

## **Unlocking the Potential: A New Vision for Community Forest Management in Nepal**

**Bijesh Mishra, Ph.D.**

The Community Forestry Program (CFP) has achieved remarkable success in the restoration of evergreen forests in Nepal. Previously, these forests had been severely depleted due to factors such as overgrazing, firewood collection, livestock forage, and timber harvesting for housing. The program engaged over 1.6 million households through more than 14,000 community forest user groups (CFUGs) in the restoration process. A NASA-funded research study published in 2021 revealed that Nepal had nearly doubled its forest cover, reaching 46% of the country's land area in 2016, compared to only 26% in 1992—more than a decade after the community forestry program was formally initiated. The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) published a discussion paper highlighting the dual objectives of forest conservation and poverty reduction in Nepal's community forestry.

While the program has made significant strides in forest conservation, it has fallen short of achieving the goal of poverty reduction. This is primarily due to the oversight of the economic benefits that community forestry can bring during the program's implementation phase. Consequently, the full potential of the forests and forest products generated by community forestry has been underutilized. Concerns have also been raised about the long-term sustainability of community forests due to high capital and labor costs, inefficient management, and inadequate returns. Furthermore, the dependence of Nepalese society on forests and forest products has shifted from firewood, grazing, and forage to construction materials, furniture, and home appliances in recent days. Data from the World Integrated Trade Solution reveals that Nepal imported wood worth approximately \$229,000 in 2019. According to the United Nations COMTRADE database, Nepal imported wood, wood articles, and wood charcoal amounting to \$75.96 million in 2021. These figures could potentially rise further when accounting for other wood-based products—a few to name such as paper, plywood, and wood pellets.

To address the lack of economic returns from well-established community forests and offset the higher management costs, this article proposes a new policy. By generating revenue, this policy aims to achieve partial compensation for investment costs and

contribute to poverty reduction. A newly proposed policy paradigm for community forest management holds great potential for restoring forests, conserving biodiversity, and fostering resilience against climate change. It also aims to reduce Nepal's reliance on imported wood and wood-based products, support local livelihoods, and strengthen the national economy. This can be achieved through a simple yet highly effective forest management policy intervention involving the perpetual cycle of tree planting or natural regeneration, management, harvesting, and replanting.

Although a tree cannot grow perpetually, its lifespan can span several hundred years. Trees experience rapid growth and accumulate timber volume during the early stages of their lifecycle. However, growth slows down as they age, ultimately leading to degradation and death, with the tree decomposing into soil organic matter. Forest management endeavors to accelerate the tree growth process, allowing for the early harvest of mature trees that can provide high-quality timber. A recent research paper by the author of this article demonstrated that by selectively harvesting mature forests and leaving a few trees as seed sources, new forests can naturally grow within approximately 40 years, producing marketable timber 3.5 times faster than natural forest growth. Nepal's doubling of community forest coverage over the past 30 years suggests that well managed Nepalese community forests possess the potential to cultivate quality trees rapidly that can supply the domestic timber market.

The success of the community forestry program in Nepal over the past four decades since its establishment in 1978 is evident. However, if mature trees are left unharvested, their growth slows down, and the quality of timber deteriorates. Signs of timber deterioration are already visible, as evidenced by the presence of decayed and hollow cores in harvested trees from community forests. This issue can be addressed by harvesting timber when trees have reached maturity but are still growing, allowing their timber to be utilized for construction materials, furniture, and home appliances. Consequently, community forest management policies should prioritize the harvesting of mature trees and the utilization of timber for various wood products, rather than allowing trees to reach a state of decay after reaching their natural lifespan.

From an economic perspective, timber harvesting would increase the availability of Nepalese timber in the domestic market, boost the revenue of CFUGs, reduce wood imports

and trade deficits, and bolster foreign currency reserves. Nepal has already invested over 40 years of time, land, capital, cash, and labor from more than 1.6 million households into community forestry management. Selling timber and wood products derived from community forests would help recoup these investments and contribute to poverty reduction, which is one of the program's key goals. Poverty reduction through community forestry can be particularly effective in hilly and mountainous regions where alternative income sources are limited.

