

Introduction

The First Regional Foresters' Forum in the Hindu Kush-Himalayas was hosted by the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) in collaboration with the Department of Forest Farming and Conservation, Government of Himachal Pradesh, India, and the Dr. Y.S. Parmar University of Horticulture and Forestry, Himachal Pradesh, India. The forum was held at Chail, in Himachal Pradesh, India, from June 14 to 17, 1995, and its theme was 'Participatory Forest Management: Coping with and Managing Change'.

The Hindu Kush-Himalayas are home to watershed systems and natural resources providing life support not only to mountain communities but also to those in the plains. Continuing resource degradation in the mountains has led to a growing concern and a sense of urgency in the context of seeking strategies which can ensure the sustainable management of mountain resources. Nowhere is the concern more marked than in the conservation of upland forests which contribute to communities' subsistence needs and to agricultural productivity in the mountains.

Participatory Forest Management (PFM) has emerged as a common strategy in the Hindu Kush-Himalayas to protect and manage forest resources in the mountains. A key element of this approach is collaboration between government institutions and local communities. Forestry professionals are increasingly recognising the role of communities and are willing to create policies and institutional environments that give local communities more control over their own resources.

ICIMOD's Participatory Natural Resources' Management (PNRM) Programme is mandated to operate in the countries of Nepal, India, and Bhutan where concepts of PFM are being promoted. While some of the impetus for this shift in focus has come from within forestry institutions, external agencies have often attempted to foster this process of change.

The first regional foresters' forum was designed to provide senior and middle-level forestry professionals with an opportunity to share their experiences in coping with and managing change in relation to PFM. These professionals brought with them rich experiences of successes and failures, but, above all, they brought a common concern for the forests and the people of the Himalayas. The workshop, structured to promote informality and maximise participation, focussed on the process of change from traditional to participatory models of forest management and the kinds of institution that are required to support this changing paradigm.

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About 45 participants from Bhutan, India, and Nepal attended the workshop. In addition to sharing information and experiences, participants also examined the merit of establishing a regular forum in the Hindu Kush-Himalayas to address emerging issues and challenges in participatory forest management on a continuing basis.