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**Perceptions of buffer zone villagers on conservation of Knuckles forest range**

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Conservation measures and policies implemented by the state in the Knuckles forest have traditionally ignored the fact that human survival systems of fringe communities are largely based on resources of the forest. Thus, there is a constant conflict between the interests of the state and those of the peripheral communities. However, there is a growing trend to incorporate communities in forest management through such approaches as JFM and CFM.

The objective of the present study was to determine the perceptions of villagers on the Knuckles Conservation Zone (KCZ) declared in 2000 as the declaration had led to significant changes in the landuse patterns and livelihoods in the buffer zone villages.

The study showed that the villagers have a very low level of awareness about KCZ and the policies relating to it. For example, of the 60 activities prohibited in the forest, the villagers could name only six. Villagers could not explain the reasons for the establishment of the KCZ or when it was declared. A significant communication gap exists between the communities and the Forest Department, which in the long run could have detrimental effects on the conservation goals. The usage of most NTFPs has reduced to less than half of what it was before the establishment of KCZ. The community has also lost some land, particularly chena lands to KCZ. With this prohibition, a significant share of their income was lost but no alternative means of income were provided. People have self-adjusted by growing vegetables on paddy lands during Yala. There were mixed responses when people were asked about the specific aspects of the KCZ policy. The changes suggested by villagers focused on reestablishing forest resource use patterns similar to what they enjoyed before the establishment of KCZ. However, what is most significant is that they all support the conservation of the forest.

Although, the Forest Department and the peripheral communities agree on conserving the Knuckles forest, there is no effective mechanism yet in place to include the communities in the conservation of the KCZ. As forest conservation in the long run depends on the active cooperation of the society in general and peripheral communities in particular as evident from other parts of the world and in Sri Lanka, a strong case can be made for the initiation of a joint approach to the management of KCZ including all stakeholders among whom the buffer zone villagers play a significant role.

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**Forest management through community participation in Sri Lanka (with reference to Kurunegala district)**

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A forest is an area with a high density of trees (or, historically, an area set aside for hunting). Plant communities covering large areas of the globe provide carbon-sink, oxygen-release, habitat, and soil-retention functions. Therefore, Earth's forests constitute one of the most important aspects of our biosphere.

In response to escalating concerns about the degradation of State-managed forests, developing countries around the world are increasingly promoting decentralization of natural resource management. From the State-centric policies that were promoted in different parts of the world in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the trend has shifted toward encouraging participatory systems of management by local communities. This shift has been prompted by recognition of the numerous problems associated with consolidating all power in the hands of the State, and of the crucial, hitherto unrecognized, positive role played by local communities-albeit nudged by international shifts in policy.

Isolated islands of forests in Sri Lanka have received the attention of both the state and the people because of their economic importance. Responsibility for forest management has been placed on technically trained officers in the public sector, the objective being to promote state regulation in the efficient management of forest resources. Sri Lanka's natural forest cover is now around 31% of the island's 65,610 sq km, and natural closed canopy forests have dwindled to 22.5 % of the total land area from 44 % in 1956. It is significant that tropical humid forests, which form the natural vegetation type of the island's ever-wet southwestern quarter, have shrunk to about 9.5% of this region. These forests are also heavily fragmented and few are more than 10,000 ha in extent. Although much of the endemic species among both fauna and flora are concentrated in the wet zone, lowland rain forests of this region comprise about 1.9% of the island's land area.

This research follows the manner in which State-driven, upwardly accountable, forest decentralization programs play out on the ground, and evaluates their impact on forests and local institutions, a topic of much current concern and debate. In-depth field interviews with the communities provide us with information about the impact of these initiatives on local institutions. Non-wood forest products are important to people for a number of reasons. First, NWFPs are integral to the lifestyle of forest-dependent communities. They fulfill basic requirements, provide gainful employment during lean periods and supplement incomes from agriculture and wage labor. Medicinal plants have an important role in rural health.

The objective of this paper is to explore forest management through community participation to protect the forest in Sri Lanka. Up to now there is no local communities currently function under a situation of constraint, where they have not been delegated responsibilities. It has been collected opinion from hundred families who lives around forest cover in Kurunegala district and 95% of people said that community participation is the best way to manage the forest in Sri Lanka. It can be taken experience from India and Nepal for this program.