
CONSEQUENCE OF SOCIAL MEANINGS EMBEDDED IN FORESTS IN CONTROLLING MISBEHAVIOR OF ECOTOURISM STAKEHOLDERS: A CASE STUDY OF MEEMURE VILLAGE IN SRI LANKA



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ABSTRACT

Ecotourism is a specialized nature visitation aimed at nature conservation, nature-based education, and benefiting local communities. It creates demand for destination management strategies/tools such as area protection, industry regulations, codes of conduct, visitor management, environmental impact assessment, advocacy, and sustainability indicators. However, most of them are alien strategies that do not match the traditional practices of the destinations and at the same time, the application of alien strategies increases the cost of forest conservation. This creates a demand for research to identify low-cost, socio-culturally sound, sustainable tools for destination management. Under this scenario, a case study was conducted based on *Meemure* village to identify the consequence of social meanings embedded in forest spaces in controlling the misbehavior of tourism facilitators and visitors. Fifty-six informants, including villagers and tourists, participated in key informant interviews. Data and information were analyzed based on qualitative methods, especially narrative interpretation methods. There are three main findings in this study. The first is that the stakeholders involved in the management of the Knuckles World Heritage have conceptualized the Knuckles Forest not only as an absolute space but also as an abstract space and lived space of the forest fringe communities. Second, because of this, *Meemure* villagers have been able to participate the ecotourism destination management as a knowing and capable agent. Third, the social meanings (mainly folktales and rumors) impregnated by the villagers in the Knuckles Forest space have been used by the villagers themselves as a tool to control the misbehavior of the local tourism facilitators and tourists. Due to the sense of space formed by the social meanings embedded in the forest, the majority of local ecotourism facilitators (87%) in the village have voluntarily set up destination management codes of conduct, adhered to them, and compelled visitors to follow them. This study concludes that a holistic conceptualization of forest spaces lays the foundation for ensuring the active participation of local communities in ecotourism destination management, and such a conceptualization sets the stage for developing sustainable and low-cost strategies/ tools for managing ecotourism destinations.

Keywords: Social Meanings, Forest, Ecotourism, Community participation, Destination Management, Meemure village

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1. INTRODUCTION

In general, ecotourism is identified as nature visitation and facilitating visitors to enjoy and appreciate the wealth of nature and any existing culture of an area. In a specific sense, it is a specialized nature tour aimed at nature conservation, nature-based education, and benefiting local communities. However, to accomplish the goal, ecotourism demands the destination management tools, such as area protection, industry regulations, code of conduct, visitor management, environmental impact assessment, consultation, and sustainability indicators (Mowforth and Munt, 2003; Honey, 2008; Williams and Lew, 2015). Many of these tools are also active in the management of eco-tourism destinations in Sri Lanka. However, on the one hand, these tools are alien methods that do not fit into the traditional practices of destinations, and on the other hand, the application of the alien tools increases the forest conservation cost. Inadequate funding and lack of local participation have led to inactive/malfunctioning destination management efforts (Arachchi et al., 2015b; Kumara, 2016; Tisdell, 2003; Wickramasinghe, 2009). It is, therefore, essential to identify alternative destination management tools that reduce forest conservation costs and increase community participation in destination management.

It seems that above mentioned issues have arisen due to a narrow conceptualization of forest space; until very recently, forest spaces were recognized by ecologists, planners, policymakers, and many other responsible agencies as a plain surface consisting of mere locations without social connections to individuals and without social meaning. Because of this, there is evidence that in some cases measures were taken to relocate the forest-based communities away from the forests (CSSL, 1994; Colchester, 2003; Gunawardena, 2003). Also, the importance of communities in the buffer zone of forest in ecotourism destination management was neglected (Gunawardena, 2003; Pathmasiri, 2019). As a result, researchers and planners missed the opportunity to identify the geographic strategies adopted by the forest-based communities in the structuring behavior

of villagers and outsiders. Further, researchers have paid little attention to identifying the significance of traditional social meanings embedded in forest space in managing ecotourism destinations. Thus, it is essential to research the significance of traditional social meanings embedded into forest spaces for sustainably managing ecotourism destinations. In this context, the main objective of the research was to identify the consequence of social meanings impregnated in forest spaces in controlling the ill behavior of tourism facilitators and visitors.

