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Source: Mountain Research and Development, 23(3) : 234-237

Published By: International Mountain Society

URL: https://doi.org/10.1659/0276-4741(2003)023[0234:CIP]2.0.CO;2

Mountain Research and Development Vol 23 No 3 August 2003: 234–237

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Women and Protected Areas in the Indian Himalayas

The unique assemblages of flora and fauna in the Himalayan region make it one of the most important biodiversity hotspots on the Indian subcontinent. Seventy-five protected areas (PAs) encompassing 9.48% of the region have been created to conserve this biodiversity and the fragile Himalayan landscape (Figure 1). However, this has engendered conflicts between PA management and local communities that suffer from restrictions on access to biomass resources. When resource use in PAs is prohibited, the implications of the conflict are more severe for local women, who bear the burden of day-to-day survival. Initiatives to empower women are hampered by women's lack of education and skills and by low self-esteem resulting from their marginalization by sociocultural taboos. Incentives are needed to promote meaningful participation by women in biodiversity conservation initiatives.

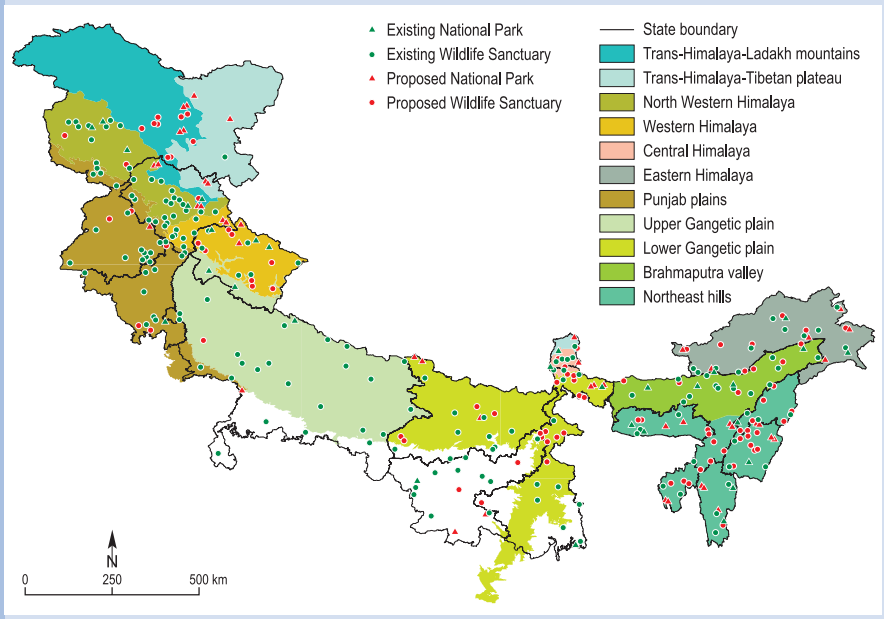

FIGURE 1 PAs in the different biogeographic zones of the Indian Himalaya. (Map from: Rodgers WA, Panwar HS, Mathur VB. 2002. *Wildlife Protected Area Network in India: A Review*. Dehra Dun, India: Wildlife Institute of India.)

The Indian Himalayas

The Indian Himalayas cover approximately 18% of India's land surface and encompass a range of topographical structures, elevations, and locations, resulting in contrasting climates from region to region. Situated at the junction of 3 biogeographic realms—the Palaearctic, the Africotropical, and the Indo-Malayan—the Himalayan region is a biodiversity hotspot that harbors rare assemblages of flora and fauna with a high degree of endemism. About 2100 bird species and 5800 plant species (26% of which are endemic) are found here, and of India's 372 mammalian species, as many as 241 (65%) have been recorded in the Himalayas.

The Indian Himalayas are inhabited by approximately 51 million people (6% of India's population). Nevertheless, the region has a low population density compared with the rest of India. The region is underdeveloped: the mean Center for Monitoring of Indian Economy (CMIE) index of development is as low as 82 (100 being the index for the whole of India). In general, the region is characterized by rugged, undulating terrain, small isolated villages, an agropastoral economy, small landholdings, and dry farming with little irrigation.

Women of the Himalayas

Women of the Himalayas have woven an indelible and colorful pattern of cultures and lifestyles that is part of the fascinating mystique of this rugged and economically marginalized region. In parts of the eastern Himalayas where some tribes practiced shifting agriculture, women enjoyed higher social status because there was no clear-cut division of labor or specific land rights. The adoption of settled agriculture in recent times has led to the emergence of a well-defined division of labor and all the inequalities associated with it. Moreover, settled agriculture is based on private ownership, nearly always involving males, thus denying women access to and control over one of the most important means of food production. Farming remains subsistence-oriented. However, cereal output is no longer sufficient to ensure subsistence. The hardship of women's daily lives is reflected in their ill health and untimely deaths, often caused by poor nutrition, lack of access to medical care, and prolonged exposure to indoor air pollution from badly designed cooking and heating stoves. Himalayan vil-

lages are thus characterized by high sex ratio imbalances, evident in the recent census. Female literacy rates remain low throughout most of the Himalayan region.

