

# Harnessing Potentials of Indigenous Environmental Myths for Forest Conservation in Rivers State

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## Abstract

Indigenous environmental mythology has long been an essential component of many communities' ecological and cultural systems in the Rivers State, Nigerian. These myths, which usually stem from the notion that nature is untouchable, offer crucial insights into the practices of traditional forest protection. This study looks into how these indigenous myths could help with current conservation efforts, particularly those that are meant to protect forest resources. By examining a number of myths and the associated behaviours, the study demonstrated how these cultural narratives have historically controlled human interaction with the environment, ensuring the sustainable use of forest resources. It also suggested how community members can remain involved in the conservation of forest resources. The study pointed out the forest's critical role in the welfare of rural Nigerian households. Therefore, the more community people participate in sustainable forest management, the more the forests contribute to meeting the needs of rural Nigerian household welfare. Thus, it was concluded that community involvement not only protects people of the community's means of sustenance but also enhances the social, economic, and environmental aspects of forestry efforts.

**Keywords:** Indigenous Environmental Myths, Forest, Forest Conservation, community involvement, Environmental Resource Conservation.

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## INTRODUCTION

A careful look at the map of the world, one would see that many of the most biodiverse forests overlap with the lands of culturally distinct indigenous communities. The lands on which they live and the natural resources on which they depend on are inseparably linked to their identities, cultures, beliefs systems and livelihoods. Hence, any change or changes in their environment can have dramatic impacts on their lives. With the increasing pressure of global development, many countries are conserving these rich forest areas to protect their nature and biodiversity, at the local level, conservation can come at a cost to indigenous peoples' physical and spiritual well-being. This is the root cause of many conflicts over conservation. Several examples across the globe and Nigeria in particular, shows that conflicts with indigenous groups challenge the sustainability of conservation programs. In Southeast Asia, for example, the establishment of a protected area was recently suspended due to land use conflicts with indigenous peoples who have been living in the area for generations. Examples like this suggest the need for

conservation strategies that better integrate the priorities of indigenous communities. Indigenous-led conservation is an effective and equitable way to safeguard habitat, reverse wildlife loss and reduce climate change. Studies show that Indigenous-managed lands boast higher levels of biodiversity unsurprising, given millennia of stewardship experience.

Historically, the indigenous communities in Rivers State have developed and maintained a variety of forest resource conservation practices deeply rooted in their cultural heritage and traditional knowledge systems. These practices have been essential in sustaining the ecological balance and ensuring the sustainable use of natural resources in the region. The Ijaw, Ikwerre, Ogoni, and other indigenous peoples of Rivers State used a variety of conservation techniques that were closely related to their cultural and spiritual beliefs prior to the arrival of colonial rule. In order to manage resources sustainably, these societies depended on their deep understanding of the surrounding environment. One popular conservation tactic was to designate specific woodlands as sacred forests, which

were frequently connected to gods or ancestral spirits. Because hunting, logging, and farming were forbidden inside the limits of these sacred forests, biodiversity was preserved and ecological stability was upheld (Aluko and Iliya, 2011). Rotational farming, which entailed cultivating a plot of land for a few years and then leaving it fallow to restore its fertility, was another old technique. This technique allows for the regrowth of native vegetation while also preventing soil degradation. In order to maintain the restocking of fish supplies, the indigenous groups also employed sustainable fishing methods, such as seasonal fishing prohibitions during spawning seasons (Oriji, 2008). The traditional methods of resource management in Rivers State underwent substantial modifications throughout the colonial era. The native conservation mechanisms were upset by the introduction of cash crops, the growth of commercial agriculture, and the colonial rulers' exploitation of natural resources.

