

## Chapter 5

# The Social and Economic Dimensions of Honey Hunting

The study team looked at the question of livelihoods and honey hunting among the people in the villages associated with the 26 sample sites.

### **Institutional Arrangements and Ownership**

Honey hunting is mostly governed by local traditions. According to these traditions, cliffs that host honeybee colonies usually belong to the local community (Table 3.1). In Kaski, individual families sometimes own the cliffs themselves, but the community either owns or has common property rights over them, and also owns the *Apis laboriosa* colonies and nests. In the past cliff ownership was sometimes transferred from one clan or community to another as a wedding dowry, but this practice is no longer common. In a few places community forestry user groups have also taken over cliff ownership and the right to harvest honey from these cliffs.

Since around 1990 the system of cliff ownership has been changing. The authority of the Forest Department and local government bodies has increased and in many parts of Nepal these bodies are slowly taking over control of the honeybee cliffs. This is one aspect of an ongoing process of formalisation and centralisation of control of resources that is taking place at all levels of government. The taking over of cliff ownership by government departments was observed in districts like Kavre, Nuwakot, and Sindhupalchowk during the preliminary survey. However, in Kaski the traditional arrangements still predominate for a number of reasons including the strength of the Gurung community and the remoteness of the area, which together have shielded traditional society from outside influences and slowed down the change towards modern lifestyles; the presence of the Annapurna Conservation Area Project which has helped raise people's awareness of their rights; and the lack of attempts by the local forest department leadership to take over control. However, as a result of poorly-defined, and in some cases missing, forest regulatory procedures, it is still possible that the Forest Department may some day take over the ownership of the cliffs in Kaski as it has in other districts of Nepal. Where the Forest Department has control of cliffs, the right to harvest honey is allotted to contractors. According to the Forest Act (HMG 2049), contractors pay a tax to the government of 10 rupees per kg of honey they harvest. Both the contractors and the government thus have a vested interest in maximising the amount of honey harvested – in contrast to the traditional practices.

## Profile of the Honey Hunters

There were 26 nesting sites in the Kaski survey and the honey hunters for these sites came from 12 villages. Almost all were over 50 years old. The great majority said that they had started as honey hunters when they were young, and had learned from their parents, grandparents, and other experienced honey hunters.

The honey hunters were mostly subsistence farmers practising agro-pastoralism. They grow wheat, barley, millet, maize, and sometimes rice on their small plots of land and keep livestock in high altitude forest areas, usually far from settlements. Family members live close to the livestock in temporary huts; the livestock is moved from place to place, depending upon the availability of fodder and the season. As well as honey and beeswax, the farmers collected non-timber forest products for food including vegetables (bamboo shoots, mushrooms, ferns, and yams) and fruit (raspberries, barberry, wild banana, and oleaster (*Elaeagnus angustifolia*)), and hunted wild animals and birds.

The honey hunters are proud of their work. Within the community, they are highly respected for having a mature, honest, fair, and courageous approach in their day-to-day life. The hunters all had strong traditional beliefs and respected nature and local traditions. They spend much of their time in remote wilderness areas looking after their livestock and have little contact with the outside world. They tend to be shy and straightforward in their ways. They have an intimate knowledge of local weather patterns and a wealth of knowledge about natural resource management. The communities prepared alcoholic drinks from millet and rice, and these also play an important part in their traditions.

## The Cash Economy

The part of Kaski where the honey hunters live is still not an area with a marked cash economy. Barter and self-production remain the major ways of maintaining livelihoods. Increasingly, however, other sources of income are becoming available and cash is used to purchase products like oil, soap, clothing, and salt that are not produced in the community. In former times honey was one of the major sources of cash income, however its importance is decreasing as less hazardous opportunities for earning develop. Temporary migration, working as porters or guides, forest development work, and others have become major sources of cash income. Remittances from abroad are also becoming increasingly important as a source of income in rural Nepal. During the survey we observed that at least one member of the family of all the honey hunters we interviewed was working abroad or at least out of the area, and this practice appears to be increasingly. Mountain tourism and the associated demand for services have also brought cash into the village economies. Even so, honey hunting has been and continues to be an important source of livelihood for some.

