
Perspectives and the Way Forward





Sundarbans
[Zaid Ahmed]

Perspectives on Participatory Forest and Protected Area Management

Abdul-Muyeed Chowdhury

It is common knowledge in Bangladesh that our forests have been decimated in recent decades. Less apparent than the loss of forests is the loss of other goods and services that forests provide, particularly to the neighboring poor people, whose well-being and livelihoods depend on these forests.

Rural homesteads all over the country have vastly increased tree production in recent decades, but according to certain experts, the collective tree production of households will never be enough to meet the energy or construction needs of a fast-growing population. Commercial fuel wood sellers hire the poor to comb through existing Reserve Forests and Protected Areas to extract whatever they can to sell. Brick-fields are constructed inside or next to Reserve Forests to use wood as a primary energy source.

Disappearance of mature commercial timber is as serious as the wood supply situation. The commercial demand for timber for construction of homes and boats will continue to increase and prices, too, will increase over time. Timber fellers will more aggressively extract wood from National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries to meet demand, further endangering the already fragile biodiversity of the country.

The problem of over-extraction has been accentuated by land-grabbers, often with powerful political protection and bureaucratic support. The sal forests of Bhawal have now been legally titled for factories, homesteads, and other private uses. Other forests have met with a similar fate in varying degrees.

Many of our forests are already “dead,” meaning that there are no saplings in the lower and middle story to replace the older trees when they die.

Taking into account the experiences of the Nishorgo Support Project supporting Protected Areas and other programs that have targeted forest management, the following shortlist of priority actions emerges if Bangladesh is to recover the healthy and productive forests it once had.

Lessons Learned

Enable poor communities to invest in forest protection and benefits

Today, throughout Bangladesh, many poor communities might leap at the chance to protect nearby degraded forest, but the Forest Department is required by current law to keep them from doing so. In Reserve Forests, there exists no viable policy or procedure by which the local poor can invest their time or capital in protecting and restoring forests and expect to

have any benefit in return. The social forestry model has been successful so far but expansion is restricted by the fact that capital investment has come from the government. Government funds are limited and in the face of competing demands participatory management of forests is given low priority.

Nepal has addressed this issue with a widespread movement for community forestry supported by laws formally devolving responsibilities and rights to communities. India's Joint Forest Management does not require heavy government capital investment and control as is the case in Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, there has been some discussion over allowing communities engaged in PA protection to benefit from buffer areas at the edges of PAs, but there is opposition to such proposals.



Communities need to see clear benefits if they are to play a sustained role in forest protection. [Md. Tareq Murshed]

The poor need a clear opportunity to invest their time and energy in protecting forests in ways that benefit them. A model needs to be adapted that can feasibly cover all the barren areas of the country. We could develop a community forestry process for Reserve Forest and khas lands, or we could modify the Social Forestry Rules to allow a “formula” that does not require government investment (and does not demand a share in benefit either) in the greater interest of the country and its economy. New Social Forestry Rules, signed in 2009, now open the door to this kind of community investment, but they have not been tested.

Biodiversity in PAs and in Reserve Forests will not be protected until those forests can be protected, and incentives for protection will remain weak as long as local communities have no mechanism for investing their resources in those forests.

Enable private investment in commercial timber production

Across many sectors, the government has divested itself of failed monopoly businesses, but not in commercial forestry. It is time for the Forest Department to structure transparent and fair concessions under which timber companies would invest their own money and management experience to raise commercial plantations on a sustainable basis. Without immediate investment in commercial timber plantations, our wildlife spaces will be decimated to meet the timber needs of today and tomorrow.

Allow forest benefits to be kept by beneficiaries at the time of transaction

In spite of its shortcomings, social forestry has been one of the great successes in the past two decades because holders of social forestry certificates receive the benefits of their timber

immediately after felling and auction. A 45% share in standard social forestry agreements goes directly to the local participants. The general principle of revenue-sharing included in Bangladesh's social forestry model needs to be extended throughout the forest sector, to other types of forestry (such as community forestry adaptations) and to Protected Areas.

The assumption of those who oppose the local retention of income in social forestry is that any value generated on government land belongs only to the government and must be centrally collected by it. Only then can a share be returned through the budgetary process. This central collection is done to comply with the concept of a consolidated government fund, into which all revenues must go. Donors, by continuously pressing the government to increase the size of its kitty, are compounding the problem. While the need for more revenues cannot be denied, it has to be done by increased collection of direct taxes. However, the argument that all value generated from public lands should be routed through the government budget and accounts is fallacious – in wetlands and fisheries, use rights are leased out and that income goes to the treasury (exchequer). Thereafter, however, the designated user communities retain any income they generate from the resource from following management plans agreed with government. There are therefore longstanding precedents for possible arrangements that would enable community (or for that matter commercial) management of forest lands of all types.

Conserving forests requires local participation and benefit-sharing and if all produce of value (fees, timber, etc) are to be monetized and entered into the government fiscal accounts, then it will never be sustainable to have local participation through benefit-sharing.

This problem has become apparent for Protected Areas. In some of the Protected Areas, community members are patrolling the forests day and night to protect them. It stands to reason that retention at source of an agreed portion of the generated fees from activities should be allowed to pay for the services provided by the patrollers. These patrollers come from very poor families who need the cash on a daily basis for their survival. Even today, the system of retention of the fees at source is not in place. Real incentives need to be offered to communities to protect forests and wildlife throughout the country. Communities can be active protectors of forests, but they must see the benefits for their survival immediately. When all moneys go into the government revenues, people lose interest, since they firmly believe the system will cheat and deprive them of their due.