The welfare of man and his wellbeing are linked with the forest and its resources (Adedayo, 2018). In the same vein Adeyoju (2001) noted that forests and their products play critical roles in the human environment, needs and livelihood. Adedayo and Oyin (2010) noted that man cannot live a convenient and satisfying life without the forest and its resources. A good example is the good people of Rundele in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State, there is a particular forest in the community that has a spiritual inclination which can never be cleared for any reason. Not even the application of today's technology can provide a suitable and acceptable alternative to the use of the forests and its resources. As such the welfare of man has a direct link with the forest and the resources of the forest. Adedayo *et al.*, (2010) noted that the welfare of a household has to do with the state of well-being, health, nutrition, happiness and safety of the household. They noted further that a household's welfare is affected by the nature of access the household has to medical care, food, hygienic water and income as well as the nature of education and social security the household enjoys. Forests are known to play important roles in the welfare of an individual or household by providing varieties of foods, income and medicinal materials. Unfortunately, the area covered by the forest has been on the decline in many parts of the country. The reason for this is not unconnected with the increasing population and the resultant over exploitation of forest resources in many places. This has resulted in decreasing availability of forest resources for the use of the people. As noted by Adedayo (2005) today, the situation in most part of the country is such that the trees in the forest, the land, the people as well as the entire rural environment are no longer at ease. This is because the forest which most of the time provide succour to many people in terms of food and income have been abused and over exploited in many places.

The environment has been seen and regarded as a home of unlimited resources to be used for human consumption. This human-centered perception of the environment has exposed the resources over centuries to environmental destruction (Mbalisi 2010). The blame on the above perception (human centered) was based on the fact that it led to development models which address growth at the expense of environment and conservation of natural resources such as soil, land, forest and water which are basic needs for human survival. Environmental issues are diverse and their extent is so large that, they know no geographical boundaries, neither are they stopped by regions. Indigenous people world over are known to be the best custodians of nature and their innate knowledge in conservation and harmonious co-existence has been recognized in many places (Sembe 2004). Any exclusion of indigenous people from participating in planning and implementing projects or activities within their territories is bound to pose serious consequences for human communities and ecological systems, (Ashton & Bryan, 2002). It is evident that Rivers States and especially private corporations tend to fixate on maximizing short term profits rather than considering long term sustainability. Projects characterized by this type of mentality can leave the environment seriously degraded, traditional resources diminished or polluted and cause extensive health problem for local inhabitants, (Ashton and Bryan, 2002).

Rivers State is one of the 36 states in Nigeria, with a population of over 5,185,400, according to 2006 census data. Rivers State is richly endowed with enormous natural resources such as oil and gas, forest and aquaculture. Hence, the utilization of these resources in the State highly devastated environment through unsustainable practices and exploitation of these natural endowments. The presences of some of these natural resources have negative impact on the environment. These experiences most of the times, cripple the economic activities of the communities as well as the source of their livelihood. The state also experiences population explosion/growth due to the presence of oil company workers. This factor further threatens the conservation of the natural resources since much pressure will be on resources to satisfy this population. In addition to the above un-conservative measures, the natural resources are placed with unsustainable practices by the indigenous people based on ignorance and the belief that the natural resources are inexhaustible. In the traditional societies, it is evident that farmers adopt various farm practices such as slash and bush burning while preparing for cultivation with the use of fire wood as an alternative source of fuel. Nzeneri (2014) asserts that some animals and plant species remain threatened in the process of cultivation while some are at brick of extinction following the activities of hunters and traditional health attendants. These and many more are some of the unsustainable practices which affect the

conservation of natural resources in various traditional societies.

### **Potentials of Indigenous Environmental Resource Conservation**

The increasing rate of unsustainable practices to the environmental resources calls for the participation of the indigenous people in the management and conservation of these resources. According to the World Bank Participatory Sourcebook (2010), indigenous participatory approach in the sustenance of natural resources especially the forest, balances the social, environmental and economic objectives. It is based on broader valuation of the environment, it takes into account, the multiple values of environmental resources, and the social and economic needs of the local people who are the users of these resources. The choice of technologies is geared towards environmental sustainability over the long term. The sourcebook maintained that, when the local commons share in design, benefits, costs and management responsibility of forest projects, they have incentives to co-operate in enforcing rules on which they have themselves agreed. It stressed that; participation is the only valuable way to conserve forest areas for sustainable development.

The involvement of indigenous people in any community development programme is a basic condition in the promotion of such programmes. This is the basis of citizen participation which is seen as the backbone to the development of any community (Akande 2016). When indigenous people are involved in the planning and decision-making process of projects or programmes in their communities, it will encourage their sense of ownership for members to take the pride in referring to such projects as theirs. The principle of citizen participation therefore assumes that the people are the most important factor and should take part in the identification of needs, planning, execution, utilization and evaluation of programmes or projects. The participation principle according to Akande (2016) is premised on the notion that there are many resources (human and materials) available in the communities that if well utilized can enhance sustainable development. Thus, the input of indigenous people in the choice of development activities is very essential for the success of any programme or project at any time.

