

Bridging the Science Gap in Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) Policies¹

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NTFPs and their relevance

Used for food, furniture, housing, and as cash crop, NTFPs include rattan, bamboo, resins, forest food plants, and medicinal and cosmetic products that are derived from forests and related ecosystems.

Previously referred to as “minor forest products”, NTFPs received little attention from government and big business because timber harvesting and utilization, as the long-established income-generating enterprise from forests, offered far better financial returns. Rules and regulations on NTFPs were subsumed in generalized policies meant for timber, which in most cases were not adequate because of the different nature, growth requirements, and harvesting and utilization tools for NTFPs.

As far as the Philippines is concerned, NTFPs are largely considered neither

“here nor there” in terms of importance and hence, are largely glossed over in government policies. Consequently, certain segments of the population dealing with NTFPs such as ancestral land claimants, field foresters, farmers and upland settlers get little guidance on the production, development, harvesting, and utilization of these products. This vacuum has deterred society from reaping full benefits from NTFPs.

Bridging gaps in NTFP Policy with Science

According to Argete (2004), a “policy-research loop” in environment and natural resources is still largely non-existent. He recommends establishing a feedback mechanism and encourages regular dialogue between research and government.

The challenge for NTFP scientists is to exert their best effort to create and sustain such a policy-research loop.

Although government has restricted legal access to NTFPs, NTFPs continue to face threats of depletion because users have resorted to illegal means to source materials because of policies that are seen as

costly, unnecessary, and/or unfair (Guerrero, 2008).

Recent advances that can provide information resources useful to policy include the development of participatory NTFP monitoring and assessment tools, yield and growth studies on NTFPs, property determination of NTFPs under different site characteristics and conditions, and process optimization by utilizing by-products from NTFPs.

Our studies on charcoal from bamboo (Quintos, 2007), for example, indicated varying yields and heating values from different bamboo species and even between sections within the culm. We have also recovered and tested the efficacy of using the distillates from the bamboo charcoaling process, indicating species-specific properties in the ability to retard termite infestation and inhibit fungal growth under laboratory conditions.

The case studies of Gatmaytan (2004) involving six indigenous communities engaged in rattan cane collection in the Philippines further justify the need for localizing NTFP policies and allowing local managers and decision-makers to resolve issues and make decisions that befit local conditions. Different decision systems, collection schemes, attitudes toward rattan, and even bureaucratic inefficiencies were noted among the villages given a common set of rattan



harvesting rules and regulations imposed by the national government.

Locally, mechanisms should be embedded in NTFP policies to lower transaction costs and shorten permit application processes, and to put in place more practicable and simplified requirements and procedures that would improve the value and availability of these resources. This can reduce unwarranted burden to those engaged in NTFP production and harvesting.

New findings reinforce that indigenous knowledge systems on NTFP exploration and utilization ought to be factored in the decision-making process. In turn, this can potentially enhance local people's attitudes towards sustainable NTFP resource management.

Forest scientists must also engage themselves in assessing the impacts of policy. The Global Network for Forest Science Cooperation (IUFRO) has developed a guide on how scientists can work at the interface of forest science and forest policy, which among others, calls for interdisciplinary teams working on the various dimensions of policy rather than scientists working individually (Guldin et al., 2005). This interdisciplinary effort has yet to be cultivated among Filipino forestry scientists.

Conclusion and Recommendations

With the increased attention that NTFPs get from government and other relevant sectors, it is important that policies

As a first step in the advocacy for a more clearly defined NTFP policy, it is important to know the agenda that the Philippine government carries relative to NTFP resources. With respect to providing policy content, scientists must be ready to share findings that can serve as the bases for policy decisions. NTFP scientists should assert the uniqueness of rattan, bamboo, leaf and fiber, vines, resins and other chemical products, relative to timber. Conditions applicable for timber extraction that are not in parallel with NTFPs include those dealing with inventory requirements prior to the grant of cutting permits, establishing allowable cuts, amount of forest charges, and harvesting and trading bans.

pertaining to NTFPs should contribute towards enhancing their regeneration and conservation and maximize the efficiency of extraction, utilization, marketing, and trade practices. The following steps are recommended:

1. Intensify the conduct of research that can help resolve policy issues pertaining to NTFPs. Likewise, more research is needed on inventory methods, sustainable harvest levels, and efficient harvesting and utilization techniques.
2. Continue advocating for more rational, poor people-oriented, efficient NTFP policies. Continue the accumulation of information on distribution, regeneration, propagation, uses of, and products from NTFPs. Conduct more fora on NTFPs and benefits derived from them.
3. Encourage better and more meaningful integration of NTFPs in Community Resource Management Framework and/or Ancestral Domain Management Plans/Ancestral Domain Sustainable Development and Protection Plan.
4. Continue efforts to build awareness and call attention to NTFPs, their status, values and the gaps in policy pertinent to their conservation, protection, utilization and development.
5. Participate in dialogues that will help bring about better policies on NTFPs. Forest scientists must strive to involve themselves in such policy processes.
6. Strengthen institutions (POs, NGOs, LGUs) that deal with NTFP promotion, research, and development.
7. Provide technical support to communities and enterprises that use NTFPs as raw material inputs. Build capacity of NTFP-dependent people to organize and manage an enterprise.
8. Improve wages of government personnel tasked with NTFP permitting, inspection, and monitoring responsibilities to minimize if not totally eliminate bribe-taking.
9. Provide access to markets for NTFP raw materials and products.

Robinson and co-workers (2008) claimed that a spatial-temporal model they used to examine resource extraction from the forests by local people revealed variability in the manner by which villagers are dependent upon the forest. "Ignoring this variability could result in inappropriate policies," contends Robinson et al. (2008). The authors also warned that imposed policies in a given area could result in unintended consequences in other areas, having noted the spatial dimension of extraction decisions.

¹ Paper delivered during the University of the Philippines Los Baños (UPLB) Science and Technology Professorial Chair Lecture held at SEARCA, College, Laguna, on November 25, 2008.

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