

KENT, REBECCA [POSTER]

Uncovering multiple functions of forest assets in south India

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This research seeks to understand the value of forest resources from within their social context in order to better understand the impacts of forest degradation and in particular the ability of different groups and individuals to adapt to these losses.

Previous research has highlighted the importance of the different roles household assets play in processes of livelihood change (Davis 2011, Dorward 2005, Kabeer 2004) and the different values placed on these functions by individuals (Ferguson 1992, Guyer 1997). This insight is applied to develop a conceptual framework to examine the multiple functions of forest assets for forest users in order to 1) predict the potential impacts of their loss 2) understand how forest assets do or do not contribute to asset accumulation or livelihood change.

In a case study of two forest dependent communities in south India, qualitative methods were used to inventory the multiple uses of the forest and subsequently to elicit the values associated with forest assets for different users. The functions of forest assets within livelihoods were categorised as: consumption, exchange, productive, protective, savings, and social. The ability of households to adapt to forest change was conceived as their ability to substitute the functions of lost or declining forest assets.

Our study finds that whilst the 'primary functions' of forest resources may be readily apparent, in-depth interviewing and observation reveals important secondary functions. Understanding these can help to predict the differentiated impacts of forest loss on community members. For example, palm leaf collection is primarily valued for its exchange value and contribution to household incomes amongst all users. However, leaf collection has important secondary functions for women (savings, productive) which relate to its ability to link households to Self Help Groups and favourable finance. This is critical to the potential for palm leaf collection to contribute to asset accumulation and livelihood change.

This study proposes that structured enquiry into the multiple functions of forest resources within livelihoods can be used to develop important insight into the potential impacts of forest loss and degradation for different community members. Impact evaluation, or ecosystem services accounting, needs to make visible these secondary functions that are so important for wellbeing and poverty reduction.

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