Young girls, like their mothers, work, assuming full responsibilities for grass and firewood collection, cattle grazing, and assistance in other farm tasks. In a study conducted in the Rajaji and Corbett National Parks, women accounted for 70.3–97% of the head loaders bringing in biomass resources from the forests (Figure 2). Factors contributing to the marginalization of women include their workload, barriers against land ownership, cultural roles, secondary status, and division of labor. Besides the noncompetitive nature of female labor, lack of skills, entrepreneurship, and credit facilities have further hampered the advancement of women.

Women and protected areas in the Indian Himalayas

India has one of the world's most extensive networks of protected areas (PAs). This network has helped conserve significant portions of India's biodiversity. But it has also engendered severe conflicts between local communities and PA management because of the dependence of local inhabitants on resources and because of poverty. PA management is based on the philosophy of "preservation" or "protection": the role of the government is to safeguard natural resources through strict enforcement of legislation, patrols to prevent illegal activities, and maintenance of infrastructure. Although the last decade has seen a shift toward involving local people in and around PAs in biodiversity conservation, successful examples of PAs where local people's development needs have been effectively reconciled with conservation concerns remain difficult to find.

Around 75 PAs have been created with the aim of conserving biodiversity and the fragile Himalayan landscape (see Figure 1). However, the Himalayas are a region where people depend most on natural resources, particularly for fuel, fodder, and thatch. In the past, hill people's dependence on forests was institutionalized through a variety of social and cultural mechanisms such as religion, folklore, and traditions. When the government assumed control of the forests, these mechanisms became defunct, and a radical reorientation of existing patterns of resource use took place, including a transition from collective to individual use of forests. The result was protests, social movements, and violation of forest laws, along with an erosion of social bonds that formerly regulated the customary use of forests. The closure of large areas for conservation has put additional strain on women, who carry the burden of securing fuelwood and fodder.

FIGURE 2 Women travel over treacherous terrain to fetch fodder, here in a village near Gangotri National Park, Western Himalaya. (Photo by Anjaji Awasthi)

Lack of governmental information and collaboration

Women living in villages adjacent to PAs are the ones most affected by the designation of PAs. Most of these women are aware of the existence of the PAs because they come into day-to-day conflict with the forest patrols. However, they are generally not aware of the reasons for these PAs. They perceive them as an infringement on their basic right to survival. Although local people generally have a positive attitude toward conservation, they have negative feelings about PAs. In fact, the area adjoining the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve (NDBR) is the region that gave birth to the famous *chipko* movement in the early 1970s, when women foiled the attempts of contractors to fell trees by hugging the trees and ultimately succeeded in bringing about a ban on commercial felling in the area. But with the declaration of the region as National Park some 10 years after the *chipko* movement, the women seem to have become totally indifferent to the condition of these forests,

"You first took our fingers, then our hands, and now you have come to catch us by the throat. You want to create walls around the WLS and put up barbed wire. You want to bribe us and take away our rights by getting our signatures." (A woman attending a village meeting on the fringe of the Binsar Wildlife Sanctuary)

FIGURE 3 An ecodevelopment committee meeting in progress in a village adjoining the Rajaji National Park. Women generally do not participate, as is the case here. (Photo by Anil Bhardwaj)

"We will ensure the involvement and consent of the women of our region at all levels of decision making, while developing and implementing conservation and tourism plans." (Statement in the Nanda Devi Biodiversity Conservation and Ecotourism Declaration)

which they now perceive as *sarkari* jungle, "government forests" that are the cause of their hardships.

The locals' inability to access forest resources, their lack of understanding of the reasons for PA declaration, and the absence of any positive interaction with PA management have led to hostility toward management. A survey conducted in villages in the buffer zone of the NDBR revealed that 90% of the women were prepared to steal biomass resources from the PA. A similar sentiment was echoed by 70% of the women in villages adjoining the Rajaji National Park. Although most were aware of the park's existence, over 80% were not aware of the reasons for it. They perceive the PA as the main cause of their hardship and maintain that the government designates PAs to earn money from foreigners at the cost of local rights to collect biomass. This alienation of local communities has been further intensified by incidents of humans being killed by predators in the hill areas. Approximately two thirds of the victims were females.

