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The Darker Side of the Forest: A Sociological Exploration of Hidden Crimes in Forests

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Abstract

The way human beings survive on the planet relies on environmental health, and forests occupy a special role in that balance; as a result, conserving forests carries great importance both locally and internationally. In Sri Lanka, forest cover has fallen to 29.7 percent over the past century despite a legal framework that once protected roughly 70 percent of the island's land area. This study examines the crimes that drive deforestation and forest degradation, focusing on the problem that forest crimes remain punishable and detrimental, yet those who commit them continue to do so. The research examines the socio-economic background of individuals involved in forest crimes in Sri Lanka, how their socio-economic status shapes their behaviour, and what solutions might reduce such offending. The Ampara Range of Ampara District was selected as the study location. A mixed-methods design combined quantitative and qualitative data: a structured, interviewer-administered questionnaire of 31 questions was completed by 31 respondents drawn through stratified random sampling from individuals with recorded forest-crime cases in the Ampara Range, complemented by semi-structured key-informant interviews with six informants, including forest and wildlife officers, law-enforcement officers, and local residents. The factors motivating forest crime were identified and analysed, showing that forest destruction is driven not only by livelihood concerns but also, to a lesser extent, by profit-making enterprises and political influence. A multi-level policy strategy against forest crime is proposed accordingly.

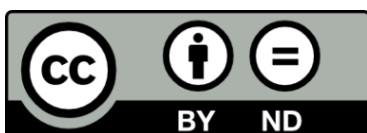
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Keywords: Deforestation, Forest crimes, Forest degradation, Policy recommendations, Socio-economic factors



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The forests greatly contribute to the life of a country. They are able to maintain environmental equilibrium and they are also useful for human culture and for the environment. This is acknowledged in Sri Lanka's Constitution where the government and people are called upon to protect and conserve natural resources. Chapter VI of the Constitution which states the Directive Principles of State Policy and Fundamental Duties, along with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) confirms that the environment should be protected and improved for the welfare of the people. All citizens are obliged under Article 28(e) to preserve community property and not to abuse or lose it, and under Article 28(f) to protect natural resources and the environment, as major responsibilities.

The provisions make it clear that the government is responsible for protecting and developing the environment and that citizens should conserve natural resources. The Sri Lanka National Forest Policy, which was laid down in the National Forestry Master Plan (Ministry of Agriculture, Lands and Forestry, 1995), places great value on the conservation of the forest resources for the benefit of future generations with their particular interest in the conservation of biodiversity, soils and cultural values. This priority reflects Sri Lanka's status as a biodiversity hotspot, where a substantial number of forest-

dependent species are classified as nationally threatened (International Union for Conservation of Nature & Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources, Sri Lanka, 2012). Forest protection legislation in Sri Lanka is not necessarily colonial but has been followed by Sri Lankan monarchs since ancient times and the island was granted protection in the Forest Ordinance of 1885, which has been amended from time to time, and is incorporated in the Forest Conservation Ordinance under Section 451, which provides the backbone of protection under the current legislation (Perera, 1977). However, the implementation of this framework is weak – especially when citizens are not actively involved - and over the past few years, there has been an increasing push to involve citizens more in the prevention of forest crime and sustainable forest management.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, roughly 70 percent of Sri Lanka's total land area consisted of forest cover; this had fallen to 44 percent by 1956 (Legg & Jewell, 1995), and stood at 29.7 percent as of the most recent national assessment (Forest Department, 2021), with more recent satellite-based analyses confirming that the pace of loss has been especially rapid in the dry-zone forests since 2010 (Ranagalage et al., 2020). Forest crime is a major contributor to this deforestation. Nationwide, forest crimes remained persistently frequent between 2011 and 2019, ranging from

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roughly 2,800 to just under 4,000 recorded cases annually, with the Ampara District accounting for a substantial and at times rising share of this total (Conservator General of Forests, 2019); the range-level detail for Ampara District is presented later, in the Study Area section of the Methodology. Under the Forest Conservation Ordinance, a forest crime is any act punishable under the provisions of the Ordinance or under regulations made pursuant to it; this general definition covers offences committed against reserved forests, conservation forests, and other state forests, and is given effect through the coordinated work of the Forest Department, the police, and other assigned officials.

