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The Ethnoecology of Sacred Forests and their Potential for Conservation

Cullen Critselous

J. William Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences



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THE PROBLEM

Sacred forests and the communities that protect them represent an alternative method of conservation that rely on religious and social taboos. The acreage and number of sacred forests in India and parts of Africa are dwindling, and it is partly because outside forces are diminishing the powers of the local authority that govern according to these taboos. Not only are important patches of forest being chopped down, but unique cultures are being lost in the process. There is a lack of proper cooperation between national forest departments, stakeholders, and the local people, so my goal is to understand why the locals conserve their forests in order to hopefully inform forest departments how they can get the locals to cooperate in the conservation effort.

THE PROJECT

My project relies on recent scientific and anthropological research conducted in both India and parts of West and South Africa that analyze the current situation in sacred forests. The articles provide a wide array of aspects of sacred forest conservation, so I compiled their research to give an overview of the potential for conservation within locally managed sacred forests. From reading these articles, I gathered that the only solution to the problems that lie within sacred forests would be culturally sensitive cooperation between forest departments and local populations. In order to do so, the forest departments must first understand why these sacred forests are protected by the locals. Through the interviews conducted by two of my sources I was able to uncover the attitudes and beliefs the locals have pertaining to sacred forests.



THE OUTCOME

Through my research, I found that in both Africa and India one of the main problems with the current situation in sacred forests is the dwindling power of local authorities. There is not a clear understanding of who owns the land and who has the right to protect it. This leads to the agency of the religious and social taboos to diminish as well. Forest departments, particularly in India, play a passive role, and due to the lack of power on the local level, forests continue to be lost to encroaching agriculture and the need for timber.

I propose that the forest departments work to protect these sacred forests against outside threats such as the lumber industry, poachers, and farmers while the local authorities use their taboos to govern the local population. Conserving sacred forests not only maintains important ecosystems, but it also maintains important cultures by revitalizing taboos and empowering the local people.

SUSTAINABILITY

This report directly pertains to both the Natural and Social systems of sustainability. By revitalizing the local authorities' power within the community, traditional values and taboos are consequently made important again. At the same time, the whole idea of sacred forests deals with conserving the Natural system in a unique manner through culturally sensitive cooperation between local populations and forest departments. Keeping these forests in tact prevent soil erosion and preserves rare, medicinal plants unique to the forests. This is a unique opportunity for the linking of the Natural and Social system because as you empower the local people's culture you conserve the forest, and vice versa.

SUSTAINABILITY

I believe my report can encourage more research involving the social sciences and sustainability in the future. When people realize that all of the systems of sustainability are truly connected then affective work can be done that benefits all spectrums of life. This report can show students how anthropology can link the systems by focusing on the human experience. Humans are intimately involved with their environment, and this relationship ends up affecting both parties in drastic ways, good or bad. My report is an example of how we can affectively benefit both the Natural and Social system through understanding the ecological processes in the environment and the cultural conceptions of the environment held by the people.

Picture sources: <https://shonilbhagwat.wordpress.com/category/sacred-natural-sites/>, www.sethlazar.org/keyword/benin;ouidah/

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