

>> SYNTHESIZE MOUNTAINS OF KNOWLEDGE <<

Submitted Abstract

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Abstract

In Johar Valley, Uttarakhand, India, van panchayat community forests provide vital support for the wellbeing of mountain communities -- both human and ecological. Tasked with safeguarding these values, community forest managers exercise decision-making authority in each village forest parcel, informed by individual and collective understandings of what it means to care for their particular forest commons. While mountain environments sustain the people who live in and near them, the same characteristics which support diversity are also rendering mountain communities acutely vulnerable to changing environments, demographics, and governance regimes. We drew on open-ended interviews with 41 forest managers in Johar Valley (conducted in November, 2019 to January, 2020) to identify key changes and articulate where different forest managers stood on each issue. We then coded interview data into sets of mental models to offer insights into the determinants of forest managers' conflicting perceptions of these changes and their implications for management choices. We demonstrate that van panchayat managers are currently navigating stewardship pathways in response to three significant and entangled dimensions of upheaval: 1) Changes in environmental condition associated with global processes as they intersect with local influences on vulnerable mountain ecosystems; 2) Population shifts and changes to historical livelihoods, which influence the level of forest dependence among local residents; and lastly, 3) A shift in co-management regimes in van panchayats, affected by both regulatory changes and the capacity of local institutions. Among local forest managers, perceptions of the drivers, trends, significance, and appropriate responses to these changes diverge sharply. As communities endeavor to sustain the region's van panchayats into the future, this analysis shows that a shared understanding of change remains elusive. However, we argue that forest managers' efforts to build alliances across the region indicate a willingness to approach emerging challenges cooperatively, and despite barriers, find common ground among diverse perceptions, priorities and practices of care.