

**Prospects of Kirala Kele Marsh Land to Conserve as a Community Forest in Matara District of Sri Lanka****Gunawardhana H.G.T.N.\*, Koralagama D., Ruwanpura G.H. and Harshana S.**

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**Abstract**

Utilisation and conservation, both should be carried out simultaneously with equal importance for a sustainable forest management. Community forestry is an emerging concept comes within this context indicating village level forestry activities decided collectively and locals participate in planning, establishing, managing and harvesting with socio-economic and ecological benefits in return. Kirala Kele is one example from Matara District. In order to assess Kirala Kele as a community forest, the study focused on three aspects; direct benefits extracted, participatory decision making in forest management, and potentials to development. A questionnaire survey was carried out over 45 forest dwellers from three Grama Niladhari divisions; Godagama, Hiththatiya, and Nadugala according to purposive sampling. Informal and formal discussions were held with officers and community leaders. Secondary data were gathered from relevant literature sources. The results reveal that the level of forest utilisation varied over the resources confined to a range of high, moderate, and low. Most of them associate with agriculture. Majority (78%) utilise for koratu farming. Seventy-one percent are extracting wood, timber, and firewood. Utilisation for medicine, grazing field, food and fruits, flowers are around 40 percent each. But, the frequency of utilisation is low since they extract these only for their usage except koratu farming and flowers. The accessibility is 61 percent in average. Forty two percent of community involves in decision making regarding the forest management. It depicts a positive association between education and decision making ( $\chi^2=6.4315$ ). Hiththatiya and Nadugala had functioning community based organizations (CBOs) Diriya and Fisheries association respectively, which had certain contribution on Kirala Kele forest management with membership strength of 89 percent. Co-management could be identified due to the participation of government (35%), community (32%), NGOs – Bio diversity society and Conservation society (11%), private sector (4%) and other households (18%). The satisfaction of living near to Kirala Kele is significant ( $Z_{cal} = 3.97$ ). Further, Kirala Kele has a high potential to develop as an eco tourism destination (0.64), eco village (0.2), and bird watching zone (0.16). In fact, the study can conclude that the Kirala Kele has a high potential to widen its benefits toward the forest dwellers within the limits of sustainable resource utilisation assuring active participation and contribution of the responsible personals. Despite there are certain drawbacks, its performances are more or less supportive to consider Kirala Kele as a community forest with a great scope for further developments.

**Keywords:** Community forest, Kirala Kele, Participatory management, Sustainable utilisation