## Sales of bee products

Cash earnings from honey overall are relatively small. The estimated value of the honey harvested in the year 2000/01 by the ten communities in the survey who harvested is shown in Table 5.1. The



*Honey hunter from Sikles village looking after his goats*



*Sikles village, home of many honey hunters*

**Table 5.1: Estimated honey produced and possible cash earnings in 1999/2000**

Harvested cliff(s)	Name of the Community	Total honey harvested (kgs)	Number of nests	Estimated value @ 400Rs/kg (NRs)	Estimated cash equivalent return @ 50% of total harvest (NRs)
5, 6	Parche VDC - 5	90	12	36,000	18,000
1, 3a, 8, 9	Parche VDC - 6	615	53	246,000	123,000
4,13	Parche VDC - 7	160	17	64,000	32,000
7	Parche VDC - 8	60	10	24,000	12,000
14	Taprang village	40	8	16,000	8,000
18	Daulo village	450	36	180,000	90,000
19	Chhomrong	670	40	268,000	134,000
22,23	Landruk village	490	34	196,000	98,000
24	Jilibrang	380	18	152,000	76,000
25	Khaderjung	100	9	40,000	20,000
<b>Total</b>		<b>3055</b>	<b>237</b>	<b>1,222,000</b>	<b>611,000</b>

ten communities produced an estimated 3055 kgs of honey over the year. According to the honey hunters about half of the honey is usually consumed during the honey hunting event and some is consumed locally as a sweetener, medicine, and health food. This would have left some 1500 kgs available to be sold or bartered, an estimated cash equivalent return of about NRs. 600,000, from as little as NRs 8000 for one village to NRs 134,000 in another. If divided equally among a dozen honey hunters it might represent between NRs 700 and NRs 11,000 per person (family). This value should be compared with the poverty line in rural Nepal, which for some support purposes is calculated as an annual average per capita income of approximately NRs 4700. These are purely theoretical estimates, however. It was not possible to discover what the real cash (or barter) gain was per village.

Each kilogram of honey harvested also provides about 200 grams of wax. Wax is also sold and marketed through middlemen at the rate of NRs 100 - 200 per kilogram and is also traditionally used as lamp fuel and to treat infections and injuries. The total value of the harvested beeswax would have been around NRs 60,000 to 120,000, but it was not possible to ascertain what the actual income was.

Bee brood is another benefit although not a source of cash income. It is an important source of nutrition and is highly favoured by local communities as an alternative source of protein; it is considered a delicacy.

## Tourism

Himalayan honey hunting is starting to attract a considerable number of tourists. One tour operator reported that he had conducted seven honey-hunting events with the help of local honey hunters for the entertainment of tourists. These tourist groups pay between 1000 and 1500 US dollars per event (around NRs 80,000 to 120,000) to the village through the tour operator to experience and participate in a honey hunting event. In many cases tourists also have the opportunity to climb the cliff and be stung by the bees. Valli's books, articles, and film (including Valli and Summers 1988 a,b; Valli 1998 a,b) have fired western tourists with enthusiasm to see and feel this part of nature

in the wildest way. There is an immediate and relatively large cash benefit to the community, considerably larger than that provided by the honey alone. However the long-term costs may be high. The honey hunters reported, and we ourselves observed, that the populations of honeybees were considerably reduced in the areas where these events were conducted more frequently. Losing the bees means not only losing honey and honey hunting events as sources of income, it also means losing eco-services like pollination of wild plants and mountain crops, leading to a fall in productivity.

## **Overall Community Benefit**

The honey hunting communities did not regard the cash income from bee products as being the main gain of honey hunting; far more the community priority is on the associated social gatherings, interactions, and rituals. The local communities value honey hunting events as spiritual and social occasions. The events provide an opportunity to meet and chat with friends and relations from other villages. In the past, they were times when young boys and girls could get to know each other and develop relationships, and they gave young men the opportunity to demonstrate their bravery and daring. This used to be a common way of selecting partners; these days, however, young people have many other opportunities to meet.

