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Cultural Justice in Sustainable Forest Management: A Case Study of Fa-Hien Cave, Sri Lanka**Withana, W.B.A.^{1*}, Manoshika, M.A.S.²**¹*Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka*²*G/ Kalahe Gemunu Primary School, Wanchawala, Sri Lanka***buddhikaanushawithana@gmail.com***Abstract**

Forest heritage sites represent a unique intersection of ecological, cultural, and social values, yet management practices often prioritize environmental conservation over the inclusion of local communities and recognition of traditional knowledge. An integrated strategy that includes ecological preservation, cultural heritage, and community involvement is required for sustainable forest management. Located in Sri Lanka's Pahiyangala Forest Reserve, Fa-Hien Cave is a culturally significant archaeological site that houses the earliest known human skeletal remains in South Asia. It is also an ecologically significant habitat that supports endemic species. This study examines the incorporation of cultural justice principles into sustainable forest management at Fa-Hien Cave, analyzing the impact of power dynamics, governance frameworks, and community engagement on ecological sustainability and cultural conservation. The study aims to examine the degree of local community engagement, evaluate the acknowledgement of traditional ecological knowledge, discern patterns of inclusion and exclusion, and investigate strategies for attaining comprehensive sustainability that harmonizes ecological conservation with cultural heritage. A qualitative case study approach was used, employing document analysis of governmental and archaeological reports, policy frameworks, media articles, and historical records. Semi-structured interviews with 25 purposely selected participants including local elders, knowledge holders, tourism operators, and forest officials were also conducted. Field observations of ecological and culturally significant sites provided context for participant narratives and an assessment of the interaction between human activity and ecological integrity. Thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework allowed for the identification of major themes related to governance, cultural inclusion, community participation, ecological sustainability, and social implications. Findings reveal a pronounced power imbalance, with decision-making dominated by institutional actors, resulting in limited recognition of local traditions, rituals, and heritage practices. Exclusion from governance contributes to cultural harm, marginalization, and diminished community stewardship, even as ecological conservation objectives are pursued. Informal community initiatives, such as volunteer-led monitoring and ritual practices, demonstrate the potential of local knowledge and participatory engagement to enhance ecological outcomes and strengthen social cohesion. Integrating cultural justice principles into forest governance can, therefore, improve both ecological and social sustainability. To achieve holistic sustainability that simultaneously preserves biodiversity, cultural heritage, and human well-being, the active participation of local communities, recognition of indigenous knowledge, and culturally sensitive management strategies are essential. These findings emphasize the necessity of multidisciplinary approaches in heritage forest management, offering actionable insights for policymakers, conservation practitioners, and tourism stakeholders.

Keywords: *Cultural justice, Sustainable forest management, Community participation, Heritage conservation, Fa-hien cave*