

Seeing the Forest and the Trees...

Nepal/Australia Community Forestry Project

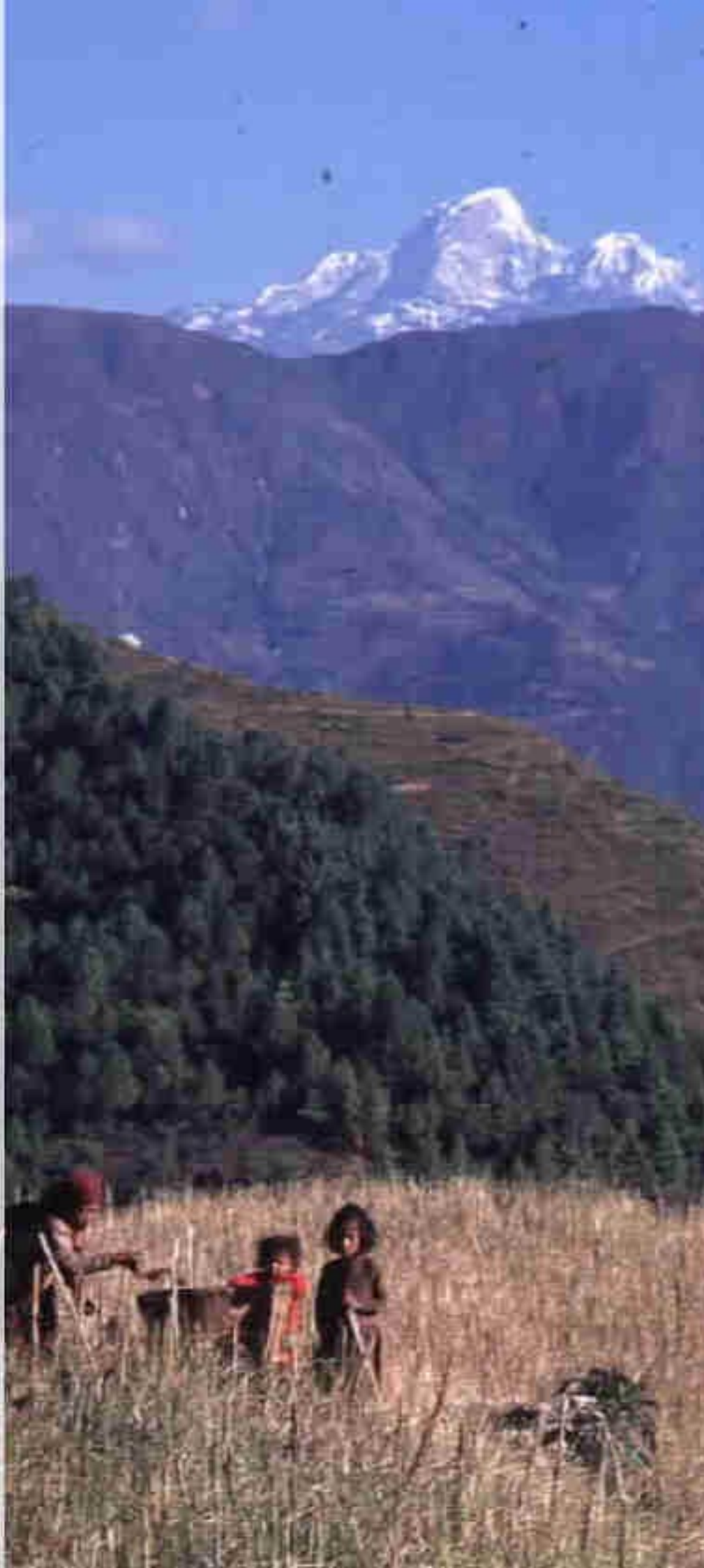
Andrea McLaughlin
Photos: Mike Jensen DFAT

Improving lives and preserving Nepal's unique environment: Andrea McLaughlin reports on one of Australia's longest-running aid projects.

Half way up a steep hill a group of six Nepali women are stopping to rest by the side of the road. They have spent all day hauling heavy loads of millet down to the local town for grinding. They're now on the way home, their bags of grain suspended from thick straps around their foreheads. Giggling and chatting they sit on a rocky platform, shading under the branches of an enormous, ancient fig tree, one of the oldest in the area.

