



Obituary for a Mountain Man

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Editor's note: Professor Robert E. Rhoades, a major figure in mountain research who was also deeply concerned with mountain development, passed away in March of this year. Robert Rhoades was a member of MRD's editorial advisory board for the past decade and the author of a stimulating article on the need for sustainable development in mountains in the development section of the February 2000 issue of MRD—the inaugural issue of the journal's new format produced by the current editorial team at the University of Bern. The following tribute is by Rhoades's colleague, MRD Regional Editor Fausto Sarmiento.—Theodore Wachs, Managing Editor

Obituary for a Mountain Man

Dr Robert E. Rhoades passed away on 24 March 2010. His untimely death came as a shock to mountain communities in many areas where his scholarly work and development activities took place. Bob Rhoades was a Distinguished Research Professor of Anthropology, and many consider him to be the founder of Agricultural Anthropology. With an impressive scholarly output of more than 130 publications, his contribution to understanding mountain systems spanned more than 35 years. Starting with studies on migration, through investigation of cultivation, production, and distribution of commodities from mountain areas, mainly potatoes, his work fostering understanding of sustainable agriculture and natural resource management in mountain systems—be they in the Andes, the Appalachians, the Himalayas, or other important mountain chains—motivated challenging new research and stimulated scientific debate on development pathways. Recently, the societal response to global climate change was an important focus of his work, resulting in the publication of books, chapters in edited books, and research articles. Many of his students and mentees have been affected by his passing after a brief battle with terminal pancreatic cancer, which is a premature

loss of potential intellectual stimulation to promote mountain science. Indeed, he was an avid supporter of the concept of “montology,” a term that describes the various aspects of disciplinary endeavor dealing with mountains, to which he devoted a great deal of effort. As a result, this term has now been entered in the Oxford English Dictionary.

Montologists of many continents and with different generational training responded to the call of Robert E. Rhoades in his recent booklet, *Listening to the Mountains*, using Aldo Leopold's inspiration to get at a larger readership with the message of mountain conservation with development. He explained that, as a native American flatlander from Oklahoma, he discovered the wonders of mountain communities during his early work as a Peace Corps Volunteer. Ever since then, his transformation to the status of honorary highlander has been supported by extensive travel to distant mountain localities and successful grants that have triggered a plethora of research projects. Because of his energetic and enthusiastic understanding of problems particular to mountains, Bob Rhoades became part of a select group of mountain organizations around the world, including ICIMOD, CIP, the Ad-hoc Committee of the International Year of Mountains, the Mountain Research Initiative (MRI) and its Americas Cordillera Transect Network (ACT), the Mountain Forum, and the Mountain Agenda. He was, indeed, a very productive member of the friendly ‘mountain mafia,’ a collection of the foremost scholarly minds engaged in mountain studies worldwide. During his long tenure as director of the Ecological Anthropology Department at the University of Georgia, mountain research grew, funding for graduate research mushroomed, and the idea for establishing UGA as a Center for Mountain Research has come close to fruition.

One of my last opportunities to interact with Bob Rhoades was as guest

lecturer in his graduate seminar on Mountain Anthropology offered at UGA. It was an obvious progression to the undergraduate class I teach on Mountain Geography. There, a heated discussion ensued with students interested to know why we should continue montological work from the social sciences perspective. His words now sound lapidary... “Because they are there! And they are at risk of transformation into something different...”

Colleagues from different parts of the world will feel his absence in international fora and the boards of many mountain organizations, such as the editorial board of MRD and the FAO-sponsored Mountain Partnership. But a cadre of new montologists is coming to the fore with many projects mentored by him directly or based on his impressive scholarly output. The new ecological methodologies and ethnographic techniques he instituted, such as the “farmer-back-farmer approach,” “memory taste maps,” “mountain to mountain exchanges,” and “seed legacies” have become traditional in fieldwork relating to mountain participatory research and development. His exemplary scholarship will energize montology as a comprehensive science, where agricultural anthropology will always bear his signature. This is particularly true in the Andes, where his extensive work in Peru and Ecuador opened the way to a better understanding of the cultural landscape and the forces that drive development trends in the currently debated scenarios of global environmental change.

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