

**National Network of Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas (ICCAs) in Nepal
pledged for collective action: Snapshot of a National Gathering
June 5-6, 2010, Lalitpur, Nepal**

Three dozens of local people representing Nepal Himalaya, hills and Terai (lowlands) assembled in the capital city, Kathmandu on June 5-6, 2010 to discuss common issues facing indigenous people and local communities conserving biodiversity through diverse initiatives and institutional forms across Nepal. They collectively pledged a formation of a national network to advance their rights and gain greater recognition and respect from the state. The diversity and richness of areas collectively conserved by indigenous peoples and local communities (ICCAs), their persistent contribution in conserving mosaic of landscapes, critical wildlife and flora, sustaining cultures and traditions, enhancing local livelihoods, and maintaining ecological functions surfaced during the two days national gathering of ICCAs jointly organized by *Ad hoc ICCA network* and *ForestAction, Nepal*.

The meeting was held at a time when Nepal is moving through political transition, drafting of new constitution is underway and when conservation movement is taking momentum globally with paradigm shifts in protected areas. Territories and areas conserved by indigenous peoples and local communities (ICCAs), their conservation stewardships are increasingly gaining attention in the contemporary conservation discourse. Their roles and contributions in conserving biodiversity resulting in multiple benefits (livelihood security, cultural preservation, maintaining ecosystems services) have embarked upon the consciousness of conservation actors globally in the recent decade. Key international policy processes including Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), especially *Program of Work on Protected Areas*, as well as important global gatherings on conservation have recognized and emphasized significance of ICCAs, as important governance types of protected areas.

Coincided with the International Year of Biodiversity and World Environment Day 2010, the gathering brought together community leaders and representatives from 14 districts (Dolpo, Solukhumbu, Baitadi, Ilam, Kaski, Parbat, Sindhupalchok, Palpa, Dang, Bardia, Rupendehi, Nawalparasi, Chitwan and Jhapa) from different eco-regions of Nepal, constituent assembly members, key individuals and organizations involved in conservation and journalists. It generated a common learning platform to exchange local experiences of conservation and deliberate upon specific and common challenges.

Communities, biodiversity conservation, state's apathy and mistrust

Many pertinent issues surfaced as the participants began to tell their stories. Despite their complementary role in biodiversity conservation and immense potentials to expand the conservation landscape of the country, stories unfolded the challenges as well as contradictions with the state policies and interventions.

- **Customary ICCAs coexisting rather predating formation of government declared protected areas** (conservation stewardship of Sherpa in governing sacred landscapes, forests, and rangelands in Khumbu faces immense threats due to cultural erosion and lack of state's recognition. Bonpo people have been conserving rangelands and sacred sites through indigenous collective practices in Pungmo, inside the Shey Poksundo, the largest national park of Nepal.)
- **Community managed wetlands faces tenure insecurity** (such as Gajedi wetland and Rupa wetland linking conservation and local livelihood. Sacred wetland Mai Pokhari although

listed as Ramsar site, faces unclear institutional arrangement for governance and contesting claims of several authorities over jurisdiction.)

- **Community forests thriving with innovations** (Choyatar community forest linking ecotourism with conservation of endangered red panda; a network of 60 community forests conserving Khata wildlife corridor in Terai Arc Landscape, disappearing vulture conservation by community forests etc.)
- **‘Conservation Area Management Committee demanding greater local control** (CAMC in Annupurna Conservation questions the transparency of humongous funds generated from tourism and demands apex body/institution of local people.)
- **Only remaining Chepang forest landscape** (with multiple use zones as strictly protected forest patch, agricultural land, grazing, human habitation and forest resource use is struggling to develop area as community forest.)
- **Sacred forests sustained by cultural values** (*Bathyan Patal* in Baitadi districts and surrounding areas rich in biodiversity conserved by locals but lacking efforts at landscape level conservation, Mai Pokhari religious forest at the vicinity of Mai Pokhari. Many sacred forest across the country still undocumented.)
- **Proposal of community based wildlife sanctuary awaits governments support** (proposed innovative model of managing the core area- the last remaining Charkose Jhadi of eastern lowland- buffered by 22 community forests, in Jalthal eastern lowland Nepal.)
- **Community managed Panchasey landscape seeking government recognition** (locals exploring the possibilities of community managed conservation area, ecological, cultural, historical significance of the area.)
- **Crisis of Barhaiya wetland ecosystem** (historically conserved by indigenous Tharu people) by private fish contracts under the aegis of state authorities. ‘It is now a time to put an end to destructive fishing contracts and locally manage the lake’ lamented, a Tharu local leader.

‘Our contribution to biodiversity conservation is not given adequate support and recognition, we do not have adequate rights to the resources we are conserving’ were the common concerns of the community representatives. *‘We need to act collectively to advance our rights, gain recognition to our local initiatives in conservation. ICCAs should be given due respect by the government’* was the assertion by Tenzing Tashi Sherpa, the newly elected president of the ICCA Network Nepal, formed at the end of the conference. The process of networking among ICCAs on an ad hoc basis had begun in August 2009. Former secretary of forest ministry, Dr Uday Raj Sharma also emphasized the importance of ICCAs in the context of Nepal and averred management plans can also accord adequate space for ICCAs.

The newly formed network endorsed the following key resolutions:

1. Formation of ICCA Network Nepal, and gain a legal status of the network by collectively drafting a statute.
2. Expand and deepen the network; engage in dialogues on ICCAs throughout the country.
3. Engage in the advocating rights of local communities and indigenous peoples conserving significant biodiversity in the constitution making process.

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June 14, 2010

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