

COMMUNITY CONSERVED AREAS IN SOUTH ASIA

Neema Pathak

Ongoing documentation of community initiatives in South Asia suggests that community conserved areas (CCAs) are widespread. This paper presents the current understanding of these efforts, what makes them succeed or fail, and lessons emerging from those for a more appropriate conservation model in the region. It also explores in brief the kind of economic development that these initiatives are pointing to, in which biodiversity conservation is an integral element rather than a constraint.

Background

The region of South Asia (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka) contains over one-fourth of the world's population, and harbours some of the Earth's most diverse ecosystems. At least three of the 18 global biodiversity "hotspots" occur in this region. These countries also have millions of people critically dependent on natural resources for economic, social, and cultural reasons. They share a colonial history, and a common economic vision seeking to join so-called "developed" countries.

The continuation of exclusionary colonial laws, policies, and attitudes in the post independence scenario, combined with neo-liberal economic policies driven by globalization, have led to serious conflicts over natural resources.

Mass uprisings against the conventional model of conservation, increasing global debate on participatory conservation policies, and influence of donor agencies, have in recent times contributed towards a slight shift in the attitudes of the governments.

In **Bangladesh**, with 75-85% of rural households dependent on fishing, some initiatives have been recently started on community-based fisheries management, and involvement in forest and protected area conservation, largely under the influence of external donors. In particular, the Management and Improvement of Aquatic Ecosystems through community involvement, called MACH, has taken on improved management in about seven large wetlands in the country¹.

In **Bhutan**, with 70% of area covered by forests, a very strictly state-controlled natural resource management regime is slowly relaxing. Recent government forestry programmes seek to transfer forest management responsibilities to local management groups.

In **India**, formal conservation has been very exclusionary. However, over the last two decades, the government has initiated programmes of joint forest management (JFM) in degraded forest areas, and ecodevelopment in and around protected areas with varying degrees of success and failure, and continued absence of power-sharing with communities. Outside of these formal efforts, India probably has the highest number of CCAs in the region. Officially these areas remain largely unrecognized, unsupported and under various kinds of threat. In 2003 a new category of protected areas, Community

¹ For more details see MACH-Technical Paper 1: Restoring Wetlands through Improved Governance: Community Based Co-Management in Bangladesh, May 2006, USAID.

Reserves, was included in the Wild Life Protection Act. However, communities have been suspicious of bringing CCAs under this category, given its straitjacketed approach and the fear that it would increase governmental control or interference. Efforts at actual devolution of powers to village level institutions have remained stuck in bureaucratic inefficiency and lack of political will.

Nepal has the most progressive conservation policy in the region. The National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act 1973 (amended 1989), provides for multiple use conservation areas, and for NGOs to manage protected areas. Legally backed management of Conservation Areas, with site-specific regulations developed by local institutions and NGOs, is a significant innovation. Nepal is also famous for handing over rights and management of about 400,000 ha of national forests to over 7,000 community forest user groups. This has been accompanied by progressive changes in forest related policy, though there have been recent setbacks. With very little investment by Government, community forest management capacity has been enhanced and wildlife has significantly increased. A national federation of forest user groups (FECOFUN) has also been formed.

In **Pakistan**, under the influence of large donors and international NGOs, the resource use and benefit-sharing rights of the local communities have been recognized in the management of protected areas. Such involvement has led to increase in wildlife populations at several sites. Community Controlled Hunting Areas (CCHA) in Northwest Frontier regions include the distribution of harvest quota of Himalayan ibex and Markhor to local people. 80% of income from hunting fees goes to the concerned communities. The recent Mountain Area Conservancy Project (MACP) also aims “to protect the rich biological heritage of the Karakoram, Hindukush and the Western Himalayan Mountain Ranges through community-based conservation approach” (www.macp-pk.org).

In **Sri Lanka**, reportedly the only traditional community left are the *Veddhas*. Even more than India, the colonial powers took over almost all common property, causing strong alienation amongst local communities. Participatory conservation has evolved in the last decade under the influence of large foreign donors. Many community-based initiatives have died down after donors have pulled out. There are a few examples of community driven conservation initiatives, but documentation on these is poor.

