



Sociocultural Characteristics of Fishermen Communities in Negombo Fishing Villages

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ABSTRACT

The fishing industry can be identified as an economic source of Sri Lankan society. The social characteristics of the fishing community living in the coastal area differ from those of the general society. The main objective of this study is to examine the sociocultural characteristics of fisheries communities in the Negombo fishing villages influence their social cooperation and economic challenges. The study included 67 respondents drawn from five fishing villages in the Negombo district, according to a simple random sample, and consisted of a data analysis with a qualitative and quantitative approach. The findings reveal that the fishing culture's rituals are closely related to their way of life and are influenced by Catholicism. The existence of a very wide and strong family bond has fostered cooperation among them and has led to a reduction in the number of reported crimes. Among the customs and traditions integrated with the environment, sea offerings and propitiating the spirit of the sea is traditionally done to increase the fish harvest. In terms of fishing, the majority have used motorized traditional boats, and the fishing gear is still traditional. It was revealed that environmental change poses economic challenges, and there are very limited alternative forms of employment apart from fishing. The conclusion was that the fishing community is a subcultural group that inherits a socio-cultural identity based on their occupation. Also, to enhance the socio-economic conditions of the Negombo fishing villages, it is crucial to address the low levels of education among fishermen.

KEYWORDS: *Negombo fishing communities, Sociocultural characteristics, Traditional fishing practices, social cooperation*

1 INTRODUCTION

The fishing community is a part of the Sri Lankan society, and they make a great contribution to the economy. Some people who live in the coastal area of fishing communities have social characteristics that are different from those who live in the mainland areas. The concept of culture is very important in studying the socio-cultural characteristics of a particular community. Edward. B. Tylor (1917) defines “culture as that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by a human as a member of society” (Baecker,1997:15). According to Tylor's definition, it is clear that culture is a characteristic of a certain group of people belonging to the larger society, having their customs and traditions. Fishing culture is also a category of subculture. The fisheries sector plays a significant socioeconomic role nationally and internationally. In terms of nutrition, income, employment, and foreign exchange, earnings depend on fish as the principal source of animal protein (Kumar and Menta, 2015). Globally, fisheries support the livelihoods of about 660–820 million people, and supply 154 million tons of fish and 16.6% of animal protein intake for the world's populations (Campbell and Mukminin, 2104). When considering the Sri Lankan fisheries sector, Alexander (1995) explains that Sri Lankan fisheries culture is deeply intertwined with the island's history, geography, and social fabric. The country's extensive coastline and numerous inland water bodies provide rich fishing grounds that support a diverse array of

marine and freshwater species. Traditional fishing methods, such as stilt fishing, casting nets, and using outrigger canoes, have been passed down through generations and are integral to the coastal communities' way of life. Fishing villages are intricate ecosystems that encompass both the natural environment and the man-made structures that support the livelihoods of the local communities. These villages serve as subcultures within the broader culture of the nation, adhering to the customs and traditions of the overarching culture while simultaneously maintaining their unique practices and beliefs.

Accordingly, coastal fishing communities are still an underdeveloped community. Outsiders are not aware of the characteristics of coastal communities. They have different ways of building their inherent knowledge, beliefs, social roles, and social structures. In the social construction of coastal communities, fishing communities are a part of this social construction. Fishing communities have a unique cultural identity shaped by their livelihoods and traditions, as well as the environment. Daily life is directly linked to the sea. Fishing communities also represent a lifestyle that is different from that of the larger society. Alexander (1995), through his research, clearly explains the distinctive features of the fishing villages in the Gahawella fishing village. Alexander notes that the most popular clothing among the fishermen is the lace coat and the sarong. Although not every village in coastal areas has residents who work as fishermen, most of the population comes from fishing families. Accordingly, the fishing

culture is mainly influenced by the cultural identity of the entire coastal community. Fishing culture is closely related to the sea. Due to these circumstances, the cultural characteristics of fishing communities depend on natural and social environmental conditions. This study focuses on the socio-cultural characteristics of fishing communities. The condition of the fishing community or coastal community is a group of people who are economically, socially (especially in terms of access to education and health services), and culturally relatively backward compared to other community groups. The condition of coastal communities or fishing communities in different regions is generally characterized by several features, such as poverty, socio-cultural backwardness, and low human resources. (Campbell and Mukminin, 2014). This study has been carried out on fishing villages in Negombo, and the research problem of this study is to identify how to affect the social and cultural characteristics of fisheries' social cooperation and economic challenges. The following objectives will be emphasized concerning the above research problem: to determine the socio-cultural characteristics of the fishing community, to analyze the role of family and community networks in sustaining the livelihoods and social well-being of fishermen in Negombo, and to investigate the impact of modernization and external influences on the social and cultural identity of the fishing community.

