

Comments on China Forestry Panel

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IASCP Bi-annual Meetings

Oaxaca, Mexico

19-13 August 2004

Below are my comments on four presentations on forestry in China in the panel entitled: "Forest Policy Constraints to Collective Forestry in China" organized by Andy White of Forest Trends:

Xu Jianchu: "Collective Forests and Expansion of Public Protected areas in China: Loss of Land, Rights and Biodiversity"

Yang Congming: "The Harvest Quota: Impacts on Incentives for Sustainable Collective Forest Management"

Zhang Lei: "The Design and Implementation of the Harvesting Quota: Issues and Options from a National Perspective."

Zhao Yaqiao: "Sustainable Forestry as an Alternative to the Logging Ban: Findings from Policy Experiments"

First Commentator, Deborah Barry of Ford Foundation, Mexico.

Second Commentator, Jesse C. Ribot of World Resources Institute

Some of the panel members asked me to summarize my comments in writing. I will do my best based on my notes. I have very little direct experience with China, which is a vast, diverse and complex nation with a long history of forestry experience, so please forgive any inaccurate interpretations. Before I do so I want to thank the panel members for excellent presentations and for the honor of being asked to be their discussant. I learned a great deal from this panel and I hope to learn more about China's forestry policy development as they emerge.

Forestry in China appears to be at an important crossroads. Political-administrative decentralization has created more-representative local administrative structures with the election of Administrative Village leaders. Foresters are searching for new alternatives to central management and to the current system of production quotas (which appear to be limiting the ability of local people to manage). The choices to be made in the near future will have great implications for forestry, local development, and the emergence and strengthening of local democracy across rural China.

Deborah Barry began with pertinent comments that I want to reinforce. The most critical is to be aware of the potential for human rights abuses in scaling up to landscape approaches to forest management. Scale matters, but it is not just large scales. The task of

the forester is to protect values at higher scales, but to do so with great attention to diverse values at the many other scales of management and use located within these larger areas. The issue is how to protect values to the world, nation, and province, with the least compromise of values that are important for local populations. The more value that local people are allowed to derive from their forests, and the more decisions they are allowed to take on forestry management, the more it appears that these local people will engage in and make appropriate decisions concerning forest protection and sustainable use. Inclusion of local people as active decision makers in forestry engages them in protecting forests for their own and for outsider purposes. Exclusion and imposed decisions alienate local populations who often react by poaching and over-exploiting the resource.

Let me begin by saying that forestry must be viewed in a long-term perspective. Based on China's rich recorded history, China and Chinese scholars have this long-term perspective. I would be willing to bet that China has very few, if any, "virgin," "primordial," or "gallery" forests. I assume that all forests in China have been cut, used, regenerated, managed and re-used many times. They have been cut and regenerated again and again. Rather than being ancient natural forests that need protection, China's forests belong not to nature, but to culture. They are the result of many generations of cultivation (as in systematic management and use by people).

I think we need to recognize that forests in China have been under continuous long-term use. They have survived this use over generations. If we are to protect these forests, we need to recognize that these forests are present because of the actions of local people who live in and around them. [As Zhao Yaqiao shows, local forestry management systems in Naxi are sophisticated and reflect knowledge of succession and management (i.e. pine trees needing light and mineral soil to regenerate) that matches "scientific" wisdom of the forestry department.] The ligneous formations are not relics of a great ancient forest. They are products of human action and genius. They are culture, not nature, and they need to be treated as such. Protecting them by isolating them from people may destroy them. It will certainly create resentment and resistance by those who have cultivated these forest landscapes for generations. Indeed, I would suggest that the term "protection" is not the most appropriate term for the objectives of forestry policy. Like in agriculture, the objective is to "optimize the use" of these forests for multiple values that include the conservation of habitat and endangered species as well as multiple uses at multiple scales. Conservation must be viewed as one among many important uses.

