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In this issue

Tribal rights and conservation practice in India's forests

Almost one quarter of India's land area is officially classified as forest, yet only 12 percent of its land actually has dense forest cover. Rather than identifying actual forests, past classification often focused on asserting state ownership over the uncultivated commons. As well as undermining customary conservation practices, this has deprived many forest-dwelling communities of their rights to forest resources and means of survival.

India's forests are rich in biodiversity and have been the ancestral habitat for many tribal and indigenous communities. In response to environmental threats and degradation, the last few decades have seen the government develop a range of laws and policies to stop the rapid loss of forests and wildlife. Independent research assesses these government interventions and suggests that, rather than supporting conservation and protecting tribal communities, these policies create new conflicts and slow down the very efforts they should support. The research identifies three key causes of this:

> **Government interventions create new conflicts and hamper efforts to conserve forests and protect tribal communities**

- Premises and procedures for identifying and defining forests are poor, resulting in land use conflicts, unclear boundaries, legal disputes and inappropriate management objectives for lands wrongly classified as 'forest'.
- Policies ignore the role of forests in tribal livelihoods and cultures, violating the overlapping laws protecting the rights of these communities.
- Forest governance has remained a centralised and top-down process which is inappropriate for achieving ecological and social justice objectives.

Besides laws making the central government responsible for major forest management decisions, India has adopted the objective of bringing 33 percent of its land area under forest or tree cover. The combination of unrealistic objectives and centralised planning means forest management remains insensitive to social, economic, ecological and cultural realities. This has led to the harassment and eviction of local communities due to their customary lands being declared 'state forests'. Since 1990, a framework has existed for resolving disputes over forest land between forest dwelling people and the state, but this is yet to be implemented. Central and state governments have been the biggest abusers of laws protecting tribal economies

and livelihoods. Furthermore, 90 percent of the country's natural grasslands have been destroyed by being declared 'forest' and planted with non-local tree species to be used for timber.

Around the world, land and forest rights of indigenous communities are being restored as an integral part of conservation initiatives, through a process of decentralising governance. Yet in India, until recently, there has been almost total refusal to acknowledge such claims. Unless new policies deal with these problems, forest management cannot achieve conservation and social justice goals.

The research recommends that policymakers should:

- ensure real forest areas are clearly demarcated by their ecological characteristics and livelihood functions
- implement decentralised forest management, with a focus on community-based responsibility and authority
- strengthen and implement mechanisms for accountability and conflict resolution by making forest governance institutions more democratic
- replace the national objective of 33 percent forest cover with state-specific objectives based on ecosystem surveys
- harmonise conservation laws with those protecting the cultures, livelihoods and rights of tribal communities
- nurture local self-governing, democratic and gender-equal institutions for managing natural resources.

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Laws, Lore and Logjams: Critical Issues for Indian Forest Conservation, International Institute for Environment and Development Gatekeeper Series No 116, by Madhu Sarin, 2005
www.iied.org/NR/agbioliv/gatekeepers/gk_abs/documents/GK116.pdf

www.id21.org

Does the privatisation of plantations help poor people?

Forest plantations provide wood and other forest products, contribute to biodiversity, improve landscapes and soils, play an important role in absorbing carbon and help to maintain water quality.

Plantations also provide employment, infrastructure and opportunities for small-scale enterprises. However, ownership of plantations is a key factor in determining who benefits most.

Over the last century, the area of forest plantations increased from an insignificant area to 187 million hectares globally and this figure is increasing by 4 million hectares each year. Research by the International Institute for Environment and Development, UK, indicates that plantations can support rural livelihoods and contribute to poverty reduction.

Governments have often promoted and subsidised private-sector investment in plantations (privatisation). However, many governments are now going further and handing over the tenure and access rights of plantations to private companies. Benefits of changing plantation ownership and management include:
● Increased economic efficiency, by using improved techniques (such as tree growing or processing methods).
● Increased investment, which can stimulate innovation in management approaches.
● Improved governance: privatisation can clarify the aims of governments and provide opportunities to involve local communities in forest management.
● Poverty reduction: new ownership may encourage more sustainable forest use and increase local incomes.
● Engaging local communities as part of the privatisation process helps to fight forest degradation and improve forest conditions. Many private sector managers also seek to have their forests certified to international standards.

Transferring plantation ownership works most effectively when power is transferred to people who manage plantations fairly, efficiently and sustainably. However, privatising plantations can also concentrate power and privilege amongst elite groups. Increased privatisation can cause conflicts, often relating to land use by poor rural people in plantations.