This study is geographically important as it explains how the individual and society construct spatial variation and how they are affected by spatial variation, that is, how spatial variation is both a cause and an effect. This study explains that space is created by the impregnation of social meanings by individuals and society. It emphasizes that space and society are mutually intertwined, and that space is constructed by individuals and society to structure human behavior. Furthermore, this study explains how the social meanings, especially Folktales, and Rumors, embedded in the space have been used by *Meemure* villagers to manage eco-tourism destinations. Therefore, this study provides an alternative destination management tool that reduces forest conservation costs and ensures local community participation in destination management.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In examining the literature on techniques used to control stakeholder behavior in tourism destinations, three geographical characteristics associated with those techniques were identified.

- The first is that the forest spaces on which ecotourism is based are narrowly conceptualized.
- The second is that the narrowly conceptualized forest spaces have been divided into land parcels/ zones based on the criteria of the planners.

- The third is that foreign/outside social meanings have been impregnated on those forest spaces.

Geographically, space has three dimensions, which are well understood through the descriptions and concepts presented by researchers such as Lefebvre (1991) and Soja (1996). Lefebvre (1991) identified three dimensions of space as perceived space, conceived/ abstract space, and lived space, while Soja identified three dimensions as *Firstspace*, *Secondspace*, and *Thirdspace*.

The space that can be grasped and understood through the senses, the physical world or the objective world that can be understood by sense perception, is called perceived space. Soja (1996) called this space *Firstspace*. The objective world is visible because it is material; it can be imaged; it can be measured. This space is sometimes called absolute space as it does not have a person's feelings or social connection. Tuan (1977 & 1979) stated that a location where there is no social connection to any person can be called space. No social connection to a person means that it is devoid of social meanings, so according to this conception, all locations in the space are the same; space has only locations. Distances between locations in absolute space can be measured and mapped. Space is also referred to as the abstraction of locations into a grid or coordinate system, such that the observer or ruler is outside of the locations or looking at the locations from the outside.

As per the Newtonian view (Agnew, 2005), space is absolute; it is independent of the matter and processes that exist on it; space holds matter and processes, but space has power beyond them. According to this viewpoint, absolute space implies distance, area, and volume, and it is stated that this distance/area/volume is infinitely divisible into units/equal parts (Crang, 2005). According to this conceptualization of space, the factor called distance (distance from the forest, near to the forest or far away, etc.) influences human behavior. Imagine there are two forests. If the only difference between the two is the difference in location (distance), you may

choose to visit or collect forest products from the nearest forest. If you select the forest far away, you will have to bear additional transportation costs.

The second dimension presented by Lefebvre is abstract space or conceived space generated by human thoughts and ideas. Abstract space is an abstraction of the objective world or the absolute space conceived in the mind through the way the person feels or thinks. On the one hand, abstract space is a thought/imagination/hypothesis that each of us individually creates in the mind by seeing, measuring, and touching the objective space.

It is, in a sense, a personal imagination. Artists (poets/painters, etc.), writers, philosophers, designers, etc. can visualize this imaginary space, theoretically, descriptively, or morphologically. According to well-known legends, Knuckles Forest is known as the home to the *God Kande Bandara* (King *Ravana*) and Saint *Pulasthi* (grandfather of King *Ravana*). Therefore, it is clear that the abstract space is not just a personal imagination'. There is evidence that the abstract space presented by writers or certain philosophers is different. These mental spaces are also projected through *Deva Puranas*, legends, rumors, etc. *Kuvera's Alakamanda* or Paradise or Hell are such abstract spaces. The normative spaces mentioned in the statements such as the 'site of *Samandevi*, the site of God *Kataragama*, the site of God *Kande Bandara*' are abstract spaces. The abstract space that is developed in each person's mind is shaped by the experiences gained through perceived space, legends, and stories, as well as the abstract spaces that have been presented and popularized by various philosophers, writers, planners, etc. Hence it is not uniform/flat. The mental map is a dynamic process that is constantly changing because the information and thoughts we get from the brain about different locations in space change relative to time. Different places are arranged in mental space. As such, this abstract space is diverse. And it is regularly updated.

The third space indicated by Lefebvre (1991) is the space in which the individual lives, interacts, and is created by the individual. It can be a

public space like a farm or a bazaar or a private space like a bedroom. It can also be a real space like the above examples or a virtual space like social media, the internet, or cyberspace. The third space, Soja (Year) stated, is the space where our social relations take place, where we experience our daily lives, and where we live. According to Leibnizian view (Agnew, 2005), space is relative. This view states that space has no power independent of the matter and processes that occur/exist in space, and space can only be defined by the relationships between space and matter/processes/experiences. According to the Newtonian view, space is active, but according to the Leibnizian view, the activeness of space comes from the matter and processes located on it. Space exists because of the relationship between matter/processes and the location where they exist/occur. Thus, there cannot be places without space or space without places; they are like two sides of the same coin; they are dependent on each other. Space then refers to a practical field in which an institution (for example, the state) or a group operates. The lived space is sometimes called concrete space; because it is not merely the objective space or the abstract space, but the space that we perceive through the experiences of the objective space and the imaginations of the abstract space; because it is the space where a person experiences, lives, has social relations and conceives social meanings. The lived space of a community nearby to a forest is different from the lived space of outsiders, including planners.

