable development of mountains will contribute to achieving FAO's goal of alleviating hunger and poverty in the world.

Today, around 800 million people throughout the world are undernourished. Many of the world's poorest and least food-secure live in mountain areas. For these people, ecotourism holds tremendous promise for reducing hunger and poverty, for strengthening communities and for protecting fragile ecosystems.

Tourism is, after all, the biggest economic activity of our time. Thanks to mountain tourism, which accounts for 15 to 20 percent of all tourism revenue, many mountain communities are among the most prosperous in their regions. In the Alps, the Andes, the Himalayas and the Rockies, tourism provides up to 90 percent of regional income. In these areas, tourism has greatly reduced poverty, food insecurity and migration.

Mountains are vital life-support systems. They support life by providing much of the world's fresh water. And as repositories of biodiversity, mountains help to conserve the world's wealth of living resources and natural wonders. They are also home to one-tenth of the world's people, and they provide goods and services to more than half the global population.

Mountains play a major role in providing livelihoods - by contributing to food security, by yielding sustainable supplies of energy and by providing beautiful environments for recreation and renewal.

These vital life-support systems simply must be maintained, and their resources must be managed and used in such a way as to safeguard both mountain ecosystems and mountain cultures. We at FAO believe that this can be done. And we are confident that the International Year of Mountains and the International Year of Ecotourism will provide excellent opportunities to achieve these aims.

Ecotourism presents immense opportunities for the sustainable development of mountain regions. It can, for example, help sustain the integrity of the environments and cultures upon which it depends, and it can return a significant proportion of revenue to local people to reinvest in their own communities.

There is no doubt that Ecotourism can encourage the protection of mountain ecosystems by increasing the value of natural environments, and by providing alternatives to natural-resource industries as sources of income and employment.

However, ecotourism does not come without some risks. It generally requires transportation and communication infrastructure. While this can reduce isolation and open mountain communities to new ideas and modes of production, it can also speed up social and linguistic changes that may threaten the very fabric of mountain cultures, as well as degrade natural landscapes.

We are therefore challenged with the task of ensuring that the role played by ecotourism is a constructive one, conducive to the development of the world's mountain regions in a sustainable way. I hope that during your deliberations this week you are able to give special consideration to how we can harness the power of this industry to fight hunger and poverty world-wide, but especially in developing countries and in countries in transition in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

At FAO, we are focusing a great deal of our energy on stimulating the establishment of national committees to lead country-level observance of the International Year of Mountains, particularly in the developing world. We believe that such committees can be leading agents of change if they are given the means to stimulate the formulation and implementation of sustainable development strategies for mountain areas and to foster mountain-friendly policies and legislation.

At last count, some 35 countries had established national committees to lead observance of the International Year of Mountains. We continue to encourage countries to take advantage of this unique opportunity to bring together a wide variety of mountain stakeholders to address sustainable mountain-development issues from a holistic, long-term perspective. The committees vary in composition, but many have representatives from government, NGOs, research and academia, civil society and the private sector. These groups can play an important role in improving policies for mountain areas by providing a common forum for consideration of a wide range of perspectives and approaches.

Good policies are among the most important determinants of successful and sustainable mountain development. Through the International Year of Mountains, and with the assistance of National Committees, we hope that countries will develop decision-making processes and policies that address the special conditions and problems of their unique mountain areas and their inhabitants.

Such policies should be mountain-specific, because, clearly, mountains are different from lowlands. Mountain ecosystems are far more fragile. And mountain people face obstacles to development that are not faced by many others: physical isolation, lack of transportation and communication infrastructure, political marginalization and harsh climates and environments.

Such policies should also be location-specific. That is, they should be sufficiently flexible to be adapted to specific communities. And mountain people - the stewards of mountain ecosystems - are highly diverse in culture, language and aspirations. One mould cannot fit all.

It is here, in the areas of decision-making and policy-making, that I see the greatest synergies between the International Year of Mountains and the International Year of Ecotourism. Both international Years promote participatory, cross-sectoral models of decision-making and policies that encourage a careful balancing of interests to protect the natural environment and improve the quality of life for local people.

I believe that mountains and mountain communities hold immense potential for all humanity - for the societies of today and tomorrow. FAO looks forward to working with you to realize the promise of both the International Year of Mountains and the International Year of Ecotourism as springboards for long-term positive action extending far beyond 2002.

Thank you very much.  
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