Nepal's Conservation in Crisis: Empowering People to Secure Natural Resources

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Abstract

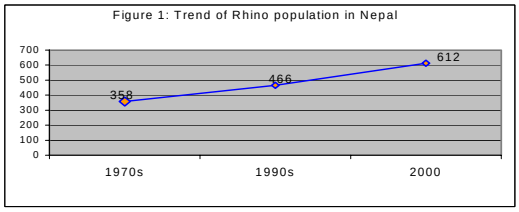
Nepal's decades of conservation efforts are at risk due to armed conflict in the country. The conservation model based on the foundation of strict protection has been found insufficient during present political crisis as protected areas enjoy no or little public support. Many protected areas are showing 'paper park syndromes'. Crisis also offers a great opportunity to conservation agencies to reassess their policies, practices, and priorities and identify better options that can withstand difficult circumstances. This paper presents an overview of present crisis in biodiversity conservation and suggests some alternative mechanisms for long-term conservation of biological resources of the country.

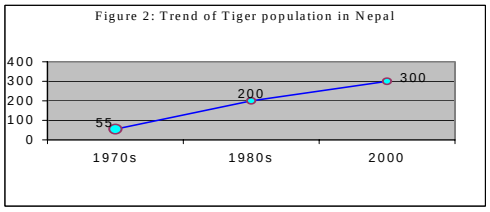
Key words: Nepal, conservation, protected area, buffer zone, crisis

AN OVERVIEW OF CONSERVATION STATUS IN NEPAL

Nepal is bestowed with an enormous wealth of natural and cultural diversity. The country has been highly successful in establishing an impressive network of protected areas as a means of protecting natural heritages and biological resources. Over the past two decades, an impressive network of Protected Areas (PAs) has been established covering about 18% of the total area of the country (DNPWC 2001). To date, the country has 16 PAs of different categories (9 National Parks, 4 Wildlife Reserves, 3 Conservation Areas, and 1 Hunting Reserve). The area under PAs has been increased by more than 6 times, from 4376 sq km in 1973 to 27196 sq km in 2000. The ratio of PA to total land area of the country is one of the highest in Asia. With the introduction of the Buffer Zone concept, the area under conservation regime has increased further.

Nepal is one of the few countries in the world, where the populations of several keystone species have recovered following the establishment of PAs since mid 1970s (DNPWC 2001) (fig 1, 2). In many respects, Nepal's commitment to the protection of biodiversity has been exemplary and the country has received international acclaim for its conservation efforts (Keiter 1995).





However, the conservation successes are always controversial. Conservation strategies of Nepal have been largely based on a people exclusive or 'wilderness protection' approach. Nepal may be the only country in the world where army has been regularly deployed for park protection. This approach, however, gave rise to direct park/people conflict as strict regulations denied access to park resources, which indeed continues to threaten the very survival of marginalized and poor communities. The revival of and increase in wildlife population has increased life and property damage in the adjoining areas, exacerbating the conflicts with park management (Nepal and Weber 1993). Although there are no comprehensive records, an official report revels that in 2000/1 an average of two people per month became the prey of wild animals in Royal Chitwan National Park (RCNP) alone (DNPWC 2001). For tourists or outsiders, strictly protected National Parks (NP) may be paradise holiday destinations, offering fascinating wildlife and landscapes, but to poor farmers they are no more than a symbol of

hardship and locked resources. The author still recalls the question of an elderly person in Langtang National park – *Janata thulo ki Janawar thulo sarkar* (who is important: people or animal my lord). Although studies on the costs and benefits of NP are non-existent in Nepal, it is likely, and of course certainly in view of the opportunity costs at community level - that the costs outweigh the benefits many times. This may be the main reason why people do not perceive parks as their property or as being for their benefit. In the absence of meaningful support from local communities, threats to sustainable biodiversity conservation continuously exist in different forms and scale.

CRISIS IN CONSERVATION

In Nepal, every period of political unrest takes a heavy toll on natural resources and biodiversity. In the three most turbulent political upheavals of the recent past (1980-81, 1989-90, 1996), forests appear to be one of the principal victims of political disruption. For example, it was reported that permits to cut thousands of hectares of forests in the Terai were sold at a premium to finance the Panchayat (the government) side of the 1980 referendum (Wallace 1988). In that year (1980/81) alone, the legal export of timber was about 160,000 cubic meters (The World Bank 1989) reaching at its maximum in the recent history of Nepal. Similarly, forestry institution is one of the hardest hit in current political crisis. More than 300 forestry infrastructures including 18 District Forest Offices have been destroyed in the last one year (personal communication Ambika Regmi – Forest Protection Officer, Department of Forests). The impact of the current political crisis due to Maoist insurgency, on conservation is also equally damaging than similar events in the past, and it is expected to increase if the crisis continues to exist. The rising trend of animal poaching and the destruction or occupations of park infrastructure certainly threaten the effectiveness of biodiversity conservation. Likewise, the uncontrolled extraction of forest products from the parks is another sad story. The destruction of forests and timber smuggling in important wildlife corridors may make situation further worse for the much hoped 'landscape approach'[1] to conservation.