The women are from the village of Gaurati Chyandanda in the Middle Hills of Nepal. Twenty years ago, the slopes around them, like many in the mid-hills, were bare and barren and the forests upon which they relied were dying. Now on either side of the road, thick patches of indigenous forest and pine plantation share the landscape with small groups of houses and tiny cultivated terraces growing maize, rice, wheat or millet. The people of Gaurati Chyandanda have legal rights to these forests and are planning to build a road up to the village with the profits they've generated from them.

One of the reasons for the change has been the presence in this district since 1978 of the Nepal/Australia Community Forestry Project. The project has brought enormous benefits to both Australia and Nepal. For Australia there is the satisfaction of a successful and sustainable project, which has used Australian forestry expertise to conserve forests and improve the lives of the Nepali people. On the Nepali side thousands of hectares of barren land are now covered in trees, which are managed and protected by local people. There is also new hope, confidence and optimism for the future amongst some of the poorest people on earth.





From Technical Advice to Self Help

Australian forester Dr Ken Shepherd first arrived in Nepal in 1977. He'd been invited by his colleague at the Australian National University, Professor David Griffin, who was designing a new Australian aid project aimed at arresting the deforestation of the Middle Hills. Like most foresters of the era, they were technical specialists: Ken Shepherd a siviculturalist, David Griffin a world expert in soil microbiology.

"What did it look like? Terrible, absolutely terrible," says Dr Shepherd. "It was dry, barren, the people were desperately poor. The hills were bare or covered in scrub."

Drastic problems called for drastic solutions and the project team set about helping the Government of Nepal with its massive program of reforestation. The Australian input was mainly in the form of technical assistance

and training for Nepal's Forest Department staff, both in Nepal and back in Australia. Within five years thousands of hectares of trees had been planted and hundreds of nurseries established.

Since then the project has evolved and changed dramatically. It has shifted from a focus on reforestation to working with groups of local forest users, known as Forest Users Groups, helping them manage and protect their own forests resources. It has gone from a project where solutions to forestry problems were imposed from above to a bottom-up approach which tackles a broad range of local issues. At the same time the nature of the Australian input has moved from provision of technical advice on growing trees to providing local people with the help they need not only to manage their forests, but to utilise them in ways which benefit the whole community.

Ken Shepherd, who was appointed Project Director in 1991, witnessed the transformation. "In

the early days, things were being driven by the centre. It was imposed. We persuaded local people to get involved. We provided the technical advice ...and the local people provided the labour. It was then found that if you set up a Forest User Group and very carefully designated which piece of forest was theirs, very often you found there were indigenous management systems in place already. We began to focus on what was already there and where there wasn't an indigenous system we started to encourage it."

There are now thousands of User Groups all around the country, managing their own patches of forest. In many cases, they have branched out, becoming micro-entrepreneurs as well as forest managers. Many have begun to generate income, enough in some cases to make a significant improvements in the lives of village people.

Focus on Women

The lives of women in Nepal are short, hard and monotonous. They spend long hours collecting forest products, fetching water, tending fields and caring for families and children. Their status is low, literacy rates are among the lowest in the world, and it is one of the few countries where life expectancy for men is higher than it is for women.

The two Districts where the project operates are also traditional areas for the sinister trade in children to the factories of Kathmandu and teenage girls to the brothels of India. Children are often willingly sold by their parents into the brothel trade. Remittances from one girl can make a big difference to a family's standard of living.

Unfortunately, many of these girls return after a few years infected with HIV. Many never return due to illness or disgrace.

Community forestry has helped provide hope. On an immediate level, women's lives have been made easier because the forest products they rely upon are now more abundant and easier to gather.

More and more women have also developed the confidence to become involved in discussions about forest issues. This has led to the development of other activities which will particularly benefit women and girls, including water schemes. The project has employed a small group of specialists to work with

forest user groups and have so far brought cleaner, safer water to 10 000 people.

Less than 20 per cent of women in Nepal can read and write. The project has helped set up literacy and numeracy classes which not only enhance their ability to take part in decisions on forestry matters but enable them to take a more active role in their own and their families' future.

