

Conservation goes back to its roots - Opinion - International Herald Tribune

Ashish Kothari

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PUNE, India — Dawa Tsering Sherpa never thought he would see this day. Standing in a village high in the Kanchenjunga range of the Himalayas, he witnessed his community being handed the responsibility of managing the surrounding mountains and valleys as a conservation area.

From Katmandu, Nepal's capital, had come "hakim sahibs" - a cabinet minister, high-ranking officials, members of international conservation organizations, even some foreign donors. The villagers were visibly excited, for they knew it was a big day. But they may not have realized its global significance.

A few years earlier, Nepal's government and conservation groups like WWF had worked with local communities to make possible the transition to local control. The aim was not only to ensure the conservation of this unique mountain landscape and its wildlife, but also to provide local people with sustainable options for livelihood, health and education. A management council representing all the communities had been set up, and Dawa Sherpa had been elected its chairman.

In the Indian state of Orissa, 2,000 kilometers to the south, Anjali Pradhan was foraging in the forests of the Baisipalli Wildlife Sanctuary for medicinal herbs that she could sell to traders. She kept a sharp eye out for forest department guards, knowing that what she was doing was illegal.

Some years back the government had banned collection of forest produce, cutting off the most important source of livelihood for several thousand families living inside the state's wildlife sanctuaries. Anjali's annual family income had plummeted from the equivalent of about \$200 to less than \$20, forcing her husband to move out in search for jobs in road construction, and the remaining family members to scrounge around for a risky illegal existence.

Areas protected for wildlife have dealt a severe blow to the livelihoods of millions like Anjali across the world. More than a century and a half of conservation policy based on the American "Yellowstone" model has attempted to separate people from nature, leaving protected areas only to tourists and scientists. Local people's own conservation traditions have been neglected as conservation was placed in the hands of centralized bureaucracies.

Thus the significance of the Kanchenjunga ceremony. In a clear break from convention, Nepal intends to entrust protected area management to communities who live closest to the resource, rather than rely only on distant government officials.

This belated trust is not misplaced. Tens of thousands of sites rich in biodiversity are conserved by indigenous peoples and local communities across the world. Most of these remain unrecognized. In the Philippines, more than 500 community marine conservation sites have been listed, and similar numbers are emerging from the Pacific islands.

In South Asia, several thousand communities are conserving forests, wetlands, marine and coastal areas. Nomadic peoples have managed grassland and desert landscapes in Central Asia and the Horn of Africa in ways that sustain considerable wildlife. Scholars estimate that 370 million hectares of forest may be under community-based conservation.

This trend will inevitably spread, and may double the world's current coverage of protected areas. This is both because of growing democratic and territorial assertiveness from communities, as also because international policy now requires it. In 2004, countries that are parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity agreed to an ambitious program of work on protected areas, which included the need to recognize and support community-conserved areas and collaboratively managed protected areas.

Such initiatives face enormous threats: political or socioeconomic divisions within communities, the incursions of rapacious international markets, imposition of destructive mining, and dams or other so-called development projects.

The biggest threat, however, is that communities in many countries remain without effective decision-making power and control over natural resources. That is why the Nepalese example is so vital.

There is a tragic postscript to the Kanchenjunga ceremony. Dawa Tsering Sherpa died, along with several officials and conservationists, in a helicopter crash while returning from the ceremony. In their memory, several groups are putting together a fund to promote community-based conservation. High in the Himalayas, their legacy will live on as villagers show that looking after protected areas can go hand in hand with making a living.

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