Armed conflict will undoubtedly alter drastically the context in which organizations operate. Very often, it seems, especially in remote and strategic areas, conservation agencies are the first to leave and the last to return. Due to security reasons, Park offices of Kanchanjunga Conservation Area, Mannaslu Conservation Area, Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve and Makalu Barun National Park have been forced to move to respective district headquarters. In many areas, particularly in the mountains, park infrastructures have been either destroyed or seized. Some 44 insurgency damages have occurred in Protected areas with maximum in Shahi Phoksundo National Park (See table 1). In some cases for example in Sagarmatha National Park, as part of the defense strategy, the army has occupied the park headquarters. In general in most of the mountain parks, only junior staff remain and are operating in a management vacuum. Many parks are now slowly turning into 'paper parks' (i.e. parks that are 'protected' on paper only) because of difficult and dangerous working conditions.

Similarly, the level of activity of park authorities in the Terai region is also slowly diminishing. In most of these parks, army posts have been amalgamated for security reasons, creating an easy time for poachers and timber smugglers. For example, in RCNP army posts in have been reduced to less than a dozen from a former total of 39. According to Yonzon (2002), all over Nepal, more than 70% army posts have been removed from PAs due to security reasons. As a result, active conservation efforts have been blocked and the breakdown of law and order is widespread. The country has lost 38 rhinos in Chitwan at the hand of poachers between July 2001 – June 2002 (Yonzon 2002) and the majority of the deaths have occurred since the declaration of the emergency. Experts claim that such mortality could knock off growth rate (Yonzon 2002) and if unchecked, the endangered one-horn rhinos will be extinct from RCNP within a decade. Furthermore, if properly assessed, the rate at which animal poaching continues within and outside of the PAs in general should be more alarming. The status of resource exploitation in the remote parts of the country where the Maoists have *'de facto*' control is unknown.

Table 1: Destruction of park infrastructures

Name of the Pas	No of infrastructures damaged / sieged
Kanchanjunga CA	2
Makalu Barun NP	5
Sagarmatha NP	_
Koshitappu WR	4
Parsa WR	_
Langtang NP	2
Shivapuri NP	_
Royal Chitwan NP	1
Manaslu CA	1
Annapurna CA	7
Dorphatan HR	3
Royal Bardiya NP	4
Rara NP	2
Say Phoksundo NP	8
Khaptad NP	3
Royal Suklaphata WR	5
Total	47

The armed conflict often reduces access to resources for many; increases access (often illegal) for a few; and create a new array of winners and losers. For example, in most of the Terai parks, last winter's annual grass cutting was not allowed, for security reasons. The closure of the parks thus reduced access to basic forest resources for many poor people, and which forced illegal extraction. In addition, reduction in park income due to the low number of tourists will affect community development activities in the buffer zones, which is another blow to poor people. It is clear that while park protection may be expensive, park destruction is going to be even more costly for long-term conservation of biological resources and sustainable livelihood. So the existing problems could cause irreparable environmental damage and may ruin years of conservation efforts and successes of biodiversity conservation.

LOOKING FORWARD

The importance of effective conservation does not change with the rise and fall of crises. So, why is the government machinery failing to protect essential resources at a time of national crisis and why are so many parks suffering the 'paper park' syndrome? These are matters of great concern and warrant thorough analysis. A common underlying factor in conflict situations is a weak state system and breakdown of law and order. During the conflict, as government priority would be more on security, conservation agencies face a severe resource constraint even to maintain minimum park management activities. This, in turn reduces legitimate and effective government control and management of natural resources, leading to increased exploitation of those resources. The unprecedented rise in rhino poaching and unchecked resource extraction from parks following the declaration of the state of emergency, reveals that conservation based on a foundation of strict protection, crumbles very quickly and enjoys no or little public support. The strong army presence may control illegal practices during peacetime, but its removal or reduction during times of active combat leaves the park open to lawlessness and devastation.