Many User Groups are also raising money, tiny amounts in some cases, but enough to inspire confidence in the future and prevent the drift of village men, women and children to an uncertain future in the towns and cities of South Asia.







A Forest Success Story

In Gaukhureswar near the popular Nepali tourist town of Dhulikhel, I met Mr Badri Pd Janggam, the elderly Chairman of the Gaukhureswar Forest User Group. He took me on a tour of their forest, a lush mixture of natural broadleaf trees, hardwood forest and scrubland.

Walking through the dense thickets, Mr Janggam explains that more than 30 households rely on this forest to provide the basic necessities of life. It provides wood to build their houses, water for them to drink, energy to fuel their fires and food to feed their animals.

The villagers have devised a simple rotational system so that some parts of the forest are rested while others are used to collect firewood, dead leaves or fodder. They have also introduced a user pays scheme, charging forest users a small fee for collecting loads of fuel.

“Before the project, we used to collect forest products from this forest, but we never cared about the forest because the collection was illegal. But now we think about the forest and we harvest carefully.”

Climbing up a steep embankment we enter the nursery, a small clearing housing thousands of young seedlings. By collecting fees from forest users this group has saved enough money to buy 1600 seedlings of lokta, a tree which provides the raw ingredient for the exotic, silk-like paper produced in Nepal and highly prized in Japan. The Australian project organised training for three villagers in how to grow lokta. “There is a company from Japan trying to encourage this species to be grown in Nepal,” says Badri Janggam. “So we think we can generate some funds out of these species.”

He won’t be drawn on what he thinks the group might do with any profits from such an exercise. “The committee will decide

whether to spend it on forest development or community development,” he says.

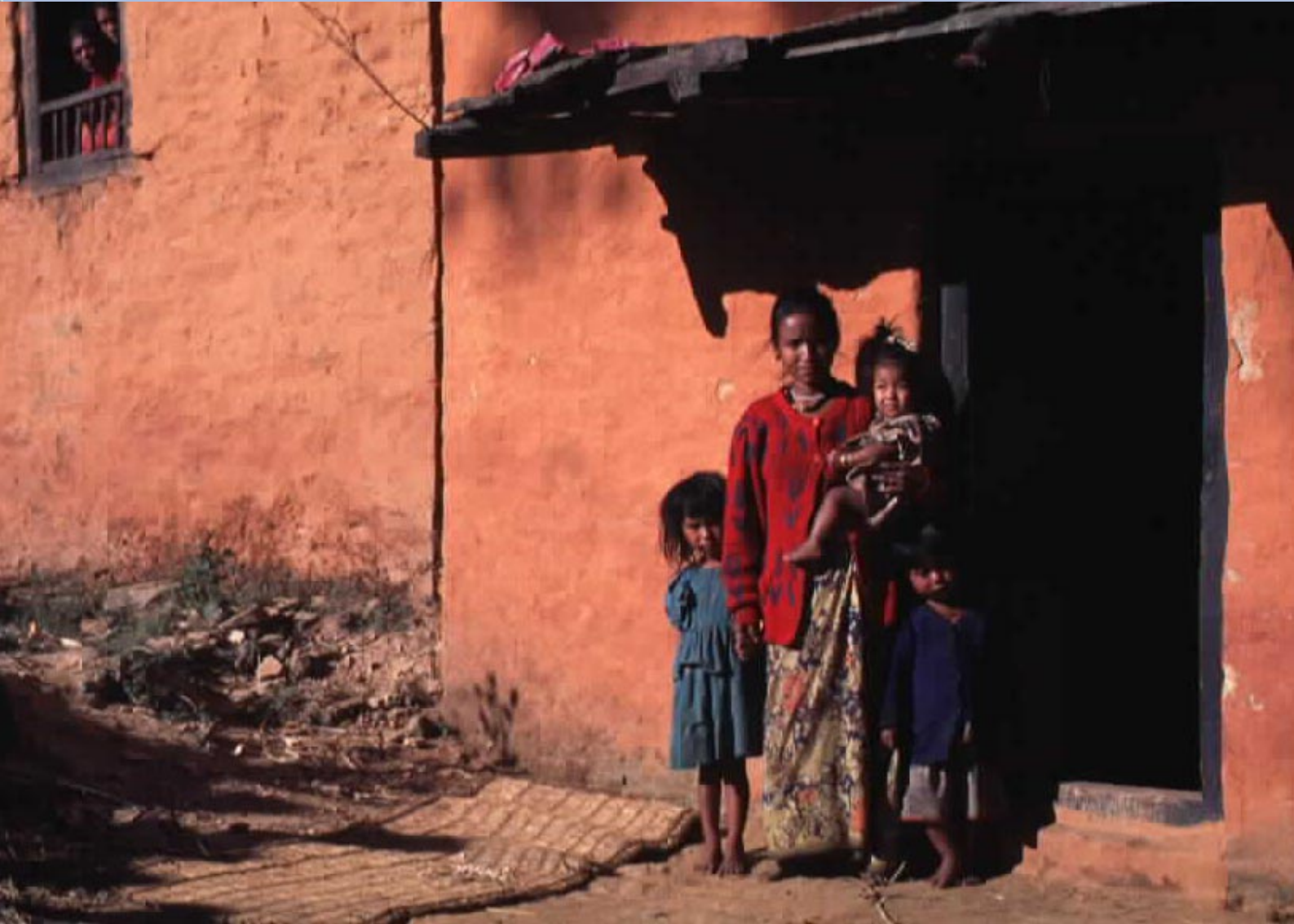
There are now groups like Gaukhureswar all over the middle hills of Nepal, protecting forests, ensuring a regular supply of forest products for their members and accumulating funds which they use to plant more trees, hire forest guards, build roads or schools, establish drinking water systems or connect electricity.