Until recently, forest-based ecotourism destination planners have ignored the dimensions of abstract space created by the local community and their lived space when planning ecotourism. Forest spaces had traditionally been conceptualized merely as absolute/perceived spaces. Thereby, the agencies involved in forest resource management, especially the Forest Department and the Department of Wildlife Conservation, were able to mark clear administrative boundaries between forests and nearby villages and to impregnate their (administrative) meanings to the forest space. Though it was able

to mark the boundaries between forests and villages, it went unnoticed that these lines were arbitrary. Administrators were able to separate the people of forest-fringe villages from forests, as the boundaries of forest and forest-fringe villages were demarcated and the forest was conceptualized as a space devoid of social meaning. Some traditional villages were removed from the forests and established in other areas, and villagers were often prohibited from trespassing on the forests and gathering forest materials. This phenomenon can be identified in Maduruoya N National Park from where the Vedda community was relocated and Sinharaja World Heritage site from where some forest-based villages were relocated (CSSL, 1994; Colchester, 2003; Gunawardena, 2003; Pathmasiri, 2019).

A similar situation has often been identified in the use of ecotourism as a forest management strategy. In many cases, intentionally or unintentionally, forest fringe communities have been excluded from ecotourism. In some cases, local communities have been involved in ecotourism but not as active partners but as passive/nominal partners. (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009). In the case of Sri Lanka, many ecotourism projects have been initiated by state-centered institutions either alone or with the support of other stakeholders, to conserve nature, improve the quality of life of local communities, and protect cultural values. In addition, government agencies have facilitated non-governmental organizations to launch eco-tourism projects. Despite some positive effects, researchers such as Gurusinge (2006), Kumara (2016), Rathnayake and Kasim (2015), Sheham (2016), and Wickramasinghe (2009) have identified negative consequences of the initiatives. The same situation was identified in *Kudawa*, *Dambana*, and *Eppawala* ecotourism destinations (Pathmasiri, 2019). Although there has been local community participation in these ecotourism projects, planners have paid less attention to integrating the social meanings of local communities embedded in the forest space for managing ecotourism. Local communities have adopted modern socio-cultural practices and neglected traditional ways and values. Without reproduction, traditional practices are

threatened with extinction. It has led to the loss of traditional ethnobotanical/ethnozoological values and thereby, the loss of biodiversity. It seems that this situation has created a demand for destination management tools for protecting the fragile nature of the destination from visitors as well as local facilitators.

In the research literature on tourism destination management, different techniques/ approaches are used for capturing opportunities while controlling potential negative impacts of tourism development. These techniques have been summarized by Mowforth & Munt (2003) under eight headings (refer to Table 1). According to Williams and Lew (2015), these techniques can be categorized into three broad themes as follows:

- Techniques/approaches that are concerned with establishing regulatory frameworks, such as area protection, regulation of industry, and codes of conduct;
- Techniques/approaches that are concerned with ways of managing visitors, such as spatial zoning, spatial concentration or dispersal of tourists, restrictive entry, or pricing.
- Techniques/ approaches that are concerned with ways of understanding and assessing impacts, such as the use of environmental impact assessment, carrying capacity, public consultation processes, and local participation or the development of indicators of sustainability.

Table 1: Tourism Destination Management Techniques

Technique	Typical responses
Area protection	Designation of national parks, wildlife, or biological reserves
Industry regulation	Government legislation, Professional association regulations, Voluntary regulation
Codes of conduct	Tourist codes, Industry

	codes, Best-practice
Visitor management	Zoning, Honey pots, Visitor dispersion, Pricing, and entry restrictions
Environmental impact assessment	Cost-benefit analyses, Mathematical modelling, Environmental auditing
Carrying capacity	Physical carrying capacity, Ecological carrying capacity, Social carrying capacity limits of acceptable change
Consultation	Public meetings, Attitude surveys, Delphi technique
Sustainability indicators	Efficiency gains in resource use, Reduced levels of pollution, Better waste management, Increased local production

Source: Mowforth & Munt, 2003

Spatial zoning strategies divide a tourism destination into zones according to the capacities and suitability of each area to handle tourism activities. In particular, this will displace tourists from highly sensitive areas and areas with fewer tourism facilities and attract tourists to areas with higher capacity. 'Honey pot' and 'sacrificial area' concepts are often used for this purpose. The creation of honeypots is expected to reduce the pressure on the sensitive areas of the tourist destination by creating areas with improved tourist facilities and increased tourist attraction. The creation of sacrificial areas is intended to allow only selected areas to be affected by tourists to generate tourism revenue for protecting the sensitive areas of the destination.