Lack of women's participation in community programs

Most participatory community programs focusing on biodiversity conservation are based on an undifferentiated view of the community that ignores women. In most states, the government mandates the formation of forest protection committees or ecodevelopment committees stipulating joint membership for each household: if the husband becomes a member, the wife automatically becomes a member as well, and vice versa. Thus, either of the 2 can represent the household at any annual general meeting. Nevertheless, in the villages around the Rajaji National Park only 45–50% of the women knew that village ecodevelopment committees (VECs) existed, and most came to know of them through talk in the village (68%). Only 11% had attended meetings, and none were aware of the required quota of women members in the executive committee of the VECs (Figure 3). At a village meeting on the fringe of the Binsar Wildlife Sanctuary in the western Himalaya, for example, the village plan for ecodevelopment was being discussed. The forest department was curious to know whether the draft plan was acceptable to the villagers. The women villagers in particular knew nothing about the plan. This resulted from the failure to consult women, the primary stakeholders, at the planning stage, although the major objective of ecodevelopment is to elicit participation of local people in biodiversity conservation.

Furthermore, even though most state circulars specify that one third to one half of the executive committee members in such bodies should be women, there is no mandatory quorum for women, either in the general body or in the executive committee meetings. Even when they attend, the presence of women does not necessarily imply their active and meaningful participation. And even as members of decision-making forums, they generally do not feel free to express their needs and concerns because they are often not in a position to challenge male colleagues who may be their husbands, brothers, or fathers.

Meaningful involvement by women

In recent years, there has been recognition of the importance of involvement by women in conservation initiatives. Most PA managers are consciously trying to develop programs that empower rural women and ensure that their voices are heard in decision-making processes.

FIGURE 4 A Bhotiya woman spinning yarn in Lata village, near the NDBR. Women's activities are multifarious and allow them to adapt and survive under difficult and changing conditions. (Photo by Ruchi Badola)

These initiatives include sensitizing the PA staff and the communities to gender issues, skill-related training programs for women, capacity building among poor women by actively involving them in alternative income-generation activities and services at the village level, and building and strengthening institutions that would ensure women's entitlements. In the case of the Binsar Wildlife Sanctuary discussed above, once the forest department realized its shortcomings and ensured that women were involved in planning ecodevelopment and ecotourism initiatives, the women took pride in the process. They are now instrumental in implementing the plan. In the Rajaji National Park, training programs for the staff and communities and skill enhancement and income-generating activities have been undertaken in addition to initiation of efforts to organize women into self-help groups. The PA management of the Great Himalayan National Park has also taken an initiative to organize poor women in women's savings and credit groups (WSCGs). The members of these WSCGs are being involved in income-generating activities. There has been a perceptible change in attitude among men in households where women bring in money, including a willingness to share household work and facilitate women's attendance at meetings. The WSCGs also function as forums for discussion and propagation of ideas, such as on-farm biodiversity conservation, besides being centers for social change where literacy, women and childcare programs, and veterinary care programs are undertaken. Although these are isolated initiatives, they show how participation by women in biodiversity conservation can be promoted through empowerment and attention to concerns about livelihood.

Conclusions

Although local mountain women have the sophistication to manage a multiplicity of roles and small production systems to adapt and survive in a fragile environment (Figure 4), their opinions and suggestions go largely unheard, undermining the development and implementation of appropriate management strategies. Gender dimensions in biodiversity conservation have hitherto been a neglected area apart from a few notable efforts by some PA management.

However, the little research that has been carried out in relation to gender and biodiversity is mostly confined to an examination of gender roles and how they have changed over time. There is still an enormous gap between the fields of gender studies and biodiversity, resulting in ignorance of gender issues and approaches in agricultural and forestry institutions. Planning to involve women in biodiversity management, at both the grassroots and institutional levels, cannot proceed without more extensive research—not only to document gender aspects of biodiversity conservation but also to document the culturally held perceptions of women and compare them with those of men. Access to education, credit, technical knowledge, entrepreneurship development programs, and employment opportunities for hill women is important to reduce their dependence on forests and resulting conflicts of interest between livelihood and biodiversity conservation. Internal reorientation at the institutional level, to make organizations gender-responsive, is necessary to bridge the gap between gender issues and the scientific management of natural resources. This requires not only recruiting more women staff and allowing their voices to be heard in senior-level decision-making forums but also integrating the needs and perspectives of local women from the earliest stage of design and declaration of PAs.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We greatly appreciate thought-provoking discussions with our colleagues, Mr Rajeev Bhartari, Ms Bitapi Sinha, Dr(s) S. Sathyakumar, and B.K. Mishra. We are indebted to Dr Leslie Taylor for encouraging us to write this article.

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