

2.2 Forests

Forests are the most important natural resource for rural people and for the maintenance of environmental conditions. Forests are the second largest resource after water. About 50 per cent of the total area is under some sort of natural vegetation cover such as trees, shrubs or grasses. However, forest areas are under great pressure for meeting firewood, fodder, timber, medicines and infrastructure development. Loss of forest area started along with malaria eradication and resettlement programmes in the 1950s in the Terai. The problem was further compounded due to change of forests from private to public ownership as per the *Private Forests Nationalisation Act, 1957*. Nepal comprised of 6.4 million ha of forests in 1964, which declined to 5.8 million ha including shrub land by the mid-1990s (DFRS, 1999). However, forests constitute only 4.27 million ha (29 per cent) of the total area of the country. Forest depletion has emerged as one of the single most important environmental issue as it has direct bearing on food production, habitat of precious flora and fauna, pollution reduction and other environmental aspects.

Diminishing forest area can be attributed primarily to the rapid growth of population and the consequent encroachment and unsustainable use of forest products, both timber and non-timber. It is also associated with conversion to cropland, and infrastructure development such as road, canals, hydro-electricity, and transmission line projects. Overgrazing and forest fire also factors contributing to the reduction of forest area and forest production.

The *Forest Act, 1993* defines forests as an area fully or partly covered by trees, and forest products include all products contained or found in or brought from forests. The Department of Forest Research and Survey (DFRS 1999), refers to forests as all land having trees with more than 10 per cent crown cover and not used primarily for purposes other than forestry. The term depletion of forest refers to the diminishing of forests in terms of quantity (gross area covered by forest) and quality (density of trees) in the forest area.