

## Conservation and Livelihoods

### Integrating People and Nature: A Perspective for Environmental Conservation and Livelihoods in the Context of Nepal

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#### Abstract

*In Nepal, protected area approach to environmental conservation has been a highly contested issue, particularly in view of the conflicts between local people and conservation authorities. Presenting evidences and insights from Royal Chitwan National park and reviews of relevant theoretical knowledge, the paper argues that the protected area approach involves enormous local social costs in terms of limiting livelihoods opportunities to local people, as well as ignoring the potential of local institutions in the conservation. It then suggests a social ecology perspective to balance conservation and local livelihoods.*

*Key words: conservation, livelihoods, social ecology, protected area, conflict*

#### INTRODUCTION

Recently, I visited some Mushar-Bote villages in Nawalparasi, who are an indigenous people residing at the bank of Narayani River. After few years' gap, I had a chance to have an informal interaction with males and females, and some leaders of the community. When I raised the issue of massive poaching of rhino this year that prominently featured in the media, Amar Bahadur Majhi and his colleagues of Rajahar told me this story:

*It is obvious that more and more rhinos are being killed. Earlier, there was no restriction for fishing. We used to fish freely, move here and there throughout the river and quite often stay overnight in the forest. People used to see us as the custodians of Park and hardly attempted to enter illegally into the park. In many instances, we either chased them away or informed the park security posts about the incidence. But now due to the restriction in fishing we hardly go to the riverside. We have seen many trees being felled and rhinos being killed: we do not care as we are forcefully excluded from the forest and river of which we have always been a part.*

When I asked about the fish population in Narayani, Tej Bahadur Musahar of Pithauli told me another story:

*Fish availability has drastically been reduced after the constriction of the Gandak dam. Similarly chemicals from Bhrikuti paper mills and beer factory has reduced fish population. We have found wounds in the fish skin around the outlets of these factories. Many times we have seen thousands of tiny dead fishes upside down due to the toxins used. Despite their (Parks') several years' attempts of breeding crocodiles in the river we have hardly encountered any crocodiles during fishing. They have not only segregated us from forest and river by denying our customary rights, but also have failed to recognize our rich knowledge about fish, forest and the way these resources are damaged. We wonder why the government does not understand these realities.*

During my several years of interactions with the members of this community, I have come across several similar responses, which come out of their long interaction with and observation on the ecological changes, which they have been observing over the past 100 years in and around Royal Chitwan National Park (RCNP). The above story is a typical example of feelings and reactions of people who live close to protected areas (PA) in Nepal. There are hundreds of stories of similar experiences, which come through a range of different groups of people who depend directly on natural resources in one or other ways.

These stories provoke some crucial questions on the current philosophy, approaches and practices of environmental conservation in Nepal:

- Can nature be protected by separating it from people?
- How compatible is the protected area model with Nepalese context?
- Are there any alternative approaches to conservation?
- How the learning from indigenous culture can be applied to improve conservation policies?

Looking into the escalating conflicts between RCNP and local people, I do not agree on the idea that nature can be protected by isolating it from people, particularly those who are inextricably linked to the natural system. By showing the historical root of national parks, I argue that protected area management approach to environmental conservation is an alien concept and do not fit with the Nepal's context. Drawing lessons from traditional practices of indigenous communities, I propose a social ecology perspective for environmental conservation, which provides a general vision for ecological conservation along with sustainable local livelihoods.

Conservationists and planners often fail to understand, or at least recognize, the understanding of socio-cultural and political roots of environmental conflicts, and tend focus on immediate technical and economic measures. This reductionist approach to defining problems has limited the scope of seeking alternative options of nature conservation that seeks to compensate local peoples for their forgone uses of natural resources. Conventional conservation approach, which essentially consists in the establishment of protected areas along with integrated conservation and development program (ICDP) in the affected areas, is being increasingly criticized for its wrong assumption of the nature-culture relationship.

Observations and experiences from RCNP show that ICDPs are not the effective solution to increasing conflicts between the park and the local people. The deteriorating park-people relation in Chitwan valley, despite continuous experimentation and implementations of ICDPs by the government and conservation authority, demands a rethinking in current approach to environmental conservation.

Nepal's environmental degradation, especially in respect of deforestation and soil erosion, gained national and international attention through several ecological studies particularly after Echolm's (1976) 'Theory of Himalayan Degradation'. Urgent measures were suggested to halt the situation immediately. Meanwhile a campaign to establish protected areas all over the world was on its way. International conservation organizations especially WWF and IUCN were urging to establish more and more PAs worldwide. As a result several protected areas were established during the seventies and eighties. In Nepal RCNP was the first (established in 1973) in this series, which now consist of 14 protected areas covering, more than 18 percent of the national territory.

