

Nepalese Foresters: Technocrats or Deliberative Scientists ?

Hemant R. Ojha, Ph.D.¹

I sometimes get confused with my own professional identity. Some people regard me as a forester while others regard me as anti-forester. When new people ask me about my profession and academic background, I often say “I have a background in forestry and then moved to political science, but still looking at forestry issues from political science angle”. Through interactions with old and new people over the past several years, I have become increasingly self-conscious about the history of our forestry profession, and the ways it has shaped my identity. This is reflected in several of my recent writings in which I have taken a political science outlook to critically examine the institutions and practices of forestry sector, including the critique of what I did as a forester in the past². I am sure many of my colleagues have gone through similar trajectories. Such changes in the professional identities and practices are inevitable given the rapid changes in the context in which we live. What is important is that one has to be critically self-reflective in one’s own professional history and constantly seek to reconstruct professional identity and expertise in the changing contexts.

A central question for every scientific profession is: how can it help to improve the institutions, policies and practices. There are different approaches used – some regard science as being able to both ‘analyze and predict’ and based on this “recommend” specific course of actions to be taken by the ordinary people or decision makers. This means that, for example, you as a forester undertake the inventory of a forest and suggest the managers to do or not to do certain forestry operations. This approach assumes the decision maker are passive recipient of scientific recommendations made by experts. The second approach to social science in the words of Frank Fischer³, is to “stimulate debate” about the decision issues which the managers or decision makers are already considering. In this approach, (which can be regarded as "deliberative scientific approach"), scientists are in ‘dialectical clash of communication’ with the decision makers, and put the empirical analysis in the context of the ‘normative frames’ of the latter. An important aspect of this position of this approach is that scientists do not take the process of inquiry away from the domain of everyday life, but always strive to enrich the everyday processes and debates around decision making. I personally subscribe to this approach, and have tried to explore how this approach could be applied in practice⁴. Indeed, this approach challenges the myth that a scientific profession is politically neutral and should be free from politics.

¹ hojha@wlink.com.np

² For example, my recent book "Reframing Governance: Understanding Deliberative Politics in Nepal's Terai Forestry" is an application of political theory to understand forest governance practices.

³ Fischer, F. (1998). “Beyond Empiricism: Policy Inquiry and Post Positivist Perspective.” *Policy Studies* **26**(1): 129-146.

⁴ For an elaborative treatment of this aspects, please see: Ojha, H. (2006). “ Techno-Bureaucratic Doxa and the Challenges of Deliberative Governance - The Case of Community Forestry Policy and Practice in Nepal.” *Policy and Society* **25**(2): 131-175.

I think all foresters should be able to reflect upon these two approaches to scientific practice, and discover where they stand in the continuum, in order to be more useful to the society. Let me illustrate the point through an example.

As a forester in the early 1990s, I experienced a technical dilemma in advising a CFUG which had a plantation forest of Alder at pole stage. It was in the eastern hill district of Dhankuta. The author was invited by the CFUG to provide technical advice on forest management. The author visited the forest with a group of local forest users to discuss thinning options. The pole size trees were too dense, and the author suggested undertaking heavy thinning so that the remaining trees could grow with sufficient expansion of the crown. Given below is a brief discussion between the author and the villagers:

The author: well, your forest is too dense for the saplings to grow. You see the crown is overlapping, and the saplings are thinner than they could be. So you need to undertake heavy thinning so that the remaining best individuals will have sufficient growing space both in the air and the soil.

CFUG leader: Of course you are right in your scientific point of view. But if we remove all of what can be removed in one go, then we will have a problem with fuelwood in subsequent years. So our strategy is to remove trees gradually so that every household can get at least a few *bharis* (bundles) of fuelwood every year. So we will cut only a few poles this year, so that we will have some left for the subsequent years too.

The village leaders did not accept the author's technical suggestion. I later realised that I was preoccupied with the notion of maximising timber volume, by offering the growing space to a few select individual trees. My 'technocratic' assumption was that it is actually the commercial value which the villagers want to maximise. On the contrary, the villagers were concerned with ensuring a steady supply of fuelwood. This is not just a question of timber versus fuelwood. It is about matching societal needs and the ecological composition of the forest, over a long space of time.

