

How green is the valley



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ASIA FILE

An extraordinary thing is happening in Nepal. Its denuded hills are getting their forests back and turning green again. As I looked at the hills around Kathmandu on a recent visit, the vegetation appeared fresher and denser than it did when I last visited the city nine years ago. Even the valley's notorious dust haze couldn't diminish the fact.

The story of this transformation hasn't been known and appreciated much outside Nepal, but it's an excellent example of what can be achieved when governmental effort meets with popular enthusiasm and is a clear proof that even serious environmental damage can be reversed if the action involves and emanates from the community.

Nepal's forests have always been under stress. With over 70 per cent of the people depending on wood for their energy needs, it couldn't be otherwise. But the decline had been particularly rapid since 1957, when the government nationalised all forests and brought them under its direct control. Immediately, things began to fall apart. The government became an adversary and people, denied their traditional rights to forest resources, wreaked their vengeance by indiscriminately cutting down trees. And the rampant denudation that followed led inevitably to widespread erosion of the ground soil on the hills, causing flash floods and frequent landslides.

The government, however,

of Sindhupalchowk in central Nepal. With support from the World Bank, the district forest officer (DFO) called *panchayat* members to a meeting, explained what the government had in mind, formed a villagers' committee and gave it a forest area with full authority to manage, protect and use the area to its best advantage. The villagers couldn't be happier and embraced the project with great enthusiasm.

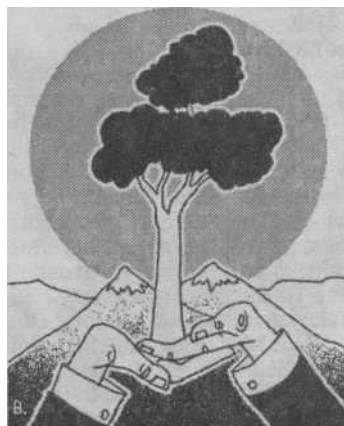
Thus came into being Nepal's first forest user group (FUG), setting a model that the rest of the country followed. Thousands of FUGs soon appeared on the scene to replant denuded hillsides and *terai* plains, enrich degraded forest areas with new plantings and protect forests that were still standing.

Under the 1993 Act, DFOs have to validate the user groups. However, once they are formed and allotted portions of forests to look after, these groups are treated as independent corporate bodies. They decide what to plant and what to harvest and how best to sell their forest products. They set up their own funds. If any money is left over, they can spend it on projects like village roads, bridges,

community buildings and schools. Many FUGs have even established credit schemes to give grants or low-interest loans to needy villagers.

At last count, over 13,000 FUGs are already up and running around the country, involving 15 million households and managing 1.07 million hectares of community forests. That's 25 per cent of the country's population and nearly 16 per cent of its total land area and the project shows no sign of slowing down. New FUGs are being formed at an average of two a day.

Will Nepal get



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made amends before things could go beyond repair and moved to right what patently was a wrong policy. Prompted by international funding agencies and non-government organisations (NGOs), it passed a landmark forest Act in 1993 that fully "democratised" the management of forests and brought forest communities once again to the fore. It is they who now have the responsibility of establishing and managing community forests in open and degraded areas; it is they who protect them; and it is they who sell their products and retain their profits.

Slowly, the lost sense of belonging is returning to forest communities all over Nepal and a new sense of empowerment is beginning to spread through its villages. The government has willingly accepted the role of a facilitator, thus rewriting the forest scenario of a country that has long been regarded as environmentally fragile.

It all began as an experiment in one village panchayat in the district

back all the forests it has lost? Perhaps not. The forest cover now stands at no more than 29 per cent of the country's total land area against some 45 per cent back in the early 1960s. But the rate of forest decline, which used to be 14 per cent during the 1970s and 1980s, has come down to less than 7 per cent, thanks to the community forestry programme.

Is the programme helping to reduce the acute poverty that afflicts Nepal? It's difficult to say. But it's certainly the best thing that could have happened to the country. Because of the programme, communities have begun to be empowered; government policies and attitudes are changing; social capital is created in the form of roads, schools and health centres; and FUGs already have a balance of about 100 million rupees in their kitty — an amount almost equal to the government's annual forestry development budget for the districts. It's impossible that all this won't have any impact on people's lives.

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Nepal's forest policy

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