However, conservation cannot wait and organizations need to be able to understand and adapt to these new and changing circumstances. Pro-active planning is essential to prepare for such crises in order to maintain effective management during times of conflict. At these times, the support of donors and international conservation partners is of enormous importance, both financially and psychologically. Even the minimum presence and support of conservation organizations has maximum value in terms of safeguarding biodiversity (Shambaugh et al 2001).

This crisis also demands that conservation agencies should reassess their policies, practices and priorities in order to cope with difficult circumstances. Participation of communities is many times important than the mere presence of conservation agencies and armed forces. Empowering people in general and local communities in particular, is the best option, as this enables the people develop a sense of "ownership" of resources. To get meaningful support from local communities, the benefit from conservation should outweigh cost to communities (Barrow and Fabricius 2002). There are many good illustrations from East Asia and Africa on how they have coped with difficult political

situations. For example, the survival of Awash NP in Ethiopia during extended periods of instability was largely attributed to participation of local communities in the park's management (Schloeder and Jacobs 2001). Conversely, parks managed in isolation have been devastated. In the Congo, for example, elephant populations were reduced to half during a very short period of armed conflict (Hart and Mwinyihali 2001). It is quite understandable that uncertainty over access rights would encourage unsustainable resource-use for short-term gain.

Clearly, the challenge of *how* to link people with conservation is the most immediate issue. Nepal has not only championed strict protectionist, approaches it is equally known for its innovative and participatory conservation approaches, such as the conservation areas and the buffer zone program, and in linking conservation benefits to local people. However, the recent incidents of animal poaching and destruction of park resources and infrastructure, indicate that people still do not feel "ownership" of the park systems and remain indifferent during the crisis time. So far, government has been only sharing benefits but not responsibilities, and has thus encouraged communities to be mere passive beneficiaries. Local people also feel that the present buffer zone programs have not been able to address the real problem of target communities (Anon 2002). For better management of the parks, rights and responsibilities should go together. It is worth considering seriously: which is more important, the winner or loser of authority, or saving our natural heritage so that it will still be here for future generations of Nepalese? Devolving conservation authority to the local level and making local people more accountable would be an appropriate option.

The time has come to realign biodiversity conservation from the bureaucratic entrapment to benefit many (Yonzon 2002). This may require policy as well as institutional re-structuring. Some form of Conservation Boards at the Park level and a Nature Conservation Authority at the center, with fair representation of government, private sector, local communities, district authorities and non-governmental conservation agencies could be explored. These organizations would be a broad-based agency with adequate autonomy and a democratic working culture. In reality, it is not such a radical approach, as government has already started devolving management authorities of many line agencies to the local bodies. These types of institutional arrangement do exist in many European and African countries and are doing well. Most European parks are fairly independent and are managed by local NP boards with a close relationship to local Councils equivalent to our DDCs. The Dartmoor NP of the UK is one of a good example of such arrangements (Haynes 1998). This is not to suggest that we should also follow suit or necessarily adopt a blueprint approach. The most important point to note is that devolving management to the local level makes it more cost effective; enhances local ownership and autonomy; and allows a level of flexibility in the management approach to suit the local situation. It has been proven that natural resource management initiatives developed in collaboration with local communities and based on local needs, are often more likely to endure during periods of armed conflict because communities have a vested interest in them (Shambaugh et al 2001). The effective protection of community forests in Nepal - even in the present state of political unrest - reinforces this theory.

CONCLUSION

Conservation will be out of context if it is not for people. Conservation organizations should take a broader approach to conservation, which means incorporating livelihood concerns in management and planning of PAs. Broadening conservation constituencies and linking conservation objectives with wider livelihood issues would save parks even during difficult times. Widespread conservation governance allows stakeholders to act collectively or individually to ensure their interests are addressed within the framework of conservation goals. Once their interests are allied with conservation, local institutions will complement the conservation effort when government agencies become ineffective during times of political crisis. In this regard, our conservation policies should be reviewed to allow stakeholders, particularly local communities, to play a greater role in the

management and planning of PAs. We must face up to this conflict and perceive it as a step towards the solution of a problem. Our rich natural heritage should not be subjected to destruction from political unrest. We cannot afford to be swinging from one end of a pendulum to another; we must compromise and learn how to live in harmony and co-existence with nature. Last but not least *"the significant problem we face can not be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them at best"*- a quote from Albert Einstein would be useful to remember here.

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[1] Landscape approach constitutes wholistic and integrated planning of a particular landscape including forest land agriculture and watershed areas for biodiversity conservation.