Nowadays, pricing policies are widely used as one of the main strategies used to manage tourists and tourism facilitators. For example, entry into many of the national parks in Sri Lanka is subject to payment of an entry fee and taxes are levied by hotels and other accommodation facilities that provide tourist facilities.

According to McIntyre (1993), Wahab and Pigram (1997), each tourism destination has a capacity (or level of use) which when exceeded is likely to trigger negative environmental

changes, and promote varying levels of damage or otherwise result in reduced level of visitor satisfaction. The carrying capacity includes the physical carrying capacity of the destination (space), ecological carrying capacity, and social carrying capacity (Williams and Lew, 2015). These techniques aim to maintain the number of tourists so as not to exceed the carrying capacity of the tourist destination or to increase the capacity of the destination to match the number of tourists. When ecological carrying capacity or physical carrying capacity cannot be increased, destination planners often try to control the number of tourists, and when social carrying capacity is low, they take steps to develop it by increasing tourism facilities and infrastructure in the area.

Based on the above literature, it can be said that researchers and tourism planners need to change the way of conceptualizing forests and forest fringe communities. As Agnew (1984) says, people are capable and knowing agents. Forest fringe communities are also not passive and impotent agents; they are active and knowing agents. Like ecotourism planners, they structured their spaces to control the behavior of people, including community members and outsiders. Each person lives in a space that is created by the individual and/or a society (Tuan, 1979). Individuals or groups of people construct the emptiness of space or the presence/absence of distinctive social meanings embedded within it; to do so, people often destroy pre-existing social structures /landscapes; alienating local communities from forests; At the same time, people will destroy /disregard the traditional social meanings (sense of place) embedded in those places and by doing so, they create spaces where they can add new social meanings. It can be said that this process has also been done by tourism destination planners in many areas of Sri Lanka. The Forest Department and the Department of Wildlife Conservation have ignored the social meanings embedded in the forest spaces by the traditional villagers, conceptualized the forest spaces as spaces without social meanings, and imposed strange social meanings (at least the meaning of protected areas) on the forest spaces.

In the research literature related to tourism destination management, there is almost no research investigating the role of traditional social meanings embedded in forests by forest fringe communities in structuring the behavior of tourism stakeholders. As such, how unique spaces are created by impregnating special social meanings and thereby structuring human behavior and how it contributes to the control of the behavior of stakeholders in tourist destinations has hardly been researched. In such a background, this study explains how traditional villagers have imposed social meanings on forest spaces and how those social meanings have shaped the behavior of tourists and facilitators. It is expected to clarify that traditional social meanings embedded in forest spaces can be used to control the behavior of stakeholders in tourism destinations sustainably.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The case study strategy was applied in this study focusing on the *Meemure* ecotourism destination surrounded by the Knuckles Mixed (Natural and Cultural) World Heritage Site in Sri Lanka. The rationale for selecting Meemure Village as the case study area to accomplish the objectives of the study is as follows.

- Meemure has a very long history: According to historical and Ravanic legends, the history of the Meemure area goes back as far as 5000 years. The legends associated with Meemura are related to the story of the Indian epic Ramayana. According to the Ramayana (Dutt, 1891), Sri Lanka was ruled by Ravana at that time, and according to Kandyans, Lakegala or Laggala (Refer to Figure 1 left) in the Meemure area was a fortress of King Ravana during the Rama-Ravana war. As the people of Meemure believe, they are the descendants of King Ravana's demon army.
- Being geo-physically isolated: Meemure is a village about 300 meters above mean sea level, hidden among the hills of Knuckles Mountain with a maximum height of 1909 meters above mean sea level. The rugged terrain of Knuckles

Mountain is characterized by a series of breathtaking rock escarpments overlooking the valley of the Heenganga River (refer to Figure 1 right). Also, Meemure is a forest village surrounded by Knuckles Forest spread over an area of about 35000 hectares (refer to Figure 2).

