

## **Deforestation in the Himalayas: Mainstream views, institutional failure and `alternative systems´. A case study from Northern Pakistan.**

**Jawad Ali, 2009**

### **Abstract**

The sustainable management of forests is of central concern to the local people who depend on forest resources for their livelihood, to international conservation agencies, and to the legal custodians of the forests, the forest services. This study explores the roles of these actors in forest management in the Northern Areas of Pakistan, particularly in the Basha Valley in the Baltistan region. During the last three decades, the mainstream view of deforestation in the Hindukush-Himalayan region attributed the phenomenon to increased local use due to population growth. This view has been contested in recent years by those who see deforestation rather as a result of complex changes in the socioeconomic conditions of the region. This study contributes to this debate by means of providing empirical data from Basha.

The study consists of three papers and an introductory chapter. The introductory chapter discusses some of the key approaches to studying common property management, including political ecology, property rights, and co-management. It describes the local and policy context, the implications of the study for the Protected and Private Forests in the NAs and summarizes the main conclusions. Paper 1 uses local data on firewood consumption and timber extraction from the Basha Valley to investigate whether the general perception regarding forest depletion due to population growth is supported by empirical data. The results of Paper 1 indicate that local firewood collection is not the main cause of deforestation. Instead, deforestation has occurred due to commercial harvesting and mismanagement by the government Forest Department.

Paper 2 investigates the extent and time period of deforestation in the Basha Valley. Using oral sources as well as satellite imagery, Paper 2 estimates a 50 percent loss of forest cover over the

last 30 years, while population growth has been relatively low. Therefore the theory of massive deforestation due to population growth is not supported by the data collected and analyzed in Paper 2. Instead, it was found that large quantities of timber and firewood were removed on the basis of informal permits called chits during a period of commercial harvesting in the 1970s and 80s. The results show that most of the wood was taken out by contractors and members of what is called the ‘timber mafia’, after the construction of the Basho link road in 1968.

Paper 3 explores institutional aspects of forest management, exposing the limitations of conventional ideas regarding corruption in the forestry services. The data gathered for Paper 3 show that, faced with a severe shortage of resources, Forest Department officials engage in what is called ‘alternative systems’, in order to perform their official tasks. Through such ‘alternative systems’, they generate extra-legal resources to finance official tasks. Conventional analyses focus only on the deficiencies of forest services, and fail to offer constructive, realistic assessments of the potential positive role the forest services could play in community-based resource management. The paper identifies possible areas of intervention in order to improve the functioning of the Forest Department of the Northern Areas (NAs) of Pakistan.

Combining the data in all three papers and in the relevant introductory chapters, this study shows that the forests in the study area have been severely depleted. While this has been due largely to the weakness of the Forest Department, the response – a greatly increased role in resource management played by conservation agencies, without a concomitant strengthening of the government Forest Department – is problematic. Conservation agencies claim to promote conservation through decentralization and local participation. While a certain degree of decentralization in the NAs has occurred, real powers have, to a large extent, shifted from the Forest Department to conservation agencies, rather than to local communities. The strengthening of the power of international conservation agencies in this manner, at the expense of strengthening a national institution for natural resource management, will undermine community interests in the long run. This is due to the fact that in reality, the approach of the conservation agencies remains as centralized as the Forest Department’s conventional approach has been.