

Box 3.11 Joint Forest Management in India

India's Joint Forest Management (JFM) initiatives are based on the concept of collaboration between local people and state authorities. Local people participate in forestry activities on land that remains, essentially, under state control; the Forest Department provides financial assistance and technical advice.

Joint Forest Management grew out of the tension in the 1970s and 1980s between Forest Department staff and local communities. This was an era of political upheaval in many states. Villages had increasing need for forest resources but decreasing access to them, as the government aggressively promoted state plantations in barren and degraded forest lands that had always been used by local people. In fact, by 1980 nearly 23 percent of India's land area had been placed under state management; the majority of the affected rural population were denied access to their traditional resource bases. Nonetheless, Indian forests were losing ground, converted to other uses. For example, during 1959–76, Indian forests lost 2.5 Mha to agriculture, mostly to encroachment by the people living on forest peripheries.

During this period, Dr. Ajit Banerjee, a young Forest Service officer posted at a small research station in West Bengal, was exploring alternative methods of forest management. In 1971 Banerjee initiated an experiment in Arabari in which local villagers would work with Forest Department staff to jointly manage forest patches adjacent to their settlement. The idea



A woman carries a "head load" of wood from rejuvenated Dhani Forest.

was to provide residents with a supply of biomass and sources of income through the sale of nontimber forest products—fruit, leaves, mushrooms, twigs, and fodder grass—and in exchange the communities would help restore and protect the forests. Soon, 618 families from 11 villages were working with the West Bengal Forest Department to restore more than 1,200 ha of forest, salvaging sal trees where good rootstocks remained and planting barren patches with fast-growing species like cashews. Some of the deforested areas were cultivated with rice, jute, and maize. The produce was sold to member families at a nominal price. The members could get firewood and fodder free for their own use.

By the early 1980s, jointly managed forests in Arabari were flourishing. Today, West Bengal, Orissa, and other states have formally endorsed the "Arabari experiment" as a general model for jointly managing forests. Widespread replication of the JFM model—with corresponding regeneration of forests—offers strong evidence that the recognition of traditional rights of local people to use forest resources could be the most important condition for managing a forest sustainably.

There remain several challenges to the further success of JFM. Marketing of nontimber forest products is still under the control of an organized lobby of large merchants. The state-run corporation responsible for marketing timber remains vulnerable to a group of contractors who keep prices low at auctions. Moreover, the efficient functioning of forest protection committees still depends on, in many cases, the personal efficiency and willingness of concerned Forest Department officials.

Community Managed Forests in 15 of 30 Orissa Districts

District	Land Under		District	Land Under	
	Villages (no.)	Protection (ha)		Villages (no.)	Protection (ha)
Angul	630	6,000	Mayurbhanj	750	35,000
Balesore	450	7,000	Nabrangpur	150	1,000
Baudh	25	2,500	Nayagarh	650	110,000
Bolangir	600	24,000	Puri	250	6,000
Debgarh	110	4,500	Raigada	75	8,000
Dhenkanal	732	8,000	Sambalpur	650	80,000
Ganjam	80	2,500	Sundargarh	125	5,000
Koraput	125	12,250			

Source: Mahapatra 1999.