Although measures for forest protection and public awareness have been introduced (Seneviratne, 1982), the volume of forest crimes remains more or less the same from year to year, indicating that the wider society is a strong influence on the continued existence of forest and natural resources, and that participation of citizens is crucial to the effective conservation of forests. Forest related offences come in a variety of forms such as unauthorised logging, encroachment on forest land, harvesting of forest resources without authorisation, destruction of forest stocks, illicit clearing, transportation and sale of logs outside the forest limits. Understanding who is engaging in these activities and why is an important

part of this research, as is the potential for such understanding to contribute to policy and more effective conservation methods in the forestry sector in the future.

Traditional rural society in Sri Lanka also had government forests linked to common ideas like that of the forest guardian (Kele Mahaththuru) and the forest justice (Kele Neethi), which led to the avoidance of unauthorised utilization as customary loyalty was upheld by unwritten agreements among traditional farmers, who were traditionally responsible for the protection of riverine buffer zones (Dayananda, 1987). However, over time these traditional values have become weaker, while the pressures on the forest system have been rising, despite a growing awareness among the public of environmental issues including global warming, rising sea-level, and a growing number of natural disasters. This problem is the main conundrum this study attempts to solve: a specific segment of the population is still engaged in forest crime despite having full knowledge of the environmental and legal repercussions. Therefore, it is crucial to grasp what influences this behaviour if an effective response to forest crime is to be designed.

The general goal of this study is therefore to analyse the factors influencing the involvement in forest crimes among the people in Sri Lanka with a special focus on Ampara. In particular this study looks at the

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background of the perpetrators of forest crime, the socio-economic factors that play a part in their involvement in forest offences and at what remedies and policy steps could be taken to discourage forest crimes.

Despite the huge amount of work done on deforestation and forest-cover change in Sri Lanka using remote sensing and policy analysis (Ranagalage et al. 2020; Rathnayake and Soto-Berelov, 2020), few studies have looked into the issue of forest crime from the victim's perspective, which is the actual place where forest protection is encountered on a day-to-day basis, at the range level. This study brings together the survey data of 31 people and records of forest crime cases and then adds qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews of forest officers, law enforcers and residents in the Ampara Range to provide range-level evidence of offenders that is often missing from existing literature on deforestation in the dry-zone and uses this evidence to shape policy responses at the community and livelihood levels, rather than relying solely on calls for more enforcement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This review briefly addresses three concepts that are crucial to the study, that is, forest crime, deforestation and forest degradation. It then contextualises the Sri Lankan history and space of deforestation, looks at the socio-economic drivers of forest

encroachment and the institutional and enforcement checks put in place to prevent it.

Forest crime and forest degradation

Forest crime is any offence punishable under the Forest Conservation Ordinance, or under any regulation or rule made under the Ordinance, as well as offences under the Flora and Fauna Protection Ordinance, and under any regulation or rule made under the Ordinance. Deforestation is removal of forest cover to other uses like agricultural land, town or mining (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations [FAO], 2001). Forest degradation, in turn, is defined as degradation that happens within forest and harms its structure or function, therefore lowering its capability to provide commodities or services (FAO, 2001) and general degradation resulting from one or more factors which lead to the degradation of a forest's biological wealth over time.

Deforestation in Sri Lanka – Historical and Spatial Context

The Sri Lankan experiences of deforestation is well documented. Forest cover decreased from approximately 70 percent at the beginning of the twentieth century to 44 percent in 1956 (Legg & Jewell, 1995) and to 29.7 percent in the latest national assessment (Forest Department, 2021). It was estimated that between 1990 and 2000, 26400 hectares were lost annually

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(approximately 1.14 percent per year) and 1.43 percent per year between 2000 and 2005 (Forest Department, 2005). The loss of forest from the dry-zone was additionally estimated from more recent satellite data, which also confirmed the loss and extended it to cover an additional 246,958 hectares over a period of 27 years to 2019, with the highest rates after 2010, coinciding with rapid after-war infrastructure development (Rathnayake et al., 2020), while active disturbance within the boundaries of protected areas has continued to be detected by satellite analysis (Rathnayake & Soto-Berelov, 2020). Nationally, losses in natural forest cover continue each year, as revealed by Global Forest Watch (2024) data, and since the years the historical estimates above were developed, deforestation has not decreased. Much of the forest that remains outside strictly protected reserves is secondary forest that has regenerated after earlier clearance, and its extent and condition are themselves a matter of ongoing concern (Perera, 2001).