- Being a socially excluded village in history: Meemure is believed to have been a place of exile in ancient times and because of its remoteness and isolation, persons who had offended against the king were banished (Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources and Ministry of Cultural Affairs, 2008). According to a 16th-century folklore, King Rajasingha exiled one of his daughters and her people to Meemure due to her guilt.
- Road and communication facilities are not well developed: From Kandy, one has to travel about 78 km to reach Meemure. About 50 kilometers of the road is a carpeted road and the rest of the distance has to be traveled on a narrow-dilapidated road (about 10 feet wide) with potholes. Also, after 5 p.m., this area becomes covered with fog, so vehicles cannot ply at night. The isolation and vulnerability of the area increase during the rainy season. This traffic roughness and lack of mobile communication coverage keep Meemure isolated from the outside world even today.
- Based on forest conservation, the people of Meemure were not displaced to the areas outside the forest: The measures taken to manage ecotourism practices in Knuckles Forests by ecotourism stakeholders are different from those adopted to manage ecotourism practices in other forest-based destinations, including *Kudawa*, *Dambana*, and *Eppawala* because of the measures taken to manage forest resources without relocating the traditional villages living in forest buffer zones (CSSL, 1994; Gunawardena

, 2003; Pathmasiri, 2019). It means that the Knuckles Forest space has tended to be conceptualized as locations that have social connections to individuals (local communities) and that embed traditional social meanings. Thus, *Meemure Village* provides an ample opportunity to identify how villagers use the social meanings embedded into the Knuckle Forest to structure the behavior of insiders (local community) and outsiders (tourists) and thereby manage the ecotourism destination sustainably.

- Being a tourist destination that attracts domestic and foreign tourists: Due to the beauty of Knuckles mountains, Knuckles Forest and its biodiversity, historical and archaeological importance, educational importance, etc., Meemure tourist destination attracts a large number of local and foreign tourists. About 3000 tourists visit this destination on average during the tourism season. Villagers sell tour packages that give opportunities for tourists to engage in village trekking, forest trekking, mountain hiking, and water sports related to natural streams. As a Mixed World Heritage (nature and culture) site managed under UNESCO guidance, local communities have the opportunity to plan ecotourism activities in the destination. So, the villagers have used traditional social meanings to control the ill behavior of tourists and local communities that would negatively affect the pristine nature and fragile local culture.



Figure 1: Tourism attractions in Meemure: Lakegala (left) and a series of rock escarpments overlooking the valley of the Heenganga River (right)

Fifty-six selected key informants were interviewed at different periods from 2017 to 2022. The key informant sample consisted of purposively selected 32 local community members (including accommodation providers, tour guides, community leaders, and non-ecotourism stakeholders) and 24 outbound tourists. Data and information were analyzed based on the qualitative data analysis method, introduced by Merriam (1998). The qualitative data analysis method consisted of five steps: narrative technique, coding technique, interpretation technique,

confirmation technique, and presentation technique.

- Narrative techniques adopted in the study include reviewing the research questions, writing the history, preparing a list of essential facts, describing the social process, collecting quotations, creating interview summaries, and chronologically writing critical events.
- Coding techniques adopted in the study include categorizing the narratives according to the stakeholders telling the narratives and the legends or folktales conveyed by each narrative.
- Interpretation of the data prepared by narrative and coding methods was done according to the theoretical framework of the research.
- Opinions of different stakeholders were compared to validate interpretation and narratives. This technique allowed the researcher to believe that the interpretations were not from the researcher's constructions but from the narratives.
- The findings of the research were presented in the form of narrative and tabulated summaries.

