

THE EASTERN HIMALAYAS :

From the Snowline to the Sealine



Background

The Eastern Himalayas lie at the center of South Asia and East Asia, connecting two of the world's largest economies: India and China. Stretching from the eastern provinces of Nepal in the west to China's Southwestern mountains in the east, it extends across India's North East and West Bengal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar. It bridges over 246 million people from over 400 different ethnic groups, across 2 key biodiversity hotspots and over 30 ecoregions. The strategic value of this region cannot be overstated, from its centrality as a water source for India, China and Southeast Asia, to its importance as a global biodiversity hotspot.

The region is endowed with rich natural capital which remains largely untapped and underleveraged, viewed either as an impediment to economic growth through a developmentalist lens, or else viewed as a battleground for increasingly embattled, endangered endemic species. Both views obscure the aspirations and rich cultures of the region's indigenous and local communities, most of whom still depend heavily on the region's natural capital for their livelihoods, albeit at a largely subsistence level.



The Problem

Since 2000, the Eastern Himalayan region has lost over 9.5% of its green cover – an area larger than that of Bhutan and the state of Sikkim put together. However, these figures, sourced from Global Forest Watch, do not capture the full complexity of the picture: the loss of primary, dense natural forests, the conversion of forests into plantation forests and the incursion of invasive species in natural forest areas. Together, these three factors have created a cascading series of effects: declining ecosystem health, declining soil health, rising desertification and the rapid depletion of water tables across the region.

80% or 197 million people in the region are employed in highly nature dependent industries (e.g. agriculture, forestry, energy production, food & beverages, tourism). Of these 80% are smallholder farmers. 40-50% of the region faces poverty intensity over a 40% threshold. Poor rural incomes force communities to turn to forest exploitation to augment their incomes, to access universal basic assets like healthcare & education. Most of these people live in the region's valleys, at high risk because of deforestation and climate risks. Forests play a key role in regulating the hydrogeology of the region – river flows, groundwater & aquifer regeneration, flooding & soil erosion prevention – without which life in the valleys would be impossible.

These problem have been further compounded by burgeoning climate risks: rising temperatures in the mountains have caused glacial melt, creating volatility in water access and adding further stresses

to an already geopolitically tense area. Over a quarter of the land in the region is degraded – the result of rampant deforestation and severe flooding. Despite shared interests for development and economic growth opportunities, the region remains divided by geopolitical interests. As a result, communities have few livelihood opportunities and many look for better socioeconomic mobility by migrating from the region.

This migration has led to the fragmenting of communities, the loss of rich traditional ecological knowledge and unsafe human trafficking. In some cases, migration between countries in the region has led to the escalating inter-community tensions and the rise of ethnonationalism. Coupled with a history of insurgency and conflict in the region, ordinary people, wildlife and ecosystems have suffered as forests are cleared in huge swathes and wildlife is traded illegally to fuel this conflict.

Long-term ecological degradation has contributed to declining incomes & yields in a primarily agricultural region, forcing people to exploit forests to augment incomes & access basic assets – spurring further ecological degradation. Today, livelihoods in the region are at threatened by the vicious cycle of degradation > shrinking incomes > deforestation > degradation: declining incomes, declining yields and rising human-animal conflict in states like Assam are symptomatic of this vicious cycle.

Combatting these twin problems of forest loss and poverty requires a united approach, to break this vicious cycle and link healthy ecosystems with better livelihood and earning opportunities for rural & forest-fringe communities.

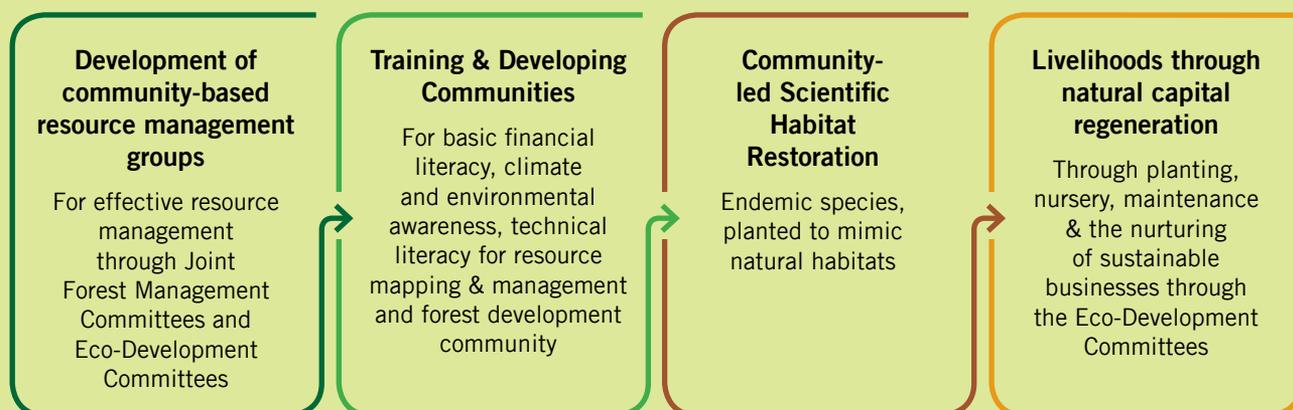


Opportunities

At the confluence of 2 billion people, the Eastern Himalayan region has a young demographic and its rich cultural diversity supply a plethora of rich perspectives and traditional knowledge yet to be fully understood by scientists and policymakers, for developing sustainable livelihood opportunities. Though young people migrate to nearby regions for work, they still retain strong relationships with their communities and seek opportunities to work in their ancestral lands among their communities while earning enough to foster wellbeing for themselves and their families.

The region still retains a quarter of its primary natural forest and 60% of forest cover, home to 12,000 species of flora and fauna with new ones being discovered every year. Approximately 6 million hectares of degraded forest land must be restored across the Eastern Himalayas to reverse two decades of deforestation, and within the North East region, over 1.8 million hectares could potentially be restored through agroforestry. An ambitious programme for restoration would create employment for up to 20 million people and enhance regional GDP growth by 2-3% annually through natural capital.

The Solution – Creating Rural Futures



The solution to these interlinked challenges is the creation of a natural capital based system to deliver universal basic assets (education, healthcare, water, energy, food security, transformative living spaces) to rural & forest-fringe communities

The Rural Futures framework functions as a positive feedback loop model. Rural Futures entails holistic community development, and the creation of rural ecosystems through optimisation of natural capital & assets. Central to the Rural Futures framework is the restoration and management of wild habitats across the Eastern Himalayas, which, in turn, strengthens the natural capital pool of the region, i.e. increases the overall worth/hectare of land.

Initial payment for restoration rewilding programmes create sustainable incomes and businesses for forest-fringe communities, incentivizing them towards natural capital regeneration. Sustainable businesses through agroforestry, bamboo, mushrooms and mindful tourism enhance natural capital values, enabling communities to become self-sufficient, accessing and delivering universal basic assets & services such as healthcare, education, renewable energy and access to water.

How?

Payment for Restoration – scientific restoration of forests led & managed by communities through a payment for restoration programme that creates immediate livelihoods for forest-fringe communities

Agroforestry – restoration of fallow or degraded land holdings through organic cultivation of food forests, with produce that can be sold on local markets or consumed at home, increasing incomes and food security

Sustainable businesses – such as mushrooms, weaves & homestays which extend the value chain of forest restoration and agroforestry, generating higher value for communities through sustainable use of natural assets

Scientific natural asset management & maintenance – communities are trained in techniques for managing forests and agroforestry, including natural resource management, monitoring forests, and conducting ecosystem assessments including biodiversity assessment and soil health measurement