Beyond Tradition: Emerging Trends in Women's Role in Protected Area Management in the Indian Himalayas

Ruchi Badola, Shivani Chandola-Barthwal and Syed Ainul Hussain

Conflicts between conservation and development characterize the Protected Area (PA) systems in the Indian Himalayas, posing significant conservation challenges. Minimizing these conflicts is critical for securing the livelihoods of local communities and for biodiversity conservation. While formulating and implementing intervention measures, the fact that women bear a disproportionate burden of PA declarations and the resultant conflicts is often ignored and gendered roles are neglected. The complex nature of PA-people conflicts entails understanding of the gendered context of these conflicts and empowering the local community in view of the gendered differences. However, initiatives to empower women are hampered by women's lack of education and skills and by low self esteem resulting from their marginalization due to socio-cultural taboos. In some places in the Indian Himalayan region where there is intervention of the state and civil society, women living inside or at PA borders are actively participating in PA management and financial and ecological gains from the PAs are reducing their vulnerability as a result. We present a multiple case study analysis from some selected PAs in the states of Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Sikkim in the Indian Himalayas, where women have taken a key role in environmental stewardship and in their own economic, social, and political empowerment. Our case studies examine the types of institutional infrastructure available and measure their efficacy in empowering women and reducing their dependence on PAs, thereby contributing to biodiversity conservation. Ways and means to sustain such efforts in the long run are discussed. Access to education, credit, technical knowledge, entrepreneurship development programmes, and employment opportunities for hill women is important to reduce their vulnerability to declining resource access and in making their voices heard. Internal reorientation at the institutional level, to make them gender-responsive, is needed to bridge the gap between gender issues and the scientific management of natural resources.