

A social-ecological approach to understanding mangrove utilisation by local communities in Sri Lanka

Rubiera Rodriguez Servane¹, Fathima Mafaziya Nijamdeen Thanne Walawwe Gedera^{1,3}, Jung Julia⁴, Hugé Jean^{2,5,6,7} and Dahdouh-Guebas Farid^{2,6}

- ¹ Laboratory of Systems Ecology and Resource Management, Département de Biologie des Organismes, Université Libre de Bruxelles, ULB, Av. F.D. Roosevelt 50, CPi 264/1, 1050, Brussels, Belgium
E-mail: servane.r@hotmail.fr
- ² Laboratory of Systems Ecology and Resource Management, Département de Biologie des Organismes, Université Libre de Bruxelles, ULB, Av. F.D. Roosevelt 50, CPi 264/1, 1050, Brussels, Belgium
- ³ Department of Biological Sciences, Faculty of Applied Sciences, South Eastern University of Sri Lanka, Sammanthurai, Sri Lanka
- ⁴ Marine Biology Research group, Ghent University, Krijgslaan 281/S8, 9000 Ghent, Belgium
- ⁵ Belgium Centre for Environmental Science, Hasselt University, BE3500, Hasselt, Belgium
- ⁶ Ecology & Biodiversity, Laboratory of Plant Biology and Nature Management, Biology Department, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, VUB, Pleinlaan 2, VUB-APNA-WE, 1050, Brussels, Belgium
- ⁷ Open University of the Netherlands, Valkenburgerweg 177, 6419AT, Heerlen, the Netherlands

Mangrove restoration is expensive and time consuming, especially when compared to the protection and management of existing forests. Typically, local communities are aware of the importance of mangroves, from which they derive direct benefits. Our study focuses on how people along the East coast of Sri Lanka perceive and live off these mangrove ecosystems, with the ultimate aim of promoting the development of a management plan that takes into account the needs of nature and people. In order to assess the impacts of mangrove ecosystems on coastal communities, their use was assessed through a questionnaire in 80 households in 5 communities along the Eastern coast of Sri Lanka taking into account differences in religion, ethnicity, economic status, gender and age. Local people were aware of the importance of mangroves to their livelihoods; in most cases they were unable to explain their particular ecological benefits. In the current study, a higher percentage of people utilizes mangroves for fishery, fuelwood and edible fruits. They rarely used mangrove wood for construction or medicine. Men answered the questions related to fisheries whereas most women did not. Older people seemed to be more dependent on mangroves. Local communities who live in close proximity to mangroves used them more often, regardless of their religious orientation. However, there were some differences between villages in the usage of mangroves for fuelwood as most villagers tend to use coconut leaves, husks and other commercial woods instead. They refer to the government-led ban in mangrove wood product use as a reason for such changes. In general, respondents were in favor of mangrove conservation, but dissatisfied with the measures taken by the government, preventing them from using the environment they strongly depend on. Developmental projects such as the Olivil harbor and bridges have had negative effects on the mangrove ecosystems as locals relate it to the loss of diversity of plants and animals, reduced fishery and water quality. Mangroves were perceived as very important for people's livelihoods, and most respondents are not optimistic about the future of the mangroves on the east coast of Sri Lanka.

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