

THE IMPACT OF FOREST CONSERVATION POLICIES ON LOCAL LIVELIHOODS (CASE STUDIES IN KNUCKLES FOREST RANGE)

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Introduction

The Knuckles Conservation Area is an important natural forest in Sri Lanka. It is rich in biodiversity and has a vital role as catchment to the major river of the Mahawali. One unique feature of the Knuckles ecosystem is its richness in habitat diversity, which covers a wide range of habitats within a relatively small area (IUCN, 1994).

The Knuckles forest is greatly threatened by cardamom cultivation, which receives high prices because of increasing demand in the international and national market. Additionally, *chena* cultivation has resulted in a sizeable decrease in the forest cover. The peripheral households are largely dependent on the forest for *chena* and cardamom cultivation, kitul products and forest resources. With the objective of sustainable management of the forests, the Forest Department declared the establishment of the Knuckles Conservation Zone (KCZ) in 2000. This has had considerable environmental implications, but caused a direct negative impact on the peripheral communities and their livelihoods. The present research, therefore, attempts to make an assessment of how the conservation efforts are likely to affect the rural people's livelihoods in the area. This has been attained by satisfying the

following research aim and objectives:

Objectives

The Knuckles communities have been extracting different non-timber forest products (NTFP) from the Knuckles forest as well as practising shifting and cardamom cultivation. Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine the evolution of Knuckles forest conservation policies and their impact on local livelihoods.

There are several problems concerning the biophysical, ecological, social, cultural, economical and political aspects which exist in the Knuckles forest areas. The major objectives of this study are:

- Examination of forest management policies and their impact on local livelihoods.
- Examination of the implications for forest management policies and their contribution to the protection of bio-diversity and habitat management in the Knuckles forest range and to sustaining productive characteristics of the forests.
- Identification of the socio-economic and physical factors that have affected and changed the forest resources management policies of the Knuckles forests

Research Methodology

The research has been conducted within the Knuckles Conservation Area and the periphery of the forests. Research sites are selected using biophysical and socio-economic information. The methodology and tools were adopted to help achieve the aim and objectives in a rational way. The use of multiple tools has ensured triangulation and a holistic evaluation of the research issues. Qualitative and participatory tools have helped in developing the subjective realities and thereby enhancing the objective realities put forward by the quantitative analysis. The study makes use of data and information, gathered through a household survey, observations, PRA and discussions. Field studies were conducted in three clusters covering 225 households.

Result and Discussion

Poverty is a prominent issue in the area and is linked to the remoteness of the peripheral villages. The total banning of cardamom and *chena* cultivation has caused considerable income losses. The quantity and frequency of the forest products harvested has declined due to limited access to the forest, causing income losses and food insecurity. The present study shows that, the dependency on non-timber forest products as a source of income is much lower in the study area when compared to the fairly high value of non-timber forest products and dependency levels in other villages, in the periphery and in the adjoining villages. However, the forest has played a major role as a subsistence source of food, wood, fuel wood and

other non-timber forest products. There are communities which benefit from the cardamom plantations in the forests. However, as replanting and new planting have been prohibited, the income from cardamom has gradually declined over time. So far, no livelihood supports have been provided to compensate for the lost benefits. Promotion of ecotourism activities, which is already in place, could, with active and meaningful community involvement emerge as a source of income to compensate for the lost income.

Out of the 225 respondents, 98 per cent said that they obtained firewood from the forest; only 14 per cent obtained timber from elsewhere. Because of the declaration of the Knuckles Conservation Area in 2000, 78 per cent of the farmer households have lost *chena* cultivation and 47 per cent have lost their access to cardamom which was a main source of income. On the other hand, 42 per cent said that they had lost their freedom because they now fear the entry into the forests. A majority has more negative attitudes towards the conservation organizations. Forest-based activities contribute to 47 per cent of the total income and 29 per cent of the cash income of a household. The study reveals heavy dependence of the peripheral communities on the forest resources. In analyzing the changes that have occurred in livelihoods, the trends in the distribution of income were examined. In the *Meemure* village cluster income inequality has increased from 1990 to 2007. In 1990, the lowest 30 per cent of the population earned only 21.5 per cent

of the total income. This has decreased by 17.5 per cent in 2007. In the *Dumbaragama* village cluster, in 1990, for instance, the lowest 30 per cent received only 22 per cent of the total income. This has decreased by 18 per cent in 2007. In the *Kelebokka* village cluster, the lowest 30 per cent of the population has received only 10.5 per cent of the total income. This has decreased by 7.5 per cent in 2007. The relative poverty of the three village clusters has significantly increased after the implementation of the Forest Conservation Policy.

Conclusion

Conservation decisions are always made, giving emphasis to long standing conservation benefits, welfare and well-being of the whole society. But, some of the immediate adverse effects such as income losses due to conservation policies have been borne by the rural communities living in adjoining villages of the forest. As experiences have shown, it is very unlikely that the Conservation Programme would achieve its objectives, unless the impact of the programmes on rural communities is assessed and alternative policy measures are taken to alleviate the negative effects.

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