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**Perceptions of buffer zone villagers on conservation of Knuckles forest range**

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Conservation measures and policies implemented by the state in the Knuckles forest have traditionally ignored the fact that human survival systems of fringe communities are largely based on resources of the forest. Thus, there is a constant conflict between the interests of the state and those of the peripheral communities. However, there is a growing trend to incorporate communities in forest management through such approaches as JFM and CFM.

The objective of the present study was to determine the perceptions of villagers on the Knuckles Conservation Zone (KCZ) declared in 2000 as the declaration had led to significant changes in the landuse patterns and livelihoods in the buffer zone villages.

The study showed that the villagers have a very low level of awareness about KCZ and the policies relating to it. For example, of the 60 activities prohibited in the forest, the villagers could name only six. Villagers could not explain the reasons for the establishment of the KCZ or when it was declared. A significant communication gap exists between the communities and the Forest Department, which in the long run could have detrimental effects on the conservation goals. The usage of most NTFPs has reduced to less than half of what it was before the establishment of KCZ. The community has also lost some land, particularly chena lands to KCZ. With this prohibition, a significant share of their income was lost but no alternative means of income were provided. People have self-adjusted by growing vegetables on paddy lands during Yala. There were mixed responses when people were asked about the specific aspects of the KCZ policy. The changes suggested by villagers focused on reestablishing forest resource use patterns similar to what they enjoyed before the establishment of KCZ. However, what is most significant is that they all support the conservation of the forest.

Although, the Forest Department and the peripheral communities agree on conserving the Knuckles forest, there is no effective mechanism yet in place to include the communities in the conservation of the KCZ. As forest conservation in the long run depends on the active cooperation of the society in general and peripheral communities in particular as evident from other parts of the world and in Sri Lanka, a strong case can be made for the initiation of a joint approach to the management of KCZ including all stakeholders among whom the buffer zone villagers play a significant role.

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**Forest management through community participation in Sri Lanka (with reference to Kurunegala district)**

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A forest is an area with a high density of trees (or, historically, an area set aside for hunting). Plant communities covering large areas of the globe provide carbon-sink, oxygen-release, habitat, and soil-retention functions. Therefore, Earth's forests constitute one of the most important aspects of our biosphere.

In response to escalating concerns about the degradation of State-managed forests, developing countries around the world are increasingly promoting decentralization of natural resource management. From the State-centric policies that were promoted in different parts of the world in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the trend has shifted toward encouraging participatory systems of management by local communities. This shift has been prompted by recognition of the numerous problems associated with consolidating all power in the hands of the State, and of the crucial, hitherto unrecognized, positive role played by local communities-albeit nudged by international shifts in policy.