

Banko Janakari

A journal of forestry information for Nepal

Desertification: A Global Concern

On the fifth June 2006, world environment day was celebrated all over the World with the slogan **“Don’t Desert Drylands!”** that calls for every nation to protect and manage biological resource and their diversity in arid and semi-arid land. Dry lands covering 40% of the Earth are thought to be home of nearly 2 billion people i.e. one third of world’s population. The Year 2006 has especial global importance while talking about the issue on land degradation and desertification. This Year has been declared as the International Year of Desert and Desertification and the Tenth Anniversary of the Ratification of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). The convention is considered as the internationally recognized and legally binding instrument that addresses the problem of land degradation in dry land and has universal memberships of 191 parties. The convention played a key role on global effort to eradicate poverty, achieve sustainable development and reach Millennium Development Goals. In this regard, every year 17 June is celebrated as ‘World Day’ to combat desertification.

In June 1994, UNCCD was adopted and opened for signature, from October 1994 to October 1995. It entered into force on 26 December 1996, 90 days after the fiftieth instrument of ratification or accession was deposited. Nepal participated in the preparatory process of convention and signed it on 12 October 1995 and deposited its instruments of ratification on 15 October 1996. Consequently, the convention entered into force in Nepal on 13 January 1997.

Nepal is facing severe environmental problems relating to land degradation. It has been reported that approximately 0.4, 1.5 and 11.7 percent of the total watershed in Nepal are in very poor, poor and fair conditions respectively. It is also estimated that about 1.8 million tons of plant nutrients are removed due to crop harvest and soil erosion processes. Out of this, only 0.3 million tons of organic and mineral fertilizers replenish while the rest is permanently taken out of the soil thereby depleting land productivity.

In Nepal, land use changes have occurred as a result of both natural process as well as human activities. The forest area has decreased from 42.4% in 1988 to

39.6% in 1999. Furthermore, Nepal loses over 240 million cubic meter of fertile top soil every year. Siltation problem has been seen in the plains due to loss of soil in the mountains leading to rise of riverbeds by 10 to 30 centimetres in the plain. Restoring soil loss by erosion is a slow process; it takes almost 500 years for just 2.5 cm of soil to form. The expanding riverbeds and overlay of sand and silt on the productive land of the Terai in the south are growing concern of the Terai people.

Nepal's Himalayas are geologically young and fragile. Although Nepal has no desertification problems in the form of dry land, it is reported that about 10,000ha of land in the western Himalayan districts such as Dolpa and Mustang features a process of desertification in the form of cold desert.

The UN Millennium Ecosystem Assessment notes that it is easier to prevent desertification than to reverse it. Population pressure and improper land management practices are the principal cause of land degradation leading to desertification. Better management of crops, more careful irrigation, and strategies to provide non-farming job for people living in the dry lands could help to address the problem.

Being a party of UNCCD, Nepal has done many efforts to mitigate environmental problems. In order to mitigate the problem of land degradation problem in Nepal, the Government has launched various preventive as well as remedial measures such as establishment of Department of Soil Conservation and Watershed Management in 1974 and formulation of the Soil and Watershed Conservation Act (1982) and its regulation (1985). On the other hand, community forestry development programme has been a successful policy initiative in controlling land degradation problems especially in the mid-hills of Nepal. Besides, the Forest Act (1993) and the Forest Regulations (1995), the Environmental Protection Act (1997) and the Environmental Protection Regulations (1997) have also emphasised the need of environmental conservation and management in Nepal. In recent years, Nepal has shown significant progress in managing forests in the middle hills with continuation of the Community Forestry Programme. On the contrary, only little efforts have been done in managing high altitude forests and dry land pasture, which provides 36% of the total digestible nutrient to the livestock and harbours unique biodiversity, rich cultural heritage, and fragile ecosystem.

Let's commit ourselves to make aware everyone of this issue and take part in combating desertification in the world so as to fulfil the Millennium Development Goal.