Indeed, with the exception of India and to some extent Nepal, there is little serious documentation of CCAs in the region. Consequently they find no mention and are not considered while designing conservation policies and programmes in the region, including in India and Nepal.

Types and examples of CCAs in the region

CCAs in South Asia are extremely varied in their origin, functioning, objectives and impact. Their origins are diverse: self-initiated by communities, initiated by or with NGOs, resulting from social struggles, or initiated by sensitive government officials.

Some **examples from India** are:

- Protection of 1800 hectares of forest by Mendha (Lekha) village in Gadchiroli district, Maharashtra, by the Gond tribal community. This village has also achieved relative self-governance and assured income for all members through the year (Pathak and Broome 2001).
- Regeneration and protection of 600-700 hectares of forest by Jardhargaon village in Uttaranchal state. Villagers have also revived hundreds of varieties of indigenous crops and are successfully growing them organically. In recent years they have also struggled against proposed mining in their region (Suryanarayan and Malhotra 1999; Kohli and Jardhari 2002).
- Protection of sea turtle nesting sites by a fishworkers' community NGO in Kolavipaalam, Kerala, including against sand mining despite continuous physical attacks and threats (Theeram 2001). Similar community protection of nesting sites of Olive ridley turtles occurs in Rushikulya area of Orissa. (Pathak and Kothari 2006)
- Traditional conservation of nesting trees of Painted stork, the globally threatened Spotbilled pelican, and other herony birds, by villagers in Kokkare Bellur village, Karnataka (Manu and Jolly 2000), Veerapattu and Nellapatu in Andhra Pradesh and several other villages in India (Satya Srinivas pers. comm. 2001).
- Conservation of forests in nearly 10,000 villages of Orissa state, without any input from the forest department. The oldest example is believed to date back to 1936. Most of these villages were faced with serious resource crunch and decided to regenerate their degrading forests.
- 600 ha. of village forest in the catchment of Loktak Lake, regenerated by youth of Ronmei tribe from Tokpa Kabui village, Chandrapur district, Manipur. This community, traditionally known for its hunting skills, has also completely banned hunting of Sangai or the Brow-antlered deer, a severely threatened species (Rajesh 2002).
- Forest and wildlife reserves declared by various tribes in Nagaland, with over 100 villages (such as Khonoma, Luzuphuhu, Chizami and Sendenyu) managing several hundred sq km of forest. This includes the 20 sq km Khonoma Tragopan and Wildlife Sanctuary declared by Khonoma village. These areas protect many endangered animals, including Blyth's tragopan, Grey peacock pheasant, Rufous-necked hornbill, Spotted linsang, Tiger, Leopard, Wild dog, Stump-tailed macaque and Asiatic black bear (Pathak et.al. 2006).

Some **examples from other countries** (where documentation is very poor) are:

- Baghmara village near Chitwan National Park in Nepal, an innovative example of community based ecotourism. Here the villagers have protected the surrounding forests, which now harbour a good population of large mammals. Villagers have constructed a few watchtowers and earn revenue by charging an entry fee from the tourists, just like the adjoining official National Park (Kothari, et. al. 2000).
- The Annapurna Conservation Area, managed by a body represented by the members of local representatives from various communities residing inside, with help from NGO, King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation (KMTNC). Communities carry

out tourism as well as cleaning of trekking route to this popular trekking site (Krishna et. al. 1999). Recent political disturbances are reported to have affected this initiative.

- Several self-initiated community forests (CFs) in the hills and plains of Nepal. In Dang district in the western Inner Terai, a local leader, Chyang B. Thapa, organised his community to protect a nearby forest in mid 1970s, even before the CF regulations were introduced. In 1993, the 212 ha Sal (*Shorea robusta*) forest, christened Bhawani CF, was legally handed over to the villagers as a CF. Even today it is among the best managed CFs in Nepal. (Bhatta et. al. 2006).
- Several community managed wetland sanctuaries, declared in Bangladesh as part of the MACH project (mentioned above). The largest of these, the Baika Beel (part of the larger Hail Haor wetland ecosystem), has been identified as an Important Bird Areas (IBAs) by Birdlife International.
- At several sites in Pakistan, trophy hunting or other incentives have been employed to move towards community based conservation, especially in critical mountain ecosystems. These include a number of Community Controlled Hunting Areas, and community conservation reserves.

