
Sacred groves as habitat islands: biodiversity conservation through cultural practices

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Abstract

Sacred groves occur worldwide, and are community-managed forests that are protected due to cultural traditions. These groves harbor important natural resources, including diverse flora and fauna, as well as springs. Some of the sacred groves are considered home to local gods. The sacred groves are often fragmented habitat islands within a landscape mosaic of agriculture and human development. A multi-year, multi-site research programme on sacred natural sites is underway. Results will be presented from research in Ghana in 2006, India in 2009-2010, and Sierra Leone in 2012. A qualitative, ethnographic research methodology was used, including open-ended interviews. A similar semi-structured questionnaire was used in all three research locations to interview residents about natural resource use, rules, and belief systems regarding local sacred groves. Results indicate that management approach and level of community involvement are linked to effectiveness of site protection and community attitudes. Societal traditions are key to the continued protection of the groves. In some cases, changing religious traditions and high demands for resource use have resulted in the reduction or loss of groves. However, culturally protected sacred sites can still play a role as key biodiversity conservation areas if community conservation traditions are supported. The groves' cultural significance and local management help ensure the future of these forested habitat islands that represent key remaining biodiversity conservation areas.

Keywords: forest conservation, social science, indigenous and community conserved areas, traditional conservation practices, CBNRM

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