## **The Dreams of the Honey Hunters: the Results of the First APPA Field Exercise**

Much of the information gathered during the APPA exercises has been presented above. However it is useful to gather together the specific results of the first APPA field exercise as a summary of the general attitudes, approaches, hopes and intended actions of the honey hunter group. The information is summarised under the four 'D' headings: Discovery, Dream, Design, Delivery.

Discovery – The honey hunters were asked questions that helped them understand the unique factors that made the high points possible in honey hunting. They were asked to share stories about exceptional accomplishments and life giving factors for their communities. Each individual honey hunter was asked to share the best moments, stories, and successes of the honey hunting system in his life. The major points identified were as follow.

- The hunters felt pride in the fact that the *Apis laboriosa* bees lived only in their part of the world. They thought that honey hunting events could/should be promoted for eco-tourism activities in the region because there was a large comparative advantage (uniqueness).
- Most honey hunters thought that the honey hunting system was an event strongly associated with social and cultural values as it brought people together for social gathering and entertainment. It was one of the strongest ways of organising people for collective benefit.
- Honey hunting is a source of cash income through selling of honey and wax. Beeswax can be processed to make different kinds of value-added products.
- Honey hunting skills, tools, equipment, and experiences are all locally developed.
- Honey hunting is a glue for social cohesiveness and unity.
- Honeybees are linked with biodiversity conservation and promotion of the environment.

Dream/Vision – After discovering the best moments, stories, and exceptional accomplishments, the honey hunters developed a future vision of what they would like to achieve and where they

wanted to be in 10 years time. This collective thinking and sharing of a 'future map' may be the most important resource for building the capacity of honey hunters and their communities.

- The group hoped to see five times more colonies in 10 years time than at present.
- They wanted all honey hunters and other community members to have strong unity and cooperation like bees.
- They wanted more skilful and trained honey hunters for honey harvesting, processing, wax processing, and making value added products.
- They dreamed of improvements in honey-hunting tools and equipment.
- They wished there would be a second generation of honey hunters to ensure continuity of the honey hunting system in the future.
- Their vision included improved forest management and forest coverage.

Design and Planning – This involved making an action plan to achieve the vision based on what the honey hunters could do for themselves. 'Designing' is a process of coming to consensus through sharing discoveries, ideas, hopes, and values. The honey hunters prepared a collective action plan for improving the honey hunting system. They made the following suggestions for implementation over time.

- Training on honey processing and packaging - Most honey hunters thought that skill enhancement in honey processing and packaging was vital for making honey-hunting more productive and sustainable in the long run.
- Training in wax processing
- Reducing the honey loss that occurs during hunting. Suggestions were given by the honey-hunters, including an exchange programme on experiences and skills.
- Awareness campaign for promoting honey-hunting as an eco-tourism activity, social gathering, and entertainment event.
- Exchange of experiences and skills in social mobilisation and networking

Destiny/Delivery – At the end of the field session, the participants made commitments to actions that would help towards achieving the vision and crystallising the meaning of the APPA process. The main commitments are summarised in the following. In practice these commitments were considerably extended and made more specific during the subsequent rounds of the process.

Capt Deu Bahadur Gurung (village group leader): I will try to continue honey hunting events as regularly as possible.

Mr Dhan Bahadur Khanal (main honey hunter): I will train the second generation honey hunters.

Mr Guman Gurung (pujari): I will hand over all the rituals and patterns related to the Puja process to the next pujari.

Mr. Sher Bahadur Gurung (signal indicator): I will continue my present duty with more co-operation and enthusiasm.

Mr Tul Bahadur Khanal (helper): I will continue my present duty of honey collection and control.

Mr. Medj Gurung (honey hunter from Sikles village): Even if the Taprang villagers are not interested in continuing honey hunting, I will not give up.

Mr. Ran Bahadur Gurung (helper): I will continue my present duty.

Mr. Dhan Bahadur Gurung (assistant village leader): I will try to bring new members into the group to increase sharing and understanding of the honey hunting system.