

**SOCIAL NORMS OF RESOURCE UTILIZATION WITHIN FOREST
FRAGMENTS BY RURAL COMMUNITIES IN
WET ZONE, SRI LANKA**

Harsha Jayawickrama^{1*}, Sisira Ediriweera¹ and Mark S. Ashton²

¹*Faculty of Applied Sciences, Uva Wellassa University of Sri Lanka, Badulla, Sri Lanka*

²*The Forest School, School of the Environment, Yale University, USA*

**harsha.jayawickrama@gmail.com*

Forest fragmentation, primarily due to exploitation and land conversion, has become a significant global concern. Such activities have resulted in sharp decline in forest biodiversity, degraded the quality and supply of resources, and caused substantial loss of stored carbon. Understanding the social norms and interdependence between forests and rural communities is vital for their sustainable management. Using the Social-Ecological System framework, this study identified and analysed the norms influencing villagers' attitudes toward tropical forest utilization within the agricultural landscape of the Wet Zone in Sri Lanka. The study area encompassed 18 forest fragments near the western part of the Sinharaja Forest Reserve. Data collection involved 53 semi-structured interviews with households located within 100 m of forest fragments, focusing on who uses forest resources and the social norms governing eligibility for their use. Activities attributed to others and perceptions of harmful practices were recorded. Findings revealed that the majority of villagers (31 out of 53) consider themselves as eligible for resource utilization, citing generational rights and livelihood needs. However, there was limited recognition of the ecological impacts of certain practices, such as timber extraction and hunting. While activities like deforestation are universally recognised as harmful, there was reluctance to oppose these practices, driven by communal cohesion and concerns about personal repercussions (38 out of 53). The study underscores a complex interplay of motivations, including resource preservation (26 out of 53), risk mitigation (6 out of 53), community security, and barriers such as distrust of authorities and respect for others' claimed ownership. The insights into local attitudes and behaviours provide a foundation for targeted conservation strategies that align with community values and address barriers to sustainable resource management.

Keywords: Forest fragmentation, Sinharaja, Social norms, Socio-ecological system