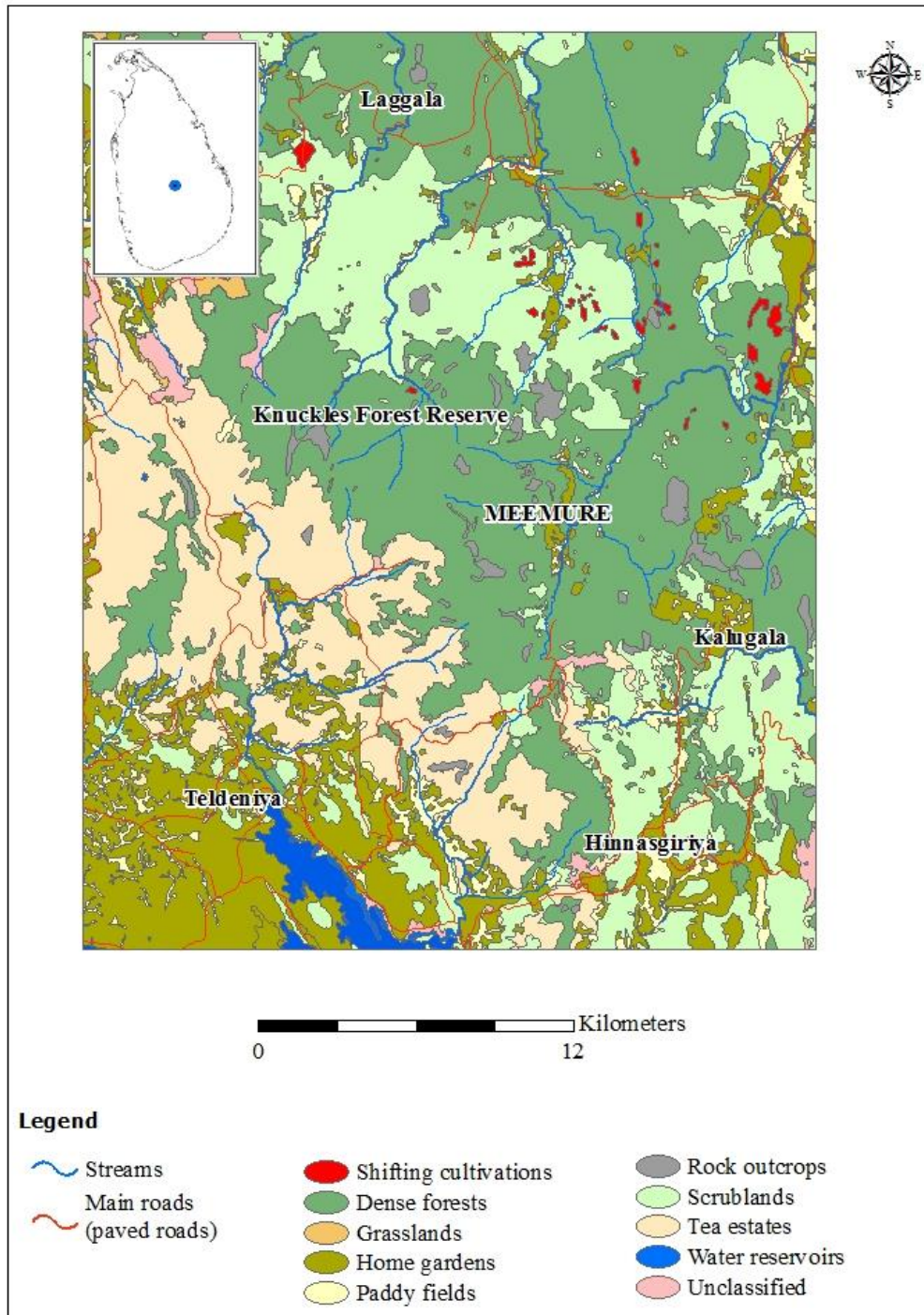


Figure 2: Land Use and Land Cover Map of Meemure Village and the Knuckles Forest Range
 Source: Adapted from the digital data of the Survey Department of Sri Lanka, 2007

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As it is commonly known, a folktale is any belief or story that is passed down orally from one generation to another, while rumors are widely disseminated talks or opinions without an identifiable source. Both legends and rumors are

believed to be false or based on myth. However, they play an important role in developing different kinds of sense of place, which in turn structure people's behavior.

There are several folktales (refer to Table 2) that led to the development of the fearful and prestigious affection that led the villagers to make a high environmental commitment to the forest. Many legends are about King *Ravana*, the ruler of *Lankapura* (Sri Lanka) about 5000 years ago. The early generation of Meemure has transmitted oral history and legends to the present generation. Hence, as indicated in Table 2, the majority of key informants know several of the folklore in the list.

Table 2: The number of key informants known the folktales and rumors in *Meemure*

The main idea of folktales and rumors	Local facilitators	Outbound tourists
The villagers descend from King Ravana and his demon community	100	83
King Ravana used <i>Lakegala/Laggala</i> mountain as a fortress during the Rama-Ravana war	78	100
King Ravana lifted his flying object, <i>Dandu Monara</i> from the <i>Lakegala</i> mountain.	63	63
There was a tunnel through <i>Lakegala</i> at the time of the <i>Rama-Ravana</i> war	94	63
The corpse of King Ravana is buried in the tunnel and the tunnel was sealed forever.	94	75
King Ravana <i>Ravana</i> is the God of the mountain; so, he is called <i>Kande Bandara Deviyo</i> .	100	100
Knuckles Forest is the abode of sage Pulasti, the grandfather of King <i>Ravana</i> .	78	96
The saint Pulasti is the custodian of Knuckles Forest	78	83
Heard the rumors of having seen the incarnation of the demon <i>Dadimunda</i> .	91	54
Souls of dead relatives (of the villagers) dwell/ roam in the forest	100	88
Rumors of deaths of irresponsible tourists in the forest	100	88

Another well-known legend in the village is about a demon named *Dadimunda*. As per respondents, some villagers have seen the demon/God in *Heen Oya* as a necked demon. As descendants from the *Vedda* community (hunters and gatherers), the villagers believe that the spirits (souls) of their dead relatives dwell in the forest.

