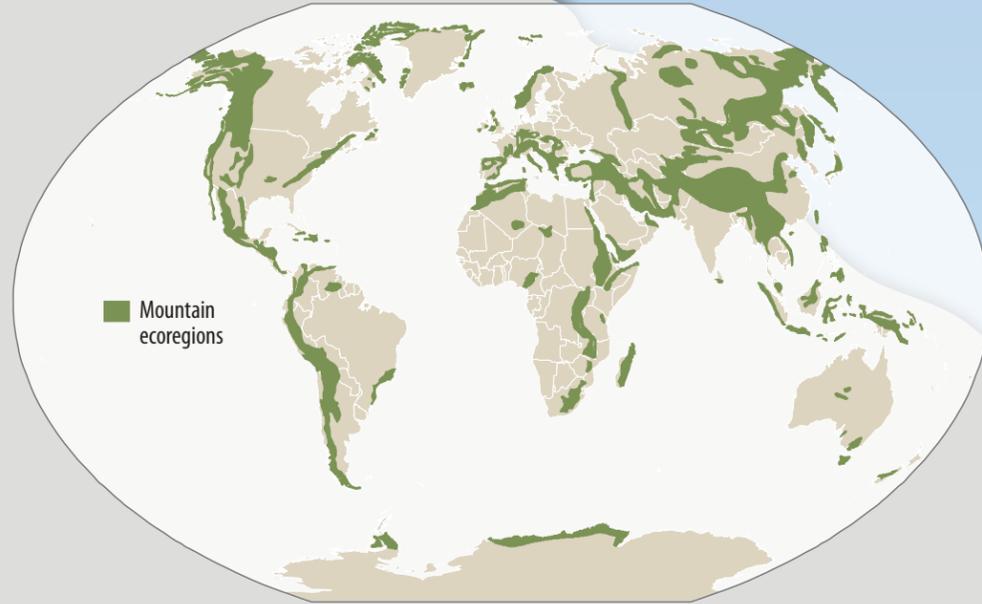


# International Mountain Day 2011: Living on the Edge

December 11 is International Mountain Day. Healthy mountain forests are crucial to the ecological health of the world. They protect watersheds that supply freshwater to more than half the world's people. At the same time, mountain ecosystems are especially fragile and degrading rapidly.



**20%** of the world's population lives in or at the edge of mountains

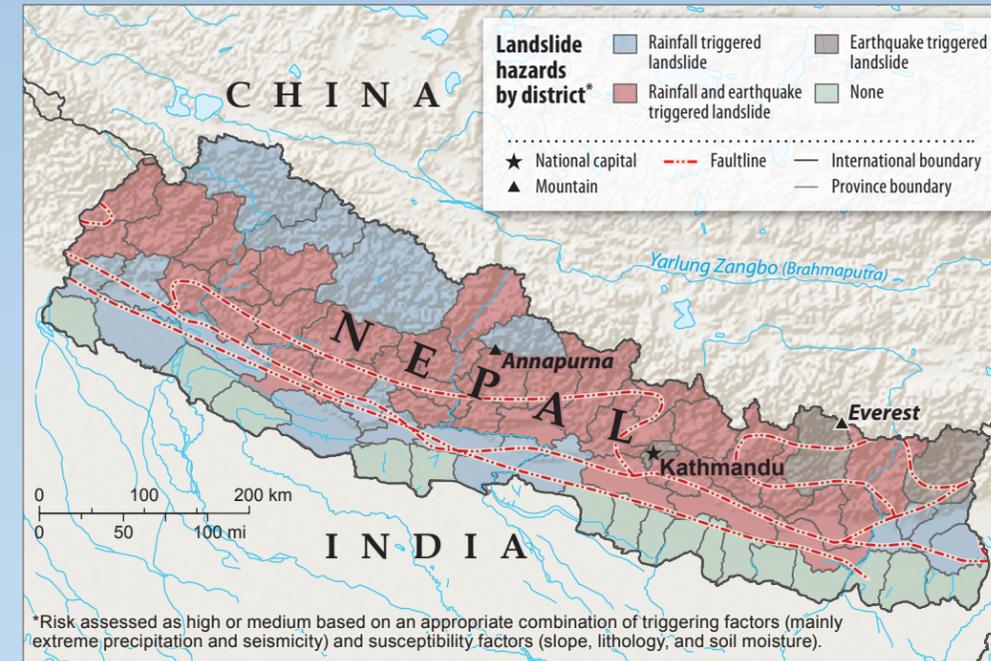
**90 million** mountain people live in poverty

**Mountains provide:**

**60-80%** of the world's freshwater resources

**23%** of the Earth's forest cover

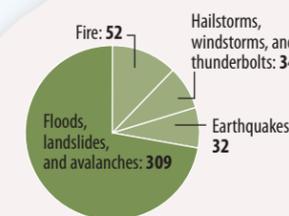
## In Focus: Hazards of the Himalayas



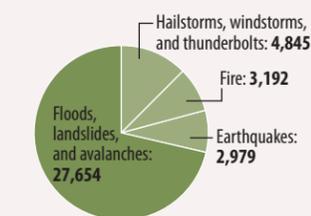
Those living in high mountain areas are also at greater risk from natural hazards. In Nepal, floods, landslides, and avalanches are responsible for the vast majority of annual losses from natural hazards— on average 72.4% of loss of life, 71.5% of families affected, and 60.4% of property lost (see figures).

**Average annual losses from natural hazards in Nepal (1983-2005)**

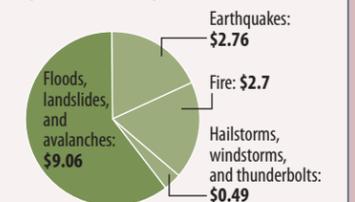
**Loss of life**



**Families affected**



**Loss of property (in millions)**



In the Himalayas and Tibet Plateau, the majority of glaciers are receding at an alarming rate. Glacier meltwater contributes a significant portion of the total runoff in the western Himalaya where mountain rivers discharge onto the arid lowlands. Permafrost is degrading in Tibet as climate warms, rendering soil more susceptible to erosion, especially where livestock trample soils.

As glaciers recede, meltwater lakes are impounded behind glacier deposits of loose rocks. These natural "dams" are unstable and subject to breaching by rising waters. This can lead to a glacial lake outburst flood (GLOF) that can cause catastrophic loss of life and property downstream. Thousands of glacial lakes exist in the Himalayas, and several hundred are especially dangerous.