



# Stakeholder motivation for the conservation of sacred groves in south India: An analysis of environmental perceptions of rural and urban neighbourhood communities

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## ABSTRACT

Sacred groves (SGs) of south India are the local communities' self-enforced spiritual institutions, which contain natural forests and swamps. Thus, the communities' faith in traditional rituals and local deities are important for their existence. SGs preserve cultural practices of ethnic communities and conserve biodiversity. Although most of these groves can be found in rural areas, rapid urban annexation is changing their landscapes. We hypothesise that the landscape type (rural versus urban) and the deity type of the SGs among other factors might affect the communities' spiritual and environmental perceptions of SGs. This study was conducted in rural highlands of the Western Ghats in Kodagu and adjoining urban lowlands in Kasaragod. We found that the urban communities valued SGs, not only for their spiritual importance but also for their environmental merits. Both urban and rural communities were cautious enough not to access or abuse the SGs. This behaviour also depended on the deity that was housed in the SG. SGs that housed highly revered deities (eg. *naga*) were seldom abused. The religious adherence was prominent especially in rural communities, so much so that the habitat quality of the SGs could be predicted based on the deity that was worshipped there. Apart from these spiritual influences, SGs are influenced by economic (coffee industry in Kodagu) and societal pressures. Sanskritization of deities or change in faith, construction of temples, land encroachments, and changes in the neighbouring societies also negatively affect the SGs. Since the SGs receive reverence on the power of the local deities, governmental bodies must discourage the Sanskritization of local deities and construction of temples. Considering the historical, biological, and cultural importance of SGs, the policies governing them is necessary to ensure that SGs stay intact.

## 1. Introduction

Sacred groves (SGs) of India (Gadgil et al., 1993; Ormsby and Bhagwat, 2010), Southeast Asia, (Bhagwat and Rutte, 2006), Africa (Sheridan and Nyamweru, 2007), and church forests of Ethiopia (Wassie et al., 2005; Reynolds et al., 2017) are the examples of community-conserved forests (Verschuuren et al., 2010). Although the motivation to protect these sacred sites is different between regions, spiritual values have contributed enormously to the conservation of local, regional, and global biodiversity (Ormsby and Bhagwat, 2010; Rutte, 2011; Notermans et al., 2016; Reynolds et al., 2017). As the communal reasons for conserving SGs were different from nature conservation *per se*, many countries do not have rigid policies to ensure their continued protection (Berkes, 2009; Rutte, 2011; Ormsby, 2014;

Lowman and Sinu, 2017).

Religious and cultural beliefs are the major drivers for the conservation of SGs in India (Freeman, 1999; Ramachandran, 1999; Bhagwat and Rutte, 2006; Ormsby and Bhagwat, 2010; Notermans et al., 2016; Lowman and Sinu, 2017). The religious communities worshipped nature as such, the natural processes, animals, and attributed Godly qualities to such entities, essentially spiritualising the whole area (Nutgeren, 2005; Negi, 2010; Notermans et al., 2016). For instance, King Cobra (*Ophiophagus hannah*), a vulnerable species re-listed by IUCN, is a major deity of traditional SGs in Kerala (Anonymous, 1889; Ramachandran, 1999; Murugan et al., 2008; Notermans et al., 2016; Das and Balasubramanian, 2017). Although it is one of the deadliest snakes, the Hindu community of Kerala and parts of Malnad region of Karnataka rarely harm it. Harming a King Cobra is

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