

IF GOOD SCIENCE IS EXPENSIVE, DON'T TRY JUMP START

Pralad Yonzon, Ph. D.
Sitapaila, Kathmandu

WHY CRY FOR GOOD SCIENCE?

Once, Professor Jim Bailey, my advisor at Colorado State University, wrote to me that good science is value-neutral and we all must guard it against the influences of personal biases to find the truth and interpret results accurately. I could not agree more because science is a lesson in perpetuity for humans.

In the recent past, the poorer communities have agreed that sciences in biodiversity conservation should be more "management-driven" than academic research. Such arrangement is also termed as applied research as it overlaps in three areas: scientific and cultural research; 2) social science research; and 3) management research. The guiding principles of applied sciences, are to bridge the gap by building respect for each other, nurture communication, and reward those who work in partnership (Harmon, 1994).

Accurate information gleaned from science, is knowledge when used as tool in managing biological resources in poorer countries like Nepal. Therefore, science is the best provider of accurate information on biodiversity conservation. Although science is a dynamic, continuing process, we have faltered in ensuring that all science-based works are complete, fair, and objective. We also have forgotten that any or all accepted results, concepts, and principles are always subject to review and critique, suggesting science is both truthful and democratic.

BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION AND SCIENCE

Since the mid 1980s, the concept of sustainable development caught up with the biodiversity conservation. Several initiatives such as community-based natural resource management, community based conservation, sustainable development and use, grassroots conservation, devolution of resource rights to local communities, and many other began. Of these, integrated conservation and development programs (ICDPs) became the forefront of conservation. Donor countries and thousands of non-governmental

organizations (NGOs) emerged and got involved. But, successes were a few and marginal in twenty years of workout. McShane (2003) notes that a major flaw occurred in international funding agencies and conservation organizations as they were not suited to work in the social and economic realms.

Likewise, biological science was considered a commodity. Without understanding of broader ecosystem dynamics at specific sites, strategies were developed and policies promoted sustainable use without action research. Today, only a heap of critical literature remains about ICDPs (Brandon, Redford and Sanderson, 1998). As ICDPs finance over sized, the global quest for win, win and only win, consequently, folded for good.

The ICDP lessons on being everything for everyone, are costly as planet saving. The dangers of conservation planning based on poor quality information affect conservation itself because of ill priorities (Blake and Hedges, 2004). To promote sustainable use of biological resources, there are no ground-based knowledge in biological and ecological science. Also, not all things can be preserved through use. Not all places should be open to use (Chapin, 2004). Thus, unfounded practices and faith may lead many geographic areas to substantial loss in biodiversity.

WHEN TO JUMP START AND QUICK FIX?

There has been a strong global support to biodiversity conservation in Nepal. On the contrary, Nepal's increased dependency on a majority of donors and international organizations has condensed them to play the role of perennial providers on several fronts. Therefore, minimizing external assistance in the form of jump start and quick fix, will be mutually beneficial.

All "jump start" are based on gut feeling and encourages expert opinions which overlooks science as accurate information provider. Perhaps, this can alone explain

why donor arranged schemes are beleaguered with various forms of jump start. In my opinion, "jump start" or "quick fix" is good once but bad twice. Nepal has a track record of 30 years of both jump start and quick fix in biodiversity conservation. During this period, saving tigers to landscape level conservation to eradicate poverty, ushering equity and benefit sharing, action plans to environmental impact assessment have been the agenda to rectify if our doings ushered societal benefits and enhanced biodiversity conservation.

No doubt, we have saved tigers and rhinos. But, other countries have saved them, too. If we champion that Nepal has progressed from a single species to landscape-level conservation, each and every country in Asia has implemented landscape-level conservation. Which country has not increased its protected area (PA) system and saved endangered species? Which country has not embraced participation of people who live in the fringe of parks and reserves? All these are global agendas and several countries are on it. Even landscape-level conservation is not new as it has progressed from Wallace zoogeographic regions (1876) to Dasmann's natural regions (1973), Udvardy's biogeographical provinces (1975), Bailey's ecosystem regions (1983), Myers's biodiversity hotspot (1988), Omernik's ecoregions framework (1995) Stattersfield's endemic bird areas of the world (1998), and WWF global 200 ecoregions (2000). I think the soul searching question for us would be "Is Nepal not losing its forest cover anymore?" We have to remind ourselves that Nepal's forest cover has decreased from 37.4% (Master Plan for the Forestry Sector, 1989) to 29% in 1992 — decimation of some 12,353 km² of forests (Yonzon, 1999). Both government and donors must believe in investing in the accretion of knowledge about biodiversity. If not, the present may continue to curtail conservation-based capacity building in academia, de-emphasize mentorship, severing of local research institutional linkages, creation of more "middleman" opportunities and misguide government agencies that they can do it all. After three long decades of waiting, we have seen how Nepal has self-inflicted and subsequently swamped its governance without contemporary knowledge that could pave the path for the future.