The villagers follow both Buddhism and folk religions. They strongly believe in the power of the forest gods, so, perform several rituals and ceremonies, such as the *Adukku Mangallaya* (thanksgiving offerings to deities from their first harvest) and folk dance, abstinence from forest damaging activities, paying respects and devotion to the forest deities, and invoke the deities to cure diseases and to protect the villagers and participants from evil influences. As per key informants, participants in the *Aluth Sahal Mangallaya* should refrain from eating meat or eggs. Thus, such customs are closed to outsiders (including tourists). However, this does not affirm that no one in the village had hunted wild animals or felled forest trees. As forest resource gatherers, they hunted and felled trees, not for commercial purposes but for subsistence purposes.

As per key informants, devotion to the forest gods means not only worshiping and sacrificing but also engaging in environmentally and socio-culturally responsible practices. They worship the god *Kande Bandara* for two reasons;

- It is believed that deforestation and the indecent behavior of anyone in the forest will anger the forest deities. It will lead to many unfortunate situations such as disease outbreaks, forest accidents, property damage, natural disasters, and crop failures.
- It is believed that observance of rituals and veneration of the deities will win the favor of the forest god and that the devotees' lives and properties will be protected from diseases, disasters, and accidents in the forest and the village; their life aspirations and economic activities will succeed.

From the point of view of the villagers, the destination consists of two zones. They use physical or tangible characteristics and invisible or intangible meanings of the regions/places for zoning the destination. The first zone is the well-known zone (*terra cognita zone*). All local key informants said they had been living in the village since birth. Thus, throughout their lives, they are well aware of the village and its activities. They know not only the physical, socio-cultural, and economic background (landscape) but also the intangible meanings that are historically imprinted in this region. The second zone is the partially understood (*terra intimidus*) zone. Elderly villagers have a better understanding of the Knuckles Forest landscape or physical, socio-cultural, and economic settings by actively participating in forest-based economic activities. However, they have developed *terra-intimidus* affection concerning the forest, based on folktales, rumors, and misfortunes that occurred in the forest. According to the key informants, the forest is not just an absolute space consisting of tangible things but also an abstract space and a lived space. They believe that it is the abode of the saints, the forest deities, the gods, the demons, and the souls of their forefathers and that the invisible forces influence those who interact with the forest. The forest is therefore a *terra intermidus zone* for the villagers and outsiders (visitors).

The affection for/towards *terra intermidus* that developed through legends has persuaded the villagers to refrain from forest-destructing activities. The majority of local ecotourism facilitators (87%) in the village have voluntarily set up destination management codes of conduct, adhered to them, and compelled visitors to follow them. The main codes of conduct are worshipping the god *Kande Bandara* before entering the forest, behaving politely, and refraining from irresponsible activities in the forest such as liquor, setting forest fire, hunting, collecting forest products (mainly animals), and disposing of trash and litters in the forest. The *Meemure* Protecting Youth Association has displayed boards at various places in the village containing the etiquette to be followed at the destination. Thus,

it is evident that the legends have regulated the spatial behavior of *Meemure* villagers.

As shown in Table 2, all outbound tourists were awoken by the villagers' folklore. Many visitors knew several legends. In addition, the host community uses rumors about deadly accidents that happened in the forests to make visitors adhere to the above-mentioned code of conduct. As indicated in the following narrative, the villagers make tourists believe that anyone who harms the forest will be excreted by the forest deities.

Four tourists lost their lives, and a few got injured in the village and forest within the last five years. Before entering the forest, we perform some ritualistic practices to dedicate our devotion to the Bandara deity, the guardian of the village, and the forest for asking for protection against evil influences. Those tourists who lost their lives had entered the forest without a local tour guide, without worshipping the Bandara deity, and had misbehaved (alcoholism). If there were local tour guides with them, their lives would be saved. (a local male tour guide)

It is believed that the irresponsible behavior of tourists (and tourism facilitators) will lead to the displeasure of the forest gods. The disgruntled gods will execute not only the guests but also the villagers. Therefore, the villagers closely monitor the behavior of tourists and tourism facility providers and take necessary action in case of code violations. Thus, it is clear that the *terra-incognita* affection created by folklore and rumors has converted villagers into guardians of the tourism destination. This role of social meanings embedded in forests in structuring the behavior of tourism stakeholders can be illustrated as shown in Figure 3.

