

The Evolution of Community Forestry in Nepal

Nepal was one of the first countries to introduce a people-focussed forest policy. Exploitation of forests and the emergence of forest management parallel developments in the political structure of Nepal. For over 100 years (1850s-1950s), the forests of Nepal were exploited to allow for the expansion of agriculture and for revenue. Policy and practice allowed for unregulated exploitation of the once extensive and valuable *Terai* forests. The hills forests, for the most part inaccessible and remote from markets, were relatively free from commercial exploitation, although they did fall victim to the exigencies of agricultural expansion. However, in recent decades, forest area has not decreased but, rather, the density of forest cover has decreased.

Nepal now has 5.5 million hectares of natural forests which is equal to 37 per cent of its land area. Only 11 per cent of the natural forests are in the *Terai* and High Himal zones; the remaining area is evenly distributed throughout the Middle Hills and the Siwaliks. Of this land area, 61 per cent has been identified as potential community forests - forests which could be handed over to local people for management. Much of the forest area in the Middle Hills is in small patches surrounded by cultivation; there are few large forest tracts amenable to conventional forms of forest management.