Country-wide

The Australian project has done more than just benefit the people of the two Districts involved. It has helped shape national forest policy and provided a model for community forestry which is now well established throughout Nepal.

The Chief Planning Officer for the Nepalese Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation, Mr Amrit Lal Joshi, is a great enthusiast for community forestry and the benefits it has brought Nepal.

Why Forests Matter



Laxmi Kumari Newar lives in a small village of 27 households perched atop a ridge in the Nepali Middle Hills. She and her husband rely on growing crops, tending animals and the products of the nearby forest to survive.

Her house, typical of those in this village, is completely devoid of furniture or any personal effects, running water or sanitation.

Downstairs it is dusty and dark. Chickens peck at the dirt floor and the air is filled with smoke from a hearth in the corner. Laxmi Kumari is cooking food for the buffalo on a small fire fuelled by a small log from the forest.

The timber to make her two story house has come from the local forest. Carrying her youngest daughter on her hip she shows visitors upstairs. Here where a little more light comes in through a window, is an old mattress, on which the entire family sleeps. The rest of the floor is entirely taken up by their recently harvested millet crop.

Outside in a stall lives the buffalo. Laxmi Kumari gathers dead leaves and pine needles from the forest for its bedding. This bedding will be mixed with dung and spread on

the family's land as fertiliser, helping increase the yields of their buckwheat and millet crops.

Laxmi Kumari's village began planting pine trees 16 years ago and now manages a large pine plantation. An elderly neighbour, smoking a locally made cigarette, recalls that in the old days, she used to spend all day digging up roots to get enough wood for one load of firewood. Now it takes less than an hour to gather what she needs for the day.

Women Managing Forests



Dil Kumari Shreshtra, 33, is the Chairwoman of the Mahankali all-women Forest Users Group Committee. She and her 13 committee members manage a 8.75 hectare forest - a mixture of pine and natural broadleaf forest - on the outskirts of the small bazaar town of Chautara. In the male-dominated society of Nepal, the Mahankali group is a bold experiment.

“Nepalese women go into the forest and collect forest products,” says Dil Kumari, holding the hand of her three-year-old daughter, “but we realised that men were always on the Committees. We thought- if we do all the work, why not form our own committee?”

“In the first six months we had some difficulty with things such as bookkeeping. Now we feel more confident and feel we can face anything.”