Policymakers need to define clearly the benefits of privatisation. It is important to constantly review processes to maintain benefits and to avoid unwanted outcomes. Developing and implementing effective evaluation methods, using a range of social, economic and environmental criteria, is vital for assessing the success of privatisation. Challenges include:
● agreeing principles for transferring ownership with all stakeholders, including the private sector and local communities
● developing a 'learning' approach to the transfer process, with opportunities to experiment, fail, succeed and adapt
● engaging local groups in ownership and management and overcoming barriers such as skills and financial resources
● enforcing forestry standards after ownership is transferred
● finding alternative employment for people who lose their jobs in the transfer process and maintaining employment standards.

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A reforestation site on a teak plantation in Togo. The goal is to create more forests to stop desertification in sub-Saharan Africa.
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Forest trade in the Asia–Pacific region

China's annual timber imports from Myanmar more than tripled between 1997 and 2002, due to restrictions on domestic logging and improvements in timber processing. This increase has provided income-generating opportunities for many people, including villagers in both China and Myanmar and Chinese migrant business people. However, Myanmar's forests are quickly being depleted.

Research by the World Agroforestry Centre and Forest Trends, USA, reviews recent trends in the forest product trade between China and Myanmar. Although recent forestry policies have enabled China to promote sustainable forestry at home, the reduction of tariffs for imported wood has had negative impacts on the sustainability of forest harvesting in neighbouring countries, including Myanmar. This is causing serious environmental damage. The research shows:
● The timber industry along China's border with Myanmar grew substantially after China imposed limits on domestic logging in 1998.
● Forests in Myanmar's northern Kachin and Shan states are being rapidly depleted without any reforestation; a lack of resources will ultimately bust the current boom in forest trade.
● The timber industry along the border is dominated by migrant workers and business people from Fujian, Sichuan, and Guangdong provinces; border prefectures in northwest Yunnan province are highly vulnerable to swings in the forest trade.

So far, efforts to reduce unsustainable logging practices have focused on controlling demand and encouraging supply in China. However, a large amount of high-value timber products from Myanmar re-exported to international markets, rather than to meet domestic demand. Controlling domestic demand in China may not be enough to reduce unsustainable forestry from Myanmar.

There are three major challenges for long-term forestry in the region. A predicted decline in forest trade means that people living on the border between the countries must move away from a reliance on the timber industry. This will require training for border populations in new occupations. Negative environmental impacts from the industry will only be solved by a reduction in logging, but there is also a need to assess existing damage and identify potential measures to repair this. Finally, China's growing economy will need a stable supply of timber. State and smallholder plantations will need expanding to provide this and reduce China's dependency on imports.

The research identifies three priorities for Chinese forestry agencies, international forestry organisations and donors:
● Help people living on the Yunnan-Myanmar border to develop new income activities and end their reliance on the timber industry.
● Assess and take action to mitigate ecological damage from the timber industry.
● Develop a more sustainable supply of timber in China through state plantations and collective forest management.

> Policies have promoted sustainable forestry in China, but high rates of imported wood have negative impacts on the forests in Myanmar

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Community forestry in Nepal: are poor people winners or losers?

As governments realise they are not always best at managing natural resources, many are transferring land rights to communities. As well as improving environmental management, this process is expected to reduce poverty. However, important social differences in communities allow some people to benefit more than others.

Research from the University of York, UK, looks at community forestry schemes in Nepal. There have been environmental improvements since the introduction of common property systems for forests, including more sustainable use and collection of forest products. However, in terms of economic gains, the poorest and most marginalised members of communities receive the fewest benefits.

Not all members of a community want to use forest resources in the same way. Differences in wealth, culture, caste and gender mean that people have different priorities and beliefs about how to manage and use the forests. In many places,

> **Forest User Groups usually consist of powerful community members, who make decisions for their own benefit and ignore the needs of poor people and women**

Forest User Groups (FUGs) make decisions about management of community forest resources. These groups usually consist of the most powerful community members. These people make decisions for their own benefit and ignore the needs of poorer people and women. This means poor people lose out economically from the shared resource and have less incentive to follow rules designed to protect the forest.

The research examines the extent to which subsistence farmers benefit:

- A widespread belief is that women and the poorest members of communities rely most heavily on community forest resources. In Nepal, however, richer and male-headed households rely more on these resources.
- Forest product collection laws favour richer households: unrestricted collection is only allowed for products such as fodder and leaf litter, rather than more valuable resources, such as firewood and high value non-timber forest products (NTFPs).
- High caste households and those headed by men tend to have more private land and livestock. These households also use forest products the most and so receive the highest income from shared community resources.
- The common property system has banned many activities that poor people used to rely on, such as making charcoal, fire wood and NTFP collection.
- Well-educated people use fewer forest products, because they have alternative employment opportunities.

Handing over land rights and resource management powers to communities in Nepal has provided fewer benefits to the poorest people. In order to improve equity in community-managed forests, the different groups within communities must be considered. One potentially fairer system would be to allow for transferable rights over forest products within a common property system. For example, poor people who do not have livestock could sell their share of forest products, such as tree and grass fodder, to another member within the FUG.