Publicly end the revenue targets implicitly handed to the Forest Department

As things stand now, the Forest Department has annual revenue targets to meet. It spends considerable time and energy to meet revenue generation targets set for it by the Ministry of Finance. This is a legacy of the colonial administration that



Seized timber is stored within the PA arrival areas, such as here at Satchuri National Park. The timber is later sold at local auctions, with all proceeds going to the central treasury. [Philip J. DeCosse]

needs to be changed. The prime responsibility of the Forest Department should be to protect the forests and to enhance the forest cover in the greater interest of the environment since climate change puts a much greater strain on the country and its economy through crop failures and natural disasters. Tree cover is the best protection against climate change. This does not mean the FD should not generate revenue from various activities relating to the forests, but the emphasis should shift from revenue to forest cover.

Pushing the Forest Department to squeeze more revenue out of forests, when forest cover is in such severe decline, is detrimental to the health of the country. The nation incurs a much higher cost to meet the adverse effects of climate change than the benefit it earns as revenue from the forestry sector.

Quantify and communicate the enormous non-market value of forests

In early 2008, the World Bank proposed USD 2 billion to reinforce our coastal zone against future cyclones and sea level rise. It is obvious that the standing forests of the Sundarbans eliminate the need for protective works at such enormous costs. It would be madness to cut down the Sundri trees in the Sundarbans to meet the annual revenue targets set for the Forest Department. But the irrational message from the budgetary system is that we should.

Some efforts are being made in Bangladesh by the FD to raise coastal forests with government investments, but a lot more can be done by involving the local people who will benefit most from protecting and nurturing these forests. We have not allocated sufficient importance to the enormous economic value of coastal forests as protection against sea level rise and storm surges. Nor have we given due importance to other non-cash values derived from forest ecosystem services such as regulating the flow of water into our wetlands and reducing siltation. The forests covering hills in the Sylhet Division regulate water flow into the water bodies (beels and haors¹) of that region, ensuring longer and more productive fishery seasons. Flash floods and earlier-than-normal drying of beels occur more frequently when upland forests have been cut down. These valuable wetlands also silt up rapidly without forest and sound land management in their watersheds. But pressure to generate revenue and meet timber needs is behind the depletion of many of these upland forests.

Make our forests carbon production centers for the poor in rural areas

We are hearing more and more about climate change, and some steps are being taken for Bangladesh to adapt to future climate changes. But we hear very little about one of the lowest hanging fruits in the carbon area in Bangladesh – enabling the poor to develop and restore forests as carbon sinks that generate cash income.

The poor need mechanisms with which they can invest in forest conservation and management, not just to benefit from fuel wood or sustainably harvested timber, but also to benefit from revenue generation linked to carbon sinks.

¹ Haors are extensive seasonally flooded saucer-shaped depressions in northeastern Bangladesh, the deeper parts that hold permanent water here and in other parts of Bangladesh are known as beels.

At today's carbon prices, one 8,000 hectare forest south of Chittagong would generate a carbon value of USD 2 million, or an annual benefit stream of more than 1 crore taka per year. With literally hundreds of thousands of hectares of deforested – but potentially highly productive – public forest lands around the country, millions of US dollars could be generated for poor communities acting to restore and protect those forests. This would greatly accelerate our journey towards a poverty-free Bangladesh with no or very little additional expenditure from the government. We need to have an easy framework under which NGOs and Community-Based Organizations could register to have their carbon projects easily recognized by the global framework. This needs to become a priority if the poor are to benefit and forests are to be restored.

Recognize and accept the existence of a profound and persistent bias against ethnic minorities in forest areas

One of the most persistent biases in the Bangladesh forest sector is against the ethnic minorities that have lived for generations in our forest areas. There seems to be a deep concern that if we give any recognition to these minorities, we will lose the land to them.

It is time to recognize and publicly accept the basic fact that these people have indeed lived for centuries in these forests, and thus may legitimately be called “indigenous peoples.” That may or may not mean land rights, but should recognize valid historical rights. We may take lessons from the historic declaration in the Australian parliament regarding indigenous peoples in that country. In our case, such recognition is needed for our own good as much as for the good of the indigenous people themselves. Indigenous peoples' knowledge can help in the regeneration and sustainability of our forests and thus help us fight climate change and its adverse impacts on the entire country.



Foresters at Lawachara National Park in December 2004 saw their primary role is using force to protect the forests. [Philip J. DeCosse]

Make “transparency” and formal “participation” the two leading characteristics of the entire forest sector

The Forest Department has in recent decades come to be seen by many as synonymous with opaque management processes and a lack of participation. Social forestry has begun to reverse this image, as has the FD's efforts to reach out to community members around Protected Areas under the “collaborative management” processes reviewed in this volume and developed through the USAID-funded Nishorgo Program. But more work remains to be done. The heart of the change needs to be a public, simple, and clear acknowledgement that the Forest Department is committed in everything it does to two central principles: transparency and participation.

How the new focus would be achieved is not entirely clear, but without this focus on transparency and formal participation, it will simply not be possible to protect the forests we still have, and to restore those we used to have.

Progress on these eight urgent actions would improve fuel wood supply for the poor, commercial timber supply, coastal zone protection, wildlife populations, nature tourism opportunities, fisheries productivity, and possibly even temperature regulations, not to mention the intrinsic biodiversity benefits of protecting our many species of plants and animals.

This chapter was originally published as an opinion piece in Daily Star, Saturday, May 3, 2008.