



Tropentag, September 19-21, 2012, Göttingen -
Kassel/Witzenhausen

“Resilience of agricultural systems against crises”

Can Development Interventions Reduce Human Pressure on Forest? A Case Study of a Long Term Observation in India

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Abstract

We re-assessed the number of people and their purpose for entering a degraded dry forest in the plains of Tamil Nadu (South India) after 21 years. We found a drastic reduction in the number of people visiting the forest for the utilisation of forest products. These changes seem to be driven by the unavailability of local markets, agricultural programmes of local NGOs and better employment options than 21 years ago.

The increasing human pressure on tropical forest is of worldwide concern but data on local level that support this trend are hardly available resulting in a lack of information for appropriate management strategies. The Palni Hills Conservation Council conducted a foot-path survey around the Kadavakurchi Reserved Forest (KRF), a degraded dry forest on a 10 km² hillock at the foot of the Western Ghats in 1990/91. Interviews at 19 interview points were done simultaneously on one day a week over seven weeks, covering all seven week days. Numbers of people entering the forest were assessed, and they were asked about the importance of forest products for their livelihoods, as well as about forest-product collection patterns and marketing strategies. The survey was redone in 2012 during the same season as in 1991.

We found an almost 40 % decrease in the number of people entering the forest between 1991 and 2012, while amongst the different forest uses the number of people collecting fuel wood in the forest showed the strongest reduction of 90 %. Heads of livestock entering the forest for grazing have increased by 25 % mainly due to a rise in the number of goats.

In interviews with local development institutions in the area, both government agencies and NGOs, as well as in 75 households we found that several employment generation and watershed development programs have been conducted over the last 21 years. Household respondents stated that alternative incomes triggered by agricultural and small-scale employment programmes underlay their reduced or abandoned utilisation of forest products. The main reason for the reduction in fuel wood collection, on the other hand, was stated by households as reduced availability of local markets.

Keywords: Development work, dry forest, forest degradation, India, long term observation, reduced anthropogenic pressure