

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Foresters Find a New Focus

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Dear Peter,

"Excuse me Madam, but this conference is only for foresters," was the greeting I received as I stepped up to the registration table of the Nepal Foresters' Conference last week. Answering lightly, "Yes, I know," I signed the registration book. The secretary's prompt production of my identification tag indicated that he had discovered my qualification in locating my name on the invitation list. His mistake was understandable; in Nepal forestry is still very much an all-male bastion. Indeed, I was the only woman in attendance at this first national meeting on forestry organized by the six-year-old Nepal Foresters' Association.

Established in 1974, this professional foresters' organization remained largely inactive until 1979, when it elected its first officers and six-man advisory board. Almost two-thirds of Nepal's approximately 150 trained foresters belong to the Association whose avowed purpose is to support the moral courage and skill development of its members, educate the general public regarding the many benefits of forests and promote national and international cooperation and exchange of ideas in the field of forestry. Last week's meeting had been called to discuss issues of general interest in forestry and to debate proposed changes and amendments to the Association's constitution. Propitiously scheduled during the holiday period falling between two major Nepali festivals, the conference, held on November 1 and 2 in central Kathmandu, attracted a relatively large crowd. One hundred and five individuals registered and many more attended the two-day gathering. Some dozen expatriate foresters, mainly those involved with various community forestry, rural development or soil and water conservation programs, also participated.

Several distinguished guests from the higher echelons of government graced the dais during the opening session. Prime Minister Suraya Bahadur Thapa's introductory speech suggesting the government's renewed sense of commitment to effective forest

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management launched the proceedings on an encouraging note. Later a member of the National Planning Commission, Dr. M. M. Sainju, urged the group to be more analytical, and especially more self-critical, in attacking the problems and challenges facing forestry today. Other presentations by various members of the Association explored traditional topics, such as, research priorities, nursery and plantation practices, soil and water conservation and wildlife preservation. Speakers on conservation education and community forestry pointed out that traditional forest policing practices have not brought the judicious use of forest resources as intended. They called upon foresters to try to change their martial image by working together with villagers to develop management schemes that would both enhance forest resources and serve the needs of local people. In a more biting indictment of recent forest policies, another speaker charged that the isolation of conservation from the mainstream of development activities plus the narrow sectoral approach to natural resources management has promoted institutional fragmentation within the government. This situation, in turn, has resulted in conflicting policy directions, duplication or absence of management responsibilities and abysmally poor communications, both horizontally and vertically, within the administration. Finally, he claimed, these inadequacies have led to a declining interest natural resources conservation at the community level.*

On the second day of the conference the audience was invited to comment on the issues raised in discussions and papers presented the previous day. In addition the chairman prodded the members to identify problem areas demanding immediate attention and to suggest suitable policies and programs for recommendation to government decisionmakers. Questionnaires distributed to the participants solicited research topics to be listed in terms of priority. The identification of tree species capable of both fuel and fodder production and suitable for widespread planting was put forth as the most urgent task before researchers.

Respondents also highlighted the lack of follow-up, especially in protection and maintenance, characterizing forestry projects in Nepal as one of the major handicaps of forest development. Difficulties in program implementation were blamed partly on the poor design of projects prepared by office-bound administrators. Rising in defense of the profession's performance, several members argued that the long-term nature of forest management is incompatible with the administration's frequent changes in policy. Further, they charged that the government's entire development strategy has been misdirected. Indeed, inadequate attention to the spectrum of basic needs of rural peoples and the intricacies of rural production systems has brought about

* K. P. Upadhyay. 1980. Loss of Renewable Natural Resources and Prospects for their Improvement in Nepal. Paper prepared for the Nepal Foresters' Conference, November 1-2, 1980, Kathmandu.

many of the country's present environmental problems.