Harvesting trees creates space for new trees to grow, leading to environmental benefits such as carbon sequestration. Newly grown trees capture carbon from the atmosphere as woody biomass. These trees can be harvested once they reach maturity, and their conversion into furniture and wood products ensures the long-term storage of atmospheric carbon. This perpetual cycle of opening space for new trees through harvesting and replanting facilitates rapid carbon sequestration, the transformation of sequestered carbon into household tools and construction supplies, and the creation of new cycles of carbon sequestration through effective management. These practices contribute to the establishment of sustainable and resilient forests in the face of climate change.

Effective community forest management also plays a vital role in biodiversity conservation and the preservation of endangered flora and fauna. Poor or inadequate forest management can lead to the deterioration of biodiversity, further endangering fragile ecosystems. Forest management extends beyond tree planting, harvesting, and replanting; it encompasses systematic research, identification of endangered flora and fauna, understanding their ecological niches and habitats, and safeguarding air, water, and wetlands. Sound forest management policies and practices provide opportunities for the systematic harvesting of mature trees while ensuring the growth of new trees in the newly harvested areas. These measures protect existing resources such as forests, land, water, air, biodiversity, and ecosystem balance.

It is important to clarify that this article proposes a policy perspective for community forest management in Nepal; however, it is not intended as a one-size-fits-all solution for managing all types of forests in the country. The author acknowledges the challenges in terms of forest research, policy formulation, legal frameworks, and regulations required to achieve the multifaceted objectives discussed in this article.

Nevertheless, globally published research on sustainable forest management for timber production, climate change mitigation, biodiversity conservation, and carbon sequestration can serve as a foundation for forest management research in Nepal. Gradual implementation of liberal and sustainable forest management policies, based on research findings, can create opportunities for timber businesses in Nepal.

The transfer of research-based knowledge and the adaptation of such knowledge to meet specific country needs are common practices worldwide. Modern forest management practices in countries such as the United States, Australia, and Canada were largely derived from European forest management practices and adapted to their unique contexts. India, for instance, established its national-level criteria and indicators for sustainable forest management policies in 1999 through a workshop involving national and international organizations. India piloted its sustainable forest management initiative in 2000 and has continuously modified it to meet its social, economic, environmental, and ecological needs. Chinese forest management policies have also undergone significant changes over the past five decades. More than 80% of community-owned collective forests in China have been transferred to individual households, while state-managed forests focus on conservation and discourage exploitation. Forest management policies implemented outside of Nepal may not fully address the unique social, economic, environmental, and ecological needs of the country. However, Nepal can learn from its experiences and research, adapting transferable knowledge to meet its own specific needs.

The common practice of planting or naturally regenerating, managing, harvesting, and replanting forests is widely employed globally to meet timber and wood product demands. Larger economies such as the United States and Europe often import wood products from Asia and Africa while also harvesting timber from their privately managed forests to meet their market demands. For Nepal, harvesting trees from community forests and replanting them can be a viable strategy to fulfill its timber requirements, reduce rural poverty, alleviate trade imbalances, and preserve foreign currency reserves. It is also essential to emphasize that this article promotes sustainable forest management practices and strongly opposes the over-exploitation of community forests in Nepal.

