

# Restoration Cases Flagship Collection

## Case #13: Rupa Lake: Restoring communal fisheries and landscapes in the Nepalese Himalaya



*Rupa Lake in 2008 post-restoration activities. Photo credit: T. Gurung*

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## In brief

### Overview

Rupa Lake, in the Nepalese Himalaya, was the main source of livelihood for the diverse fishing communities surrounding it. But by the 1990s, poor management combined with upstream deforestation and agricultural runoff led to a sharp decline in fish populations. A grassroots community initiative, the Rupa Lake Restoration and Fisheries Cooperative, restored the lake to its previous vibrant and clear state with abundant fish harvests and tourism opportunities. The Cooperative converted the lake from an open-access resource to a communally managed and regulated commons, replaced individual fishing activities on the lake, and brought together diverse stakeholder groups. Starting in 2001, membership dues were used to fund lake restoration using a combination of direct interventions on the lake and landscape initiatives upstream. With the help of a local NGO, they established a payment for environmental services arrangement between fishing communities and upstream farmers—upstream farmers share in the dividends in exchange for installing agroforestry systems, practicing organic farming, and restoring forests. These activities dramatically reduced aquatic plants, increased fish harvest and revenues, and improved water quality. Forest cover increased in the watershed and locals adopted less polluting agricultural methods.

### Exemplary practices

The Cooperative funded activities through membership dues and fish sales, built on existing initiatives, and worked with other community groups, regional NGOs, and government organizations in the watershed. Their innovative PES arrangement effectively linked upstream land use with downstream lake health. Lake users belonged to an impressive range of different ethnic groups. Poorer, lower-caste fisher families were more reliant on lake resources, and hesitant to give up individual fishing rights. The Cooperative granted them a transition period where individual fishing was permitted, ensured they were represented on the executive committee, and gave them first priority for employment opportunities.

### Key lessons learned

- *Converting an open access resource to a community-managed commons can foster restoration.*
- *Sharing the benefits from downstream lake use with upstream land users can effectively promote land and lake restoration and better land management.*
- *Social harmony is key for collective restoration, and requires planning and ongoing negotiation.*
- *Areas where environmental resources and services are critical for local livelihoods and are noticeably in decline make good candidates for restoration.*
- *Capacity building and decision-making power can effectively empower and engage community members; common interests can bring diverse stakeholders together to restore.*