Key lessons, including for formal conservation²

- 1. Conservation benefits are not only monetary:** Benefits envisaged by communities include long-term livelihood security; economic benefits from sale of surplus produce, eco-tourism, value addition, and so on; year round local employment; increased awareness, capacity and empowerment; a stronger political identity; community cohesiveness resulting in more appropriate social, health and education inputs; social recognition of local knowledge and innovations; greater negotiating power leading sometimes to even being able to influence national policies.
- 2. Security of tenure is essential:** A sense of belonging or custodianship towards the resources is the most important reason for community conservation. This sense develops through constant consumptive, economic, cultural and religious association with these resources. Conservation initiatives are observed to be more successful if the local communities have legal ownership as in Nagaland in India, or *de facto* control, as in most other cases mentioned above.
- 4. Decision-making and institutional functioning need to be transparent and well-informed:** CCAs clearly show that a transparent and democratic process of decision-making leads to more successful long-term effort. The emphasis on equal representation, transparent financial accounting, and consensus decision-making is often (though by no means always) followed. Additionally, there is an attempt to make well-informed decisions, including through a system of regular group discussions or seeking outside inputs, to help improve understanding.

² More details on these issues have been illustrated with examples from the region in Pathak et al 2002. See also Table in the Editorial in this volume.

- 5. Role of local leadership is crucial:** Considering that a large amount of the villagers' time must go into earning a living, it is sometimes difficult to sustain the fervour for forest protection activities, especially if there are no immediate threats. In such circumstances, as also in times of crisis, the role played by a local or outside leader, is absolutely essential. Such leaders have to pay enormous personal price to play the required role, which can at times be a hurdle towards finding a second line of leadership.
- 6. Are external interventions necessary?** While the local community is the most important actor in CCAs, a critical role has been played by external interventionists in most of the above-mentioned cases. An active role of the state as a partner in the management of resources is often envisaged by local communities, but on equal terms and in the capacity of a facilitator and guide rather than an authoritative ruler. There are numerous other examples where external intervention has actually resulted in the breakdown of a well-functioning community effort, particularly in India and Nepal.
- 7. Ensuring livelihoods does not always mean compromising biodiversity:** Most communities managing CCAs opt for a mix of slow and fast-growing local species rather than exotic or monocultural plantations, and harvest of non-timber forest produce rather than timber (Poffenberger and McGean 1996). Many include within their management strategies completely inviolate zones, multiple use zones and zones for rotational or seasonal use. Strict rules and regulations are framed to prevent over-exploitation. Although there is little ecological research on exactly how CCAs benefit wildlife, visual impressions, signs and oral histories clearly indicate that such benefit is taking place.
- 8. Conservation planning needs to be at the landscape level:** Conservation of resources for communities is a part of cultural and livelihood insurance, and is linked with other social, political, economic aspects of community life. However, governmental (and often NGO) activities are highly compartmentalized, with little coordination between departments. Similarly, conservation cannot be separated from other developmental processes, which may undermine or complement it. This calls for landscape-level or regional participatory planning.

Conclusion

Community initiatives are social processes, which can be time consuming, complicated and often full of contradictions. Despite this, and despite numerous legal, policy, financial and tenorial constraints, communities have in many CCAs managed to achieve the twin objectives of conservation and livelihood security. Their achievements however remain highly undervalued and unrecognized, resulting in many CCAs being taken over for mining, dams, and urban areas, or are dying out due to inappropriate interventions or lack of support.

CCAs represent lifestyles and worldviews different from the one prevalent in the dominant society. The current model of development mandates maximum use of

resources in minimum time and restricts conservation to a few human-free pockets. On the contrary community initiatives point towards a continuum of conservation efforts integrating ecosystem based economic development and different forms of conservation ranging from inviolate zones to multiples use zones. There is an urgent need to recognize and encourage such initiatives, provide appropriate policy environment and tenurial security, help buffer them against external threats, and help them overcome internal inequities and constraints. All this must be done in an environment of consultation, trust, transparency, and sound knowledge.

