

Sustainable Forestry is the Key

By Dr. C. S. Karim

I remember talking to a retired forest officer sometime in the 1980s. He told me a thought-provoking story. He had started his career as an officer of the Imperial Forest Department in the 1940s. He went to his boss, a young Englishman, after joining his new post at a "reserve forest" somewhere in Assam. The boss, visibly drunk although it was early in the day, told him: "Look, I am having guests tonight. Ladies are coming. We will dance and need drinks. Get a case of whiskey and some beer." The young recruit kept standing in front of his boss, expecting that the boss would give him some money for buying the stuff. The boss was intelligent enough to understand that his young officer was confused. He barked "Bondobosto koro" (make arrangements)!

The office enquired of his subordinates how to do "bondobosto." Several mature trees in the first came down and sold the "supplies" were efficiently arranged. When he attended the party at the bungalow in the evening, he got an appreciative nod from the boss. The officer ended his story by adding. "I have been busy all my professional life doing the "Bondobosto" job.

This summarizes how the role of forest department has changed from conservation to revenue earner, leading inevitably to corruption. If one is required to chop a number of trees for drinks, chopping a few more for meeting more urgent needs becomes quite logical. I, of course, oppose chopping trees for any reason whatsoever.

I remember in 2007, when I was heading the Bangladesh Ministry of Forests and Environment, receiving a proposal from the Forest Department to chop down some plants in the name of 'thinning and felling,' apparently to replace some mature trees to facilitate re-plantation. When I disagreed, the reply was that the Department would be deprived of revenues of 1,800 Million Taka.

I went up to my colleague in the Finance Ministry and asked him point blank: "What if I deprive you of projected revenue of 1800 million Taka?" He was taken aback and said "I won't like that, of course. But why are you saying so?" My reply was that if I forgo that amount to reduce deforestation, the actual long-term earning would be a few times more. He said that in that case he didn't mind losing revenue. I was successful in stopping at least that act of eco-destruction.

Another incident I remember occurred after the catastrophic cyclone Sidr. Vultures came in, mostly from abroad, giving proposals to restore acres of mangroves that were lost to the cyclone. Again, I declined their money-making schemes. These came from people who had little idea about mangroves that had survived centuries of cyclonic devastations. And these were restored without external interventions. My slogan was "Let's not disturb the Sunderban and its biodiversity. Let it take care of itself. In fact I feel elated that soon after Sidr, when the Sunderban was left to itself, trees started regenerating. I may have been naive but I thought that interference could be of little help to regeneration. And that turned out to be the case.

Since concern about climate change has become universal, people are increasingly becoming aware of the multi-dimensional benefits of tree canopy. Its role as a

natural sink of carbon dioxide and emission of additional oxygen, prevention of soil erosion, nitrogen fixation in the soil, thereby enhancing soil nutrition, is now widely recognized. Nobody can cast a doubt on any of these. But, the arithmetic may not be as simple as it looks. A regimented, top down, approach to conservation will most likely fail to deliver the goods.

Sustainable forestation can be a difficult proposition for Bangladesh to attain, a country where population density is about 1000/ Sq. Km. Already the pressure on land is out of proportions. The logical way out is encroachment into the forests to meet demands for housing, agriculture, industrial activities and other areas of human activities. The forests are disappearing fast. The trees are sources for fuel, both in villages and urban fringe locations or even cities not covered by the network of fuel, timber, building materials and other materials. Balancing demand and supply under such conditions becomes extremely difficult. This is our number one reality.

The next question is one of ownership. In the sub-continent the ownership of forest lies with the government, possibly because forests were conceived as sources of revenue. Even today, I have found that the Shundari variety of trees of the Sunderban is licensed to trader for chopping to supply to the safety match industries. The News Print Factory uses the same source for supply of raw material. Unless a suitable alternative is found, it will be difficult to check deforestation. The people don't have the sense of ownership/ or belonging. Efforts were made to create public awareness on the worth of a mature tree but it failed to motivate people. I once wanted to stop clearing a part of the already dwindling Madhupur Forest for creating a resort for a near-extinct species of monkeys. I failed to understand how an enclosure of brick walls could stop their migration, as if these creatures could not scale a 10-foot brick wall. I had to scrap an ongoing project where some foreign donor had made financing available. The ethnic group, Garo, was not consulted on how best the restocking program could be realized. I have heard that, against their will, a new variety of plants is being introduced. To reject the ideas and practices of indigenous people who have lived for generations in the midst and vicinity of forests is to invite ecological disaster.

The choice of plant variety responsive to site specific agro-ecological conditions is critical. For example, during Sidr, tall trees planed on either side of the streets were uprooted easily in the Greater Barisal district. It transpired that this "wisely selected" variety had shorter stems and were thus easily uprooted. Local knowledge and experience must be used in designing a plantation program. For example, it is commonly believed that shift cultivation in the Hill Tracts (known as Jhum) is the culprit-in-chief of deforestation. I had talked to people there and came to know that Jhum is good for nitrogen fixation and hence for agriculture production. Since the ethnic groups move the sites frequently, they allow for restocking at sites abandoned after certain number of cycles of cultivation. This is a point favoring a synergy between traditional knowledge and perception of the promoters.

It is interesting to note that certain parcels of land in the hill tracts were leased out to entrepreneurs for rubber cultivation. We have in the process lost valuable forest coverage and produced nest-to-nothing in terms of production of rubber latex. This is just another glaring example of economic interest prevailing over sustainable forest coverage.

A number of concepts and models were developed to improve efficiency of plantation program. These included community forest and household forestry, to name only

two. These have had some successes in the beginning but did not last. In 2007 I visited some sites of road-side strip forest program in Moulavibazar. Groups along the road were given the responsibility of planting trees, chop the mature ones and take the financial benefits. People seemed to see the benefits and were found to be enthusiastic. The problem I see is that the gestation period is so long that it could be difficult to motivate people to wait that long. But this model is worth trying out on a large scale.

My information is based on my perception obtained from my short tenure in the Ministry of Forest. I admit that they may not be all correct but surely the use of local knowledge and experience, honed over generations, is something we cannot ignore.

Let me share one final word of caution. In 2007, and again in 2009, we had catastrophic incidents of mudslide in Chittagong. During that time we had a record rainfall. Since we did not have much vegetation, the effects were devastating. The record rainfall was a wake up call, an indication of what can result from climate change. The intensity and frequency of landslides and similar disasters can increase dramatically. Perhaps the mudslide was a manifestation of nature's retaliation. We have to be better prepared. Sustainable forestry is one of the tools of effective adaptation..