NO "NEW FOUND" KNOWLEDGE

After the Convention on Biological Diversity, agreed then by some 165 countries in 1992, natural resources such as biodiversity has become the property of sovereign countries, communities, and individuals. However, over the years, major players in biodiversity conservation became more opinionated and top heavy. Their stakeholders (band wagons) prefer to merely ignore or discount the ideas of good science for the sake of hoarding funds. Eventually, arrogance and ignorance both rule open minds. For example, we have no clue on how those thousands of villages in and around the PAs, are gathering their fuelwood and timber needs given the high

population growth rate and how we cope with them in the next 20 years without hurting ecology with economics? What are the alternatives which could be used as contingency? Did we learn any science by introducing 87 rhinos in Bardia and their decimation? When Bhutan could build some 30 million dollar trust fund from scratch in 1991, why Nepal is still harping about it for the last 15 years? All these relate to mismatch of Nepal's ground realities with jump start and quick fix. They do more harm than good.

TRIUMPHANT PLAYERS & DYING MENTORS

It appears that there is no need to invest in "new found" knowledge when hoarding of funds, is a priority. Consequently, progressive policy guidelines, adaptive strategies, and management prescriptions are less preferential because government agencies give foreign NGOS the much needed license about area jurisdiction and authority on biodiversity.

Maintaining ecological integrity of the land, is difficult because of its dynamics. Therefore, collaboration and partnership between academia, research-based organization and development agencies, will be the guiding principles for biodiversity conservation. For these to happen, we must rekindle linkages between academia, institutions and the government agencies to grasp information gathering processes (research) so that "benchmark" knowledge is not replaced by anecdotes, lengthy non-qualifying reports and steering committees. We must have a new, younger cohort of fact seekers instead of engaging "arm-chair" experts and "conference" biologists. Hence, mentorship and practicing good science for accurate land-based information will remain fundamental for the viability of protected areas.

To make mentor opportunities more visible, formal programs work better because they strengthen the need for students and professionals, employees and organizations in networking and get experience on their own. But, this is not happening.

All university graduates have a hard time finding their way in the profession. Also, many never find their way into a job despite the fact that there are so many untended tracks. Some may consider mentorship not more than a small blimp or even insignificant, but it is one of the ways to get to life-time experiences, build relationships and even upgrade professional standards.

Many successful professionals are absolutely sure that their professional life would not be the same without mentoring they had received throughout their education and career. Then the question is, how do we bottle up this 'mentorship factor'? One possibility is to develop formal mentorship programs that could encompass employees, university students, and other interest groups. There are no pre-designed ladders (structures)

in mentorship but we can make one, based on our needs, by developing guidelines and protocols. Therefore, mentorship assumes about human capacity development and building social capital.

NGOs: FOREIGN OR INTERNATIONAL?

The 1991 Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal including Organization and Association Act 2034 and Social Welfare Act 2049, are problematic because they do not fathom beyond two labels: NGOs (non-governmental organization) and INGOs (international non-governmental organization). INGOs in Nepal, are the biggest beneficiaries of donor’s grants as their budget easily exceed 100 million annually. Foreign aid to INGOs grew from 2.7 percent of total in 1990 to 4.56 percent in 1999 (CPWF and Action Aid, 2003).

IN DISGUISE

In Nepal, foreign NGOs in the disguise of INGOs, arrive from those countries who give aid money to Nepal and these foreign NGOs help their country offices to expedite grant money. Therefore, they are not international truly and do not bear the working spirit of high levels of economic freedom and lower levels of corruption which is an index of democratization (Blake and Martin, 2002). These foreign NGOs and donor countries together have created a course of action, referred as “crony capitalism” (Rose-Ackerman, 2004). In reality, they constitute a bottleneck for the growth of NGO movement. Lal (2003) suggests that they do impose the value system of the donors on recipient countries and are pre-disposed to global corporations with a different focus, different products to sell and a different kind of profit to make. If Nepal can brave itself to create a legal format for national NGOs, foreign NGOs and international NGOs, such adaptive platform will reduce the uncertainty and

release a huge potential in building the civil society through robust Nepali NGOs. Also, a stringent law should prohibit foreign NGOs not to use any aid money allocated for Nepal by the donor countries.

