



Isis International

Women, biodiversity and national economies

It is clear that the goods that women collect, cultivate and harvest and process are vital to their families' health nutrition and income. Almost invisible is the fact that the products and revenues are also important parts of national economies. It has been reported that non-timber forest products (NTFP) in India accounted 'for nearly two-fifths of the total Forest Department revenues and around three-quarters of the net export earnings from forest produce' - and that the majority of workers in the NTFP economy are women. (Kaur, 1990) In Acre, Brazil, not only do women cultivate the food, spices and medicine grown near the house, but they also carry the primary responsibility for processing forest products. Because processed goods fetch a higher price in the market, the skills and knowledge women maintain are of great economic importance. (Kainer and Duryea, 1992) Estimates on the percentage of income derived from forest products vary by community (Hecht, 1993; Jodha, 1986; Kainer and Duryea, 1992; Kaur, 1990), but it is clearly a critical element in the livelihoods of households with access to these resources.

Resources collected from the wild are also important in developed countries, and the loss of those resources has social and economic costs. The destruction of rich estuarine ecosystems in the US cost \$200 million per year (1954-1978) in commercial and sport fisheries alone. (WRI/IUCN/

UNEP, 1992) And these figures do not even include losses to subsistence fisherfolk or social costs related to the culture disintegration of these fishing communities.

Class and gender struggles: a threat to women and to biodiversity

There has been - and continues to be - a severe erosion in the vast library of indigenous knowledge as both resources and those who are most knowledgeable about them disappear. With the passing of elders who recall useful plants and animals that no longer exist, irreplaceable storehouses of wisdom in what Rocheleau (1991) calls the 'science of survival' are lost. And it is the women who retain more of this knowledge who continue to be overlooked. Even if resources themselves survive there is no guarantee that women can continue to count on even the limited access they now enjoy if gender and class struggles over resources intensify. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that women's knowledge will be passed to a younger generation. Because of increased time spent on other activities, displacement of families, devaluation of traditional knowledge in favour of more 'modern' knowledge, or disruption of the rhythm or fabric of social structures, less time is spent transmitting the intimate knowledge women and men have of their environments. (Wachiira, 1987)

People who care about women's lives should see the value in supporting efforts to sustain the Earth's biotic wealth. Those who are concerned about biodiversity should see that the world is on a collision course which presages environmental and social disaster unless women and their families receive an equitable share of resources.'

Common threats to biodiversity and to women

'The same phenomena which are diminishing biodiversity are impoverishing women as well. These include

- * the unsustainable high rate of natural resource consumption
- * the narrowing of traded products from agriculture, forestry and fisheries, and the commercialization of many subsistence resources
- * the failure of economic systems to value the environment and its resources or the value of women's unpaid labour and the failure to account for intangibles such as social stability, inter- and intra-

generational equity and self-sufficiency

* the inequity in the ownership, management and flow of benefits from both the use and the conservation of natural resources

* the deficiencies in knowledge and its applications

* the promotion of unsustainable exploitation by legal and institutional systems.'

Source: 'Biodiversity and Gender Issues: Recognizing Common Ground' by Janet N. Abramovitz, in *Feminist Perspectives on Sustainable Development* ed. Wendy Harcourt, Zed Books Ltd., 1994, Copyright Society for International Development.