

# 1 Introduction

Forests are the largest renewable natural resource in Bhutan. The Royal Government of Bhutan (RGOB) has been extremely conscious of the potential for environmental damage from uncontrolled exploitation of forest resources and unsustainable land-use practices. The government consistently emphasises conservation and natural resource management in its national development plans and has now prepared a comprehensive conservation strategy. Nevertheless, increasing human and livestock populations are beginning to exert considerable pressure on forest and land resources in the accessible areas.

All land in Bhutan not explicitly registered as private land has been declared Government Reserve Forest. As a result of both cultural and physical remoteness, Bhutan has retained much of its natural vegetation and therefore has relatively intact natural forests. Until now the remoteness and low population have meant

that forest exploitation was minimised, and this is greatly in Bhutan's favour as it moves towards a reasoned policy for protection, conservation, and sustainability in forest use.

While resource degradation is not acute at present population and extraction levels, it could become severe in 20-50 years time if there is no proper management. In the more populated areas, the quality of forests is being degraded as a result of overextraction of valuable species for firewood, timber, and non-timber forest products, and uncontrolled grazing by livestock. In particular, there is a high consumption of fuelwood in the temperate areas because of the cold climate. There is a growing demand for construction timber in urban and rural areas as development activities increase and cash incomes rise. Development is also creating more wood-based industries dependent on forest resources.