

CONCLUSION AND THE WAY FORWARD

Conclusion

The Monpas are one of the many communities in Bhutan whose livelihoods depends on the forests around them. The far-sighted environmental policies and legislations of the RGOB has made it possible to maintain more than 70 percent of its land under forest cover. While a lot of emphasis has been given to protection of nature, a study such as this shows that the national policies and legislations may sometimes undermine the centuries-old local traditions and practices that are based on sustainable resource use. It is important that formulation of policies and legislations should take into consideration the local practices and build upon them.

With the Monpa villages falling under the park boundaries and owing to strict enforcement of park regulations, the majority of the Monpas feel that their resource use rights have been compromised. This in the long run will not only jeopardize the conservation objective by creating negative attitudes towards conservation, but may further marginalize the communities by minimizing their livelihood opportunities. The complete ban of resin tapping since 2002, is one such example. While this may be a positive initiative for protecting the Chirpine forests, adequate alternative options should be explored and discussed with communities before such regulations are enforced.

Having said this, the RGOB policy to maintain atleast 60 percent forest cover for all times will go a long way in preserving the environment which is not only a source of national revenue (through hydropower generation, eco-

tourism etc.) but also needed for the survival of communities such as the Monpas. However, careful planning and management of the forests should be done such that there is equitable sharing of benefits arising from this valuable resource.

Another important issue that is highlighted in this study is the conflict with the outsiders for resource use. Conflict over resource use is an important indicator of resource stress or degradation. It is important to identify such conflicts over resources and come up with suitable solutions and legislations in consultation with the resource users. This will prevent accumulation of such conflicts and potential degradation of the resource-base.

Finally, while we take pride in the history and rich culture of indigenous communities, such as the Monpas, we also notice an increased assimilation of these communities into the national mainstream – mainly the language, dress and religion which make important part of their culture. While this is evident in any developing community, development policies should encourage and support the local culture and build on it. Environment should be created such that the indigenous communities take pride in their culture rather than feel left out of the so called development process.

The way forward

In spite of a great deal of publicity and growing awareness about deforestation, destruction of forest still continues. Ten years ago, the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro called for increased attention to be given to concerns of indigenous peoples. The same was reiterated at the World Summit on Sustainable Development

at Johannesburg in 2002. At this hour, when world leaders have pledged to halve poverty and hunger by 2015, there is an even greater need to document, conserve and utilize the indigenous knowledge systems for the well-being of humankind. Tribal cultures are the treasure-house of indigenous knowledge systems which are built through trial and error over centuries, and most of the practices have sound scientific basis, which need to be studied and analyzed.

Documenting such knowledge provides a basic platform for formulating policies which may lead to sustainable development in any country. Development of the indigenous communities can be achieved by increasing opportunities for them. Otherwise, how can traditional knowledge be valued and conserved within the native society, if, such knowledge offers little or no economic benefit to the indigenous peoples? Ethno-biologists have a great role to play by rescuing disappearing knowledge. If such knowledge can be conserved, it can help us in understanding the linkages of cultural and ecological systems, help to maintain a sense of pride in local cultural knowledge and practices and reinforce links between communities and the environment which is crucial for conservation. There is a delicate relationship between the stability of the forest ecosystem and the culture of the inhabitants. The invaluable role of indigenous peoples in the conservation of natural resources should be recognized. National policies should preserve customary traditional practices and protect indigenous property, including ideas and knowledge. The traditional knowledge and resource management practices of the indigenous peoples should be integrated with modern development strategies while ensuring benefits to these people. These benefits in return become the incentive and motivation for the local people to conserve the resources.

A survey in central Bhutan found that the households used more edible plants fifty years ago than at present [Christina 2000] which explains the change in the harvest and use of wild edible plants as well as the loss of knowledge about them. Another study in eastern Bhutan mentioned that, the rural population of Radhi consider people collecting edible plants from forest as of lower social status [Wangchuk 1998]. Likewise, even in this Monpa community, knowledge of plants and their use is slowly disappearing as explained by the different trends among the three Monpa villages. Following the gazetting of the Black Mountain National Park by the RGOB and the three Monpa villages falling into the buffer zone of the park, implementation of stricter regulations on the use of forest resources has occurred. It is expected that the Monpas will gradually reduce their reliance on the forest and its products. With this, it is feared that this important knowledge base will weaken and it can be lost altogether. It is vital to document this knowledge, as done partly by this study, do further research into areas of importance, and build strategies that are suitable and sustainable.