

# Les produits forestiers non ligneux et la gestion de la forêt kéralaise : droit d'usage et droit de contrôle\*

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## Abstract

The mountains of the Western Ghats of Kerala (South India) are renowned for their rich biodiversity. Kerala is the birthplace of the traditional system of medicine Ayurveda, which is based on medicinal plants. The Ayurvedic industry has been booming since 1980, with an increasing demand on national and international levels. Cultivation of medicinal plants is still very low and 93% of the raw materials used in Ayurvedic drugs come from the natural environment, mostly from forest areas. The question of the supply capacity of the forest ecosystem is crucial in a context in which economic interests and biodiversity conservation are confronted. This opposition also exists between the policies for the protection of forest resources and the realities of its use. The challenge of balancing the economic interests, environmental concerns and social welfare of local forest-dependent populations is at the basis of thinking about sustainable development for forest areas. From national institutions to local populations, different actors are involved on the local level in the collection and marketing of non-wood forest products, including medicinal plants. They are developing management strategies that are described in this paper as logics of space, use and power.

An analysis of the legal documents related to forest management shows an evolution from a view focusing on the productivity of forest resources to a conservationist perspective. The place of the local populations in these policies has been ambiguous. Only the *National Forest Policy, 1988*, finally recognised their user rights to the forest and advised the development of “participatory management”. The state system of marketing of forest products created in Kerala in 1978 is based on cooperative societies, the members of which are exclusively *adivasi* (“tribal”). The federation of these societies has the monopoly on the supply and marketing of forest products. While the collection activity relies on a network of cooperatives, the final marketing of forest products is therefore centralised. The system is based on collaboration between state institutions, from the fixing of the prices to the transport of the products. However, the cooperative system is in competition with a strong private sector, which is the real power in the market.

In order to reduce the gap between the cooperative system and local realities, some societies unofficially take products from non-*adivasi* collectors. The collectors themselves also collaborate to have all of them included in the system, despite their status. The private sector attracts both allowed and non-allowed collectors.

The control of the activity is creating competition between state institutions (*VSS v. Society*) and within the same state institution (among societies for the forest ranges). The collectors adapt themselves to changing structures, as far as they have an outlet for their products, but the VSS (*Vana Samrakshana Samithi* – Committee for Forest Conservation), a creation of Joint Forest Management policy, is seldom seen as a way of participating in the decision-making process. Participatory management, linked to the idea of “good governance”, also modifies the sharing of responsibilities for forest protection as well as degradation. Currently, the transfer of power between authorities and local populations deals more with the idea of “responsibility for misconduct” than of “responsibility for a project”, which alone could lead to real empowerment.

Finally, the collectors are in the centre of a rivalry game between state institutions and between the federation and the private sector. Despite the idea of participative management, the forest continues to

be controlled by outsiders. Adivasi collectors enjoy a right of use of resources, but not a right of control over their activity. The effort of collection compared to the price obtained on the market makes this activity one of the least remunerated. This, added to competition by other collectors who are not recognised by the authorities, makes the long-term management of forest resources a difficult challenge.

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