

A Preliminary Assessment of the Economic Impact of Conservation of Knuckles Range of Forest on Rural Communities in the Vicinity

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ABSTRACT. Conservation decisions are always made giving emphasis to long standing benefits and welfare of the whole society. But, some of the immediate adverse effects such as income losses due to conservation programs have to be borne by rural communities living in the vicinity of the forests. As experiences have shown, it is very unlikely that a conservation program will achieve its objectives unless the impact of the program on rural communities is assessed and alternative policy measures are taken to alleviate these negative effects.

The objective of this study is to investigate the farming systems of some selected villages in the Knuckles region and make a preliminary assessment on how the proposed conservation program is likely to affect the rural economy.

Data were collected by conducting a survey in three grama niladhari divisions, namely, Meemure, Narangamuwa and Ranamure. A farming system approach was adopted to describe the economic activities. Total revenue and total money income earned by farming, forest bound activities and off-farm activities were estimated. Average percentage loss of income under different assumed degrees of protection was assessed since no detailed conservation plan was proposed as yet.

The results reveal that farming systems of the area consist of two resource bases, namely, village and forest. Village based activities contribute 58.27 per cent of the total revenue and forest based activities contribute 41.73 per cent, on average. Among forest based activities, cardamom is the only activity which accounted for a significant income loss if banned under a conservation program. It contributes to a significant percentage of the total revenue as well as money income. Therefore, even under the lowest degree of protection, 25.78 per cent of the total revenue is expected to be lost.

Since cardamom is the highest income earning activity, banning this will have serious implications on the economy. This study therefore, suggests investigating the possible alternative methods of cultivating cardamom in systems such as agro-forestry with minimum damage to the forest ecosystem. Further, it will be worthwhile to study the current resource utilization within the village resources systems in order to find out ways to improve the efficiency of resources utilization, so that the rural communities will be able to compensate part of the lost income.

Key words: Forest Resource Management, Livelihoods Development.

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