Dry-zone forests cover approximately four million hectares, mostly occurring at elevations between 50 and 150 metres elevation, and this is a high percentage of Ampara District (Survey Department, 2015) and accounts for about 22 per cent of the forest that remains in Sri Lanka (Gunatilleke & Gunatilleke, 1983). Although the dry zone is relatively sparsely populated, poverty and income inequality are still significant. Land use is high and

intensive but is rarely efficient; a large proportion of land within the dry zone is under government ownership (Land Use Policy & Planning Department, 2018). Ampara Range case reports show that high land demand and low agricultural productivity continue to drive people to encroach the state forest illegally as per the Land Development Ordinance No.16 of 1969, the individual is having right for the maximum two acres of land though the land demand is very high and agricultural productivity is very low.

Forest Encroachment is the result of Socio-Economic Drivers

Pressures from rural livelihoods are a key factor identified for forest encroachment. Slash-and-burn (chena) cultivation and uncontrolled grazing of cattle are important deforestation activities, especially in Sri Lanka's dry area, where deforestation is often deliberately carried out for better cropping conditions despite the damage to soil and forests (Weerawardana, 1999). Households dealing with the acute economic pressure also have to resort to timber logging, which is also often taken up in the last resort within forest areas reserved for forest utilization (Mohd Noor et al., 2020). In the global context, as population grows the food demand has also increased, which has been directly observed as a direct drop in the world's forest cover (Uzair et al., 2017), and similar in Sri Lanka when people and land pressure has turned the dry

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forest cover in Sri Lanka to agricultural land.

Other evidence around the region corroborates this livelihood-based story of encroachment. A recent mixed-methods study combining remote-sensing and household-surveys in Kerinci Seblat National Park in Indonesia revealed that the vast majority of encroachment cases—76 %—involved households with no land or low capacity to support themselves, and that livelihood-support measures, not just enforcement, were the main policy response needed (Habib et al., 2025). It is a general pattern that was observed in the Sri Lankan chena-cultivation study, in which encroachment is an economic adjustment to the broader dry-zone agrarian system, and not as an act clearly deliberate in committing crime (Sandika & Withana, 2010). Meanwhile, the promotion of deforestation through land-use incentive programmes created by the state and commercial institutions has also been associated with deforestation (Uzair et al., 2017), as has illegal activity linked to the promotion of ecotourism, which has been proven to exploit the attractiveness of forest and historic natural site in order to intensify deforestation (Mian et al., 1999).

Institutional Frameworks and Enforcement Challenges

In Sri Lanka, forest protection is the responsibility of various institutions,

primarily the Department of Forest Conservation, Department of Wildlife Conservation, Central Environmental Authority, and Coast Conservation Department, and is enforced by the Sri Lanka Police, the Special Task Force and the armed forces. The legal framework covers the Forest Conservation Ordinance (established since 1904), the Flora and Fauna Protection Ordinance, the National Environmental Act, the Coast Conservation Act and the State Land (Recovery of Possession) Act (Forest Conservation Department, 2019). Nevertheless, over time illegal forest use has grown (Forest Conservation Department, 2019) driven not necessarily by a lack of legislation itself, but rather by various issues of poor institutional coordination, lack of capacity to effectively enforce the rules, and sometimes by the effect that political and commercial will has had on the decisions about land use. Similar institutional weaknesses have been reported elsewhere in the region: in Nigeria's Ogun State, for instance, persistently high rates of forest offences have likewise been linked to weak enforcement capacity and poor coordination among the agencies responsible for combating them (Adejumo et al., 2018).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research aims at explaining the persistence of a set of people who, despite knowing the legal and environmental implications, continue



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to commit forest crimes. It is a mixed-methods design with the objective of shedding light on the motives behind forest crime, the socio-economic systems of the criminals and policy options for addressing the problem. The study area, Ampara District is one of the two most deforested areas in Sri Lanka following Western Province and has the highest deforestation rate and illegal utilisation of forest resources in the country. The Forest Department is managing the district with four range divisions namely Ampara, Maha Oya, Akkaraipattu and Lahugala, of which Ampara range, which represents the DSA of Ampara, Uhana, Damana, and Eragama, was selected as the main study area due to concerns regarding the occurrence of forest-related illegality in the area. Forest cover in Ampara District has declined steadily in recent decades, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Forest Cover Reduction in Ampara District, 1992–2015

Year	Forest Area (ha)	Forest Cover (%)
1992	166,668	37.3
1999	164,129	37.0
2010	151,109	34.2
2015	149,547	33.9

Source: Department of Forest Conservation, 2019

Each forest range is the primary operational unit for field-based conservation and management under the Sri Lanka Forest Department's operational framework, overseen by a Forest Officer responsible for enforcing forest law and preventing forest crime. Table 2 situates forest-crime trends in

the Ampara Range within the wider nationwide and district patterns for 2011–2019, drawing on progress reports from the Conservator General of Forests and Ampara Range Office records; range-level figures are available only from 2015 onwards.