1.1 Academic and practical importance of the study

Based on exploring the challenges and unique characteristics of coastal fishing communities, the study by Ray et al (2015) highlights that coastal fishing communities in Cirebon are often underdeveloped and marginalized. This means they lack access to basic resources, economic opportunities, and social services that are more readily available in other communities. Research has shown that geographic isolation, a lack of political representation, and economic disparities have contributed to the social problems associated with these fishing villages. Thus, Ray et al (2015) further stated that many aspects of life within these communities remain unknown to outsiders. This refers to their unique cultural practices, local knowledge systems, and social dynamics that are not easily understood or recognized by those outside the community. Also, the researcher further states that the coastal communities have their own ways of understanding the world, shaped by their experiences and environment. Their knowledge might be deeply rooted in the coastal and marine environment, influencing their beliefs, customs, and social roles (Ray et al, 2015). As Campbell identifies, the characteristics of the fishing community in India are not homogeneous, as they belong to different castes. These communities have their distinct social and cultural governance structures and traditional practices, depending on the coastline they inhabit. At least 2-3 castes are exclusively involved in marine fishing in each maritime area, and they are not related to the agrarian

system. The community institutions, mostly organized along caste, kinship, or religious lines, play an important role in resolving conflicts (Campbell and Mukminin 2014). Campbell Stuart's research has primarily focused on identifying the common characteristics of the fishing villages. Kumar et al (2018) have emphasized that Indian fishing villages typically exhibit a rich culture characterized by closely-knit communities that rely heavily on traditional fishing practices for their livelihood. It is much related to religion and culture (Fish are believed to be deities). These villages are often located on the coast and consist of sturdy dwellings made of locally sourced materials such as bamboo, straw, and mud. Women play an important role in the community by processing and selling fish, maintaining the household, as well as participating in various cultural and religious activities. Social bonds are strong, and extended families live close to each other and share resources. Despite modern influences, many villages strive to maintain their traditional customs, languages, and festivals. (Kumar et al, 2018).

As identified by Sregphea and Touch (2016), socioeconomic issues of the worldwide fishing communities can be stated as follows: fishing communities, particularly in developing regions, often face a myriad of socioeconomic challenges. In many cases, fishing is a primary livelihood, yet it is frequently marked by economic instability due to fluctuating fish stocks, market prices, and environmental conditions. Many fishermen operate on a subsistence level, earning just enough to

support their families, making them vulnerable to economic shocks. Limited access to education and alternative employment opportunities further perpetuates poverty within these communities. Also, the researchers further mention that the socio-cultural factors associated with the fishing villages also directly affect their problems. Sometimes, traditional beliefs and faiths lead to deviant behavior (Sregphea and Touch, 2016). Katz (2016) has researched the relationship between fisheries and poverty. Data has been collected from ten fishing villages selected in America, where it is emphasized that food security is challenged due to the poverty of fishermen. This study emphasizes that two major variables contributing to criminal activity among fishermen in fishing villages where financial hardships are prevalent are a lack of a stable income and a shortage of alternative work opportunities. The researcher has identified that fishermen's poverty contributes to large-scale criminal networks and that the cultural rituals lead to criminal activities. Furthermore, fishing communities often face economic challenges, such as fluctuating fish stocks or market prices. Rituals may be performed to appease spirits or seek divine intervention in these matters. When these rituals fail to bring the desired results, frustration can lead to deviant behavior, such as theft, illegal fishing practices, or substance abuse (Katz, 2016). This study especially focused on poverty and fisheries. Also, researchers have been concerned about the cultural rituals among the fishing community. Bandaroff (2015) emphasized that social and cultural factors directly influence fisheries-

related crime. The research question of this study is to identify the social and cultural characteristics of fisheries. Globally, the fisheries sector is shaped by unique social norms, customs, and morals. Bandaroff identified two main cultural variables influencing crime: community dynamics and the influence of external factors. Research findings reveal that, as fishing is an essential means of survival, it leads to illegal fish trade as well as interpersonal violence. Accordingly, the purpose of this research is to focus on the social and cultural factors that influence fishing crime.