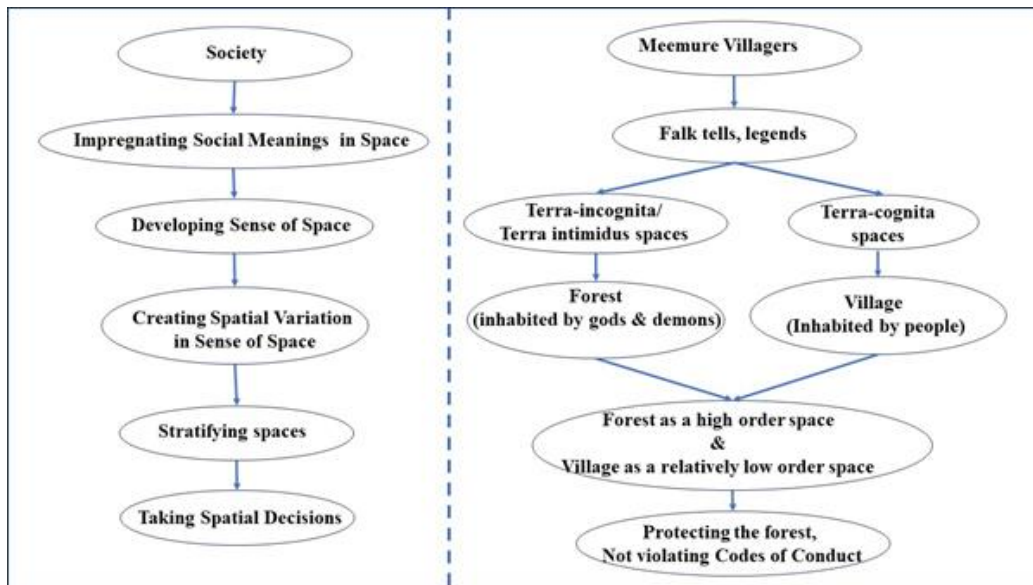


Figure 3: The role of social meanings in structuring the behavior of tourism stakeholders: schematic representation (left) and in the case of Meemure (right)

5. CONCLUSION

Traditionally people have impregnated social meanings in forest space. These traditional meanings come to life as folktales, stories, and rumors. These legends have had a significant impact on developing a sense of space for those who are drawn to them. Thus, the rumors and folktales in *Meemure* have led to the development of terra-incognita affection with the Knuckles Forest. In other words, rumors and folktales have led to the development of spatial variation in the sense of space and then it has led to the stratification of spaces based on the sense of spaces. This stratification has structured the decision-making process of the villagers. Villagers have influenced outsiders to adhere to the spatial decisions of the villagers. Hence it is clear that the behavior of tourists and local tourism facilitators is more effectively structured without any financial cost. Also, villagers have voluntarily adopted codes of conduct to manage visitors and tourism facilitators. Thereby, they have become not only tourism facilitators but also destination custodians. Therefore, traditional social meanings, especially folk tales, and rumors, impregnated in forest spaces can be identified as cost-effective tools for ecotourism destination management. Hence, this study concludes that a holistic conceptualization of forest spaces lays

the foundation for ensuring the active participation of local communities in ecotourism destination management, and such a conceptualization sets the stage for developing sustainable and low-cost strategies/ tools for managing ecotourism destinations.

The legends are reproduced in society through active participation in socio-cultural practices and the life-long socialization processes of the local community. One can identify legends and rumors as untrue, with no scientific evidence to substantiate them. The reality is that social meanings (folklore and gossip) embedded with forest spaces play an important role in structuring local communities to make sustainable use of the tangible and intangible resources of tourist destinations. However, the irresponsibility of any stakeholder (including researchers and planners) puts these intangible resources at risk of disappearing from society. Once despaired, the environmental and socio-cultural commitment of villagers and tourists will diminish. The locals would not adhere and make others adhere to the above codes of conduct. It would negatively affect the pristine resources, the sustainability of the tourism industry of the destination, and the livelihood of the community. Not only that, it will lead to an increase in forest conservation costs. Therefore, responsible agencies should identify traditional social meanings as ecotourism destination

management tools. Such understanding would lead to active community participation in managing ecotourism destinations sustainably.

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