

# Banko Janakari

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## Nepal's forest: a diminishing resource ?

The national forest inventory has been completed. And, its report has also been recently endorsed by the Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation. With this, documents on Nepal's forests now on will cite the country having only 29% of its land under forest having ten (or more) percent of crown cover. Hitherto this figure was 38%. It is not the matter of citation in the texts that is important, what is shocking to all informed people of the country, is a substantial loss of the country's forest area in the past twenty years. With an annual rate of 1.7% decrease of the country's forest cover, and in the Terai alone such rate being 1.3%, the country's policy makers might be in grave concern of the existing forest management practices.

The estimation done by the Land Resource Mapping Project in 1978/79 indicated Nepal's forest cover as 38% plus 4.7% shrub totaling to 42.7%. The present figure is 29% forest cover plus 10.6% shrub totaling to 39.6%. There seems, however only 3.1% decrease in the forest land, but the increase of shrub cover in every regions at the cost of forest area followed by a gradual transformation of forest land into other land-use forms in the Terai, is nothing but an indication of a catastrophic ecological imbalance for the mountainous country like ours. The decrease of forest cover from 34.2% in 1978/79 to 23.4% in 1993/96 (annual rate of loss is 2.3%) in the fifty one hilly districts and the lowest percentage of shrubs and forest cover in areas between 1000 to 2000 m is its sign.

What went wrong ? Why is Nepal's' forest - so vital for restoring water balance and supporting optimal productivity of agricultural land - decreasing with a pace seemingly beyond control ? In spite of a huge input from our own efforts as well as from a number of external funds expended to manage the forests, the reverse gear so pronounced in the forestry sector, is some thing very serious.

Plenty of reasons are cited purporting to explain the causes of forest destruction. Of them, reasons related to population increase have been cited the most often. But, one must not forget the trans-boundary smuggling of timber, legal and illegal settlements of the hill migrants, agricultural expansion, fire, and also the presence of Bhutani refugees are the significant causes which have not been effectively tackled. Above all, scientific management practices to increase forest productivity have never been

adequately applied, and since 1964, the growing stock of forests in the Terai is in decline from 101 to 73 cubic metre for Sal (*Shorea robusta*) and 76 to 58 cubic metre for the Terai Hardwoods.

Much has been depicted about the country's shift in forest policy from 'a failed policing' to 'participation', and much is expected from it. Nepal has been praised, especially by the donors for adopting it. Peoples' participation is undoubtedly a noble approach of forest management and should be cherished. But, the lack of adequate homework before handing over and/or the snail's pace of handing-over forest areas to the communities (the present rate of handing over may need sixty more years for its completion), their post formation support, and solving issues related to conflicts and other discrepancies especially in the Terai where there is market access, etc. have made this programme debatable. Handing over large areas of commercial forests to a small number of users is one such example which will force people to think instinctively on the negative side of this programme.

The role that forests play in the country like ours needs no elaboration to forestry professionals; nonetheless, the truth is that the forests of Nepal are decreasing at an alarming rate since 1960s. The national mandate of developing forestry sector for the welfare of the country is solely given to forestry professionals. And it is, none other than we forestry professionals, senior or junior, should share the credit or discredit of the state of affairs. Instead of pointing fingers to others, we should take responsibility for not being able to manage them to the level needed. Unless realised, the time is not very far when we won't see the remaining public forests, except protected areas, of this beautiful, but neglected country.

Lastly, thanks to the hard core effort of the Ministry for strictly setting aside 18.1% of the country's land as protected areas most of which have reasonable forest cover, or is it the only system to save the remaining forests of the country ?. Hopefully, better sense will prevail.

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