According to Ashton and Bryan (2002), lack of indigenous people participation in planning and implementing development projects, within their territories have a number of serious consequences for human communities and ecological stems. Lund (2002) asserts that community participation is a means to efficient achievement of policy goals, performance or project success. The reason had been that, indigenous people's act as utility maximizing individuals. According to them, the key to successful outcome of partnership with industry to, develop a natural resource

on a community land is to establish a much greater level of community involvement or input in setting project goals and in its design in conjunction with their traditional beliefs that are related to the natural resources such as environmental myths. Environmental myths according to Rao and Campbell (2019) include customs and tales about the natural world, which present an alternative viewpoint on ecological management to Western methods. In same vein, Smith and Long (2017) defined environmental myths as indigenous cultural narratives structures which frequently feature symbolic depictions of the natural world and our responsibility to preserve it. These myths according to Johnson (2022) influences how communities interact with their surroundings by acting as moral and ethical compass. In view of this, Davies (2020) asserted that environmental myths importance in today's conservation efforts is becoming more widely acknowledged as a way to promote more environmentally friendly behaviours.

### **Myths and Environmental Conservation in Rivers State**

Rich cultural traditions and environmental knowledge have been passed down through the decades by indigenous tribes in Rivers State, Nigeria. These customs contain a variety of myths and beliefs that are essential to the preservation of forest resources. The African perspective of environmental resource conservation is sacralized, most African people are guided by Earth-based spiritual traditions and practices, and these serve as a sustained source for their practical struggle for the healing of ecosystems and for sustainable living from the earth's resources (van Schalkwyk, 2011). In support of this, Suganthi (2019) contended that the preservation of the environment depends on the spiritual awareness of men and women and on an attitude of responsibility centered on having a reverential attitude toward the environment in taking care of it while dwelling within its premises. In many rural communities in Rivers State, the traditional belief in the spiritual qualities and applications of natural resources has an impact on the conservation and enhancement of the natural environment. This indicates that the administration and conservation of natural resources are greatly influenced by indigenous traditional worldview systems. Regardless of how valuable a myth is for usage today; mythology has always been important for the preservation of the local biodiversity. The use of myths is one of the many strategies for managing and conserving natural resources. As long as the local populations have an interest in them, these traditional belief systems are capable of safeguarding biodiversity species in particular and the environment in general.

International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) in Diawuo and Issifu (2015) pointed out that majority of African populations practise African Traditional Religion (ATR) and cultural traditions that are sustainable and favourable to the

environment, greatly aiding in the conservation and sustainability of natural resources. Traditional African belief systems attribute supernatural abilities to items known as gods and goddesses. African traditional religion and belief systems, according to Rim-Rukeh *et al.*, (2013), centre around the homes of the gods and goddesses, which are revered by the people they rule and can be found in rocks, streams, ponds, trees, land, or anyplace else in the society. Indigenous belief systems, such as mythology, was important for the preservation and management of natural resources in the state of Rivers State. Myth continues to be the dominant influence in many Rivers State rural communities on how people behave when it comes to using natural resources. Environmental myths as noted by Rao and Campbell (2019) include customs and tales about the natural world, which present an alternative viewpoint on ecological management for the Western approaches. In view of this, Robinson and Johnson (2023) asserted that environmental myths serve as foundational elements in the cultural narratives that guide conservation practices., they are instrumental in shaping community attitudes towards environmental stewardship.

