

THE USE OF FORESTS BY RURAL COMMUNITIES AND ITS IMPORTANCE TO FOREST CONSERVATION PLANNING: A CASE STUDY IN THE KNUCKLES FOREST OF SRI LANKA

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The indigenous communities of the Knuckles forest depend on the surrounding forest for their survival. A government conservation plan has been implemented in the Knuckles region with the aim of conserving this unique natural heritage. This paper looks into the current use of the forest by the indigenous people, change of forest-use in history and the attitudes of the people towards the current conservation status of the forest. The aims of the project were, to qualitatively assess forest use by the indigenous community and identify key social issues that need to be addressed when implementing a conservation plan for the Knuckles region.

A Participatory Rural Appraisal was conducted in five villages in the eastern slopes of the Knuckles range. Data collected based on geography, history, forest-use and conservation issues was qualitatively analysed focusing on a temporal analysis.

Results show that these villagers lead a very simple and difficult life, based mainly on paddy cultivation and forest use. Current use of the forest is mainly for subsistence purposes, grazing of buffalo and cardamom cultivation. Main use in the past was for shifting cultivation. Conservation issues included both consumptive and altruistic concerns, particularly regarding the prohibition of shifting cultivation, pine plantations, biodiversity and migration.

It concludes that the villagers are almost exclusively dependent on the forest and damage to it from them seems to be minimal. It also infers that when initiating conservation plans it is important to assess what *part*, *how*, for what *purpose* and by *whom* the forest is used.