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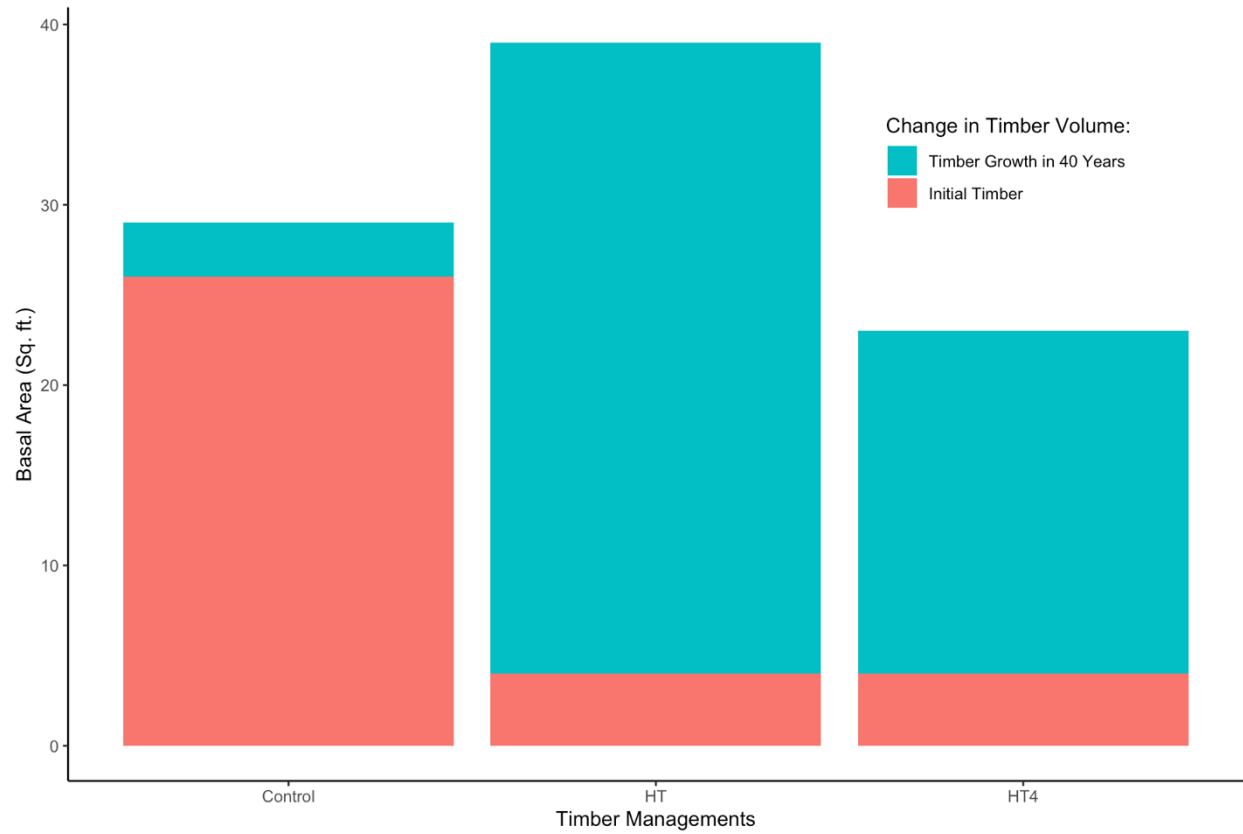
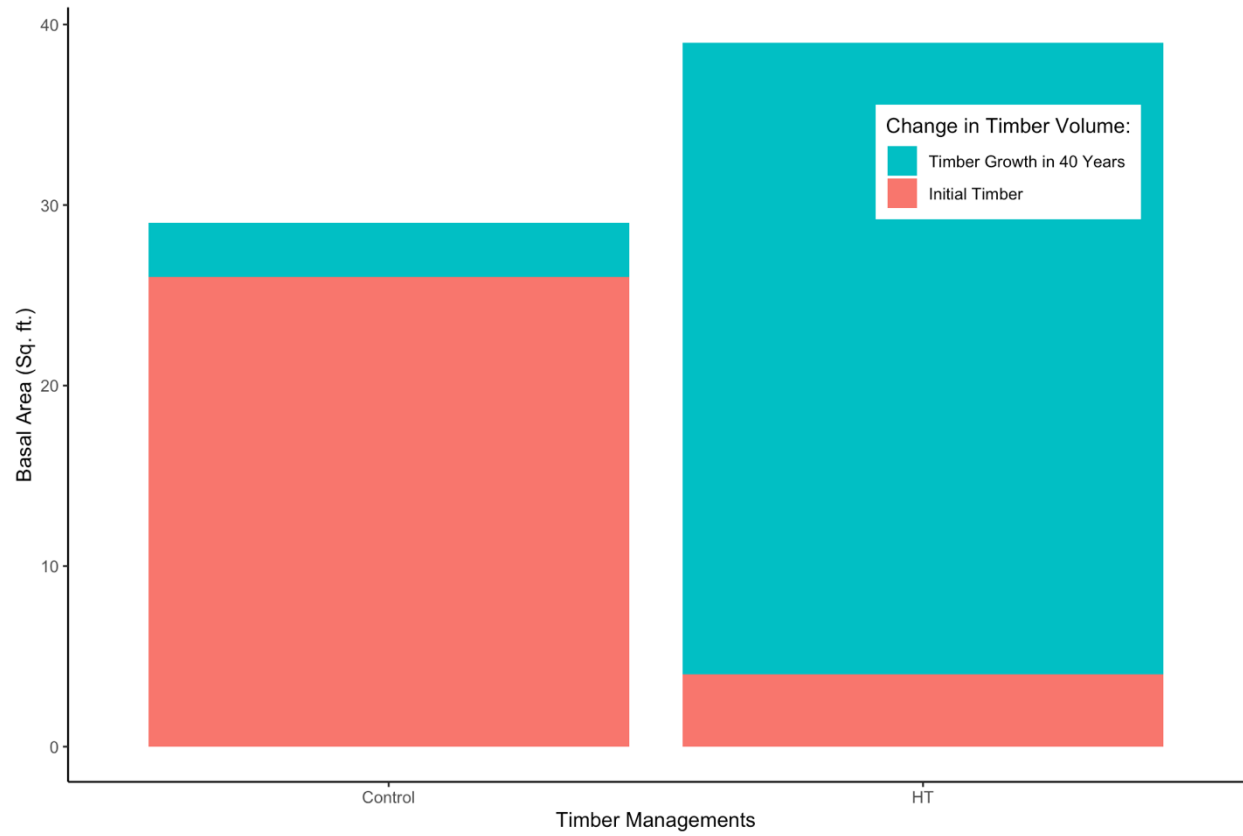
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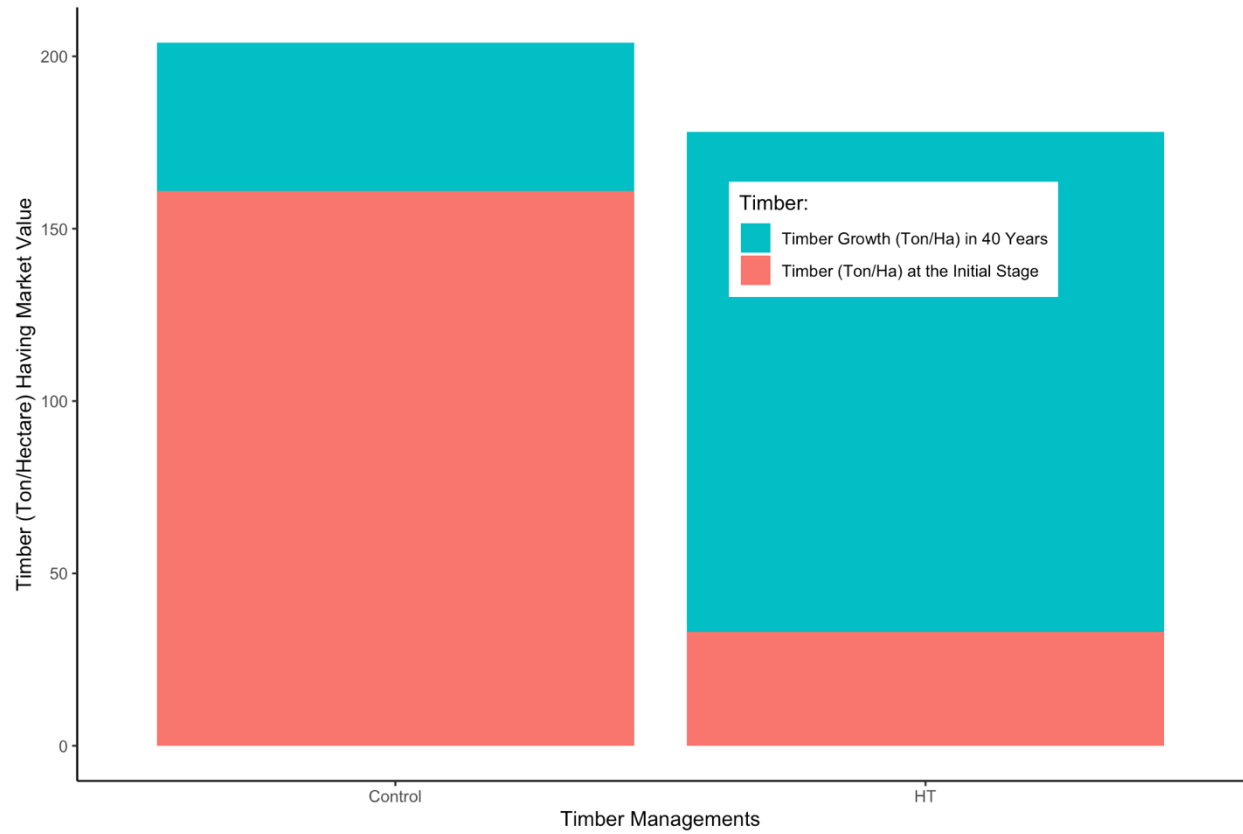