#### **Indigenous Environmental Myths in Rivers State and their implications for Forest Conservations**

Indigenous environmental myths are narratives that convey cultural beliefs about the natural world. These myths often include themes of reverence for nature, sacredness of certain areas, and the existence of spiritual guardians. Indigenous knowledge systems that have been developed over decades through observation and interactions created a comprehensive understanding of ecosystems according to Harris *et al.*, (2019). Lee (2021) asserted that indigenous systems incorporate cultural values and practices with ecological management, in contrast to Western conservation methods that frequently place an emphasis on technical solutions. Forest resource conservation is critical for maintaining biodiversity and ecosystem services, especially in regions like Rivers State, Nigeria where habitat loss and deforestation are major issues as noted by (Okereke and Ntiamao-Baidu (2021). In some rural communities in Rivers State, such as Runde, Rumuche, Rumuakunde, and Oduoha, the myth of sacred forest is one of the important ways forests are conserved in these communities. The sacred forests are protected area that no form of accessibility is granted to indigenes and non-indigenes even harvesting of timber and fuel wood is prohibited through some forms of social norms. The people have the believe that the forest is inhabited by the gods and goddesses of their land, it is a place where they communicate with their gods, goddesses, and ancestors. Animals in the forest are also regarded as totems which are forbidden to be killed or eaten by anybody, violators are meant to undergo spiritual cleansing or face spiritual consequences. Sacred forest in these communities have been known for their protection of biodiversity. All these are the various environmental myths that have been age

long traditional forest conservation practices that have kept the forest resources and animal species in the forest intact, though some part of the forests is been encroached gradually. Some of the Indigenous environmental myths for forest resource conservation in Rivers State are:

1. The myth of the Sacred Forest
2. The myth of the Forest Spirits
3. The Myth of the Ancestral Trees
4. The Myth of the Forbidden Zones
5. The Myth of the Healing Forest

#### **The Myth of the Sacred Forests**

In Rivers State, there are numerous indigenous communities who maintain the belief that ancestral spirits or deities live in specific woodlands designated as sacred forest. These forest are revered and used for religious rites and ceremonies, and frequently shielded from logging, poaching, and other types of exploitation. Indigenous cultural and environmental activities in Nigeria's Rivers State are heavily influenced by the Myth of the Sacred Forests. The respect and spiritual significance attached to some wooded areas which are said to be the homes of strong spirits and deities—are embodied in this narrative. The traditional ecological knowledge of the communities in Rivers State is firmly rooted in these beliefs (Okwu and Eze, 2022). According to mythology, Sacred Forests are said to be supernatural beings endowed with spiritual power rather than just actual locations. Guardian spirits, who keep an eye on the harmony and balance of the natural world, are said to guard them. The forests are commonly connected to creation myths, in which they are portrayed as the initial home of the gods and the origin of life and human nutrition (Adamu, 2023). The idea that forests need to be protected and revered is reaffirmed by these stories, which highlight their holiness. The Sacred Forests' legendary stories prescribe certain taboos and behaviours that are essential to conventional forest management techniques. For example, hunting or harvesting specific species is prohibited within these sacred zones because it is thought to incite the wrath of the forest spirits and cause disaster or ecological imbalance (Smith & Long, 2017). Social conventions and spiritual beliefs work together to enforce these bans, which keeps the forest ecosystems mostly intact. The Sacred Forests of Rivers State hold great significance due to their involvement in various community rites and festivities. These forests are thought to be the spiritual centre of the community, and many traditional festivals and rites of passage involve ceremonies performed in or near them. These rituals strengthen cultural identity and ties to the community in addition to honouring the spirits (Johnson, 2022). Thus, safeguarding these holy locations and preserving cultural heritage are related.

The concept of sacred forests contributes to ecological balance and biodiversity preservation. Sacred forests serve as protected regions where wildlife and plants can coexist peacefully. They act as genetic

repositories for a variety of species, which is essential for maintaining biodiversity.

### **The Myth of the Forest Spirits**

Indigenous stories frequently tell of guardians or forest spirits that keep the forest safe and punish those who damage it. It is thought that these ghosts watch over the health of the forest and the sustainable use of its resources. According to Inyang (2015), the "big creatures" that inhabit the forest are said to represent some of the ancestors, who are said to have made their home there. In addition, it is thought to be abode and the home of both good and bad spirits from the land. In this sense, certain forest areas have been set aside and declared sacred, making it illegal to carry out disruptive human activity like farming, hunting, and trapping there. Fear of these ghosts' vengeance discourages overuse and promotes environmental stewardship. Because people are careful not to disturb the spirits, the myth of the forest spirit supports the sustainable use of forest resources. It also helps to preserve big expanses of forest because specific places are left untouched because of the presence of these spirits.

