2. Conceptual Arguments

The responsibility of using natural resources as well as sustaining them should fall on the same people. Users and others who have rights to participate in decision-making about the protection and management of forests should be encouraged and enabled to do so. If they are denied that right, and "*if a community allows its forest resources to be depleted*", then "*its members must invest more energy and money in finding fuel and building materials*" (Korten 1986:5). Farmers in the villages of Nepal are aware of these realities.

People in a community usually desire to use the resources at their disposal productively, equitably, and sustainably to meet their needs. But actual performance varies from one community to another. The nature of control also varies from being broadly shared among user members to being controlled by individual leaders.

It is pertinent to consider such questions as: who controls the use of resources? Is it the Government or the people? Under the former PF and PPF system, only one way was provided for people to participate; the whole community was expected to protect the forest resources. In practice, however, until recently, the use of forest resources was strictly controlled by the Government. In other words, the protection and management system was purely **control-oriented** -- the Government retaining control on the local use of forest resources.

In spite of the Decentralisation Act of 1982 and the Decentralisation Bylaws of 1984 making it illegal not to decentralise (Shrestha 1987), it is still questionable whether the Act fostered the much publicised ideal of popular participation in Nepal. There is a popular Nepali saying, *"hattiko dekhaune dant ra khane dant bhindabhindai hunchhan,"* literally meaning that an elephant has different sets of teeth for displaying and for eating or chewing. In Nepal, *panchayat* rule, decentralisation, people's participation, and many other schemes and slogans simply became the elephant's *"dekhaune dant,"* displayed rather than put into practice.

In their discussion of community forestry in Dolakha, Gautam and Roche (1987:12-15) argued that people's participation had failed because of a wrong approach; perhaps, they suggested, we should talk of District Forest Office participation in people's forestry.

Cultural Context

McNeely and Pitt argued in favour of adding cultural and social dimensions to environmental planning and management for "*conservation from below*" and efforts "*to build on indigenous and traditional knowledge and practice*" (1985:1). This is what is needed in Nepal. It is essential to have an effective forest protection and management system for the rural areas in Nepal, but the means are needed to ensure that such efforts (of protection) benefit the local people who live near the forests and use the resources.

From the cultural perspective, it is important, first, to recognise the profound and detailed knowledge of the local people about their ecosystem. They not only know about the value of different species of trees in their forests but also have effective ways of using the forest resources sustainably for food, timber, fuel, medicine, and fodder for domestic animals. Second, it is equally important to recognise and utilise the local methods of protection and management. These methods typically rely on local cultural and religious norms, values, and beliefs. They are effective because they allow sustainable use practices (Klamn 1985).

Cultural norms and values, including religious beliefs, also act as control mechanisms--thereby aiding the local forest protection and management systems. It is also important to consider the local culture while dealing with the issue of popular participation. Since forest protection and management are human-centred, human-controlled, and human-manipulated processes, and since human societies are characterised by diverse social organisations and culture-specific norms, values, and beliefs, it is normal to find differences in the strategies adopted by different societies for the protection and management of their forests. For example, **religious fencing** (using religious objects as symbolic fence markers) has been crucial in some places in Far-western Nepal, not only in the conservation of religious forest patches but also in the management of other forests. In other places, the religious factors may not be important at all in this respect.

Conceptual Model

Forestry research needs to be comparative, holistic, and procedural. It should focus on interactions between people, resources, and culture (Figure 1). The case studies presented in this paper exemplify such an interaction.

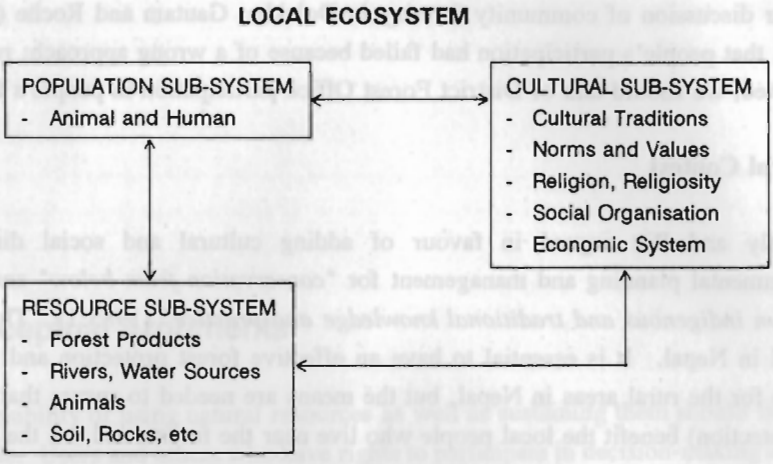

Figure 1: Conceptual Model: Interconnectedness of Population, Resources, and Culture

It is our contention that the observed forest protection and management systems in the rural areas of Nepal are the results of an interplay of a host of variables subsumed under cultural, population, and resource sub-systems as shown in Figure 1. Any attempts to address environmental issues cannot afford to ignore such a reality.

Blaming the village people for the deterioration of forest resources (increasing population needing more farmland, pasture, etc) is also a faulty judgment at best. Bajracharya (1983), in an empirical study at the village level, has persuasively argued that the problem of deforestation in Nepal ought to be considered within a holistic perspective. His data show that the real cause of deforestation in Nepal is not exclusively because of the demand for fuel among villagers. Clearance of forests often results from the need to increase agricultural productivity and to meet the increased food and fuel requirements of the ever-increasing population. While food production can be increased by land expansion (for cultivation) as well as by improving the productivity of the land already under cultivation, the rural farmers in Nepal often opt for the first method because of limited opportunities to apply the second. It is, therefore, essential that we look at the phenomenon under study from a holistic perspective as suggested in the conceptual model in Figure 1.