



Tropentag, October 6-8, 2009, Hamburg

“Biophysical and Socio-economic Frame Conditions  
for the Sustainable Management  
of Natural Resources”

**Forest User Perceptions of Today’s Forests in Western Kenya**

BARBARA DARR, JÜRGEN PRETZSCH

*Technische Universität Dresden, Institute of International Forestry and Forest Products, Germany*

**Abstract**

In the traditional communities of Kenya the land use has been regulated within the clan and family system. The control was based on religious and cultural value systems. These systems have been influenced by the colonial and the subsequent independent government. Nevertheless, the traditional way to perceive and use forests has partly persisted.

The aim of this paper is to highlight these remains of traditional management with special emphasis to the intangible values. Furthermore, the question is how this knowledge can be used to foster a sustainable participatory forest management. Can traditional management strategies be revived and applied together with today’s forest management of the government?

An interdisciplinary method mix has been applied to investigate this topic. Social empirical data of the forest user perceptions, attitudes and values have been collected in three case studies (among Isukha, Tiriki and Ogiek) in Western Kenya in 2006 and 2007. Their views are mirrored against the paradigm of science based governmental forest management.

The adaptive hierarchical structure of the culture ecologist Bargatzky (1986) that orders values in a structure from profane to very abstract serves as theoretical framework and demonstrates that values are anchored in religious and cultural value systems that on the other side need to be practised to persist.

The results reveal that high value is given by the respondents to those resources that are helpful in daily life. Local forest users are knowledgeable on possibilities and limits of their natural environment as well as on misuse of these resources in the course of governmental management. The rules stipulated by contemporary forest management regimes are less effective than traditional rules in terms of forest protection. These results are integrated in the adaptive hierarchical structure of Bargatzky. This structure thus provides the basis to understand the importance of different values to different stakeholders.

The discrepancy between traditional and actual forest management could be reduced if the traditional forest user perceptions are no longer neglected but implemented in a participatory forest management.

**Keywords:** Intangible values, Kenya, local forest users