

XIII.A.5. Factors Influencing Sustainable Forest Management under Regulated Private Property Regimes: The case of the Haadis of Dakshina Kannada

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Conventionally, forest policy debates have centred around the relative efficacy of state versus community management of forests. The underlying assumption is that forests are common-pool or public goods. In fact, however, forests display characteristics of privatizable goods as well, and so in practice several institutions exist in the Western Ghats in which forested lands are under exclusively individual ownership and/or management. We examine the operation of one such system, the haadis of Dakshina Kannada.

Haadis are fully privatized forest lands, regulated only under the Karnataka Tree Preservation Act. The owners have the right to convert the lands to non-forest uses, such as cashew plantations, which are quite popular in that region. Nevertheless, a large majority of these lands continue to be maintained as "forests", i.e., woodlots dominated by a few naturally occurring tree species that provide fuelwood, leaf manure and timber in varying proportions to the owner. We analyse the factors influencing the land-use decisions of the owners: whether to convert to cashew plantations, whether to maintain as long-cycle timber woodlots or short-cycle fuelwood/leaf manure woodlots. We show the critical role played by access to credit, non-agricultural incomes and social customs of the household in shaping these decisions. We also show that the state's attempt to regulate the management of these lands is largely counterproductive, since it actually creates barriers to the obtaining of higher returns from forestry. Forest policy needs to take cognizance of the ecological, institutional and economic conditions under which land owners might actually want maintain land under natural tree cover and seek to facilitate, not hinder, such activities.