Table 2. Reported Forest Crimes, Nationwide, Ampara District, and Ampara Range (2011–2019)

Year	Nationwide	Ampara District	Ampara Range
2011	2,956	127	—
2012	3,009	119	—
2013	3,015	150	—
2014	2,845	117	—
2015	2,804	116	15
2016	3,717	330	82
2017	3,887	319	80
2018	3,768	265	70
2019	3,931	245	85

Note. Data compiled from the Progress Reports of the Conservator General of Forests (2011–2019) and records from the Ampara Range Office.

As Table 2 shows, both district- and range-level forest crime rose sharply from 2016 onward, roughly tripling relative to 2015 and remaining elevated through 2019; this trend motivated the decision to focus this study's fieldwork on cases recorded in the Ampara Range.

Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, a structured, interviewer-administered questionnaire and semi-structured key-informant interviews – because the survey method sets the stage for the prevalence and



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demographic pattern of forest-crime involvement, while the key informant interviews provide depth of explanation not captured by a structured instrument. Supporting secondary documentation was obtained from the Forest Conservation Department (FCD), the Ampara District Forest Office, and the Ampara Range Office, including crime reports, case files of arrested offenders and prosecution of forest-related crimes, and performance reports on forest-related police activity.

Sampling Strategy

The population of interest comprised all individuals with recorded forest-crime cases in the Ampara Range over the preceding five years (2016–2020), a total of 332 people. A stratified random sampling method was used because forest crime in the Range occurs across several distinct offence categories, each with potentially different underlying causes: unauthorised clearings, unauthorised fallings, unauthorised timber transport, removal of minor forest products, and a residual category of other violations. Table 3 sets out the population and corresponding sample drawn from each stratum.

Table 3. Population and Sample by Forest-Crime Category, Ampara Range (2016–2020)

Forest Crime Type	Population in Stratum	Sample Size
Unauthorized clearings	138	14
Unauthorized fallings	38	4

Unauthorized timber transport	28	3
Removal of minor forest products	18	2
Other violations	110	11
Total	332	34

Note. Records from the Ampara Range Office.

A systematic sample was taken within each stratum, with every 10th person selected; 34 persons were selected. Of these 31 questionnaires were completed, with the remaining three unreachable or declining to participate. The analysis is based on the realised sample of 31 respondents. This sample size ($n = 31$) is deliberately small, designed to represent the known size of the offender population within the Ampara Range rather than a sampling deficiency, as only 10 per cent of all 332 persons with recorded offences was targeted to achieve the stratified sample in Table 3. This scale conforms to other small-population and enforcement area studies and accompanied by six semi-structured key-informant interviews to enhance the depth and triangulation of the results. Forest crimes are often committed in a 'chained' fashion rather than as single events, and the study also employed key-informant interviews to cover different viewpoints on forest law-enforcement, forest offending, and communities' experiences of forest crimes, i.e. a forest law-enforcement officer, a street-level

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forest law enforcement officer, a wildlife officer, a timber crime participant, a resident living close to the forest, and a forest law-enforcement officer working with forest fire cases.

Data Collection

Primary quantitative data were collected using a structured questionnaire of 31 questions covering 28 variables, administered by 13 trained research assistants to the 31 respondents identified through the sampling procedure above. Primary qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the six key informants described above, using an ordered interview guide that nonetheless allowed informants to speak freely. Fieldwork was conducted principally in the Ampara, Damana, Uhana, and Eragama Divisional Secretariat areas, with some participants residing in Batticaloa and Monaragala Districts. Secondary data, comprising crime reports, performance reports, and case files from the Forest Conservation Department, the Ampara District Forest Office, and the Ampara Range Office, supplemented the primary data and informed the sampling frame.

