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**Forest Research
Institute (F.R.I.)
Dehra Dun**

www.iufro.org

IUFRO Conference on Gender and Forestry

November 16th till November 19th 2008

Impact of deforestation on rural women and their roles in biodiversity management

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Key Words: Deforestation, women, biodiversity, health, fodder and fuel wood

Abstract: The linkage between women, forests and the domestic economies of poor rural households in India can be categorized into three patterns:

- First, forest produce are central to the livelihoods of the tribals in India. Many studies have documented that poor households are more dependent on free bio-mass goods and common property resources than better off households.
- Second, women are the primary gatherers and managers of biomass goods in poor rural households. They are the principal users of forests which are still the most important sources of basic needs such firewood, fodder, food items and non-wood forest products (NWFPs) for millions of rural households. Deforestation is taking a heavy toll on the economy and health of rural women in India. Ninety percent of rural women in India have to struggle daily for collecting fuel spending long hours and travelling substantial distances causing drudgery, health problems and poor nutrition to women. Decline in the availability of the forest products is cutting down the women's primary source of income which used to come from the sale of products from cottage industries such as beedies (local cigarettes), honey, bamboo-baskets, leaf plates, gum and brooms etc. As mentioned above, women perform key roles not only in the gathering but also in the processing, storing, utilization and marketing of free biomass goods.
- And third, women's roles and responsibilities are pivotal to protection and management of biodiversity. They had a stake in protecting local biodiversity and natural resources like wood and water as additional burdens fell on them when these resources dried up. Moreover, given that men and women draw on forests and village common lands in different ways, there are gendered differences in the knowledge about plants and species. Moving in and out of forests, women have down the years accumulated loads of knowledge in the sustainable use of natural resources as well as numerous insights of the value of biodiversity.

Both equity and efficiency (better forest conservation) can thus depend centrally on women's participation in the institutions for forest management. Women's experiences and contributions in maintaining an ecologically sound environment must therefore be central to the agenda for the twenty-first century.

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