

Introduction

The Vajra Hotel at the base of the sacred Buddhist stupa of Swayambhu in Kathmandu, Nepal, was the site of a series of meetings sponsored by the MacArthur Foundation, U.S.A., and the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD). The meetings took place from April 13 - 15, 1994. Twenty grantees of the MacArthur Foundation's Eastern Himalayan Programme also shared their experiences and reviewed issues and options for conservation and development needs in the region which is identified as one of the world's "hotspots" - in most urgent need of conservation action in view of its rich yet quickly disappearing plant and animal diversity. This was also the site of a seminar on "Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Biodiversity Management," sponsored by ICIMOD and the MacArthur Foundation. A planning session on the promotion of Trans-boundary and Inter-country Conservation Programmes was the third component of this international consultation.

Over 50 participants from Bhutan, China, France, India, Indonesia, Nepal, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, the U.S., and UNESCO, representing government agencies, universities, research institutes, and NGOs, convened to discuss issues related to people's participation in natural resource conservation and management.

Through grants from the MacArthur Foundation, 20 organisations and individuals reviewed the specific conservation problems their countries face in light of their development needs. Through an interactive process, the basis was laid for discussion on the role of indigenous knowledge in the maintenance of biodiversity.

Members of the collaborating organisations of an ICIMOD project on "Promotion of Agroforestry/Forest Management through Local Organisations in the Eastern Himalayas" presented the results of their two years' field work in Sankhuwasabha District, Nepal, and in Yunnan Province, China. In this action research project, SAGUN, a Nepali NGO, and the Kunming Institute of Botany collected indigenous knowledge of resource management from the communities inhabiting national parks and protected areas. The research should be useful to park managers for understanding the needs and resources of the area and the effect of park policies on people, so as to bring about park-people policies and relationships that are mutually beneficial.

The cultural beliefs and practices which form the basis of these communities' worldviews and affect their land-use decisions and resource management practices have been a significant part of the research. As part of the programme, training and small-scale technical inputs were introduced to improve, but not replace, traditional systems and local organisations strengthened to sustain project initiatives beyond the three-year project duration.

The gathering of this assortment of experts provided a unique opportunity to address conservation issues from an ecoregional perspective in which ecological, not national, boundaries are of foremost importance. The scope for trans-boundary and regional conservation programmes was further explored during the planning sessions. A field visit to ICIMOD's demonstration and training site at Godavari concluded the three-day event.