REFERENCES

- Kothari, A., Pathak, N., Anuradha, R.V., and Taneja, B. (eds.). 1998. *Communities and Conservation: Natural Resource Management in South and Central Asia*. UNESCO and Sage Publications, New Delhi.
- Kothari, A., Pathak, N. and Vania, F. 2000. *Where Communities Care: Community Based Wildlife and Ecosystem Management in South Asia*. Kalpavriksh, Pune and IIED, London.
- Krishna, K.C., Basnet, K., Poudel, K. C. 1999. *People's Empowerment Amidst the Peaks: Community Based Conservation at Annapurna Conservation Area, Nepal*. Case study for South Asian Regional Review of Community Involvement in Conservation, sponsored by the International Institute of Environment and Development under its *Evaluating Eden* project. Kalpavriksh. New Delhi and IIED, London.
- Manu, K. and Jolly, S. 2000. *Pelicans and People: The Two –Tier Village of Kokkare bellur, Karnataka, India*. Kalpavriksh, Pune and IIED, London.
- Pathak, N. and Gour-Broome, V. 2001. *Tribal Self-Rule and Natural Resource Management: Community-based Conservation at Mendha-Lekha, Maharashtra, India*. Kalpavriksh, Pune and IIED, London.
- Pathak, Neema, with inputs from Anwarul Islam, S.U.K. Ekaratne and Altaf Hussain. 2002. *Lessons Learnt in the Establishment and Management of Protected Areas by Indigenous and Local Communities in South Asia*. (see http://www.iucn.org/themes/ceesp/Wkg_grp/TILCEPA/community.htm)
- Pathak, N., Kothari, A., and Balasinorwala, T. 2006. *The Naga Transformation: Conservation by Communities in Nagaland in India*. Kalpavriksh, Pune/Delhi. (brochure)
- Pathak, N. and Kothari, A. 2006. *Where Blackbucks Roam, Turtles Breed and Birds Fear No More*. *Hornbill*, January-March 2006. Bombay Natural History Society.
- Poffenberger, M. and McGean, B. (1996). *Village Voices, Forest Choices : Joint Forest Management in India*. Oxford University Press, Delhi.
- Rajesh, S. 2002. *A case study on Loktak Lake*. For the Directory of Community Conserved areas in India (under preparation). For more details contact Salam Rajesh, salamrajesh@rediffmail.com.
- Suryanarayanan, J. and Malhotra, P. (1999). *Community-based Conservation in Jardhargaon, Tehri Garhwal District, Uttar Pradesh, India*. Draft. Case Study for the South Asian Regional Review of Community Involvement in Conservation,

Evaluating Eden Project, Kalpavriksh and International Institute of Environment and Development.

Kohli, K. and Jardhari, V. 2002. Kataldi: Limestone Mining Threatens Forests. *Sanctuary Asia. Vol. XXII No.6, December 2002.*

Personal communication with Surendra Babu, Satish Babu, Ramesh, and Vinod. 2001. Theeram Prakruti Samrakshana Samiti, conserveturtlegrove@yahoo.co.in.

Bhatta, B., Akhileshwar, L. K., Dev, O.P., and Springate-Baginski, O. (2006) Participatory Forest Management in Nepal Tarai: Policy, Practices and Livelihood Impact. In Springate-Baginski, O. and Blaikie, P. *Forests, People and Power: The Political Ecology of Reform in South Asia*. In press.

Acknowledgement

This paper is based on the findings of several individuals and organisations in South Asia, coordinated by Kalpavriksh. Inputs have been received from Anwarul Islam, Dhaka University; Suki Ekaratne, University of Colombo; and Altaf Hussain, WWF-Pakistan and IUCN- Pakistan.

Neema Pathak is a member of Kalpavriksh, an Indian environment research and action group. She has worked on community based conservation for a number of years now, and is currently putting together a national report on CCAs in India. She served on the Core Group of the IUCN WCPA-CEESP Strategic Direction on Governance, Communities, Equity, and Livelihoods (TILCEPA) till last year. E-mail: neema.pb@gmail.com

As published in PARKS Cardiff Series 2006