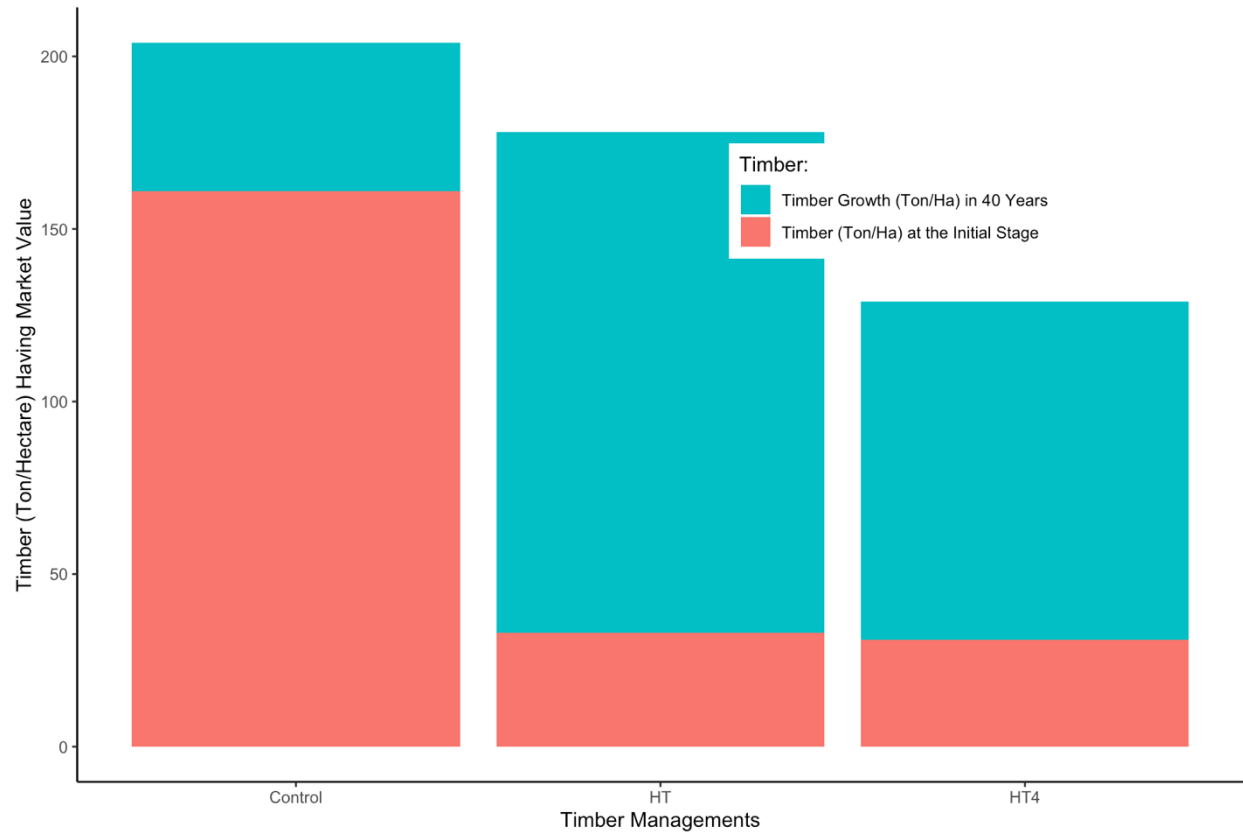
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**Description:** Dr. Mishra is an applied economist at Auburn University, USA. He has formal degree in natural resource economics, agricultural economics, statistics, and environmental science. He is an experienced multidisciplinary behavioral economic researcher in agriculture, energy, and natural resource management.