The study "The Role of Fishing Material Culture in Communities: A Sense of Place as an added-value in the Management of Coastal Areas" was examined by Khakzad and Griffith (2016). The relationship between fishing culture and the natural environment is the primary focus of this research. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured in-depth interviews and case studies from fishing villages in North America. According to research results, it has been found that deviant behaviors occur in the fishing community due to new policies and environmental developments. Also, it has been recognized that due to the challenges faced by the fishing community in adapting to the changing environment, fishermen resort to crime. When considering the Sri Lankan fishing community, Alexander (1995), researched the Gahawella fishing village in Sri Lanka. As mentioned by Alexander in his book on the "Sri Lankan fishermen", the Sri Lankan fishing villages are vibrant coastal communities deeply intertwined

with the sea, characterized by traditional and modern practices. Houses, often constructed from locally sourced materials like wood and thatch, line the shores alongside boat sheds and net drying areas. The villagers' lives revolve around fishing, with men typically venturing out to sea while women handle processing and selling the catch. Strong family units and cooperative organizations underpin the social structure, fostering mutual support and collective decision-making. Rich cultural traditions, including religious rituals and festivals, celebrate and seek blessings for bountiful harvests. Alexander further stated that the blessing of the boats before setting sail or the celebration of a bountiful catch serves to strengthen the bond between the people and their environment. These practices are not merely symbolic but are integral to the survival and well-being of the community. Despite challenges such as environmental threats and economic vulnerability, these villages exhibit resilience by integrating modern technology and improving disaster preparedness, all while preserving sustainable fishing methods and community solidarity (Alexander, 1995). Accordingly, considering all the above-mentioned literature investigations, many researchers have identified the socio-cultural factors associated with fishing villages, and through these studies, have not conducted an in-depth study of the socio-cultural factors inherent in the fishing community. These researchers have identified that socio-cultural factors directly affect the poverty of the fishing community, crime, environmental challenges, and other social problems, but these socio-

cultural factors have not been studied separately. Many researchers have studied this research problem from different perspectives. However, their studies have had both successful and unsuccessful aspects. Therefore, this research problem needs to be reexamined. Based on all these factors, this research is expected to fulfill the relevant research gap.

2 METHODS AND MATERIALS

Negombo fishing village was selected for this study because Negombo is one of the biggest open-air fishing villages and markets in the country. Thirty-nine fishing villages are included in the jurisdiction of the Negombo police division. It had been analyzed that the population of the Negombo area will be one hundred and fifty thousand (1,50000) by the end of December 2022. Based on the research objectives, five fishing villages were selected by simple random sampling from among the fishing villages in the Negombo police division. Namely: Wellaveediya, Pallansena, Thaladuwa, Palagathure, and Welihena. In determining the sample size, it is useful to ensure that the sample is representative so that the results can be generalized. In this study, the sample was determined to be 67 individuals out of 200 fishermen, using Slovin's formula. The data contributors were selected using a simple random sample. In addition, this research was conducted using both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods, with data sources including primary data and secondary data. Primary data were gathered using an interview method during the two months in which this research was conducted; also,

information was obtained under participant observation during this period. In this study, secondary data were obtained from the literature (journals and books). Finally, data analysis was conducted using the mixed-methods analysis, which interprets the interview and observation. Ethical considerations were also taken into account while conducting this research. Prior consent was obtained from all data contributors in the sample, and they were informed about the purpose of their participation. Confidentiality and anonymity of the data contributors were ensured throughout the research. All information provided by the data contributors was used for research purposes only.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the research results, the socio-cultural characteristics of the Negombo fishing Villages community include: social organization activities of the Negombo fishing villages community, fishermen's education level, fishing technology tools, number of families, additional business, fishermen's status, cooperation system, and belief system.

