

Banko Janakari

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Surveying Nepal's forest resources

The foundation of Department of Forest Research and Survey (DFRS) was laid way back in 1963 with the establishment of a Forest Resource Survey Project. Upon undergoing a series of changes, the institution responsible for surveying forest resources of the country has given birth to this Department only in 1999. Coincidentally, it is the same year when the last report on forest resource of Nepal (1987-1998) came in.

As the name suggests, the institution had also achieved its goal of surveying and successively publishing the country's forests resources in the decades of 1960, 1970, 1980 and 1990. It has thus significantly helped the policy-makers and planners who always wished for sustainable management of this renewable resource, reportedly contributing about 15 percent of the country's GDP.

Despite huge efforts in conserving and utilising forest resources, forests of Nepal continue to degrade both in area and productivity. Nepal's forests continue to decrease at an annual rate of 2.3 percent in hills and 1.3 percent in the Terai. The total forest area of the country has also gone down considerably from 5.5 million hectares to 4.27 million ha. during 1987-1998. This comprises to only 39 percent of the country's total area under some kind of forest area-not 'forest' having 10 percent or more crown cover. The latter is only 29.6 percent.

The shift in forest policy from state to community management in the late 70s has brought some hope on rejuvenation of forests. And, the way Community Forestry gained popularity (over one million ha of forests are now under 13,000 plus Forest User Groups for community management) the higher emphasis and investment given in it by the state has been well justified. People started to believe on its success. Those involved in developmental activities of community forestry have perceived that forest regeneration and growth in many hills have distinctly been brought about by local protection and management. Hence, it is but natural that people debate on the validity of forest statistics of 1987-1998.

Forests and trees not only provide wood and non-wood products, but also contribute to numerous environmental goods and services such as conservation of biodiversity, mitigation (and enhancement) of climate change, play a key role in poverty reduction, and improve agricultural productivity, etc. These multiple uses have in the past been under-represented in forest assessment. Our previous forest assessments focussed mainly on stem volume and area. The strength of non-timber forest products in reducing poverty was overlooked.

There is no doubt that forest assessments at a regular interval are necessary. For the developing country like Nepal, it may be difficult to bear the huge cost, and modern technology of nation-wide survey of forest resources. Nonetheless, in the interest of country, finding partner(s) having common interest should be not be too difficult for the concerned authorities. Commitment must be shown by thm to initiate national forest resource assessment in line with the most important parameters that the Global Forest Resource Assessment might suggest for this decade.