

The Eastern Himalayas represent some of the last remaining fragments of India's original forests and accounts for a quarter of the country's green cover. The region includes two of 36 global biodiversity hotspots, with nearly 60% of the region still under green cover. Many of India's most iconic species, including the one-horned rhino, make their homes in these forests, alongside myriad ethnic communities. In addition to being a biodiversity hotspot, the region represents India's richest concentration of cultural diversity, with over 200 different ethnic communities living in harmony with these forests.

However, rapid deforestation is threatening the destruction of this region's biodiversity and its cultural richness: by 2028, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh are expected to lose 9,000 square kilometres of forest. And while net forest loss remains at approximately 600 square kilometres across the region, green cover is growing increasingly fragmented, destroying habitats for the various wildlife species endemic to the region. The destruction wreaked by rampant deforestation has been compounded by the region's growing desertification crisis, with between 20 and 40% of the land under desertification across several of the north-eastern states. Combined with high exposure to climate change risks, this has created a negative cycle, in which severe flooding caused by unpredictable shifts in the South Asian monsoon pattern leads to further soil degradation and desertification, making natural regeneration of arid land virtually impossible. In some cases, severe floods have swept away whole forests, leaving habitats fragmented and in need of rebuilding from scratch.

Rural Futures In The Eastern Himalayas

The repercussions for communities living on vulnerable lands are severe – nearly 70% of the region relies on agriculture for a living and most are small-holding farmers, who are now struggling to earn stable livelihoods. Meanwhile, the looming threat of climate risks has accelerated the need for stronger adaptive capacities to meet the exigencies of climate change. Unlocking these adaptive capacities is no easy task: investments in the region are weak, and while the government has made significant effort to insulate against the worst of these effects, their efforts still fall short of the needed interventions.

The Rural Futures framework was born out of the need to unite community and conservation needs to rebuild fragmented habitats across the Eastern Himalayas. The impact of rebuilding habitats are twofold: improved green cover and greater climate resiliency. Habitat restoration is ordinarily a non-earning prospect for communities, but Rural Futures flips this on the head by building on the region's natural or forest assets to provide a stable source of income and basic amenities for communities.

In addition to afforestation, Rural Futures builds capacities within communities to create sustainable, long-term forest and land management mechanisms. In turn, this paves the way for sustainable agroforestry programmes, creating ecologically sound incomes for communities, and turning enriched forests into earning assets, rather than depleting capital. Ecologically and economically empowered communities, in turn, gain greater purchasing power and greater social mobility.

At the core of Rural Futures' vision lies the notion of a society in which economy and ecology are reintegrated – rather than the current model of externalised environmental costs. In other words, human needs, and forest and biodiversity needs no longer compete in a zero-sum game for land access, but develop a symbiotic relationship strengthening one another. In the future, this enriched relationship between ecology and economy – the Naturenomics™ perspective on economy – builds adaptive capacities to meet future and tertiary human needs such as education, healthcare, energy access, and water and food security.



From Rural Futures To Ecological Civilizations

Rural Futures represents one stepping stone on the pathway to reintegrating economy and ecology to build ecological civilisations. Communities across the Eastern Himalayas have long been practitioners of this integrated economy, though industrial and economic pressures have forced many to abandon integrated models for the divided, commodity-creation-based model that drives global capitalism. Where forests once used to represent economic assets, accruing value as they grew, now forests represent value only when transformed into tradeable commodities.

Revaluing forests as community wealth assets, as the Rural Futures framework does, is one of the many tools to achieve the return to principles of ecological civilisation. A holistic model ultimately recognises not just the ecosystems service value of forests, but crucially, the labour value involved in managing and regenerating forests. In doing so, an ecologically centred ●



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economy emerges in which economic value is created through ecologically restorative activity, not continued extractionism.

The depth of change required goes far beyond the realm of the economic. Current rights systems privilege individuals and single entities over communities and aggregate, borderless entities like forests; the present over the future. A new model of rights recognises not just the rights of community ownership of forest land, but also incorporates the community perception of their right to a continued, unsevered relationship with forest land. Restructuring rights must reflect the needs of governing the forest commons: mutualistic, cooperative relations that extend beyond the present and incorporate future responsibilities to the land.

In restructuring rights to include community rights to land, this lays the groundwork for transitioning away from competitive growth models to cooperative ones by creating long-term social investment in the future of both land and forests. Elinor Ostrom's work on governing the commons lays out how community cooperation can effectively manage resources held in the commons, when coupled with mechanisms for social control, accountability, and negotiation. Rebuilding cooperative efforts requires capacity building support to build negotiation, conflict resolution and planning tools on a community-wide scale.

Many of the communities the Balipara

Foundation works with in the Eastern Himalayas recognise the importance of these principles and of pro-ecological action, but find themselves unable to act because of socioeconomic pressures. Scaling up the ecological civilizational model beyond the scope of the Eastern Himalayas, to create a substantial web of support for these communities requires shifting business and investment models away from externalised environmental costs and high yield but environmentally destructive fossil-fuel-based investments, towards investments in India's natural assets – and especially in the swiftly disappearing forests of the Eastern Himalayas.

The forests of the Eastern Himalayas are rich with natural wealth, relegated to the side because it cannot currently be liquidated. But in the future, in an ecological civilisation, a time might come when this natural wealth is the primary source

of community and economic wealth. The Supreme Court's recent judgement on the Forest Rights Act was lauded for its contribution to the conservation agenda, but restricting communities from using forest land will only restore increasingly fragmented islands of forests. Only ecological civilisations can undo the systemic damage exerted on our country's forests, by centring ecology in economy and building futures for rural communities; not just its urban centres.

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