**ChatGPT Prompt:** Suggest appealing title to replace "Rethinking Community Forest Management in Nepal"

**ChatGPT Output:** Unlocking the Potential: A New Vision for Community Forest Management in Nepal

**ChatGPT Prompt:** Rewrite this article with more clarity, grammatical correctness, engagement, and powerful delivery without changing the Tone of the article. Make it more professional.

“Community forestry program (CFP) became successful in restoring evergreen forests—which was previously destroyed by over- and open-grazing, firewood collection, fetching livestock forage, and harvesting timber for housing need—by involving over 1.6 million households from more than 14,000 community forest user groups (CFUG) in Nepal. NASA-funded research published in 2021 found that Nepal has nearly doubled its forest covering almost half of the country (46%) in 2016 compared to 26% in 1992 around the time when the community forestry program started. IFPRI discussion paper about community forestry in Nepal stated forest conservation and poverty reduction as two major goals of community forestry. The primary focus of CFP implementation was dominated by restoring and conserving forests. The goal of poverty reduction remains unachieved because the economic benefit of community forestry was largely ignored during the implementation phase. Ignoring the economic facet of community forestry management has led to the underutilization of forest and forest products produced from community forests. The long-term sustainability of community forests is already in doubt because of higher capital and labor cost, inefficient management, and lack of return from the community forests. This article proposed a new policy to overcome the lack of return from well-grown community forests which can at least partially offset the higher cost of management through revenue generation.

The dependency of modern Nepalese society on forest and forest products has shifted from firewood, grazing, and forage to construction materials, furniture, and home appliances. The World Integrated Trade Solution data shows that Nepal imported wood

equivalent to United States Dollar (USD) \$229,000 in 2019. The United National COMTRADE database on International Trade taken from Trading Economics shows that Nepal imported USD 75.96 Millions of wood, articles of wood, and wood charcoal in 2021. The cost of imported products can be higher than the above-mentioned figure if other wood-based products such as but not limited to paper, plywood, and wood pellets are accounted for.

A newly proposed policy paradigm of community forest management has the potential to restore more forests, conserve biodiversity, and create resilient forests against changing climate. This policy can further reduce the dependency of the Nepalese market on wood and wood-based products in imported materials, support local livelihood, and support the Nepalese economy. These objectives can be achieved by a simple but very effective forest management policy intervention of planting, managing, harvesting, replanting trees, and repeating the cycle perpetually.

A tree cannot grow perpetually although its lifespan can be several hundred years. Trees tend to grow and accumulate timber volume aggressively during the early phase of their lifecycle. Tree growth starts to slow down as it grows older, degrades after certain years, eventually dies, and converts into soil organic matter. This growth cycle is very slow without management. The idea behind managing forests is to speed up the tree growth process so that mature and quality timber can be harvested earlier than its natural growth cycle. A recent research paper published by the author of this article found that the production of marketable timber can be 3.5 times faster by harvesting mature forest alone and leaving a few trees as a seed source for a new forest to grow naturally in about 40 years compared to the natural growth of forests. Nepal doubling community forest coverage in the last 30 years suggests that Nepalese community forests have the potential to grow quality trees to supply quality timber in the Nepalese market.

The community forestry program in Nepal has successfully grown forests for more than 40 years since its formal establishment in 1978. If mature trees are left unharvested, tree growth would slow down, and timber quality eventually starts to deteriorate. The sign of timber deterioration is already visible as signaled by the presence of decayed and hollow cores in harvested trees from the community forest. This can be prevented by harvesting timber when the tree is still growing but mature enough to use timber as construction

materials, furniture, and home appliances. Community forest management policies, thus, should focus on harvesting mature trees and using timber as various wood products rather than letting trees grow, die, and decay.

Economically, timber harvesting would increase the flow of Nepalese timber in the Nepalese market, increase the revenue of CFUG from timber, reduce the import of wood and its derivatives, reduce trade deficiency, and increase foreign currency reserve. Nepal has already spent more than 40 years, land, capital, cash, and labor of more than 1.6 million households directly to manage community forestry. Selling timber and wood products produced in community forestry would compensate for investment costs as well as reduce poverty—one of the two goals of the community forestry program in Nepal. Poverty reduction through community forestry can be more effective in the hilly and mountainous regions where the alternative source of income is very limited.

Harvesting trees implies opening space for new trees to grow. Environmentally, new trees grown in newly opened spaces sequester new carbon from the atmosphere as woody biomass. Newly grown trees can be harvested after their maturity and converted into furniture and wood products to trap atmospheric carbon longer. This cycle of opening space for new trees by harvesting mature trees and growing new trees to capture atmospheric carbon can be repeated perpetually. Quicker carbon sequestration, relocation of sequestered carbon in the form of household tools and construction supplies, and creating space for a new carbon sequestering cycle through management create sustainable and resilient forests against changing climate.