The committee charges a small fee to the 80 households who use the forest to collect firewood and fallen leaves. They’ve raised enough to help build a new water supply and a series of retaining walls to prevent soil erosion in the forest. Their forest is healthy and productive and the water which used to take them hours to collect is now cleaner and more plentiful.

The next project to be undertaken by the committee says Dil Kumari is “...to build a primary school ... because the other school is crowded and too far away.”

Overall women still play a limited role in decisions over forest management in Nepal, partly because of social, religious or caste restrictions and partly because most of them can’t read or write. In the Mahankali group, only Dil Kumari. Who has a job as a clerk and the Treasurer of the committee have any formal education. In an attempt to address this, the NACFP has developed a literacy program especially for women members of Forest User Groups, with 6000 women taking part so far.

Mr Joshi, who undertook post-graduate training in Australia as part of the project and was a District Forest Officer in one of the Districts where the project operates, acknowledges the influence of the work which went on there.

“Australia was one of the donor countries which was involved in support of the forestry sector at the time when this policy of managing forests by the

community was initiated. Most of the ideas were generated from the districts where the Australian forestry projects were going on. So I don’t hesitate to say that the idea was generated ... by the people of those two districts.”

Community forestry in Nepal has been so successful it is now enshrined in law under legislation which is widely regarded as amongst the most progressive in Asia. This legislation enables the

control and management of the forests to be handed over to villagers - to the people who are most likely to look after the forests - because their survival depends on them.

The people of Guarati Chyandanda are in the midst of making some complex decisions about their forests and their future. The pine trees which they planted around 16 years ago, because they were the only

Thirty Years of Partnership

species tough enough to survive on the denuded hills, are now mature and needing to be thinned. Some of the group want to continue developing the pine plantation because of the opportunities it provides to raise money. Others want to harvest the trees systematically and allow the natural broadleaf forest, which provides a bigger range of forest products, to regenerate. They are also looking at options to add value to the timber produced by their forests. A small saw mill has been suggested as an option, as has the construction of furniture for the markets in town.

The local forest rangers and project staff have been explaining why the forest needs to be thinned and the options available to the group for making money from their timber.

The outcomes of the Australian forestry project in Nepal can thus be written in many ways. In bald terms there are over 350 active Forest User Groups in the two Districts, with more being set up every month. Thousands of hectares of natural forest have been brought under the management of users groups. 20 000 ha of new trees have been planted.

But there's much, much more. There's a whole community which has grown in confidence and skills and resources and thousands of people who are working to improve their lives while conserving the environment at the same time.

"This approach of using forest user groups is time consuming. It's slow. It won't work if you just whizz in there for a year and you're out. AusAID should really get the credit for staying with it as long as they have."

(John McEachern, Country Representative, Nepal, IUCN)

In the early 1960s the Government of Nepal asked Australia for help to reforest the Kathmandu Valley with the first Australian residential forestry adviser arriving under the Colombo Plan in 1966. It was the start of a relationship between Nepal and Australia which has lasted thirty years.

A succession of Australian technical advisers arrived over the next ten years. They travelled the country, advising the Government and setting up trial plots of Australian species such as eucalypts and acacias around the Kathmandu valley.

The trials of imported species weren't a success and were stopped in the mid-1970s. At the same time came the realisation by everyone involved, including the Australian Development Assistance Agency (later AusAID), that if Australia was to have any impact on the forests of Nepal, its aid would have to be broadened out from technical assistance to an integrated approach which involved people as well as trees.

The new project which began in 1978 was heavily influenced by the new ideas of community forestry. Not a lot was known about how to actually implement community forestry, but over the next 16 years the Australian project, in partnership with the Government of Nepal, consistently broke new ground. The role of the Forests Department also changed dramatically over the years. Rather than enforcing and policing government policy, it now works with the people to help them plan for their forests and their future.

While the project has evolved through a number of distinct phases since 1978, it has been managed throughout by the Australian National University, most recently by ANUTECH Pty Ltd, the University's commercial agent.

Many of Australia's top foresters spent long periods of time with the project, creating a continuity in personnel which has added to its success. It has demonstrated that a long term approach to development creates understanding and a sharing of ideas and skills which has benefited the people of Nepal as well as Australia.

