

FORESTACTION: LEADING THE PATHWAY TO SUSTAINABLE FOREST MANAGEMENT IN NEPAL



In this blog, Rahul Karki discusses the role of ForestAction, a leading NGO in forestry in Nepal, in shaping sustainable practices in forestry and contributing to livelihoods. He also explores the challenges facing the forestry sector and potential ways forward.

CONTEXT

Nepal's forest cover has increased significantly in recent decades. [Between 1992 and 2016, forest cover saw a remarkable rise, representing 44.74% of the country's total area.](#) While various factors have contributed to this increase, community-based forest management is widely credited for this achievement. Nepal's community forestry is recognized as a global model for community-based natural resource management, demonstrating effectiveness in restoring degraded landscapes and generating livelihoods for rural populations.

[The Master Plan for the Forestry Sector \(MPFS\) of 1989](#), still considered a milestone policy document, was instrumental in institutionalizing a people-centric approach to forest management. This document marked a critical turning point in shifting the perception of forest officials toward decentralized forest governance. Following the advent of multi-party democracy in Nepal in 1991 and the promulgation of the Forest Act 1993 and Forest Regulation 1995, community forests proliferated, reinforcing the acceptance of decentralized forest governance.



In the following years, several organizations outside the government emerged to support the institutionalization of community forestry. One such organization is [ForestAction Nepal](#) (Box 1), a

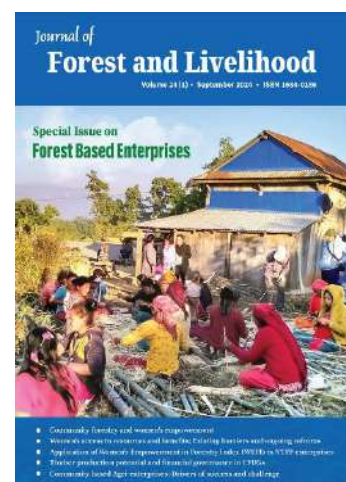
learning-oriented institution with over two decades of experience in forestry research and policy engagement. Today, community forests occupy nearly 2.4 million hectares—about a third of Nepal’s forest cover—and are managed by over 23,000 community forest user groups, comprising 3.19 million households.

Box 1: ForestAction Nepal

Established in 2001, ForestAction serves as a hub of diverse expertise, providing a competitive advantage in creating new knowledge for change. It adopts a four-pronged approach to achieve its goals:

- a. Research and innovation
- b. Capacity building
- c. Policy dialogues and public debates
- d. Knowledge production and dissemination

In pursuit of these objectives, ForestAction engages with a diverse range of stakeholders from research design to policy communication. In addition to prioritizing action research, ForestAction publishes a range of outputs targeted at specific audiences. Notably, it publishes the Journal of Forest and Livelihood, a peer-reviewed journal that disseminates key insights and lessons across Nepal’s natural resource sectors. Beyond research, the organization supports stakeholders through capacity-building opportunities, including field-based training, apprenticeship courses, workshops, and discussions on critical contemporary issues such as forest restoration, forest fire management, agroecology, and silviculture management.



ACTION-ORIENTED ENGAGEMENT AND LEARNING

ForestAction’s central approach involves multi-level engagement, from local communities to provincial and national policymakers. Researchers strive to uncover the root causes of challenges facing the forestry and agriculture sectors while generating evidence from the field. In this process, ForestAction engages with local communities, government agencies, policy actors, and scholars, helping them reflect on and articulate their challenges at both the village and policy levels.

As a not-for-profit organization, ForestAction has the flexibility to identify research agendas in collaboration with local communities, policymakers, civil society groups, and experts. It has proposed alternative approaches that blend scientific knowledge with local wisdom in resource management. For instance, there has been ongoing debate between the government and civil society (e.g., FECOFUN) regarding the term ‘scientific forest management,’ with civil society groups arguing that it is not sufficiently sensitive to local communities.



Interaction with women entrepreneurs in Nawalparasi, Nepal

To address this, ForestAction facilitated multiple stakeholder discussions, leading to the adoption of the term ‘active and equitable forest management.’ This term was not just semantic; ‘active’ refers to incorporating silvicultural science and local knowledge, while ‘equitable’ highlights justice and fairness in forest management.

SHAPING SUSTAINABLE FORESTRY PRACTICES FOR RURAL LIVELIHOODS

Despite nearly 45% of Nepal’s land area being covered in forests, the sector continues to face persistent challenges (Box 2).

Box 2: Challenges in Nepal’s Forestry Sector

Nepal’s forestry sector faces multiple challenges that threaten its sustainability. This is particularly evident in community forestry, where its contribution to local livelihoods falls short of its potential. The socio-environmental foundations that originally supported community forestry have evolved due to factors such as rural outmigration, shifts in income levels and agricultural practices, and the low economic returns from forests.

Moreover, increased forest cover is sometimes seen as counterproductive due to rising incidents of human-wildlife conflict and an increase in forest fires over the past decade. Additionally, a declining youth population has reduced leadership in forest management and governance.

Likewise, the increasing availability of market substitutes for forest products, such as aluminum, has contributed to declining forestry activities. The decreasing contribution of forests to the rural and national economy has weakened community interest in further investment in forest management.

Passivity in forest management has led to the proliferation of invasive species, negatively impacting forest ecosystems, biodiversity, and rural livelihoods. While some efforts have been made to address these issues, there remains a gap in recognizing the interconnectedness between sustainable forestry practices and livelihoods. Encouraging local community involvement in tackling these challenges is crucial, as demonstrated by ForestAction’s intervention in managing invasive species in eastern Nepal (Box 3).

Box 3: Managing Invasive Species through ForestAction’s Involvement

Jalthal, a remnant forest covering approximately 6,100 hectares, has been severely affected by invasive plant species, including *Mikania micrantha* (mile-a-minute weed), *Lantana camara* (Lantana), and *Mimosa diplotricha* (giant sensitive plant). Managing these species posed ecological and coordination challenges among community forest user groups, the Division Forest Office (DFO), and local governments.

ForestAction played a key role in bridging this gap by collaborating with government institutions and local communities to implement invasive species control strategies, such as manual removal and promoting natural regeneration. Additionally, local forest user groups generated income and employment through compost-making and agroforestry. The compost, made largely from invasive plant species, was used in local farmlands and sold for additional income. This participatory approach to invasive species management and forest restoration, coupled with knowledge dissemination in Nepali, has been instrumental in fostering sustainable forest management.



Regeneration of native species after clearing *Mikania* in a community forest in Chitwan, Nepal

LOCAL COMMUNITIES AND BEYOND

With over two decades of engagement in Nepal's forestry sector, ForestAction continues to foster collaboration with local communities, government agencies, academia, development partners, and donors. Through adaptive learning, the organization engages a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including emerging researchers, students, local leaders, and women's groups. Such engagement is essential for identifying emerging challenges and incorporating innovative solutions beyond traditional forest management approaches.

WAY FORWARD

Given Nepal's evolving socio-political landscape, the forestry sector must break free from the status quo by acknowledging diverse challenges and adopting a reflective and deliberative approach. Although research is undervalued in Nepal's forest policymaking process, decision-makers must recognize the importance of robust methodologies and field experimentation. Collaboration between policymakers and organizations like ForestAction can be instrumental in addressing Nepal's forestry challenges. Additionally, providing training and learning opportunities for local communities—the true custodians of forests—will better equip them to tackle emerging issues in the sector.

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