Managing community forests can be beneficial for biodiversity conservation and the preservation of threatened and endangered flora and fauna as well. Poor or lack of management can sometimes lead to poor biodiversity conservation further endangering the biodiversity. Managing forests is more than planting, harvesting, and replanting trees. Forest management also includes systematic research, identification of endangered flora and fauna, their ecological niche and habitat, protecting air, water, and wetlands, and creating ecosystem balance. Sound forest management policies and practices further open opportunities to systematically harvest mature trees and replant or grow new trees in newly harvested land in several cycles without harming existing resources such as forests, land, water, air, biodiversity, and ecosystem balance.

As this article is promoting planting, managing, harvesting, and replanting as a concept of community forest management in Nepal, it is also important to clarify what this article is not about. The policy and practice suggested in this article are not one-fits-all policies for the management of all types of forests in Nepal. This article is intended to provide a new policy perspective for community forest management which otherwise would remain unutilized economically. The author is knowledgeable about the insufficiency of forest research, policy-wise, legal, and regulatory difficulties in managing forests in Nepal to achieve the multifaced objectives discussed in this article. However, research-based literature about sustainable forest management for timber, climate change, biodiversity conservation, and carbon sequestration are sufficiently published globally which could be used to establish a baseline for forest management research in Nepal. Liberal and sustainable forest management policies can be implemented gradually based on forest research findings which further opens timber business opportunities in Nepal.

Transfer of research-based knowledge and adaptation of knowledge to meet the unique need of a country is commonplace practice throughout the world. Modern forest management practices in the US, Australia, and Canada are largely adopted from European forest management practices and adapted to fit their respective context. India formulated its national-level criteria and indicators for sustainable forest management policies in 1999 through a national workshop involving national and international organizations, piloted its sustainable forest management initiative in 2000, and continuously modified it to meet its social, economic, environmental, and ecological needs. Chinese forest management policy has drastically changed in the last five decades. More than 80% of the community-owned collective forest in China are transferred to individual-owned households and state-managed forests are managed to conserve forest and discourage exploitation. Forest management policies implemented outside Nepal may not satisfy the unique social, economic, environmental, and ecological needs of Nepal. However, Nepal can learn from their experience and research that are transferable and adapted to meet the Nepalese unique need.

A common practice of planting or natural regeneration, managing, harvesting, and replanting forests is a common practice globally to meet their wood and timber need. Larger economies such as the US and Europe often benefit by importing wood products

from Asia and Africa as well as harvesting timber from their privately managed forest to fulfill their market need. Harvesting trees from community forests and replanting trees could be a better strategy for Nepal to meet its timber demand, reduce rural poverty, reduce the trade imbalance, and preserve foreign currency. Finally, while this article emphasized harvesting, and replanting trees to meet the socioeconomic, ecological, environmental, and conservation needs, the author is strictly against over-exploitation of community forests in Nepal.”

### **ChatGPT Output:**

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While the program has made significant strides in forest conservation, it has fallen short of achieving the goal of poverty reduction. This is primarily due to the oversight of the economic benefits that community forestry can bring during the program's implementation phase. Consequently, the full potential of the forests and forest products generated by community forestry has been underutilized. Concerns have also been raised about the long-term sustainability of community forests due to high capital and labor costs, inefficient management, and inadequate returns. In recent years, the dependence of Nepalese society on forests and forest products has shifted from firewood, grazing, and forage to construction materials, furniture, and home appliances. Data from the World Integrated Trade Solution reveals that Nepal imported wood worth approximately \$229,000 in 2019. According to the United Nations COMTRADE database, Nepal imported wood, wood articles, and wood charcoal amounting to \$75.96 million in 2021. These figures could

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Although a tree cannot grow perpetually, its lifespan can span several hundred years. Trees experience rapid growth and accumulate timber volume during the early stages of their lifecycle. However, growth slows down as they age, ultimately leading to degradation and death, with the tree decomposing into soil organic matter. Forest management endeavors to accelerate the tree growth process, allowing for the early harvest of mature trees that can provide high-quality timber. A recent research paper by the author of this article demonstrated that by selectively harvesting mature forests and leaving a few trees as seed sources, new forests can naturally grow within approximately 40 years, producing marketable timber 3.5 times faster than natural forest growth. Nepal's doubling of community forest coverage over the past 30 years suggests that Nepalese community forests possess the potential to cultivate quality trees that can supply the domestic timber market.

