

Local community attitudes towards mangrove forest conservation: Lessons from Bangladesh



Anjan Kumer Dev Roy^{a,b,*}

^a School of Commerce, Faculty of Business, Education, Law and Arts, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, QLD 4350, Australia

^b Ministry of Planning, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, Sher-E-Bangla Nagar, Dhaka 1207, Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Degradation of mangrove ecosystems is a major concern in many countries of the world. This study examines the attitudes and perceptions of local communities towards the conservation of the world's largest mangrove forest, the Sundarbans in Bangladesh. Village households were interviewed. The Schlager and Ostrom's theoretical framework was applied to reveal local forest-dependent people's positive attitudes towards conservation and that their socio-economic and demographic characteristics influenced these attitudes. They valued those functions that were directly linked to their economic wellbeing and were inclined to engage in alternative livelihood activities provided illegal access to forest resources were curtailed. Respondents living adjacent to the forests admitted their illegal access due to a lack of alternative economic opportunities. 60% of the respondents viewed that present state property rights regime violated their harvesting rights. More than half of the people (57%) surveyed desired to participate in conservation practices as proprietors. Policy directives in line with Schlager and Ostrom's theory for *de facto* and *de jure* ownerships and management change may provide some scope for development of sustainable livelihoods for forest dependent people from the conservation of critical mangrove ecosystems like the Sundarbans.

1. Introduction

Situated in inter-tidal estuaries, mangrove forests provide a critical habitat for a diverse range of terrestrial and marine flora and fauna in tropical climates. They provide a diverse range of goods and services of use to human beings: timber, fuelwood, beverages, thatch, dyes, charcoal and tannins [21,30,46,50]. Besides their vital role in coastal protection and water filtration services, the most significant productive and biochemical role of mangrove ecosystems is their ability to sink carbon [20].

Despite the benefits of mangrove ecosystems being clear, their destruction continues alarmingly [6,39]. This adversely affects the sustainability of mangrove ecosystems and livelihood security of local forest-dependent people. Information failure further attributes to this mangrove loss as a result of the local people's lack of awareness about the conservation value of mangrove ecosystems [5]. The underlying reason identified is the lack of understanding of the direct relationship between mangrove ecosystems and the livelihood benefits provided to humans.

Past research indicates the participation of local people is a major factor in the success or failure of natural resource conservation [17].

Hence, studies of attitudes and perceptions of local people (frequently very poor) have contributed to an understanding of their needs and aspirations and thus their attitudes towards conservation [29].

Although larger policy decisions may influence conservation of mangrove forest resources, their sustainable use largely depends on local people and their exploitation of its resources [5,6,41]. These people are fishers, woodcutters, honey and other non-wood forest product harvesters. Hence, it may be possible to examine how people's attitudes are influenced by conservation policies and vice versa. This not only allows more effective and efficient resource allocation and planning but also provides baseline data to assess the efficiency of future policies for conservation [18]. Also, this will guide future policy and management decisions in designing, implementing and evaluating integrated conservation and development project interventions [38].

This study examines the level of local support for sustainable management to achieve conservation of the Sundarbans Reserve Forest (SRF) in Bangladesh. The research questions of this study are framed thus:

1. Are local people positively supportive of conservation of mangrove forests generally?

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +88 01715630899/+61 422296010.

E-mail addresses: anjan_devroy@yahoo.com, anjankumerdev.roy@usq.edu.au.

