

Introduction

The ability to access and gain rights over the use of common property resources like pastures, forests, and water sources, is fundamental to sustaining livelihoods in most parts of the greater Himalayan region. Common property resource management regimes have existed over long periods with well-defined rules governing rights of access within and among communities. However, in most cases not all sections of a community or particular communities had equitable access and entitlements. Furthermore, the poorest and most powerless groups tend to depend disproportionately on local common property resources for their livelihoods, but are often in the weakest position in terms of securing access and benefit rights.

In 2001, ICIMOD initiated a 'Participatory Action Research Programme on Equity and Poverty in the Management of Common Property Resources in the Hindu Kush-Himalayas' in line with its mandate of pursuing the larger goal of equity and rights for marginalised peoples in the greater Himalayan region. Several case studies were undertaken focusing on access to different types of common property resources. The objective was to identify those groups that are most marginalised among users of common property resources in the region, and to make recommendations on policy aspects to enhance equity in the access to and management of common property resources. This publication is based on one of these case studies. It has been prepared in order to raise awareness for and stimulate discussion on a particular aspect of equity and access to common property resources: the impact of conservation measures on local communities.

Forests are a vital resource for the livelihoods of many communities living in the greater Himalayan region. Contention over access to forest resources has emerged historically in the form of powerful vested interests exploiting forests for their needs, but also in the approaches of the state to conservation – particularly in the reconciliation of people's needs with protected areas. This paper narrates and explores the struggle by the people of the Niti Valley in the state of Uttaranchal in India when they experienced losing their livelihoods following the notification of the Nanda Devi area in 1982 as a national park, and later as a biosphere reserve. It brings to light the complex web of issues that the communities living around the Nanda Devi National Park have had to grapple with in negotiating their rights with the state. Of particular interest is the impact of opening the core zone to restricted tourism activities in 2003 in response to protests over many years. What effect will this have in the long-term on traditional livelihoods, issues of equity and management, and finally sustainability and conservation itself? The passing of the Nanda Devi Declaration by the local people asserting their rights vis-à-vis external tour operators and affirming their own commitment to community-based management and equity symbolises the extent to which this community has found how to voice their needs and take control over their lives. The case study on which this publication is based was undertaken in a participatory process which allowed for the creation of a space in the advocacy campaign of the people of the Niti Valley to ensure analysis and monitoring of equity issues as an ongoing process. The Nanda Devi advocacy campaign has gradually matured to raise some fundamental issues by defining wilderness as a common property resource.

Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve timeline

Since time immemorial, Nanda Devi has presided over the Uttarakhand Himalayas as its patron goddess and highest peak; the Nanda Devi Raj Jat pilgrimage is conducted in her honour every 12 years. Although Nanda Devi remains off limits to travellers and climbers, the local Bhotiya inhabitants graze their goats and sheep throughout the region while carrying on centuries old trade relations with Tibet.

1883	The first recorded attempt to enter the Rishi Ganga Valley at the base of the Nanda Devi peaks, the mountaineers are turned back by the precipitous gorge at the basin's entrance.
1934	Eric Shipton and H.W. Tilman discover a passage into the 'inner sanctuary' of the Rishi Basin.
1936	H.W. Tilman and N.E. Odell scale Nanda Devi for the first time.
1939	The entire Rishi Basin is declared a game sanctuary.
1962	The India-China border is closed indefinitely, affecting the trade and migration routes of the Bhotiya people. Locals turn to trekking and tourism for their livelihoods.
1974	Protests against commercial clearing of the forest and tree felling in Reni village launches the famous Chipko (tree hugging) movement. Fifty-year old Gaura Devi emerges as a feminist heroine by leading village women to defend their forest. Subsequently, women participate in overwhelming numbers in Chipko actions across Uttarakhand.
	Nanda Devi is opened to Western mountaineering, providing a short boom to the local economy. It becomes the second most popular destination in the Himalayas next to Everest. Lata village becomes a major departure point for expeditions.
1977	First reports of ecological damage due to the tourist trade prompt concern in environmental circles.
1982	The Nanda Devi sanctuary is upgraded to a national park. All treks, expeditions, and grazing are banned in the core area.
1988	The Nanda Devi National Park becomes the core area of the newly designated Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve, Man and the Biosphere Programme activities are launched to mitigate losses of surrounding communities from the closure of the core zone.
1992	UNESCO declares NDBR a world heritage site.
1993	An army-led team removes 1,000 tonnes of rubbish from the Reserve left behind by mountaineering expeditions.

Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve timeline (cont'd)

1998	Growing resentment over forest restrictions leads to a massive entry into the core area in protest against the government's indifference. This 'jhapto cheeno' (swoop and grab) movement emerges from the same villages that gave birth to the Chipko movement.
2000	NDBR is included in the new state of Uttaranchal, placing hope in ecotourism's potential as an economic pillar.
2001	The Indian Mountaineering Foundation is allowed to survey NDBR's potential for high-end tourism. Local villagers make the government consider community rights first.
	The Lata Village Council convenes a workshop in concert with its citizens, the village leadership, and allied grassroots organisations, and issues a declaration for community-based ecotourism and biocultural diversity conservation.
2002	A new state government is elected in Uttaranchal. The local MLA and tourism minister is defeated on account of dissidence in his own party on the Nanda Devi issue.
2003	New pro-people NDBR director, in consultation with community groups and activists, sets a new policy allowing regulated tourism with guaranteed community participation.
2004	Initiation of the first Annual Nanda Devi Women's Festival. Locals celebrate the 30 th anniversary of the Chipko movement The Nanda Devi campaign receives runner-up Conde Nast Ecotourism Award. Bali Devi attends UNEP 'Women as the Voice of the Environment' conference in Nairobi, the first Chipko woman activist to attend an overseas conference.
2005	Land is procured in Lata village for building a museum on biocultural diversity under the proposed Nanda Devi Education Trust.
2006	On 8 March 2006 the Nanda Devi Campaign launched its website www.mountainshepherds.com A US-based charity organisation, Winterline Foundation, comes forward to support training in basic mountaineering for 40 unemployed young people from NDBR and the setting up of a company for trained young people. Training in basic mountaineering at Nehru Institute of Mountaineering, Uttarkashi, is scheduled from 20 August 2006. The Nanda Devi Campaign will also select 17 women from all around the world to participate in the inaugural Nanda Devi Women's Trek, celebrating the partial opening of NDBR to community-based tourism.

Source: Adapted from the Nanda Devi Campaign, <http://nandadevi.prayaga.org>