The success of the community forestry program in Nepal over the past four decades since its establishment in 1978 is evident. However, if mature trees are left unharvested, their growth slows down, and the quality of timber deteriorates. Signs of timber deterioration are already visible, as evidenced by the presence of decayed and hollow cores in harvested trees from community forests. This issue can be addressed by harvesting timber when trees have reached maturity but are still growing, allowing their timber to be

utilized for construction materials, furniture, and home appliances. Consequently, community forest management policies should prioritize the harvesting of mature trees and the utilization of timber for various wood products, rather than allowing trees to reach a state of decay after reaching their natural lifespan.

From an economic perspective, timber harvesting would increase the availability of Nepalese timber in the domestic market, boost the revenue of CFUGs, reduce wood imports and trade deficits, and bolster foreign currency reserves. Nepal has already invested over 40 years of time, land, capital, cash, and labor from more than 1.6 million households into community forestry management. Selling timber and wood products derived from community forests would help recoup these investments and contribute to poverty reduction, which is one of the program's key goals. Poverty reduction through community forestry can be particularly effective in hilly and mountainous regions where alternative income sources are limited.

Harvesting trees creates space for new trees to grow, leading to environmental benefits such as carbon sequestration. Newly grown trees capture carbon from the atmosphere as woody biomass. These trees can be harvested once they reach maturity, and their conversion into furniture and wood products ensures the long-term storage of atmospheric carbon. This perpetual cycle of opening space for new trees through harvesting and replanting facilitates rapid carbon sequestration, the transformation of sequestered carbon into household tools and construction supplies, and the creation of new cycles of carbon sequestration through effective management. These practices contribute to the establishment of sustainable and resilient forests in the face of climate change.

Effective community forest management also plays a vital role in biodiversity conservation and the preservation of endangered flora and fauna. Poor or inadequate forest management can lead to the deterioration of biodiversity, further endangering fragile ecosystems. Forest management extends beyond tree planting, harvesting, and replanting; it encompasses systematic research, identification of endangered flora and fauna, understanding their ecological niches and habitats, and safeguarding air, water, and wetlands. Sound forest management policies and practices provide opportunities for the systematic harvesting of mature trees while ensuring the growth of new trees in the newly

harvested areas. These measures protect existing resources such as forests, land, water, air, biodiversity, and ecosystem balance.

It is important to clarify that this article proposes a policy perspective for community forest management in Nepal; however, it is not intended as a one-size-fits-all solution for managing all types of forests in the country. The author acknowledges the challenges in terms of forest research, policy formulation, legal frameworks, and regulations required to achieve the multifaceted objectives discussed in this article. Nevertheless, globally published research on sustainable forest management for timber production, climate change mitigation, biodiversity conservation, and carbon sequestration can serve as a foundation for forest management research in Nepal. Gradual implementation of liberal and sustainable forest management policies, based on research findings on the basis of globally published research, can create opportunities for timber businesses in Nepal.

The transfer of research-based knowledge and the adaptation of that knowledge to meet specific country needs are common practices worldwide. Modern forest management practices in countries such as the United States, Australia, and Canada were largely derived from European forest management practices and adapted to their unique contexts. India, for instance, established its national-level criteria and indicators for sustainable forest management policies in 1999 through a workshop involving national and international organizations. India piloted its sustainable forest management initiative in 2000 and has continuously modified it to meet its social, economic, environmental, and ecological needs. Chinese forest management policies have also undergone significant changes over the past five decades. More than 80% of community-owned collective forests in China have been transferred to individual households, while state-managed forests focus on conservation and discourage exploitation. Forest management policies implemented outside of Nepal may not fully address the unique social, economic, environmental, and ecological needs of the country. However, Nepal can learn from its experiences and research, adapting transferable knowledge to meet its own specific needs.

The common practice of planting or naturally regenerating, managing, harvesting, and replanting forests is widely employed globally to meet timber and wood product



demands. Larger economies such as the United States and Europe often import wood products from Asia and Africa while also harvesting timber from their privately managed forests to meet their market demands. For Nepal, harvesting trees from community forests and replanting them can be a viable strategy to fulfill its timber requirements, reduce rural poverty, alleviate trade imbalances, and preserve foreign currency reserves. It is essential to emphasize that this article promotes sustainable forest management practices and strongly opposes the over-exploitation of community forests in Nepal.