

5 June 2011

World Environment Day

Profiling Forests
in the International Year of Forests 2011

FOR MOUNTAINS AND PEOPLE

World Environment Day and the Significance of Forest Ecosystems in the Hindu Kush-Himalayas

For the Himalayan populations, forests are a source of livelihood and cultural identity, pillars for sustaining agriculture and the local economy, and producers of invaluable goods and services. Furthermore, forests have a paramount role in adapting to and mitigating the impact of climate change. However, swelling basic human needs and macro development initiatives are not matched by sustainable forest management to secure and sustain the host of productive and regulatory services provided by forests. In the International Year of Forests 2011, World Environment Day provides an opportunity to raise awareness among decision makers and development practitioners on the significance of the region's forests for sustaining forest-dependent communities, building local economies, and finally making populations more climate resilient, for example through value addition of rendered goods and services.



Challenges to Forests

Forests account for one-fourth of the land use in the Hindu Kush-Himalayas (just over 1 million sq.km). The forest ecosystems provide a wide array of goods and services such as food, household energy, hydropower, timber, grazing land, biodiversity conservation (including wildlife habitats), and non-timber and mineral resources, as well as opportunities for recreation and spiritual renewal. Yet despite their immense environmental, socioeconomic and cultural value, they have become degraded and depleted over the years.

The major processes associated with deforestation and forest degradation are largely anthropogenic, including clearing of land for agriculture, use of forests as grazing lands for livestock, human settlement, unsustainable logging, mining, hydroelectricity projects, military activities, mass tourism and massive infrastructure development. Only three of the eight countries in the region have stabilised or reversed their forest cover loss in recent years. Centralised forest governance systems that treat forests as 'revenue sources' and deprive authentic forest users from traditional access to forest resources do not appear to work.



ICIMOD's focus

ICIMOD's main aim in the sector is to secure and sustain forest ecosystems in the Hindu Kush-Himalayas for provision of goods and services and for climate resilience. The focus since the 1980s and 1990s has been on comprehensive research on key regional issues such as pro-poor and inclusive forest policies, institutional arrangements and management approaches; harnessing of knowledge on access and benefit sharing; and creation and building of advocacy networks and institutional arrangements for sustainable forest management. In line with debate on and initiatives for re-empowerment of traditional communities, ICIMOD mobilises knowledge networks, civil society and policy makers to build on community-based or participatory forest management concepts. This approach is aligned with the global attention to decentralised natural resource management advocated in the Earth Summit's Agenda 21.

The debate on the impacts of climate change in the region has brought the forest sector into the limelight. Work in the sector increasingly focuses on generating knowledge in the major areas of governance, livelihoods, ecosystem services, and technologies. Good forest governance is key to sustainable forest management in the region; it can ensure long-term delivery of forest-based local livelihoods and ecosystem services. Modern technologies to collect and validate forest information are also important. Knowledge on conservation technology and good energy-related practices can make a major contribution to local climate change adaptation and reducing women's labour. The aim is to keep innovating, to consolidate knowledge and to communicate it to forums on policy and practice. ICIMOD is aware of the need for updated strategies to foster opportunities brought by climate change and to pursue fresh economic avenues created by new development paradigms.

Along with our partners, we address knowledge gaps in the sector by:

- contributing credible learning towards consolidating regional policy and strategic frameworks and actions for implementing sustainable management of forests, keeping climate, gender, and equity in view;
- contributing to national and regional frameworks of cooperation for good forest governance based on participatory forest management;
- improving knowledge on valuation of forest ecosystems and interfacing ecosystems such as rangelands, and testing and mainstreaming their paradigmatic role as avenues of development (e.g., via incentive-based mechanisms for communities rendering sustained forest goods and services, including forest carbon and biodiversity; sustained value chains for livelihoods and local economy; and sound management approaches);
- building a regional repository and forum of knowledge on forest ecosystems in the Hindu Kush-Himalayas and facilitating exchange of learning between regional policy and decision makers, researchers, and resource managers.

Apart from building a broader cross-institutional context, ICIMOD is using the International Year of Forests 2011 as an opportunity to refresh understanding on the crucial role of forest ecosystems in delivering goods and services to millions in the region, and how we can help them do so in an efficient, effective, equitable, and sustainable way. Forests are an integral part of discussions and solutions in areas such as remote sensing and geo-information based data collection and validation; climate resilience; and economic instruments for sustainable, gender-sensitive, and equitable natural resource management. ICIMOD is building strategic alliances and partnerships and promoting innovation on capacity building and regional cooperation to promote the development of mountain-specific sustainable forest management.



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