3.1 Social Organization Activities

The social organizations that are followed by fishermen are generally organizations related to their work as fishermen, as well as religious organizations. Many fishermen have joined these organizations for professional reasons. Fishing is a very expensive activity. It was reported that the fishermen have joined various private organizations to get fishing boats, fishing gear, and fuel for engines. In addition to

these private organizations, the organizations that every fishing family is associated with can be named as follows: fishermen’s cooperative society, religious and church committees, fishermen’s welfare associations, village development committees, environmental and marine conservation committees, conflict resolution committees, and women’s committees. According to the data obtained, it was clear that these social organizations are essential for the fishing community to ensure the welfare of the community and to maintain the harmony of the community to manage the challenges posed by external factors such as environmental changes and economic pressure. Also, these social organizations strengthen the internal and external structures of the fishing community. Therefore, these social organizations play a strong and decisive role in carrying out economic activities and maintaining social cohesion among the fishing community. Through collective participation, leadership roles, and shared responsibilities, the fishing community strives to preserve the customs and traditional culture within their villages and strengthen the interconnectedness. Social organizations also ensure the transmission of social and cultural values from generation to generation.

3.2 Fishermen's Education Level

Considering the education level of the fishermen in the selected areas, overall, their education was very low level. It can be presented as follows:

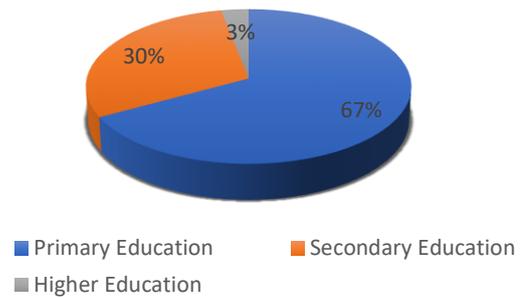


Figure 01. Education level of data contributors

Based on Figure 1, 67 % (45) of fishermen have completed primary education. Schools in these villages provide primary education, but many children have dropped out after primary school to join the fishing workforce. This shows the low level of education of fishermen in Negombo fishing Villages due to a lack of awareness of the importance of education, the large amount of education costs incurred, and limited educational facilities. 30% (20) percent of fishermen have completed secondary education. The dropout rate has increased at this level as young boys often begin working full-time in fishing or related activities. The lowest percentage of the selected sample reported pursuing higher education, accounting for 3% of the total population.

3.3 Fishing technology tools

According to the data obtained, it was clear that both traditional and modern fishing techniques are used for fishing in Negombo. Traditional tools include canoes (oruwa) and larger fishing boats (Vallam) equipped with hand-operated nets and trammel nets. These nets were reported to be widely used to catch species such as sardines, mackerel, and Prawns. Moreover, longlines are frequently used to target larger

fish, such as tuna. Crabs and lobsters are caught in shallow coastal areas using cast nets and traps similar to lobster pots. In recent years, modern technologies have been increasingly integrated into the fishing industry in Negombo. The use of motorboats has enabled fishermen to travel longer distances and stay longer at sea. It was also reported that fishermen have been able to efficiently locate fish beds by using GPS and an ecosystem at present. Ice boxes were used for preserving the catch, which is vital for maintaining the freshness of fish over longer trips. These technologies have enhanced the efficiency and safety of fishing operations, enabling better yields and reducing the risk associated with traditional fishing methods. Ice boxes have been used for fish preservation, which has helped to maintain the freshness of the fish during the long fishing journey. These methods have enhanced the efficiency and safety of fishing.

3.4 The Number of Dependents

According to the data obtained from the data contributors, the number of family members can be graphed as follows:

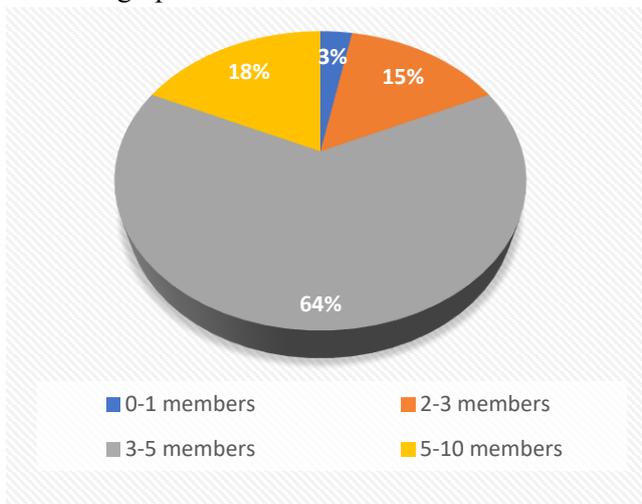


Figure 02. The number of dependents

Based on figure 2, in fishermen's families in the Negombo fishing Village, 2 people had 0-1 dependents (3%), while 10 people had 2-3 dependents (15%), 43 people had 3-5 dependents (64%), and 12 people had 5-10 dependents (18%) in their families. These statistical data indicate that the majority of the sample represents median family households. This trend highlights the traditional family nature of fishing families. Overall, all these findings suggest that the majority of the fishing families in Negombo have dependents. The data provided made it clear that this would lead to economic instability. The main reason for this was the lack of a specific income pattern in the fishing industry, which is a profession that depends on seasonal factors.

3.5 Side jobs of fishermen in Negombo

According to the data obtained, there were cases of fishermen doing jobs in addition to their fishing industry. This is because the fishing job cannot be done continuously every day. It was reported that the primary cause of this has been changes in the natural environment.

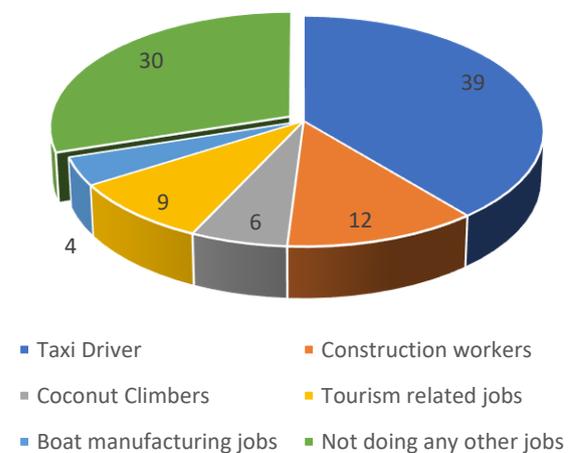


Figure 03. Side jobs of fishermen

Based on Figure 3, it can be seen that the side jobs of the Negombo fishing community in the category of taxi drivers amount to 26 people (39%). In comparison, those who work as construction workers are 8 people (12%), and those who work as coconut pickers are 4 people (6%), tourism-related jobs amounted to 6 people (9%). Also, the number of 20 people who are engaged only in the fishing industry without engaging in any other occupation is ten. They are not engaged in any other work because they cannot work hard and go back to sea.

3.6 Fishermen Status

According to the obtained data, sixty-two married people (93%) and three divorced people (4%) were reported in the Negombo fishing village; remarkably, no one was reported as unmarried. also, two single moms were reported. When considering the length of residence in Negombo, fishing villages have varied significantly depending on several factors, including family heritage, migration patterns, and socio-economic conditions. Many fishing families in Negombo have lived in the same villages for a long time. They have taken care not to change their residence as the fishing industry is passed down from generation to generation. It was also clear that they believed this deep-rooted connection with land and sea is part of their identity and culture. Furthermore, the data obtained indicated that ownership of fishing gear and boats is also passed down from generation to generation. Also, there are cases where newer residents have moved into these villages, either from other parts of Sri Lanka, such as Anuradhapura,

Batticaloa, Trincomalee, and Jaffna, or from different occupations. Overall, based on the data, while many residents have long-standing ties to the area, the length of residence in Negombo fishing villages is a complex mix of long-term generational habitation and more recent migration.

The house condition of the fishing villages can be presented as follows under the fishing status. Fishermen's houses in Negombo, according to data gathered from 67 respondents, showed that 10 fishermen's houses (15%) had only coconut leaf-roof huts, while 26 people (39%) had tin-roof wooden houses and it was specially reported that these houses lacked sanitary facilities. Also, 2 people (3%) had ready-made houses, 6 people (9%) had semi-permanent houses, and 23 people (34%) had permanent houses. This shows that the conditions of the houses of the fishing community in Negombo fishing village are generally in inconsistent condition. In addition, the houses in these villages are generally simple in terms of layout, consisting of two bedrooms, a living room, and a kitchen. In addition, some houses have a small shed or outdoor area for drying fish or storing fishing gear. Also, considering the religion of the people living in these villages, 90 percent were Roman Catholic, 6 percent Muslim, and 4 percent Buddhist.