### **The Myth of the Ancestral Trees**

Certain trees are thought to be home to the souls of some indigenous communities' ancestors, spirits permeated the trees, plants, animals, and other living things that comprise the forest. This is in line with Ikeke (2013) view that the forest in Africa is more than just the trees, that it embraces everything that resides in the forest and is inhabited. Several peoples are afraid of the spirits of the forests, there reports of trees that, due to their alleged magical powers, would not budge, not even with the aid of contemporary equipment intended for the purpose. Thus it is customary to conserve and cherish these ancient trees, and it is frowned upon to take them down. This idea supports the preservation of the forest's older, ecologically significant trees. Sacred groves, home to ancestral guardian spirits and sacred trees, might be found close to African towns and villages. There was a lot of biodiversity in these groves. Various species of plants, animals, and other organisms lived in sacred groves, much like in other types of forests. Seldom do African hunters hunt in the woodlands mentioned above. There are different spirits that inhabit forests or trees. While some woodlands are haunted by malevolent spirits, others are inhabited by benign spirits, (Ikeke (2013). This myth has contributed to the preservation of old-growth forests, which are crucial for preserving biodiversity and forest structure. It also strengthens the cultural value of conservation efforts by establishing a connection between environmental health and reverence for ancestors.

### **The Myth of the Forbidden Zones**

There are parts of the forest that are deemed banned zones, meaning that human activity is either entirely prohibited or severely restricted. These locations

are thought to be home to strong spirits or to be inhabited by potentially harmful forces. Because they were considered to be the "most spiritual and mysterious of all life forms," according to Burnham (2000), African people held the plants in the forest in high regard. In particular forests, certain areas were open to everyone, whereas beyond a certain point, only the head priest or medicine man had access. Certain forests were deemed bad because persons who died suddenly or mysteriously were thrown into them, and they were thought to be home to evil energies. Evil forests were typically kept and were not to be destroyed, as were forests that held the charm of life or life elixir and were the sites of unique sacred religious activities. Consequently, these areas remain unaltered, contributing to the maintenance of vital habitats and species. In the forest, forbidden zones serve as natural sanctuaries for many plant and animal species. By minimising human interference, these places preserve biological processes and functions.

### **The Myth of the Healing Forest**

Indigenous beliefs frequently include the notion that certain plants and animals have therapeutic qualities, as well as the concept that forests have healing abilities. Because the forest is regarded as a source of health and well-being for the community, this myth encourages caring over it. The desire to preserve access to the forest's therapeutic resources drives people to protect it. By promoting the sustainable harvesting of medicinal plants and the preservation of their habitats, this approach helps to save the many ecosystems that are home to a wide range of medicinal species.

### **Ways of Involving Rural Community Members in Forest Resource Conservation in Rivers State**

In view of the far-reaching benefits of the forest to the people of the country, especially the roles of the forest in improving the welfare of the people, it is important that ways should be sought in maximising the potentials of indigenous people in forest resource conservation. It is pertinent to observe that the sustainability and efficacy of conservation activities depend on the involvement of rural community members in the preservation of forest resources. Here are several efficient ways to interact with them. According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO, 2019), this strategy gives local people the authority to manage and preserve forest resources. Community involvement improves the social, economic, and environmental elements of forestry initiatives in addition to safeguarding their means of subsistence. Involving people in the process of promoting sustainable forest management techniques can result in increased forest biodiversity and decreased deforestation. Their enthusiastic involvement in forest preservation campaigns and tree planting events helps to mitigate climate change, sequester carbon, and promote sustainable land use. In addition, giving communities a say in decision-making processes fosters a sense of

accountability and ownership among them, which makes project implementation more successful and long-lasting. Involving local people is essential to successful and sustainable forestry operations; it is not just a choice. Some of the ways community members are involved in forest resource conservation in Nigeria are.

### **Participatory Forest Management (PFM)**

PFM involves local communities in the planning and management of forest resources. This approach fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility among community members. The Ogoni People's Council in Rivers State has been involved in the restoration and conservation of degraded forests in the Ogoni region, using traditional knowledge and practices.