## **CONFLICTS, CULTURAL ROOTS AND CRITIQUES**

### **Conflicts**

Various forms of conflicts between protected areas and local people have been documented from different parts of the world (Ghimire and Pimbert, 1997; Kothari et al. 1998). RCNP in Nepal is not the exception (Nepal and Weber, 1994; KMTNC, 1996; Straede, and Helles, 2000). As they have observed the major sources of these conflicts are restriction over resource use, human and domestic animals casualties from wild animals, and grazing and collection of fuel wood and fodder. The effects of these conflicts are the diminishing quality of life of many people, particularly poor and indigenous peoples living in and around the PAs. Consequently local people seem to have alienated from these resources, which has changed them from conservers to destroyers. The decreasing sense of responsibility towards park among the Bote/Majhis is clearly a result of this process. This alienation along with the park authorities' inability to check the destructive forces arising from market and industrialization (such as the beer factory polluting rivers) have ultimately threatened the ecological integrity of the PAs.

The ever-increasing conflicts between park and local people have already become visible and there are some recent attempts to reduce them particularly through participatory ICDPs. Park and people project launched from 1994 and buffer zone management program launched from 1996 in Terai Parks are the major initiatives in this direction in Nepal. Compensating local people for their otherwise lost resource access by supporting them in their socio-economic development is the fundamental logic behind this approach (Sayer, 1991). Despite the flow of huge resources, these attempts seem to be unable to establish an amiable relationship between local people and protected area management (Brandon and Wells, 1992). Amelioration of these conflicts and ensuring conservation along with sustainable livelihoods of the local residents has become a real challenge for the environmental management in Nepal.

### **Incompatible cultural roots**

Separating nature to save it from people has its root in the modern Western scientific understanding of nature. It presents human behavior as anti nature and thus advocates protecting nature from people (Colchester, 1994, Guha and Martinez-Allier, 1997). Within the Western Judeo-Christian tradition, wild nature is presented as an evil and that human progress was possible only by achieving mastery over nature (Colchester, 1994). Human civilization has thus been presented as against the nature. When the forest resources were depleted as a result of growing economy in the industrial societies, initiatives to save the forest from over exploitation began in the West particularly in the US. The US model of nature conservation took the form of preserving 'pristine wilderness' in its original form, undisturbed from any kind of human intervention. Establishment of Yellowstone National Park in 1872 as the first national park by evicting several people from its territory is a living example of this history. Although non-consumptive uses of these resources (recreational purpose) were permitted, the basic purpose was to keep nature away from human activity. To equate environmental conservation with wilderness, according to Guha and Martinez-Allier, (1997) is distinctively an American notion.

This model is then expanded all over the world particularly to protect the tropical rainforest from growing population of poor in the developing countries. The massive growth of protected areas in the developing world during last 30 years gives the picture of expansion of this idea from First to Third World countries. Nepal's national conservation policy is highly influenced by the global conservation movement, dominated by wilderness protection thinking (Muller-Boker, 1999);

Ghimire, 1992; Parajuli, 2001). Muller-Boker (1999) in her more than 20 years of observation and interaction with the Tharus of Chitwan has rightly commented about the commencement of national park as the dominance of "a modern, scientifically molded understanding of the environment that stands against the nature culture nexus of a traditional pro-industrial society". As Shrestha and Conway (1997) observed, the official development and environmental policies of Nepal fail to recognize the intertwined relation between forest and people under peasant ecology. On the whole these policies foster the process of alienation of local people from their natural resource base and have put people's daily survival against the environmental sustainability. The above story from Amar Bahadur Majhi shows how the separation of these fishing communities from their livelihoods base has alienated them and how it contributed to increased rhino poaching and tree felling from the park. Once they felt that the forest and river no more belonged to them they did not care much about the illegal activities of other people that undermine the integrity of the park.