3.7 Mutual Cooperation System of Fishermen

According to the data obtained, it was clear that the system of cooperation in Negombo fishing villages is deeply rooted in the social and economic life of the community. This

cooperation is known as ‘Muththettu’ or ‘Attam’ in their language. It is reported that fishing in Negombo is often done as a group activity, especially fishing using nets (Ma-Del) is a task that cannot be done by an individual. Many people gather for that. Another fact that was revealed here was that if one member of the fishing community is in trouble, they all help him. Especially in these areas, the ‘Attam’ system is used, where members take turns helping each other, such as doing net repairs, boat maintenance, or even house construction. They think that doing so can strengthen brotherhood. In some cases, fishermen have formed cooperatives or small informal groups to pool their resources for larger investments, such as purchasing new boats or upgrading fishing gear. The profits from such investments are then shared among the contributors. Furthermore, data revealed that these fishing villages have community-based organizations or elders who play a role in decision-making. These groups help manage common resources, mediate disputes, and organize community activities. Decisions about fishing practices, such as when and where to fish, are often made collectively and are also made through this committee. Also, according to the data obtained, it was clear that due to the involvement of respected elders in resolving conflicts, the solutions are fair and protect community harmony. It was also a major feature of this that everyone involved in religious and cultural events developed cultural and social cooperation. Together they participate in carols and street tours.

3.8 Belief system of Negombo fishing villages

Based on the obtained data, it is clear that Cultural rituals in fishing communities are rich in symbolism and tradition, reflecting the deep connection between the community, the sea, and their livelihood. Also, the belief system of Negombo fishing villages is a fusion of Roman Catholic Christianity. Before going to sea, fishermen seek blessings from religious leaders and offer offerings to the sea gods to ensure safety and prosperity at sea. The St. Anne's and St. Sebastian's church festivals, which are held in their area, are also celebrated with great pomp by the fishermen. Funerals are conducted following Catholic religious traditions, and the fishermen's ornaments, clothing, and tattoos also reflect the fishing culture.

4 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The following preliminary conclusions can be drawn from this study. The socio-cultural characteristics of the Negombo fishing villages reflect a community deeply intertwined with their environment, traditions, and collective social structures. Fishermen consider social organization activities as a major part of their lives and are members of various religious and social organizations. These communities believe that these groups are essential for maintaining social harmony, addressing challenges like economic pressures, and preserving the cultural identity of the community. Also, according to the data obtained, it is clear that the fishing community, which is limited to primary education, has paid more attention to economic contribution. Fishing in Negombo is a blend of traditional

and modern practices, with tools ranging from canoes and hand-operated nets to motor boats equipped with GPS and ecosystems. This combination of techniques allows fishermen to adapt to environmental changes and increase their efficiency. The fishing community engaged in secondary occupations to support their families more easily.

According to the study, it is clear that the fishermen's social status is closely tied to their long-standing residence in Negombo, often passed down through generations. They believe that a deep connection with the land and the sea is an expression of their identities. Further, the performance of ancient rituals envisages cooperation and harmony and forms part of the community's identity. The belief system and rituals of Negombo fishing villages are all associated with Roman Catholicism. As the main livelihood of fishermen is connected with the natural environment, they always respect the natural environment. Also, the fishing community strongly believes that the sea is considered God and the blessings of the natural environment have a direct effect on their economic goals. Moreover, it can be concluded that the economic strength and community cooperation of the fishing community are directly affected by the factors of social culture.

Accordingly, to these facts, the suggestions can be presented as follows: To enhance the socio-economic conditions of the Negombo fishing villages, it is crucial to address the low levels of education among fishermen. Improving access to education and raising awareness of its importance can have long-term benefits for this

community, as well as conducting educational programs tailored to the needs of fishing communities can provide them with an understanding of traditional livelihoods and modern economic opportunities. Fishing methods should be modernized while preserving traditional techniques. By introducing sustainable fishing technology and practices, the fishing industry can ensure long-term viability. It also enables the fishing industry to increase efficiency and reduce environmental impacts.

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