This leads me directly into comments on the paper by Xu Jianchu. Xu speaks of protected areas, but he emphasizes that areas may already be protected. They fall under a system of management that is part and parcel of a complex worldview of local people that integrates landscape into local cosmology, providing the foundations of an ethics of management and use for the local populations. Xu depicted this view in an artist's rendition. One of the most difficult challenges of forestry managed at large scales is to represent this local world view in the larger-scale decisions. The importance of integrating local views into higher scale decisions is multiple. It allows policy makers to design policies that enable local people to optimize their uses at the same time that it

allows higher scale understandings to inform policy making. It also creates the space for local people to engage in forestry and therefore work with, rather than against, the objectives of those operating and making policy at higher scales.

How is local knowledge of forestry and local use and management practice to be integrated into decision making? What channels of representation (in addition to Xu's painting) are there that can guarantee or at least help local views to influence the design of forest management policy? I would argue that these channels are multiple. They are systems of communication already existing in the party system. They are communicated by researchers who understand and can translate this local understanding into language accessible to policy makers. They are also "represented" through local elected officials at the Administrative Village level. The challenge for the forestry service is to design a system that enables local knowledge and local aspirations to be represented in decision making. The trick is to design a system that is consistent with the new decentralized approach to development and to forestry. Representation matters if local knowledge and local labor are to be mobilized for local good and for the good of all higher levels of political-administrative organization in which they are nested. I argue that if local people are able to make decisions, then their world view will be included in the decisions they make.

Zhang Lei's presentation brings up other important issues in forestry policy design. Zhang Lei spoke of a transition away from the quota system. She spoke of the need for public benefit forests to also serve local use. The alternative approach presented is a shift from quotas to area-based management that would involve management plans for specified areas. But how consistent is this approach with local need? How consistent is it with local aspirations? The risk is that the management planning approach can replicate that top-down quota system in the form of plans that serve the same top down management styles. It puts in place a system of plans that require the same hierarchy of approval and allocation that are present in a quota system. This, unfortunately, is inconsistent with decentralized or local approaches that other speakers have mentioned. It does not create the space in which local people can make decisions.

An alternative to the quota system and to the management planning system is a "minimum-standards" approach. In this approach, legislation sets minimum standards or objectives for management—such as endangered species protection, soil erosion, or flood control. Local people can then do anything they need to use their forests in a manner that does not compromise the higher-level values. By focusing on the few actions that are required and the few actions that are forbidden for good management, it allows local people to then do what they need in a manner that they see fit—as long as they do not breach higher-level minimum rules. I have written about this minimum standards approach elsewhere.¹ The difference between this approach and most regulatory approaches is that this approach 1) sets the *minimum* requirements that local people can

¹ Please see our web page at www.wri.org/wri for the document entitled "Waiting for Democracy: The Politics of Choice in Natural Resource Decentralization." This document will be put on the web some time in the next two weeks. It went to the printer today and we just need to put the "pdf" file on our web page. I will also send a copy of two other documents that briefly address this topic as an attachment.

stay within or choose to augment; 2) it allows action within those requirements *without approval* from above; 3) it sets some basic rules along with *goals for quality of forests* while allowing local people to choose the means to achieve these goals in the best way they see fit; 4) it focuses forest service intervention on the *necessary technical decisions* while leaving allocation and management decisions within those technical requirements to local people.

In short, both quotas and management plans can be tools for management. In some instances they may be required (where there is an absolutely clear technical necessity), in others they may be tools that local people can choose in order to attain their own or state imposed quality standards or their own production objectives. But, the regulatory system chosen by the forest service needs to allow significant decisions for local people to make without having to appeal to an approval process. Quotas can be used by local people to manage the quantity and the allocation of production rights. Management plans can be drawn up by local people alone or in cooperation with higher scale forest service agents if those local people want to go beyond the uses that are possible within the minimum standards. But, without a space for local decision making, where local people can make decisions on their own, there is little possibility to mobilize the great store of local knowledge and the great local labor force to optimize forest benefits for everyone.

