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## Let's air our dirty laundry

Scientists and developers can't save the world when they have to play along to get along

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### The truth won't out

Corruption and incompetence would not suffice to cripple development if scientists and developers were not afraid to blow the whistle and expose them. But it seems that the only way to protect your job in this little gossipy country is to protect the egos and reputations of those who are screwing up. Question: How can we put an end to self-censorship

It's no secret: Nepal is a development basket case. Despite the fact that the country is overrun with foreign researchers and developers and flooded with loan and grant money, the major problems remain intractable. No one has any doubt where the roots of those problems lie: bad governance and self-interested assistance. Corruption is deeply entrenched in Nepal, as in most LDCs. Foreign aid is frequently a poisoned gift, designed to further the donor nation's priorities, often at the expense of the recipient. Ke game?

What can the scientific community do to improve the effectiveness of development programs in Nepal (and presumably elsewhere)? The first step is to admit that we are part of the problem.

Let's start with an observation made by Gautam and Watanabe in this issue of HJS. Writing about the need to apply traditional silvicultural knowledge, the authors point out that "the NTFPs are so vast and diverse that merely waiting for scientific results may entail delays that preclude sustainable management." Clearly there are many other fields where we cannot afford the luxury of complete scientific investigation – and I strongly suggest that we not wait for a full investigation of this phenomenon before consideration of the next step. That is, what should a scientist do when he suspects that his research is an unnecessary obstacle to effective management?

Now let's look at a rather different sort of bottleneck. In 1989, Ives and Messerli published *Himalayan Dilemma*, a work that could well serve as a textbook on the inadequacies and misapplications of scientific research in the Himalayan region. One fairly typical example: it seems that, while researchers have been studying the hydrology of micro-scale watersheds in Nepal, they have been unable to correlate their findings with data gathered far downstream. The Indian government classifies all such data as secret – presumably to avoid giving away evidence that might be incompatible with India's unilateralist development of water resources. So, what should researchers in Nepal do when they cannot come to solid conclusions about critical phenomena such as the erosional impact of agricultural intensification, road-building, and forest removal?

These are among the simplest dilemmas facing Himalayan researchers. Here, based solely on my own experience, is a short laundry list of some of the nastier double binds that confront scientists working in the Himalayan region.

1. Despite the fact that they are supposedly making important contributions to economically and ecologically challenged nations, INGO personnel as well as foreign academics doing research in the Himalayan region actually depend on the good graces of their host countries. Prudence is essential if one wishes to work for extended periods in a protected area. Researchers in Tibet are, of course, well-advised to concur with Chinese versions of that region's history, and to refrain from criticizing China's Taiwan policy, repression of minorities, and remarkably vicious authoritarian regime. But the self-censorship does not involve only historical and ethical abstractions: it also involves agencies and policies that are central to the researcher's work. Criticism of the management of Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP), for instance, is extremely risky given the current King Gyanendra's longtime patronage of the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation. The result is a sustained whitewash of both development and conservation efforts.

2. Self-censorship also applies when it comes to the performance of international agencies. In a world where who you know is everybody's stock-in-trade, it just isn't smart to point fingers at well-heeled organizations.

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3. When it comes to remote locales, very few researchers or developers stay in the field long enough to make a great difference. Graduate students are more likely to endure the hardships (and learn the local language) than professors and developers, but they need to finish their degrees, go home, and look for work. The result is that a large proportion of basic research and development in the field is done by neophytes.

4. Certain topics are so politically potent that it is dangerous to take a contrarian stance. Examples: gender studies, garbage on Mt. Everest, Sherpa and Tibetan culture, ecotourism, rapid participatory assessment.

5. No one publishes his own failures. In many cases, these are the experiences that would be most instructive to others working in the same field.

Of course, there are people who tell the truth, and some who even get away with it. "It's all bullshit on Everest these days," Sir Edmund Hillary told an interviewer in the run-up to the Golden Jubilee celebration of his and Tenzing's first ascent of that peak. (He was referring to the commercialization of adventure.) In fact, there are competent and committed researchers and developers, even in Khumbu. But it's the bullshit that threatens to overwhelm every decent effort. It's the self-censorship, the evasion, the whitewash, that sustains the failure of development.

So, what to do? That is the question that we pose to our readers.

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