Other changes could improve the fairness of community forestry in Nepal including:

- increasing the fairness of decision making and management by ensuring that FUGs represent all social groups, including women
- encouraging alternative employment opportunities to reduce dependence on forest resources.

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case study

Supporting community forest management in Lao PDR

Increased demands for suitable agricultural land, shifting cultivation practices and logging have led to severe deforestation and environmental degradation in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR). After years of ineffective forestry management, the Lao government has now launched community based conservation initiatives to halt deforestation and promote sustainable forest management.

Research from the Faculty of Forestry, National University of Laos, argues that village forestry can promote long-term sustainable forest management. Village forestry aims to encourage community development by ensuring that local people receive a significant share of forest profits. Villagers participate in resource management training and become active participants in making forest management decisions.

Key research findings include:
- Local people have used profits from forest products to develop roads, schools and irrigation systems.
- After initial uncertainty about the motives of the project, local people now see village forestry as a good way to manage their forests and benefit their community.
- Before village forestry, local people had no control over the environmental damage caused by commercial logging companies. Now logging companies must negotiate low-intensity logging with villagers.

The development of village forestry has required time and money to train local people in forest management techniques. However, profits from forest products have been directed back into communities, enabling increased conservation and environmental protection.

Policy recommendations include:
- support and training, including participatory land use planning and participatory forest inventory training, for local authorities will help them to work effectively alongside villagers
- governments must be willing to devolve management responsibilities to local authorities and villagers
- the role of villagers as decision-makers and managers of forest resources must be included in new laws and regulations
- authorities must finance management training programmes and technical services to enable villagers to develop skills such as forest management, land use planning, financing and community development
- access rights for local people to use forest resources must be recognised and supported by central government policies.

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From poachers to tour guides: a forest management success story

The challenge of forest conservation is to balance a range of ecological, social and economic interests. Many attempts at participatory forest management fail because of conflicts between these different interests. What conditions create successful and sustainable participatory forest management?

Research from the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization looks at a participatory approach to forest management in India. In the mid-1990s, the Periyar Tiger Reserve in Kerala faced many problems. Although the reserve was established to protect the habitat of tigers, it is also an important place of worship for Hindus, and a lakeside tourist destination. The number of religious pilgrims and tourists grew steadily from the 1950s. This caused significant environmental impacts, such as clearing of the forest for roads and tourist developments.

Despite the growth in tourism, forest communities remained poor. Whilst some worked in low paid jobs providing services to tourists and pilgrims, many were involved in illegal trade in forest products. The Forestry Service decided that policing the forest was no longer an effective approach to management.

In 1996, the state government launched the India Eco-Development Project to reduce conflicts between local people and park officials. One key element of the project is the understanding that there are mutual benefits if different stakeholders work together in forest management. However, this relationship is only possible if local people secure incomes that match their previous illegal activities. This was difficult to achieve in Periyar because of the huge diversity of people around the reserve who depended on the forest.

The project established Eco-Development Committees (EDC) to form relationships between similar social groups. Ethnicity, locality or profession formed these groups. The research shows:

- Poorly paid labourers formed several EDCs at different stages of the pilgrimage route. Others consisted of former bark smugglers, and other ethnic and occupational groups, who were trained to protect forest and wildlife by forming patrol squads.
- EDCs must contribute to the protection and management of the reserve. In exchange, local people are allowed to earn a legal income from the forest, such as collecting forest products and tourism activities.
- The project funds EDCs, but they are also required to match this contribution in cash, labour or agricultural products. Reserve authorities agree activity plans with each EDC.
- EDC members pay a percentage of their salaries into a community fund. This process will continue after the end of the project to ensure the sustainability of the EDCs.

> **Working together in forest management is only possible if local people secure incomes that match previous illegal activities**

Decisions on the structure, formation and functioning of the EDCs were central to the success of the project. This has implications for participatory forest management in other places, which have frequently encountered conflict between stakeholders.

- Each EDC is formed of people with similar backgrounds and interests. This means that discussions are equitable, disputes are more easily resolved and it is easier to gain co-operation within the EDC.
- EDCs should have income-generating and welfare functions, and work towards self-sufficiency. Successful EDCs are more likely to be effective in conserving forests and protected areas.

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useful websites

Asia Forest Network
www.asiaforestnetwork.org

Centre for International Forestry Research
www.cgiar.org/cifor

Forest Conservation Portal
www.forests.org

Forest Ethics
www.forestethics.org

Forest Trends
www.forest-trends.org

International Institute of Environment and Development - Forestry
www.iied.org/NR/forestry/index.html

International Union of Forestry Research Organisations
http://iufro.boku.ac.at/iufro

ProForest
www.proforest.net

United Nations Forum on Forests
www.un.org/esa/forests

World Rainforest Movement
www.wrm.org.uy

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