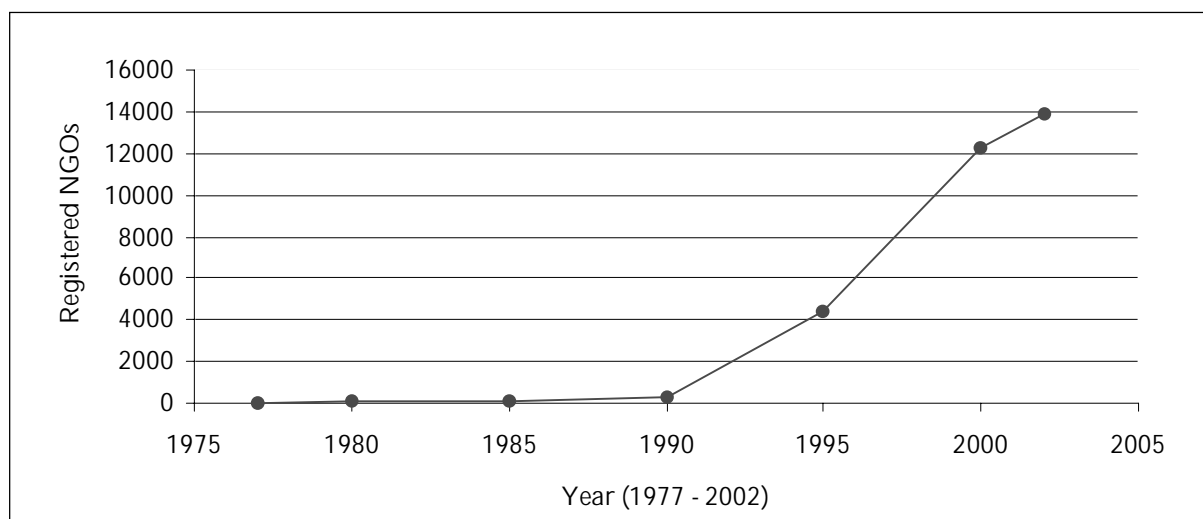
There are extremely few INGOs in Nepal who do not stalk aid money or assistance allocated for Nepal. These are the ones who earn or raise grant independently without heightening Nepal’s inability or crisis to address development. How many such good INGOs are there, who are altruistic in nature? Not even a handful!

“SPONSORED” GRASSROOTS

There are 16,000 registered NGOs and 122 INGOs in Nepal. Of NGOs, only 1,500 (9.4%) are functional. The growth of NGOs are significant since the restoration of democracy in Nepal in 1991 (Figure 1). One main reason about the increase is availability of a greater amount of funding to sustain democracy. Donors bring their foreign NGOs in Nepal as conduits for such assistance. Therefore, all viable NGOs may well reflect either a strong access to foreign money or their acceptance to work under them (Bhattachan, 2004). These figures speak volume on a platform to argue between job providers versus a window of opportunity to serve the people and their societies. A majority of them work in human welfare and they all help government agencies in addressing demography-related issues and crises.

Given all these happenings, fallout are many on in-country NGOs. Donor dependent NGOs have ensured the smooth functioning of the system without upsetting the balance of power and thus, the rich and powerful remain entrenched. For such disruptive organizational behavior, two constraints tower them: 1) financial security has become a priority; and 2) they do not prefer to upset their relationship with politicians and government officials to restructure policy and

Figure 1. Growth of registered NGOs in Social Welfare Council (1977 - 2002)



governance. Thus, they have reduced themselves to be meek and submissive agents for financial relief. In other words, they could have become siblings of development extension agents of the government.

Nepal must live to learn its vital lessons from the ongoing armed conflict. While insurgency, poachers and timber smugglers have unknown effects on biodiversity, many state- and donor sponsored organizations (both community-based and non-governmental) have fallen. The inability of these "sponsored" grassroots, signals that they cannot cope as they bear both bureaucratic entrapment and political stigma (Yonzon, 2004). At least, to cure the symptoms of colossal loss of biodiversity due to insurgency, the general prescriptions of good science and clean politics need to be applied with local sensitivity.

REINVENTING THE WHEELS

Today, even in these difficult times, conservation has centered on the power mechanics of echelons that grab opportunities unduly and deprive the knowledge-based communities. One probable way-out is reinventing the wheels. For such, donors and their intended beneficiaries must and shall encourage: 1) devolution of centers of power (government and foreign NGOs); 2) widening transparency in local governance; 3) practice of good science for accurate land-based information; and 4) support development of unambiguous policies through action research to curb nagging politics that benefit a few. Obviously, a society with a large class of knowledge-based people can break free a nation from the grips of backwardness and poverty (DeLong, 2003).

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Pralad Yonzon received his Ph. D. in wildlife from the University of Maine, USA. Dr. Yonzon, Chair, Resources Himalaya Foundation, works with his colleagues in south and southeast Asia on biodiversity conservation. Readers may write to him at habitat@resourcehimalaya.org



GPO BOX 2448, Kathmandu, Nepal
editors@resourcehimalaya.org
www.resourcehimalaya.org

Resources Himalaya aims to be a regional promoter of "good science" to facilitate "politically correct" decisions so that biodiversity conservation in the Himalaya is secured and benefits of conservation practices accrue to the poorest segment.