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How Does the Commercialisation of Nature Influence Relational Values and Food Security in North-Eastern Namibia?

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Abstract

In Africa, the relationship and connection of rural people to nature is undergoing changes related to the increased selling of natural products. In rural north-eastern Namibia, the selling of forest timber and non-timber products, as well as river products like fish and reeds, has intensified, risking degradation of ecosystems functions and services upon which the local residents depend for food and income. This study explores how relational values are changing due to the increased selling of natural products in Nambi and Marema villages. The study focuses on relational values as these reveal villagers' shared meanings and moral responsibilities towards the management of natural resources. This study shows how intensive commercialisation of nature is creating conflicts among resource users as their economic and socio-cultural interests and values come to differ. The study also reveals how the emerging conflicts are affecting food security at the village level. Photovoice method was used to collect qualitative data from 20 villagers, to articulate relational values and meanings attached. Villagers' perceptions of the impact of commercialisation of nature on relational values were obtained through 157 structured interviews. Data were analysed with thematic analysis as well as factor analysis. The maintenance of cultural heritage, identity and enhancing social interactions and relations were amongst the most important relational values expressed by villagers. These values are attributed to ecosystems such as the river and not only to single natural feature, such as reeds. Elderly people and individuals who interact with nature beyond interests to gain money (e.g. traditional healers) expressed the most relational values and fear that intensive selling of natural products will cause loss of socio-cultural knowledge and shared values. Further, the culturally important natural features like trees are threatened by the processes of commercialisation, through the institutional settings which are put in place to manage the new markets, for instance, community forests. These are perceived by most villagers to attract outsiders in their own resource system and to generate social conflicts within the village. Research findings indicate that institutional settings such as community forests affect local people's relational values, ecosystem services health and local's accessibility to food.

Keywords: Commercialisation of nature, community forests, ecosystem services, Namibia, relational values, rural communities