For foresters, keeping forest dense and not doing adequate thinning is not scientific, and also not economically optimal. This indicates a misfit between the technical mindset of the forester and the practical sense of the local people. Scientific professionals, including foresters, tend to formulate opinion or advice by "bracketing of all theses of existence and all practical intentions⁵ ...". This can be conceptualised as technocratic approach. The challenge is to move away from technocratic approach and explore how practitioners of science become prepared to engage deliberatively with the common sense of ordinary people. In other words, the purpose of deliberative scientist is to help the managers of forest to explore different options of forest management actions based on the purpose and expectations of the managers by supplying needed technical information and forging better debate over decisions alternatives. Foresters as scientists do not have political basis to intervene into the moral domain-i.e. to prescribe specific regimes of thinning or forestry operations. Rather, they should link the technical-analytical process dialectically with the commonsense and socio-political visions of the people concerned with the problem.

In practice, foresters and local forest dependent communities often fail to harness this deliberative potential. At a broader scale, this kind of mismatch between the practical sense of

⁵ Bourdieu, P. (1990). "The Scholastic Point of View." *Cultural Anthropology* 5(4): 380-391.

local people and scientific views of foresters can be found in the ways massive plantations were established in the hills of Nepal, responding to the perception of a Himalayan crisis in the late 1970s. International experts and local forestry officials worked together to establish plantations in many hill districts in Nepal. These plantations comprised species such as pine and alder that were easy for the technical staff to establish. In the 1990s, when such plantations were brought under community management, local people gradually changed pine forest into a broad-leaved forest composition. For the local people who draw their livelihoods through a dynamic interface between forest and agriculture, multi-species broad-leaved forest are essential to meet their diverse needs of fuel wood, animal bedding, agricultural implements, fodder, and small timber of various size and quality specifications.

Why have foresters been able to impose their prescriptions over local forest managers? Looking at the history of forestry profession in Nepal, we can see that it has enjoyed techno-bureaucratic power on the basis of (a) the notion of *haakim* which privileges forest officials over citizens, (b) the symbolic image of forest science as superior form of knowledge, (c) governmental monopoly of forestry knowledge. All these comprise the key attributes of techno-bureaucratic approach to scientific practice. As a result, forest management initiatives in Nepal have been technocratically-dominated by forest officials and even in the context of community based forest management, the actual practices of forestry are guided by the language, concepts and meanings of forestry science. Foresters actually colonise the local knowledge and hence often alienate local people in taking control of community forest.

But in the recent years, forest science and forestry profession in Nepal have experienced renaissance. There have been a series of crises into the traditional legitimacy of top-down forestry profession and there is growing level of self-reflexivity among forestry practitioners over their own identity and expertise. Key forms of crisis include: challenge to *haakim* relations of power by a series of political movements in the recent years, wider challenge to reductionist approach to science and emergence of interdisciplinary approaches (including increased dialogue between forestry and social sciences), growing movement for knowledge democracy, demand for greater participation of citizens in state policy processes and decision-making beyond forest official-minister nexus.

Looking at the type and the pace of change taking place around forestry profession in Nepal, it seems that the traditional forestry profession is likely to be more deliberative scientific practice in time to come. It is likely to be further differentiated and diversified within itself, and interlinked with other professions in time to come, creating more spaces for deliberative practice. As a result, new generation of foresters are likely to pursue diverse strands of intellectual practice that link forest, people, society and policy. Sweeping global issues such as climate change have reinforced the importance of scientific forestry profession, especially in the pursuit of technical forest inventory needed for potential carbon trade. But given the wide range stakes and stakeholders involved in the issues, the scientific practice cannot remain opaque to the practical discourse and deliberations. This means that even a technical forestry practice has to stand the test of social sciences as well as dialectically engage with the normative positions of the decision makers. This will require increased dialogue between forestry and social sciences, which will generate even newer genres of hybrid experts in the field of forestry. Likely development of service industry (outside of the state) at national and international level can create spaces for new forms of profession. Professionals who articulate both science and politics under wider frames of deliberative science are likely to make more visible contributions to social change and environmental sustainability.