

## Why mountains matter for Meso America



**Mountains in Meso America cover 25.2% of the region and hold a remarkable 12% of the world's biodiversity on only about 2% of the earth's land surface. A total of 86 indigenous ethnic groups occupy 54.2% of the mountain territories. The greatest global threat to sustainable mountain development in the region is climate change. Other threats are mining, expansion of hydropower generation, urban sprawl into mountain areas, deforestation, and soil erosion.**

Meso America extends from the Tehuantepec Isthmus in Mexico across Southern Mexico to Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama, covering a total of 862,468 km<sup>2</sup>. Since Rio 1992, Meso America has found itself immersed in a new and more complex international situation without having achieved rapid advances in human development and regional integration in recent years. This situation poses strategic challenges that will require not only innovative and bold regional and national responses, but also major improvements in the collective capacity to implement them.

### **The contribution of mountains to sustainable development in Meso America**

Today, a vast majority of Meso America's more than 50 million people live in the lowlands of the Pacific coast. Nevertheless, Meso America has a high concentration of large cities in central valleys that increasingly depend on water from the mountains. Regional ecosystems and the economic and social capital they support are now facing climate change and, as a consequence, an unprecedented combination of tipping points, including extreme population growth (doubling of the regional population since 1992). Forests, state protected areas, biological corridors for connectivity conservation, and indigenous territories cover 72.6% of the mountain land. In contrast to the more densely populated and industrialised lowlands, the mountains represent an opportunity for the region to strengthen conservation and sustainable development.

### Manifold challenges

One of the main causes for increased pressure on natural resources is the region's rapid population growth from 11 million in the 1950s to more than 50 million today. A great part of the regional economy is based on extractive use of mountain natural resources. Energy production from renewable resources within mountain protected areas is growing, particularly hydroelectric and geothermal energy production. Challenges for sustainable mountain development include mitigating the impacts of climate change and adapting to this change; providing jobs, health care, and education services; achieving food security; preventing outmigration; stabilising democracy; fighting corruption; strengthening local government; protecting the natural heritage; and supplying clean energy. These challenges are of a magnitude that makes it impossible for any one country to address them alone. Close and effective collaboration within the region is crucial.



Lake Arenal – a source of hydroelectricity in Costa Rica (O.Chassot)

## Policy action for the mountains of Meso America – and the future we want



Family owned coffee fields at 1600 m, Central Valley of Costa Rica (O.Chassot)

The Meso American Biological Corridor (MBC) is the region's best opportunity to implement sustainable mountain development, provided that the Central American Integration System and its Central American Development Commission (SICA-CCAD) are put to work with a strong backing from all countries in the region. Today, the MBC still faces many challenges, but the administrative structure has been consolidated, allowing the eight countries to jointly plan and evaluate progress (CCAD 2005). There is a need for strong coordination, dedicated leadership, and sufficient funding to ensure operation and broad regional participation. This must be coupled with efforts to strengthen

and empower local organisations in order to be successful at the local level. The Costa Rican model of connectivity conservation and management, for instance, could be replicated and adapted elsewhere in the region, fostering the institutionalisation of regional initiatives expressed in local action through alliances between the states and civil society. Currently, the Meso American Biological Corridor covers only 16,6% of the mountain regions of Meso America, leaving ample space for increasing connectivity in mountain areas. Efforts to design additional connectivity landscapes in mountains should be continued, with a view to filling conservation gaps and promoting sound land planning. Biological corridors are particularly relevant as a planning and management tool which can be used to connect mountain areas with the densely populated lowlands at the regional and continental scale, thus creating a link that may enhance the appreciation for mountains in the regional culture.

A mountain culture must be developed at all levels. Mountains must become an integral part of local, national, and regional agendas in Meso America. There is an urgent need for the establishment of a new inter- and multidisciplinary regional mountain institute which will contribute to fostering such a "mountain identity" within the region, and which will support and guide government action in favour of sustainable mountain development.

