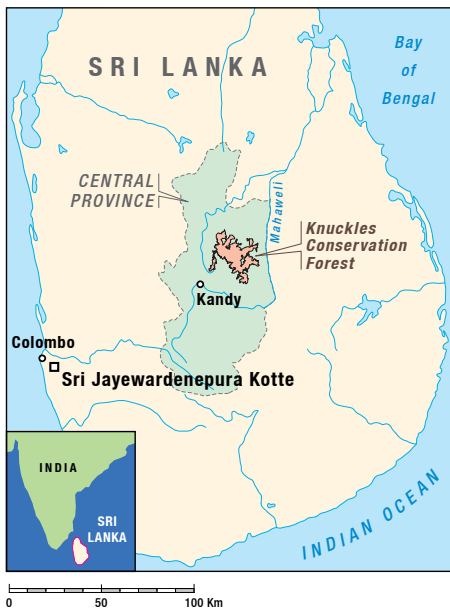


Common understanding creates successful forest governance

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For decades, the government of Sri Lanka has been concerned about degradation in the Knuckles forest, a mountainous area in central Sri Lanka. Its answer was to create the Knuckles Conservation Forest (KCF) in 2000. With this declaration, shifting cultivation was prohibited, most large-scale cardamom production was stopped, and the entire system of private tenure was called into question. The declaration of the KCF was rightly seen as a major victory for conservation. The problem, however, was that the process of designating the forest, for which government lacked the resources to manage on its own, involved little consultation with those stakeholders who would be most affected.

In fact, its declaration had a negative impact on the livelihoods of local villagers, reducing their incomes by up to 40%. It also affected private landowners, who had no option but to sell their land. The channel of communication in this process flowed from top to bottom, so inevitably some tensions and frustrations arose between local communities, private landowners and the government.



An elder from Atanwala village explains the situation: *"We were not asking for a free ticket to exploit the forest. We were asking for a way to propose specific considerations for improving our lives. We needed to make the government understand our concerns."*



The Knuckles Conservation Forest

Listening to the villagers
(Photos © S. K. Hennayake)

"We were not interested in just criticizing the government, but we wanted to be heard."

In 2006 IUCN chose the KCF as a pilot site for its European-Union-funded project *Strengthening Voices for Better Choices* (SVBC), to address forest governance issues. After three years, the Knuckles pilot site shows promising improvements in governance. First, SVBC used IUCN Sri Lanka's broader network to mobilize support from business for livelihood activities supporting local entrepreneurs. Second, villagers formed themselves into marketing societies, and private landowners formed themselves into an NGO called *Eco-Friends*, giving them a collective voice to engage in local forest issues. Third, information flows from the pilot site concerning the real value of livelihood losses suffered by villagers have influenced decision makers, who are doing their best to respond.

A local forum has been created in which stakeholders can discuss their concerns. A national multi-stakeholder forum – the first of its kind in Sri Lanka – has also been created to address broader issues of forest conservation, feeding lessons into national policy.

Communities in the KCF have started reaping the benefits of proactive participation in local governance processes. SVBC has helped to promote adaptive management, build confidence and create transparency. The voices emerging are increasingly clear and strategic, promising a better future for forests in Sri Lanka.

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