

**Nontimber Forest Products – From The Minor to the Major Leagues
The increasing importance of NTFPs in the global economy**

**Jack Croucher, Ph.D.
Vice-Chairman ANSAB**

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The Natural Products Expo is held every year in Baltimore Maryland USA with over 350 exhibitors. A similar expo is held annually on the west coast of the US as well. Sub sector studies for ntfps indicate that in Nepal alone the turnover could be well over \$26 million dollars annually. This is what is known of the legal trade, let alone what we don't know about the illicit trade. The value of the most economically important NTFPs in world trade totals about US \$11 billion annually (Iqbal 1995). Growth in the natural products market is in a range of 3% to 20% (Grunwald 1994), which is on average 3 to 4 times average national economic growth rates.

Along with having become a successful strategy for rural economic and environmental development, NTFPs are also well on their way toward becoming an important sub-sector of many economies. It is now time that we start recognizing them as such and move them from the realm of subsistence based cottage industries to the realm of a serious economic activity that has the potential for creating jobs, generating income, and alleviating some of the poverty that grips remote regions of the developing world.

NTFPs provide important additional income streams for thousands of rural men and women. The processing, transporting, handling and marketing of NTFPs provide employment for countless others. And, due to the nature of their origin, NTFPs can play an important part in efforts to alleviate poverty in remote rural areas where other economic opportunities are scarce.

It is very auspicious that this workshop is held in Nepal, which has the enormous biological wealth of species that include a large number of valuable NTFPs. While there is a tremendous opportunity in the NTFP sub-sector there are a number of challenges that must be addressed before full and sustainable benefits can be achieved. The producers, harvesters and local stakeholders of the biodiversity often receive little benefit from economic uses of natural resources. It is very important that they share in the benefits and develop a genuine interest to sustainably harvest natural products and conserve the resource base. The main challenges that we need to address immediately in each country include:

- Reforming policies and regulations as well as implementation practices that promote sustainable and equitable use of these resources,
- Sustainable management practices that stop depletion of resources and increases productivity of the commercial species,

- Increasing local capacity in sustainable management of these resources,
- Improving processing and marketing practices that generate incentive for local conservation practices,
- Increasing the share of retained income from lucrative foreign markets,
- Ensuring more equitable distribution of benefits

In order for jobs to be created and incomes enhanced and poverty reduced we need to start treating NTFPs in a somewhat different manner than we have in the past. I would like to suggest a few things that I believe are required for this sub-sector to grow and flourish.

First of all let's dealing with it as a sub-sector of the economy that has the potential for making important contributions to the nation's economic well-being. Let us drop the notion that we are dealing with "minor" products and start thinking in terms of major products with global significance.

Secondly, let's end our tolerance for illicit trade and other sub-economic activities that presently characterize the NTFP subsector, not only promoting exploitation of collectors and harvesters, but also seriously depleting natural resources and damaging the environment. A new atmosphere of transparency in which existing laws are enforced and new legislation drafted that recognize the importance of this sub-sector and its unique qualities and characteristics. It can no longer be acceptable to deplete a resource to the point of extinction only to then ban its further use. In America we call this "closing the barn door after the horse has escaped". There's a great deal of that going on in this subsector. Serious attention must be given at the national and international level to practical definitions of "sustainable harvesting" not only in terms of the quantity of material harvested but also methods used in harvesting.

Thirdly, we must recognize that biodiversity conservation must be the overriding objective of all NTFP work. But it must also be recognized that conservation is not equivalent to creating reserves or sanctuaries and that most NTFPs, indeed most biodiversity, occur in anthropogenic ecosystems. If the people residing in these ecosystems are not brought into the benefit chain through planning, decision-making, jobs and income, there is no chance that this subsector will thrive.

Fourthly, we need to explore the potential of making use of appropriate technologies such as linking e-commerce and e-trade to the NTFP subsector.

There is ample scope for collaboration among scientists and business interests given the unique nature of the subsector. It is now time to make an earnest beginning.