

PREFACE

Tropical forest management is one of the major global concerns for which international policies are being formulated and government programs designed. However, the actual management of the forest and forest lands should generally be in the hands of the people in the area.

Traditionally, both the extraction licenses and disempowered local communities throughout the world have been accused - in a contradictory manner - of being the main culprits in the destruction of the forests. It is now being acknowledged that commercial extraction is unsustainable in practice. Traditional practices of making clearings within the forests in the Philippines, which are many and varied, generally, no longer allow sufficient time for natural regeneration to occur due to the decline in forest area and the more rapid cycle of community activity. The upland population has increased and large scale migration makes a wide frontal impact on the forest, pushing it back permanently once it has been opened and cleared by earlier loggers. Furthermore, the destruction of forests has facilitated the introduction of plantation practices, which compensate only in the physical role of ground cover that prevents erosion and in wood production. These plantation practices lack natural diversity and are a poor substitute for the complex interactions that are characteristic of a tropical forest. In addition socio-cultural stability is often lost and the economic gains are limited to commercial ventures and add little to gross national product.

In managing tropical forests today, the efforts in countries with low forest cover are increasingly directed to protecting each segment of the remaining forest. They do this by promoting the more traditional methods of extracting resources practiced by communities that have a long-term dependence on the forest. They also look upon the forest in the broader context of social relations. Each socio-culturally related forest block requires a particular management method that is appropriate to the local context and that relates the local community to the state as monitor. If the last fifty years of global forest destruction is to be slowly reversed, a tremendous effort is now required.

With Asia as a principal target, donor investments working with governments focus on policy reform, new modes of planning and of implementing community based programs, watershed rehabilitation, natural regeneration and reforestation, the promotion of private sector investments in sustainable forestry, and the development of the monitoring role of government.

Five common themes stand out in these initiatives:

- the urgency of entrusting forest related communities with the responsibility and authority for sustainable management of the resources;
- the necessity of getting local government land use planning to respond at a primary level to the requirements of watersheds and catchments in and across their areas;
- the importance of cultural sensitivity in program implementation and the necessity of thinking through the needed economic element of community empowerment and responsibilities;
- the greater reliance on natural regenerating processes and fire control instead of on exotic inputs to rehabilitate and restore the health of forest ecosystems;
- the reorientation of the government officers and local government officials to facilitate communities in resource management.

Movements in these directions call for and involve a radical rethinking of the fundamental precepts that for over a century have influenced forest policy in the tropics. For such a comprehensive rethinking to succeed, the governments, donors and advocates involved require assistance and support in order to attain an understanding of the problems, opportunities and responsibilities. This deeper understanding is necessary so that new policies, modes and approaches to crucial forest issues will gain acceptance and help overcome the broad social and institutional resistance to change. Furthermore, there is a need for a forum where practitioners and advocates share experiences and lessons learned. It is necessary to explore, develop, and use alternative methods and tools that are scientifically sound and culturally sensitive, while interfacing with government programs.

The Asia Forest Network (AFN) is one initiative addressing community involvement in forest management and gives a focus to discussions. A working dynamic was shared initially in 1993 and during a meeting of the network in 1994, members from the Philippines formally organized a Philippine Working Group (PWG), so that the analysis of the country's needs and responses could be pursued in a more continuous and systematic manner. As a member of the group, the Environmental Science for Social Change (ESSC), then known as Environmental Research Division, was asked to run the secretariat and facilitate the site visits.

Continuous exchange has been sustained among the PWG through site visits and local meetings. The PWG also participates in other organizational assessments where a greater understanding of community-environment relations are evident. Occasionally, regional-sectoral linkages act as fora for discussions on community based management of forest areas.

The emergence of community contract reforestation brought non-government organizations into a general discussion of broader community management. But more importantly, it gave those genuinely concerned occasion to broaden environmental experience.

Membership is on the basis of willingness to attend and share in the discussions and really depends upon people, who outside of their regular responsibilities, are interested in community forest management and natural regeneration.

The PWG is made up of Department of the Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) personnel, policy makers, NGOs, donors, development workers, and technical specialists. There are usually ten to fifteen people on any visit. It is a “hats-off” group; no one is asked to speak for their organization, but rather to listen and share learnings from other places with the community and local officials. The group identifies areas with potential for effective local resource management so that this can be strengthened and institutionalized for wider use. The group also reviews and looks for possible gaps in policy development and program implementation.

Lessons from these visits were already shared during the Natural Resources Management Plan II, Annual Work Plan in January 1997, where the additional strategies of the government’s Community Based Forest Management Regional Plans were designed. It is hoped that these notes will be of help to these men and women and other non government groups, who with such dedication and commitment struggle with communities, often with opposition from traditional private interests, to establish a new “movement” of community management in the Philippines.