### **Community-Based Forest Enterprises (CBFEs)**

Community people can profit sustainably from and manage forest resources by establishing CBFEs. These businesses may engage in ecotourism, the collection of non-timber forest products, or the production of sustainably harvested timber. In light of this, the Federal Ministry of Environment (FMEnv, 2018) formed committees to supervise the management of forests, incorporating people of the community in the decision-making process. The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO, 2019) stated that CBFEs give local communities the authority to manage and preserve forest resources. Accordingly, the Ekuri community in Cross River State established an Ekuri Initiative-managed community-owned forest reserve that encourages sustainable forest management and conservation. Additionally, the Idanre people of Ondo State have created ecotourism projects that support the preservation of forests and benefit locals financially.

### **Education and Capacity Building**

The capacity of rural people to conserve forest resources is increased when they get instruction and training in sustainable forest management techniques. The Nigerian protection Foundation (NCF, 2020) states that it is vital to plan training sessions, workshops, and awareness campaigns to inform locals about the value of forest protection. This covers instruction on sustainable harvesting methods, biodiversity preservation, and agroforestry. This bolsters the International Union for Conservation of Nature's (IUCN, 2018) claim that training and capacity-building initiatives are necessary to improve community members' abilities in forest management. In addition, women should be included in forest management since they contribute to the daily depletion of forest resources. Women's involvement in forest conservation and management will be encouraged by initiatives that involve them, such as the founding of Women in Forest Conservation.

### **Incentive Programmes**

Offer communities rewards for their participation in conservation initiatives, including

infrastructure development or scholarships. According to the African Development Bank (AfDB, 2019), giving community members access to microcredits, tax incentives, or payments for ecosystem services (PES) encourages them to participate in conservation efforts.

### **Integration of Traditional Knowledge**

Utilising local and indigenous knowledge of forest ecosystems can improve conservation efforts. Community people frequently have a thorough awareness of local biodiversity and sustainable practices, according to the Nigerian Institute for Social and Economic Research (NISER, 2017). In order to manage and conserve forests, we must acknowledge and respect these indigenous knowledge and traditions. Nigerian. Sacred groves, or forests revered and guarded by customs and beliefs, are kept by communities such as the Rundele, Rumuche, Rumuakunde, and Oduoha communities in Rivers State. Additionally, the Tiv people of Benue State have appointed traditional forest guardians to use customary knowledge and methods to preserve and safeguard forests.

### **Policy and Governance Involvement**

Giving community people a say in governance structures and policy-making pertaining to forest management gives them the ability to influence and support conservation policies. Encourage collaborations between NGOs, government organisations, and communities to exchange resources and expertise (UNDP, 2019). To support community-led forest management and conservation, a number of community forestry associations, including the Nigerian Association of Community Foresters, have been founded. Additionally, the Nigerian Conservation Foundation's Forest Watch programme involves community members in keeping an eye on and guarding against illicit activity in forests. Again, it is essential that the forest policies of all the states in the country should be reviewed. There is the need to review the forest policy of many states in the country in view of the emerging contemporary issues in forestry that are germane to promoting sustainable forest management and the reduction of rural poverty. Presently the forest policy of most states in Nigeria allows for people to have access to forest resources in open access areas (free areas). They only need to obtain permit to cut trees in the open access area.

### **Collaborative Monitoring and Evaluation**

Participating community members in the assessment and observation of forest resources guarantees the openness and adaptability of conservation initiatives. Monitoring carried out by the community can promote accountability and offer data in real time. The Sustainable Forest Management (SFM) plan, launched by the Nigerian government, involves local people in choices about forest management and conservation. Notable example to this effort is the community in Imo State establishment of community forest managed by the

Igbo Community Forest Association, to promote sustainable forest management and conservation in the State.

## CONCLUSION

Indigenous knowledge is used to preserve the community's way of life. A value placed on this information could support cultural identity and improve its application to social and development objectives, like biodiversity conservation, cheap and adequate public health, and sustainable agriculture. This paper has demonstrated how important the forest is to Nigerian rural households' well-being. These benefits include those related to the environment and ecology, the economy, society and culture, health, and religion. It is crucial to remember, though, that sustainable forest management can increase the forests' contributions to enhancing the welfare requirements of Nigerian rural households. Reducing deforestation, encouraging social forestry initiatives in rural areas, discouraging rural residents from using fuel wood excessively, including rural residents in forest conservation, enhancing forestry extension, and reviewing state forest policies are some of these strategies. When appropriately implemented, these strategies are thought to play a significant role in supporting conservation efforts, which in turn support the benefits that forest resources provide to the welfare of rural households.

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