Yang Congming explores in his presentation the “effects and impacts” of the quota system. I would add the same question that Deborah asked: for whom and for what? We also need to add the most critical question “for what function”? Quotas are put in place for a number of reasons—only some of which are environmental-management related. They may also serve other functions, such as monitoring, as a means of organizing taxation, access control, patronage, or control over lucrative markets. A complete study would look at the functions in addition to the effect and impacts.

One of the impacts that Yang mentioned was that the impacts reflect the undifferentiated nature of the quota system. Because it operates at such a large scale, it is not sensitive to variations on the ground—different ecological and social needs in different places. Hence, he too suggests the move to a management planning system. I would ask him the questions: will a shift to management planning change this? Is there sufficient expertise and labor in the forest service to attend to the great variability from place to place? Can this be done in a way that will eliminate overly bureaucratic top-down approval processes while maintaining environmental services? I would suggest that the answer is somewhere in a hybrid system that starts with minimum standards—rather than plans for all local actions.

Yang also mentioned a very important point that I cannot over-emphasize. He suggested that when protection is what the state desires, people should be paid for the labor involved in protection. I would add all other values that the state would like to optimize. In many countries around the world, work on environmental management is not treated as if it were labor. People are expected to manage and conserve the environment in return for some benefits they (or more often, others living further downstream or down valley) derive from environmental products and services. This is a grave mistake. It is the reason

that many local people withdraw from environmental management requirements that are imposed on them. No government would expect a local town to build and maintain a bridge for a national highway just because it crosses the river in their town. Bridge building is paid labor. Local people view forest management much the same. The management requirements imposed on them to protect national and global values should be remunerated if we are to expect people to engage in these activities. Hence, I agree with his recommendation to “pay for protection.” It is important to note that pay for protection will only work if the pay is to those people who are actually doing the work—it may be ineffective if payments are to local administrative units that then mobilize local labor to carry out the work as collective public action.

Zhao Yaqiao spoke on how to improve local management. He described how the current forestry ban and quota have undermined the use of local knowledge in forestry. He suggested developing “sustainable Forest Management at the village level. His central question is “how to improve existing local management.” He suggests we need to bring local knowledge into the process. I agree fully with this tenet. I think, however, that we do not need to study this knowledge and then re-introduce it into practice. The key questions are: If this knowledge exists, why is this knowledge not being used? What are the conditions under which local knowledge can enter into decision making and management processes? How can one create the conditions under which this knowledge can be used?

Local experiments in local forest management are increasing. These must be encouraged. They must also be conducted with close monitoring so that we can understand which approaches work under which conditions. I believe that the experiment involved some villages in which production quotas were being allowed and some where management planning was taking place (my notes are not sufficiently detailed and I do not recall the exact details of his case). In my notes, I suggest broadening the experiment. Experimentation is critical. I suggest that the forest service begin to delimit zones in which local quotas can be set, zones where only minimum standards are put in place, and zones in which management planning approaches take place. Such an experiment could help China to set national level policy to enable and strengthen local management and use under various conditions.

To conduct such an experiment requires research. The experiments need to be monitored, carefully documented and analyzed using a comparative research framework to help identify best practices. But, in addition to these experiments, China must be full of diverse experiments that could inform the elaboration of policy in many regions of the country. An effort to compile existing research and to launch new research that can inform the new policy process could help assure that China will develop a robust policy framework for forest management that does not maintain the mistakes of the past or replicate the mistakes of many other countries around the world.

As a small post-script, I think it is important to recognize that developing minimum standards, finding the line between technical and non-technical decisions, choosing and building appropriate local institutions, mobilizing local initiative, and many of the other

ideas discussed here, require much more elaboration and discussion. The above note is only the beginning of a dialogue. These kinds of policy ideas need to be worked out conceptually, translated into the language of policy, negotiated with multiple actors in and out of government, tested and re-worked in the implementation process.