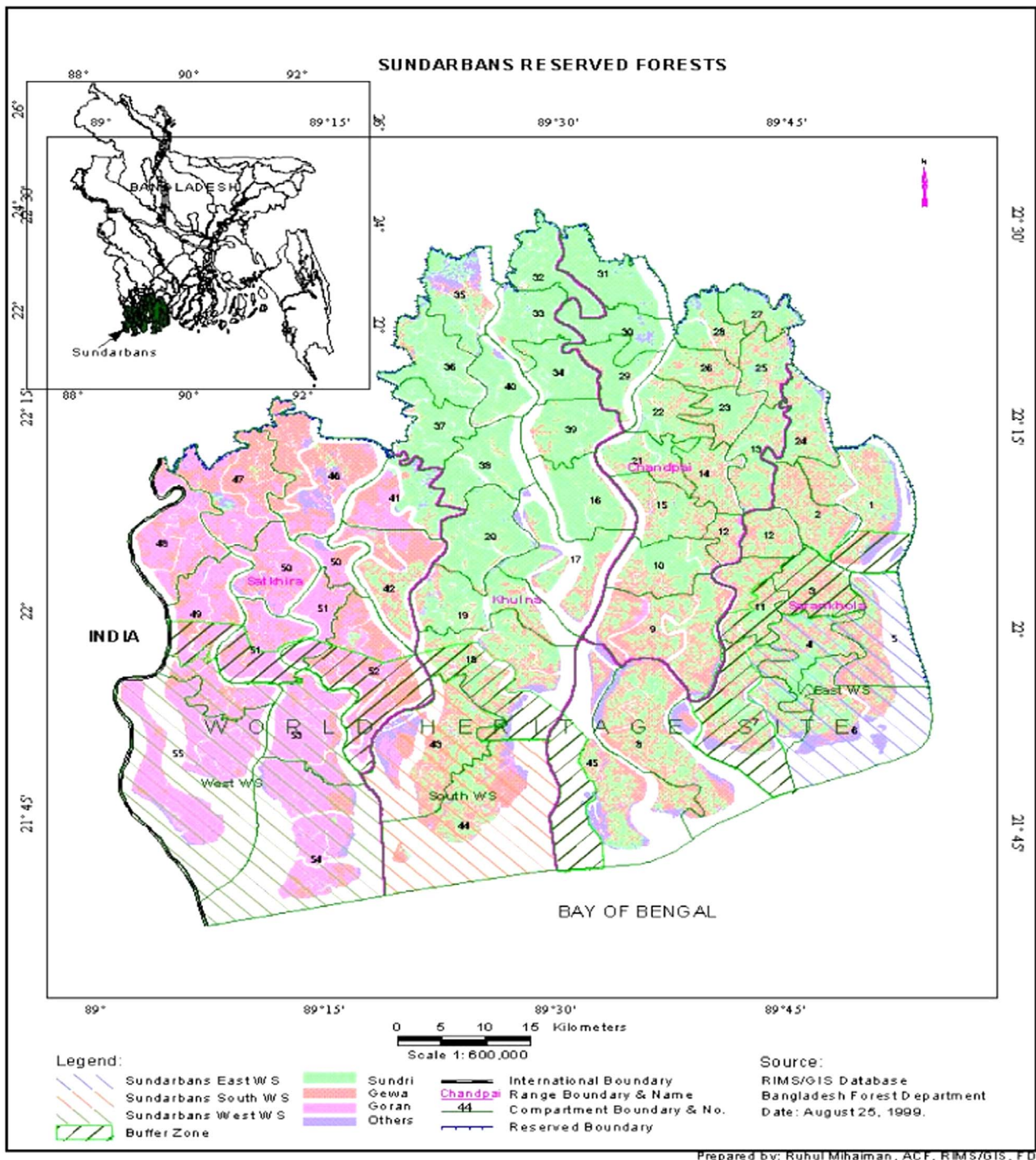


Fig. 1. The Sundarbans Reserve Forest, Bangladesh.

2. What are the attitudes of local people towards the existing management regime and potential alternatives to manage the SRF?
3. What are the dominating factors shaping their attitudes towards conservation?

2. Theoretical framework

Centrally planned natural resource management systems have often suffered from faulty design in absence of a co-management structure with local people's participation and partnership. Hence, this top-down management have been marked by inefficiencies and even corruption [52]. Sharing the power and responsibility between the government

and local resource dependent communities as an arrangement is applied in a co-management structure to attain resource sustainability and livelihood outcomes. However, this is often failed due to the ill-defined property rights and absence of *de-facto* co-management arrangements [34]. Hence, Schlager and Ostrom's (S&O) (1992) classification of property rights bundles has been used as theoretical framework for this study.

An individual can hold different levels of rights in a common property resource setting. Accordingly, S & O classify four rights holder categories: authorised user, claimant, proprietor and owner. An authorised user enjoys access and withdrawal rights while a claimant enjoys those rights with management rights as an addition. 'Who will

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