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**The Importance of Non-Timber Forest Products in Livelihood Maintenance of Rural Communities of Mulatiyana Forest Reserve, Sri Lanka**

**Weththasinghe B.T.\* , Caldera H.I.U.**

<sup>1</sup>*Department of Plant Sciences, University of Colombo, Colombo 03, Sri Lanka*

*\*bhagyaweththasinghe@gmail.com*

**Abstract**

Forests provide many products and ecosystem services for the wellbeing of people. However, increase in human population has caused an enormous pressure on the way of utilising forest resources. Several studies have claimed the use of Non-timber forest products (NTFPs) as a forest conservation strategy involving local communities. The NTFPs contribute in several ways to improve the livelihoods of populations living adjacent to forests; providing food, water, medicines, energy, other material inputs and a source of income. This enhances the value of the forest and encourages community-based forest conservation. A study was carried out in the Mulatiyana Forest Reserve; a lowland rain forest in Southern Province, Sri Lanka to obtain an overview of the current utilisation of NTFPs. Seventy-two individuals who use the forest on a regular basis and are residents within 1 km boundary of the forest participated in the survey. The study found that, utilisation of forest resources is restricted to age classes above 30 years. Thus, the interaction between the forest and the younger generation is rare. There is only 16% female representation among the users and therefore, promoting the use of NTFPs by females has the potential of supporting their families by improving their livelihood. A majority of the forest users (85%) have not attained the GCE O/Ls' indicating their possible ineligibility to pursue a profession. More than half (58.4%) of the forest users are farmers. Forest products are extracted as input materials for farming activities and hence their livelihoods are strictly bound with the forest. Most of the forest extractions were carried out to fulfill their food and medicine requirements. Plants with timber value (*Vitex altissima*), medicine (*Canarium zeylanicum*, *Dimocarpus longan*, *Coscinium fenestratum*) or other importance (*Gyrinops walla*, *Caryota urens*, *Caesalpinia bonduc*) are illegally extracted from this forest. Controlled and well managed practices inside the forests under the inspection of relevant authorities are essential to achieve sustainable forest management. Forest officers and rangers are actively involved in protecting this reserve. Community around the forest also actively participate in such activities by informing the authorities of illegal actions. The NTFPs are an important resource for local inhabitants, which also encourages community-based forest conservation actions. Further attention should be given to this aspect in local forest policy implementation.

**Keywords:** Non-timber forest products, Community forestry, Sustainable forest management, Rural communities, Sri Lanka