

3 History of Forest Management in Bhutan

3.1 Traditional Forest Management

An important characteristic of the forest sector in Bhutan is that the legal status of the various types of land use has a dominant influence on alternative forest use and resource allocation. Until fairly recently, land in Bhutan was essentially considered as a common property resource, with land use appropriated on a traditional basis. A common property resource in the Bhutanese context is defined as a forest resource held and managed by an identifiable community or communities to meet the needs of an individual or community as a whole, with traditional rules and customs governing its usage. Land was chosen and occupied by the rural population on the simple basis of availability and assumed use capacity. Demands were small relative to the available land, and there were relatively few serious land use conflicts. With the enactment and adoption of the Bhutan Forest Act in 1969, all land in Bhutan that was not privately owned was declared to be government reserve forest. Effectively this act closed the 'commons'; a system of permits was created in its place to authorise limited rights to the use of government forest.

The actual use of the forest is much older than the present system of government ownership and control. Traditional patterns of forest use and management have existed for centuries, and these patterns continue, directly or indirectly, to have an impact on forests. Much of the land used for agricultural purposes and for house building was originally cleared from forests. Similarly much traditional grazing land

and land used for collection of feed and fodder was originally forested. The use of forests for collection of firewood and wood for home construction was traditionally sanctioned as part of customary rights and was incorporated into the Land Act of 1979.

Before the then Department of Forest was created in 1952, every village, community or individual used to own a patch of forest or grazing ground for cattle in or around their village. These forest resources were subject to indigenous management. For example, if a person from outside a village wanted some trees or to graze their cattle in a forest or grazing area owned by a community or individual, then he or she had to get permission from the owner. Those seeking permission had to offer something, usually a bottle of 'ara' (a locally brewed alcohol). If someone from outside a village was found cutting trees or grazing cattle without permission, then that person would be fined or a case filed in court. With the creation of the Department of Forest and the adoption of the Forest Act of 1969, this kind of forest management by the local people faded into oblivion. The Department of Forest became the sole custodian of forest resources in the country. The current efforts of the government to revive the old system through the introduction of social and community forestry programmes have met with little success so far.

3.2 Government Management of Forest Resources

Government management of Bhutan's forest resources started with the creation of the

Department of Forest in 1952. The main activities of the Department have included institutional development, surveying, and demarcation of forest land. In 1969, the Bhutan Forest Act was adopted to regulate the use of forest. The National Forest Policy was passed in 1974, it emphasised the conservation and sustainable utilisation of forest resources. A survey of the forests was conducted with the assistance of the Indian Government, which provided information about growing stock, growth, and annual allowable cut.

As a result of inefficiencies in the contract system, forest logging operations were nationalised in 1979, and tree planting by farmers was initiated under a social forestry programme. Greater emphasis was placed on forest demarcation and afforestation activities, and the preparation of forest management plans was initiated.

3.2.1 Forest Policy

The guiding principle of Bhutan's Forest Policy is to ensure that forest resources are used sustainably and contribute to social justice and equity. The policy also emphasises conservation of the environment as the prime aim and derivation of economic benefits from the forest as a rationally managed resource as the second aim. The policy decrees that a minimum of 60 per cent of the country's geographical area is to be kept under forest cover at all times. This policy has mainly been implemented through laws and regulations restricting grazing in critical watershed and protected areas, banning logging on steeper slopes, and restricting the conversion of forest lands to other uses.

Historical Evolution of Forest Policy

The government policy on forest was instituted to ensure an adequate supply of forestry products to meet the needs of all inhabitants, and was based on development of customary user rights. The policy also took into account the sustainable management of forestry resources, which has been the principal rule for all state-managed forests. These concepts

were incorporated in the Forest Act of 1969, which declared that all land in Bhutan not privately owned was to be 'Government Reserve Forest', and its use would be regulated by a system of permits. The policy also led Bhutan to embark on a programme of establishing protected areas (parks, sanctuaries, and reserves), the total area of which is now 970,000 ha, 26 per cent of the country's geographic area.

Under the Forest Act of 1969, Bhutan consolidated numerous directives relating to forest rights, forest products, and royalties. The Act protected the country's forests by naming those lands over which no one had permanent inheritable or transferable rights as Government Reserve Forests. Felling of trees, burning of forests by shifting cultivators, and hunting and fishing in forest reserves, national parks, or wildlife sanctuaries were strictly prohibited and brought under the control of the Department of Forest.

Draft Social Forestry Rules were promulgated under the Forest and Nature Conservation Act of 1995 to promote social forestry effectively. These Rules allow trees planted on private land to remain free of royalty. The Rules also allowed five or more households to obtain user rights to an area of partially degraded government forests as long as a reforestation and management plan is followed. Royalty rates are reduced or rescinded, and individuals may apply for leases under the rules in accordance with certain terms and conditions.

In 1991, as part of its efforts to prepare the Master Plan for Forestry Development, the government formulated a revised Forest Policy Statement that emphasised the necessity of balancing the nation's conservation and economic development goals. It stipulates that forest resources will be managed in a scientific and systematic manner and that this resource base will be expanded through viable investment programmes. It acknowledges the necessity to allocate forest resources to different management regimes such as those for protection forests, production forests, and community forests. The policy recognises the

importance of people's participation in the management, use and expansion of resources, and calls for multiple-use management in recognition of the realities of the country.

The government has taken three important steps toward implementing the forest policy that are intended to give the policy initiatives a proper base:

- preparation and adoption of the Forest and Nature Conservation Act of 1995, this replaced the Forest Act of 1969;

- formulation of a forestry programme framework for the development of the forestry sector; and
- a decision to develop Forest and Nature Conservation Rules based on the Forest and Nature Conservation Act of 1995.

Table 3 summarises the major Bhutanese policies related to forestry. In addition, there are other government policies, such as those on tourism management, that also seek to limit any adverse impacts on forest resources.

Table 3: Historical Timeline of Forest Policy Development in Bhutan

Year	Name of Policy, Acts or Rules
1969	Bhutan Forest Act
1974	National Forest Policy
1979	The Land Act of Bhutan
1984	Bhutan Logging Corporation Charter
1985	The Forest Policy of 1985
1990	Social Forestry Rules
1991	Revised Forest Policy Statement
1995	Forest and Nature Conservation Act
1996	Revised Draft Social Forestry Rules