

Traditional Forest Knowledge in Asia: Sustaining Biocultural Diversity

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In a rapidly changing, increasingly globalized and culturally homogenized world, what is the role of traditional forest knowledge and practices? Can this fast-disappearing wisdom contribute to poverty alleviation and sustainable forest management? These were among the questions explored during the conference "Sustainable Forest Management and Poverty Alleviation: Roles of Traditional Forest-related Knowledge", held in Kunming, China from December 17th to 20th 2007.

Importance of Traditional Forest Knowledge for Sustainable Livelihoods

Traditional knowledge and practices have sustained the livelihoods, cultures and the forest and agricultural resources of local and indigenous communities throughout Asia for centuries. This knowledge, most often tightly interwoven with traditional religious beliefs, customs, folklore, land-use practices and community-level decision-making processes, has historically been dynamic, responding to changing environmental, social, economic and political conditions to ensure that forest resources continue to provide tangible (foods, medicines, wood and other non-timber forest products, water and fertile soils) and intangible (spiritual, social and psychological health) benefits for present and future generations.

Challenges to TFK in a rapidly changing world

Despite their importance and contributions to sustainable rural livelihoods, traditional forest-related knowledge and practices are fast disappearing in most Asian countries, (and indeed worldwide) for a number of reasons. The expansion of the increasingly globalized market economy in previously self-sufficient rural areas, the impact of infrastructure development and greater exposure to mass media, and government policies and regulations within and outside of the forest sector restricting access and traditional use of forest resources, have led to a general erosion of traditional culture and of traditional land and forest management knowledge and practices, and declining interest in traditional wisdom, knowledge, and lifestyles among younger generations. The negative implications of this loss of TFK on livelihoods, cultural and biological diversity, and the capacity of forested landscapes to



Conference attendees at the Zixishan Nature Reserve, Yunnan Province, China

provide environmental goods and services remain poorly understood, largely unappreciated, and undervalued by policy-makers and the general public in most countries.

Opportunities and the role of formal forest science

Working with local and indigenous communities, the forest science community can contribute to the revitalization of traditional forest-related knowledge in several important ways, including:

- Documentation of TFK in close partnership with holders and users of this knowledge, using ethically appropriate study methods;
- Research on traditional forest management conservation and practices that help to elucidate and generalize the ecological underpinnings of traditional knowledge;
- Economics, marketing and policy research aimed at improving opportunities for increasing rural incomes from products and services provided by application of TFK;
- Integration of TFK into forestry curricula, and partnership with the holders and users of traditional knowledge for education of the general public and decision-makers on the livelihood and environmental values of TFK.

This conference was jointly organized by the Chinese Academy of Forestry, IUFRO's Task Force on Traditional Forest Knowledge, and the Asia-Pacific Association of Forestry Research Institutions (APAFRI) with the cooperation of several other organizations in Asia and financial support from the Korea Forest Research Institute, the State Forestry Administration of PR China, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the Austrian Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management, United Nations University and APAFRI. The 150 participants from 20 countries included research scientists, students, representatives from NGOs, national and intergovernmental agencies and bodies, and local and indigenous community members. A total of 65 papers and posters were presented.

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