Throughout the discussions the current catchwords, social or community forestry and people's participation, were bandied about with little attention to definition. Despite the dictionary's pronouncements on these collective nouns, what consistently came to my mind was a vision of the traditional all-male caucus of community political leaders plus a few Forest Department officials deciding the structure of the new village forestry project. Thus, when the chairman called for contributions from the audience, I took the opportunity to rise to the podium and call for the recognition of the important role rural women play in the harvest and utilization of forest resources, especially fuel, fodder, fruit and similar minor forest products. Noting that the poor adoption rate of new farming techniques in some areas of Nepal has been attributed to the exclusion of women from agricultural extension programs, I urged the participants to actively solicit the advice and assistance of local village women in the design and implementation of community forestry projects.

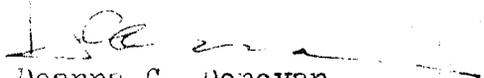
Possibly the most significant, and surely the most exciting, episode of the conference came late in the second day after the conclusion of the formal comments. Following an extended tea break during which several select committees prepared recommendations on specific policy questions, the assembly reconvened for the presentation and discussion of the various recommendations. The vigorous debates that ensued over several issues, in particular, forest cutting levels and log exports, betrayed the younger foresters keen dissatisfaction with recent forest policies and management practices. Several members demanded a ban on further tree felling until the backlog of cut timber has been cleared from sawmill stockpiles. Foresters familiar with conditions at the mills in the Terai pointed out that a tremendous amount of wood is lost to decay in storage as the mills cannot keep pace with timber harvesting. Moreover, they claim that sizeable revenues are forfeited through the sale and export of unprocessed logs to neighboring India. Disagreement over these and other topics gave rise to passionate debates which continued late into the afternoon, even well after the electrical system had failed. Finally, two hours past the scheduled conclusion of the conference, with the chairman struggling to read the recommendations by dim candlelight, the proceedings were brought to a close. Decisions regarding the final format of the policy recommendations as well as discussion of proposed constitutional changes were postponed until a future meeting.

By the sheer number as well as the enthusiastic contribution of participants, the Nepal Foresters' Conference must be judged a success. The opening speech, delivered by one of the most senior members of the administration, heralds a greater government commitment to the conservation and development of forest resources. The meeting itself offered an ideal forum for the exchange of ideas among professionals often otherwise isolated by the very nature

of their vocation. Moreover, as a non-governmental gathering, the conference also provided the largely government-employed group with an acceptable avenue to air their greivances regarding administration policies and working conditions. It was clear from the extra-session discussions as well as the general comments from the floor that many foresters are quite upset with the rampant political corruption that has infested government offices and hastened the indiscriminate destruction of the forests, especially in the Terai. A number of individuals complained that they have been called upon to support, and even to justify, policies and practices that they personally and professionally feel have been unsound both from the point of view of natural resources management as well as social welfare. The clamorous challenge of the old guard by more idealistic and far-sighted younger foresters seems to reflect the new boldness that has developed following the success of the students' political assertiveness last year.

As several participants observed, with approximately 150 trained foresters, Nepal appears to harbor sufficient capability to launch an assault on the country's enormous environmental problems. A highly motivated, well-organized group, such as the Nepal Foresters' Association, could provide the moral and technical support necessary to galvanize forestry professionals into pressuring government decisionmakers for badly needed reforms in forest policy and administration structure. Of utmost importance in any reorganization of the institutions of natural resources management in Nepal is the improvement of communications. The recent forestry conference in Kathmandu provided a stimulus to exchange among forestry professionals. Foresters at all levels should work to strengthen these new channels of communication and pursue the development of dialogue down to the level of the village consumer. It has become all too clear in Nepal that in order to preserve the productivity of wildland resources, the forestry sector must learn to respond more directly and immediately to society's needs, especially those of the rural populations. Indeed, it would serve well both policymakers and field workers to note that the most pressing problems plaguing forestry today stem from the shortcomings of social and economic systems rather than the mysteries of the physical and biological sciences.

Sincerely yours,



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