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Review

The importance of dry woodlands and forests in rural livelihoods and poverty alleviation in South Africa

Charlie M. Shackleton [a,*], Sheona E. Shackleton [a], Erik Buiten [b], Neil Bird [c]

[a] *Department of Environmental Science, Rhodes University, Grahamstown 6140, South Africa*
[b] *46 11th Street, Menlo Park, Pretoria 0081, South Africa*
[c] *Forest Policy and Environment Group, Overseas Development Institute, London, United Kingdom*

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Abstract

Indigenous forests and savannas, along with plantation forests, offer numerous benefits to rural communities and society at large. Yet, the role of forests and forestry in contributing to sustainable livelihoods and poverty alleviation are widely debated. However, much of the debate pertains to lessons from the humid tropics, with little consideration of the widespread dry forests and savannas. This paper considers the role of dry forest types, including savannas, using South Africa as a case example. It concludes that a large proportion of the population makes use of forests and the resources from them. These are vital components of local livelihoods, which probably prevent people from slipping into deeper poverty. Moreover, for a measurable proportion, engagement in informal forest activities, as well as the formal forestry sector, has resulted in them being able to move out of poverty. Additionally, the generally dry nature of forests in South Africa, coupled with the high unemployment rate, limit the extent of alternative locally based livelihood options, thereby magnifying the contributions from forests and forest products. The depressing effects of widespread HIV/AIDS on labour availability, economic activities and livelihoods has exacerbated peoples' dependence on forest products.

Keywords: Ecotourism; Forestry; Non-timber forest products; Plantations; Poverty; Safety-net; Savannas; South Africa; Sustainable livelihoods

1. Introduction

It has been long appreciated, both internationally and within South Africa, that forests (in the broadest sense of the word) offer numerous benefits to adjacent communities and society at large (Wollenberg and Ingles, 1998; Oksanen et al., 2003; Lawes et al., 2004a). Such benefits include consumptive resources, spiritual and aesthetic needs, employment, and ecological services such as carbon sequestration and water regulation. However, in many situations access to such benefits is neither uniform nor equitable between nor within communities.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +27 46 606 8615; fax: +27 46 622 5524.
E-mail address: c.Shackleton@ru.ac.za (C.M. Shackleton).

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The majority of forests, by their very nature, are located within rural and frequently remote areas. Typically this means that such areas are relatively underdeveloped in terms of infrastructure, government services, markets and jobs. It is not surprising, therefore, that communities living in and adjacent to savannas and forests are characterised by seemingly high levels of poverty and limited livelihood opportunities (Wunder, 2001; Sunderlin et al., 2005). This is a developmental and environmental challenge for State agencies the world over. It is a developmental challenge because forest dependent peoples are frequently amongst the most marginalised and neglected communities. It is an environmental challenge because the spectre of resource depletion always looms as people continue to use forest resources and through land transformation to farming, mining and urban uses. Yet, use of forest resources potentially offers significant returns (whether in cash, direct-use or indirect use values) and hence, sustainable use poses an opportunity to meet both developmental and conservation goals (Crook and Clapp, 1998; Arnold and Ruiz-Pérez, 2001; Shackleton, 2001; Sunderlin et al., 2005).

Attempts to combine both of these goals have been made through broad-based poverty alleviation initiatives, strategies and policies. Poverty alleviation is a binding policy goal internationally, as stipulated and agreed in the Millennium Development Goals (2002), and is the guiding principle of multinational agencies such as the World Bank. Within South Africa, poverty alleviation was elevated to a national policy goal following the democratic transition in 1994. Poverty is greatest in rural areas (Carter and May, 1999). Forestry is frequently an important economic activity in these rural areas, and is therefore posited as a potential key player in rural poverty alleviation, or at the very least, poverty mitigation.

Recently, the international reviews of Wunder (2001) and Angelsen and Wunder (2003) concluded that, whilst forests do have some role to play in poverty alleviation, it is relatively small, and that forest-dependent peoples will continue to be marginalised and have low standards of well-being as measured by conventional development indices. They concluded that forests seemingly offered little in terms of opportunities for expanding livelihood options and accumulation of wealth and assets required to reduce livelihood vulnerability; but rather that forest-dependent livelihoods offer limited options resulting in potentially persistent poverty (Byron and Arnold, 1999; Arnold and Ruiz-Pérez, 2001; Angelsen and Wunder, 2003). Whilst a robust conclusion, it was founded largely on literature from the humid tropics. The question therefore needs to be asked whether or not the same applies to the drier regions of the globe, especially in countries where tropical forests are relatively rare, but where dry forests, savannas and thicket biomes may be extensive, such as in South Africa. Indeed, this is timeous, as the Department of Forestry in South Africa is currently in the process of developing policy on forest-poverty linkages. This paper, therefore, considers the importance of forestry, forests and forest products in rural poverty alleviation in South Africa as both a development and environmental challenge.

2. Terminology

Within this paper we make repeated use of the terms forest, poverty and non-timber forest products (NTFPs). Each of these is widely use internationally, but often with certain regional nuances. Consequently, in this section we define our use of the terms. Firstly, our use of the word forest/s conforms to the international definition used by the FAO, to mean any land with greater than 10% cover by woody, perennial plants. It is thus an all-embracing term to include indigenous forests, savannas and plantations. It may also include agroforests and trees on farms or residential areas, but in this paper we exclude urban forests.

With respect to the term poverty we follow the working definition of May (1999), as the “inability of individuals, households or entire communities to command sufficient resources to satisfy a socially acceptable minimum standard of living”. This one is robust enough to embrace most dimensions of poverty, as well as accommodate the fact that it is socially defined, and hence includes the spatial variation in conceptualisation and indices, which is useful in a country as big as South Africa with significant regional variation in resources and socio-economic conditions. For those readers requiring such benchmarks against which to interpret the incomes