### **Theoretical critiques of nature-culture divide**

This nature-culture dichotomy, which leads to separating environmental resources to protect them from local people, has been severely criticized for its wrong philosophical base and its practical consequences on the livelihoods of the poor rural inhabitants in developing countries (Guha and Martinez- Allier, 1997; Shiva, 1991; Guha and Gadgil, 1994; Neumann, 1997; Parajuli, 2001). Scientific forestry and wilderness conservation both are informed by the notion of nature-culture divide that is at the heart of the modernist paradigm and obfuscate the understanding of how nature and culture might actually intersect and interpenetrate in non-western societies (Parajuli, 2001). Indigenous societies find their biophysical, human and super-natural world in continuity embedded in their social relation (Escobar, 1998). Moreover they have a symbiotic relationship with nature so that their socio-economic viability is intrinsically intertwined with the long-range sustainability of their environmental resources base. (Shrestha and Conway, 1997).

## **A NEW PERSPECTIVE**

### **Local foundations**

Any approaches that might be helpful to reduce current conflict between PAs and local communities and that could ensure sustainable rural livelihoods and at the same time should enhance local ecological condition should emerge from our local context. The rural farming society under the traditional 'peasant ecology' in Nepal, who still depend heavily on the subsistence farming provides the best scenario to observe the interaction of forest resources conservation and livelihoods. Thus while discussing the appropriate approach to forest conservation, it will be worthy to revisit our traditional practices of forest resource utilization system.

Tharu, Darai, Kumal, Bote and Musahar, the indigenous communities of Chitwan and Nawalparasi have been building their civilizations in co-operation and co-existence with the local forest, land and water resources in this valley. The extreme hot weather combined with malaria, snake and wild animals which many migrant still fear from did not detract the these indigenous people from this valley. These people with many other peasant groups still see their future in a well-advanced agrarian system where subsistence production goes with improving the quality of life and enhancing the local ecological condition. Parajuli (2001) calls this as 'ecological ethnicity' for their respectful and symbiotic relation with local ecology. This is what Gandhi called an 'agrarian simplicity' or Wendell Berry a 'land ethic'. In this system farming is an art of producing food with the best management of land, forest and water resources assuming them as a single unit. This is how forests have been protected in this valley for several generations. It is only after the government's intervention in this valley through Rapti Dun Development Program, deforestation began.

## **Theoretical development**

Some scholars have put forward the theory of social ecology to better explain the relation between human society and natural world, which draws its validation from the experiences of indigenous peoples in different parts of the world. Bookchin (1990) explains human being and their behavior as a product of a natural process and thus is part of nature. Social ecology does not recognize the dichotomy of the nature and culture and thus advocates a co-existence between them.

This gives a different perspective to understand and explain the ecological challenges of our present society. Current environmental conservation measures, which focus on greenery, wilderness and wildlife, seem to be lacking in their understanding of social roots of ecological problems. Above story from Tej B Musahar shows how Gandak dam and manufacturing factories have contributed to the deteriorating river ecosystem while the authorities blame fishing as the only causes of depletion of fish population. According to Bookchin and other social ecologists environmental problems cannot be solved without addressing our economic, cultural, ethnic and gender problems. Since our ecological history is being shaped by the nature of social contradictions of our society solving societal problems should precede to wilderness protection or scientific forest management to face present ecological challenges.

## **Implications**

In the context of environmental and livelihoods challenges of Chitwan Valley the above discussion clearly tells two statements. Firstly, ecological sustainability and local livelihoods both can be ensured not by separating them but by integrating them into a single and coherent system. This means a shift from bureaucratic enforcement to people's common responsibility. This is to recognize local people's access to and control over forest resources and to believe on their ability to conserve and manage it. Once we recognize and appreciate this relation we can find several ways to integrate local people with the forest resources around them.

Secondly, in order to improve the environmental condition of the area there needs a pre attention to solve the social problems such as poverty, community disintegration and social conflicts of the area. There is no basis to expect forest conservation from the hungry mouths and homeless poor who have been denied from their traditional basis of livelihoods. Equal attention should be given to control poachers and forest mafia so that they cannot live outside the public scrutiny and come to justice.

Chitwan Valley is abundant with fertile soil, rich forest and ever flowing water resources, which could be a hope for thousands of poor people living around there. There is a great prospect of ensuring and improving local livelihoods by integrating local land, forest and water resources with the productive activities of the local people. Although attempts may be made to keep nature intact by bureaucratic enforcement, giving it back to the community for renewal will lead to livelihoods, survival and sustainability in a real sense. Gandhi's agrarian simplicity always emphasized peasant ecology and urged for the careful interaction with nature. It may assert a fundamental rearrangement of land, water and forest, by defending peasantry from both ends - environmentalism (wilderness conservations) and developmentalism (western industrial mode). These ideas and approaches are increasingly being integrated under social ecology, which seeks to provide a general vision to realize the popular slogan 'forest for livelihoods'.

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