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Challenges of Biopiracy: Implementing Community Based Eco-tourism (CBET) in the Sri Lankan context

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Abstract

Protecting the right of the local community/country to use their own genetic resources available in a particular area is an important element of environmental and biodiversity conservation. However, one of the main biodiversity conservation challenges in Southern peripheral countries is biopiracy. Community based ecotourism (CBET) is a well-established concept and its implementation is an important component for many regional development strategies. This research argues that though CBET which originated as a Western concept was successfully applied in number of projects, it generates biopiracy challenges in its implementation since CBET operates within different geo-political, economic and cultural contexts. This research examines such challenges in CBET initiatives in the Sinharaja world heritage site, Sri Lanka.

A qualitative-inductive research methodology has principally guided this research to examine the socio-cultural, socio-economic and geo-political context of biopiracy issues. A total of 293 participants have informed this research including 193 interviews (115 individuals, and 15 different focus-groups totalling 78 people) and 100 questionnaire respondents. A critical discourse analysis (CDA) method is used to examine both primary qualitative data collected through participant and direct observation, interviews and secondary data.

One of the main findings is that despite plans being developed at a community level, in wider context, biopiracy challenges related to superimpose capitalism contest the CBET ideologies. Superimposed capitalism results in individualistic and competitive behaviours that undermine collaborative and responsible community approach. Presently, smuggling out of Wallapatta plant (*Gyrinops walla*) and gathering Spotted toefinger gecko (*Cyrtodactylus triedra*) an endemic nocturnal reptile species, have become profitable in Sinharaja world heritage site and a growing number of biopirates venture into here. Local community of this site take risks in forest genetic resources smuggling because it provides them with the means of earning much money within a short period. Regardless of all prevalent laws and regulations against bioprospecting, biopiracy, biological resource and wildlife smuggling, authorities have still failed to control these activities in this site because of the support given to bio-pirates by the local community. The research concludes that CBET is an appropriate pathway for tourism development in Sri Lanka but recognition of biopiracy issues associated with superimposed capitalism is required and needed to be addressed. A well-defined monitoring system and an effective legal framework to control adverse effects are important for achieving CBET goals while confronting biopiracy.

Keywords: Biopiracy, Community based eco-tourism, Superimposed capitalism