

India Gives Community Forest Management a Try

by KALYANI

Environment News Service (ENS)

July 24, 2002

The World Bank has launched a program that seeks to put villagers in some of the poorest areas of southern India in charge of the tropical forests where they forage for fuel and food.

The Washington, D.C.-based Bank said Monday that a US\$108 million credit program would encourage tribal groups, migrant grazers, and landless communities to take on primary responsibility for managing forests in parts of the state of Andhra Pradesh.

"The project aims to reduce rural poverty by placing forest areas under the management of poor and primarily tribal forest-dependent communities," the Bank said in a statement on the project, which was approved by its board last week.

The project, to be implemented in 14 of the state's poorest districts and overseen by the local forestry department, comes after a similar program, launched by the Bank in 1994, which brought Andhra Pradesh officials and forest communities together to manage woodlands.

That joint project, which ended in 2000, drew criticism from environmental and conservation campaigners over the stake held by forest communities in relation to officials from the forestry department.

"The main problem with the joint management of forests was the fact that the revenues were never equally shared by the government and the forest dwellers," said Richard Mahapatra, a special correspondent for *Down to Earth* journal, published by the New Delhi-based Centre for Science and Environment (CSE).

"Many of the promises that were made in the earlier project were not kept," said Mahapatra, noting that villagers received less than 50 percent of revenues from bamboo trees and tendu leaves (used to make tobacco rolls), despite being promised an equal share from non-timber products.

"The [Andhra Pradesh] project can only work if the local community gets the full benefits of forest produce," he stressed.

Now the local people, forming village organizations to protect forest land, are joining forces with the state forestry department to rejuvenate Andhra Pradesh's degraded forests.

The six-year project, which is expected to begin before October, will give villagers more income than they received under the previous program because it will also include a share of revenue from timber sales, according to Sumir Lal, the Bank's spokesperson

in New Delhi.

It will start by laying the groundwork for local people to get involved in the management of the four million hectares of forestland through a series of training sessions with villagers, nongovernmental organizations, and state officials.

The Bank hopes that by giving local communities the knowledge and skills to manage the forests, by maintaining healthy trees and combating illegal practices, such as logging for firewood, the program will not only increase the wealth of local people, but also help to conserve the rich plant and animal life in the areas.

Forest officials will supervise the work of the villagers, ensuring that the forests are preserved, the produce marketed, and the accounts maintained. A series of village committees will eventually be set up to take over sales of forest products and accountancy work.

"This project will put local villagers in charge of the forests. They will get revenues from the forests, which will, in turn, encourage them to conserve the forests," said Lal. "It is essentially an anti-poverty, income-generating program with a side focus on the sustainable use of forests."