Local Power and Forest Use in Rural Tanzania

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Are longstanding residents, or “locals”, protectors of forests or the main contributors to continued deforestation? The vast majority of illegal forest use in rural Tanzania is for the collection of fuelwood, of which virtually all households express an insufficiency and greater need. Not all households, however, elect to engage in this illegal and potentially risky activity. Using survey data and a list experiment conducted in two rural, forest-proximate areas of Tanzania, I demonstrate that local groups are more likely to volunteer as forest patrollers and to cite the importance of environmental protection, but that they are also twice as likely to illegally cut from the forest. I argue that this is due to two primary factors: 1) newer migrants being less familiar with and so intimidated by forest-related activities; and 2) policy structures engendering local “hoarding” or “protecting” of secret information regarding the forests, including common access points, ways to avoid injury, capture, etc. Due to the illegal nature of cutting and high levels of distrust among villagers, newcomers are not able to openly ask locals for advice regarding forest use; likewise, locals hide their forest use from fellow villagers. Equity-minded implications of this are that newcomers who might have a greater need for forest resources (more vulnerable, land scarce or insecure households), are not given an “in”. Implications for resource conservation are that there may be a need to target conservationist programs to local populations; successful policies must develop a greater understanding of and seek to shift the locals’ cost-benefit analysis of forest use. New migrants, who often lack historical and spiritual connections to the forest, are often painted as the prime contributors to deforestation; this paper suggests a more nuanced view of local behavior and a need to revisit beliefs about locals as guardians of forests and their resources.