Ghana: Ancient tradition in community forest management

A country with an annual deforestation rate of 1,71%, which in 17 years (1955-1972) lost one third of its forests and further 5,6 million hectares from 1977 to 1997, Ghana also holds ancient keys for a meaning model of forest conservation.

However, government attempts at dealing with biodiversity loss have applied a reductionist approach which has implied the establishment of protected areas at the expense of people. Experience shows that this eventually fails to achieve the proposed goal.
And the solution is out there, in old systems which until recently remained extremely effective. Long before official organisations were established to carry out sustainable forest management and conservation, there were traditional community resource management systems. A prominent feature of such systems is the setting aside of patches of forest by traditional authorities for sustainable resource use and the preservation of vital biodiversity. These areas have different names in different cultures, but are often referred to as sacred groves, fetish groves, local forests or community forests. Some such forests are designated as burial grounds for chiefs or as the home of local deities. But in most cases they are intended to protect watersheds, fragile ecosystems, and plants and animals of conservation importance to local communities.

Traditional authorities are usually the title holders of such areas, and exercise general administrative functions over them. But the management, defence and preservation of such lands are the responsibility of the entire community.

Societies issued controls and sanctions to protect them, and these reserves are intact today in places where culture and traditional religions remain strong. In such reserves, the community forests or sacred groves now support a much larger variety of plant and animal life than do surrounding areas, providing vital products and services such as building materials, timber products, fuel wood, fruits and nuts, bushmeat, snails, mushrooms, and most importantly, plants that are used as traditional medicines. Harvesting is strictly selective there, controlled and allowed only at time intervals that benefit and satisfy the entire community.

On its part, the community adheres to traditional norms and regulations governing the management of these forests, as well as local norms and beliefs governing sacred or fetish groves which prohibit harvesting forest products. Entry is allowed only on specific days or periods for the performance of rituals. Most such groves are believed to contain the “earth god” or spiritual beings that promote peace and prosperity and check antisocial behaviour, and have resulted in remnant patches of primordial forest even in densely populated areas.

However, modernisation, urbanisation and the spread of Christianity and Islam have weakened once revered traditional religions and cultures, changing belief systems in most communities. Many of these sacred groves are being encroached upon and destroyed leading to a loss of livelihood for local communities that depended on forest resources for survival.

In Ghana, sacred and community forests that have contributed immensely to biodiversity

conservation are also now under serious threat. Once found dotted throughout the different vegetation zones of the country, their presence ensured that endemic species restricted to that zone were protected from extinction. Remaining reserves include, to name a few, the Buabeng-Fiema Monkey Sanctuary, the Aketenchie Community Forest, and the Akyem Community Forest at Akyem Takyiman. The Buabeng-Fiema Monkey Sanctuary is a Ghanaian forest of global importance, home to the endangered Mona monkey and other endangered animal and plant species. It has also become a major tourist attraction, generating revenue for local communities and the nation.

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