



A COMMUNITY APPROACH TO FOREST CONSERVATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: THE NTFP-EP EXPERIENCE

The Non-Timber Forest Products Exchange Programme (NTFP-EP) for South and Southeast Asia has been working for over a decade in seven countries (Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Cambodia, Viet Nam, India and Bangladesh) in support of local – mostly indigenous – communities that depend on non-timber resources from forests for their livelihoods.

This steadily expanding network of community organizations and support NGOs is driven by local demand and aims at strengthening the capacity of forest-based communities to use sustainably and manage a broad range of NTFPs. These products include, among many others, wild fruits, tree resins and gums, materials for crafts and forest honey.

Furthermore, the network and its secretariat play a significant role as catalyst and facilitator in two overarching fields. The first involves enhancing livelihood security by improving local cash income – through enterprise development, processing and marketing of promising NTFPs – and improving subsistence economies based on foods from the forest. The second focuses on sustainably managing forest resources, community forest conservation and rehabilitation, as well as issues related to land tenure.

In function of the above-mentioned topics, ample attention is given to a number of other initiatives, such as strengthening community-based institutions, fostering dialogue on NTFP-related policies with relevant government agencies, as well as advocacy, media work and lobbying directed at restricting destructive developments. Among these initiatives is a topic that today is receiving more focused attention: working to articulate positive cultural values – in particular those related to good forest stewardship – since experience has shown that conservation efforts are most effective where they concern communities with largely intact cultures or with an explicit desire to revitalize or strengthen cultural integrity.

Support is provided primarily through three types of interventions. The first entails “information provision”, such as documenting best practices and lessons learned through illustrated booklets, films, posters, etc. The second involves exchanging expertise and experiences through

community-to-community visits, regional workshops and internships. Finally, direct support is offered by staff and experts affiliated with the NTFP-EP, by means of technical advice or even linking communities up with promising trade contracts, centres of expertise, the media and policy-makers.

Case study

Honey is a useful example to demonstrate the essence of the NTFP-EP approach. Wild-gathered forest honey, primarily produced by the bee species *Apis dorsata*, has long been a much sought-after delicacy throughout Asia. However, consumers are concerned with quality issues such as, for example, adulteration of the product with sugar and water or with low-quality *A. mellifera* honey, which is rampant. Therefore, the prices that consumers are willing to pay are rather low. Furthermore, the resource base and supplies are under threat because of forest degradation and conversion and often few, if any, government services are available to assist honey collectors.

In order to address this situation, starting in the late 1990s, several pilot schemes were initiated with forest honey collector groups within the NTFP-EP network. In recent years, these schemes have grown into full maturity and have expanded well beyond the original sites. Sustainable harvesting practices have been commonly accepted, while – through the introduction of improved hygienic handling techniques – acceptable high-quality standards are now achieved region-wide. Furthermore, network partners take pride in guaranteeing the purity of their products. Strict internal rules have been established to this end, while traceability of the source of origin has been made relatively easy.

As a result, but also helped by extensive free publicity in local media, markets have opened up and income derived from honey and wax collection has, in many cases, increased significantly (*please see Sundarban honey wisdom on page 42*).

In addition, organized honey collectors play an increasingly active role in forest conservation. Since it is a basic fact that bees cannot produce good honey without numerous flowering trees, suitable host trees for their hives, adequate water supplies and a large enough forest to support seasonal migration patterns, honey harvesters are in the front line for promoting conservation of intact and biodiverse forests. In Indonesia, for example, this point was forcefully stressed by senior officials during the 2008 national workshop “Forest honey and forest conservation: what is the link?”

Conclusions

One term used within the EP network is “looking at the forest from an indigenous community perspective”. And indeed, those NTFP-collecting communities with an immediate stake in keeping the forest and its resources intact potentially constitute a considerable pro-conservation force. It is my wish, therefore, that now at last – in the International Year of Biodiversity and with Asia’s forests under pressure as never before – this so far largely untapped potential be fully recognized.

Lessons learned

To conclude, important generic lessons learned while working with NTFP collectors in the region and recommendations subsequently made include the following.

- Aim for a holistic approach and from the start address livelihood, conservation and sustainable management simultaneously, together with issues regarding land tenure. At the same time, enhance institutions and the cultural integrity of the communities.
- Do not try to force quick fixes; instead, ensure a long-term commitment over extended periods.
- Ensure that the communities’ aspirations and concerns are always fully incorporated. It is also important that the venture primarily is – and remains – the community’s own initiative.
- The eventual self-reliance of the grassroots partners involved requires finding simple and culturally appropriate solutions.
- Empower community organizations by providing them with direct links to quality expertise, trade contacts and policy-makers. In other words, avoid becoming a gatekeeper!

This handful of guidelines may sound all too obvious. However, go to the field and listen around. You will discover that such seemingly simple basic points still very much need to be implemented on the ground.

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