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Issuing annual permits for harvesting thatch grass as compensation to local people in Nepal: does this policy have effects on conservation attitude?

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One of fundamental strategies in community-based conservation is people receiving benefits from conservation projects are more likely to express positive attitudes towards conservation. As a result, various forms of compensation and economic incentives are provided to local people to reduce park-people conflicts, and to influence the people's attitude towards conservation. Nepal, being a leader in integrating conservation and local development, implemented a policy in 1976 to address the legitimate needs of local people residing in and around protected areas by allowing them the restrictive use of park resources. Since then, people in lowland Terai are given permits to harvest thatch grass from protected areas for a limited period every year. Thatch grass is traditionally used by the people in Terai as a building material in the roof of houses. In recent years, the grasses are also used as raw materials in the paper industry. Based on a case study in Shukla Phanta Wildlife Reserve, this study describes policy of issuing permits for grass harvesting, and its impact on people's attitude towards conservation.

The results of a questionnaire survey, administered to approximately 2000 people, showed that the amount of thatch grass harvested per household differed among the people of different ethnicity, and was positively related to household size and their economic status. The people who could afford to hire others were able to harvest more thatch grass. More than 50% of people harvested grasses to sell them in the market. While people having an opportunity to harvest grasses had positive attitude towards the reserve, many of them were found misusing the permits to extract fuel wood, timber and other products that are normally prohibited for use from the reserve, primarily due to weak monitoring system. Moreover, with an increasing number of houses with roofs made up of materials other than thatch grasses, people's priority in resource use from the reserve has also changed in recent years. We conclude that there is a need to re-examine the policy of issuing grass harvesting permits, as a change in the underlying incentives for consumptive uses of resources from protected areas will help to influence people's attitude.