Data Analysis

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used for the analysis of the quantitative data. The distribution of each variable was first

explored by a proportional frequency analysis procedure to determine the distribution of the variables across the sample, and then the bivariate, or two-correlated, procedure was conducted on a number of variables that were thought to have an important relationship to the research questions being asked. The transcripts from the six key-informant interviews were analysed using the six phases of Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarising yourself with the transcript, generating initial codes, collating codes into candidate themes, reviewing themes against the data, defining and naming themes, and finally writing-up. The results of both strands are reported in the following section, grouped by the study's three specific objectives, with each qualitative theme explicitly connected to the survey statistic that it supports and/or challenges.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following sections integrate the quantitative survey findings ($n = 31$) with the thematic findings from the six key-informant interviews, organised around the study's three specific objectives so that each variable is presented alongside its critical interpretation and its connection to the wider literature.



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Socio-Economic Backgrounds of Individuals Engaged in Forest Crimes

Table 4 summarises the socio-economic profile of the 31 respondents across gender, marital status, education, household size, income, land, housing, and community participation.

Table 4. Socio-Economic Profile of Respondents

Variable	Category	Percentage(%)
Gender	Male	90.3
	Female	9.7
Marital status	Married	87.1
	Unmarried	12.9
Educational level	Primary (grades 1–8)	58.1
	Secondary (grades 9–13)	41.9
Family dependents	1–2	25.8
	3–4	48.4
	5 or more	25.8
Monthly income	Low (< Rs. 25,000)	48.4
	Medium (Rs. 25,000–50,000)	51.6
	High (> Rs. 50,000)	0.0
Source of income	Farming	51.6
	Wage labour	38.7
	Self-employment	6.5
	Permanent employment	3.2
Land held (extent)	Less than 1 acre	67.7
	1–4 acres	25.8
	More than 4 acres / none	6.4
Nature of land title	Government primary documents	58.1
	Unauthorized	25.8

Nature of residence	government land	
	Sinnakkara (freehold) documents	12.9
Rural voluntary-organisatio n	Permanent	67.7
	Semi-completed	19.4
Official position in such organisatio n	Temporary	12.9
	Yes	45.2
p	No	54.8
	Yes	6.5

Source: Questionnaire Survey, 2017

For most indicators, the profile of the smallholders and wage labourers in the land-poor low-to-medium income groups is consistent, as can be seen in Table 4, with that of affluent or organised actors: two thirds have less than one acre of land, all are in the low- or medium-income bands, and more than half have primary-level education. The majority (54.8 percent) showed no membership in any of the rural voluntary organisations; most of these were married with three or more dependants, indicating some extent of community isolation among those offenders, which may lead to intervention in the future. In general, this profile reflects recent comparative evidence concerning the Kerinci Seblat National Park in Indonesia, where more than 90% of encroachment cases were among landless families and among economically constrained



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wage-based encroachers for who encroached to improve their livelihoods, with livelihood-support responses recommended as a complement to enforcement (Habib et al., 2025). It also aligns with chena-cultivation literature in Sri Lanka where encroachers as making an economic adjustment in a land-scarce agrarian system, rather than engaging in behaviour motivated by criminal intent (Sandika & Withana, 2010).

The Role of Socio-Economic Conditions in Forest-Crime Engagement

Table 5 sets out the nature of the offences recorded, respondents' stated reasons and motivations for engaging in them, and the way offences were organised and led.

Table 5. Nature, Motivations, and Group Dynamics of Forest-Crime Involvement

Variable	Category	Percentage (%)
Nature of offence	Illegal land encroachment	48.4
	Other violations	16.1
	Unauthorized tree felling	12.9
	Illegal grazing of cattle	12.9
	Unauthorized extraction of resources	6.5
	Unauthorized timber storage	3.2
	Personal necessities	74.2
Reason for engaging	As a hired worker	9.7

Underlying motivation	At the request of another person	12.9
	Economic needs	3.2
	Livelihood needs	96.8
Participation type	Wage-based employment	3.2
	Alone	58.1
	As part of a group	32.3
	With another individual	6.5
Motivation of group members	With a family member	3.2
	Personal needs	87.1
	Economic benefits	12.9
Leadership role	Led the activity	80.6
	Did not lead	19.4
Knowledge of forest law	Limited	51.6
	Moderate	45.2

Source: Questionnaire Survey, 2017

Illegal land encroachment for agricultural use is, on its own, the single largest category of offence (48.4 per cent), and when combined with unauthorised tree felling and illegal cattle grazing (12.9 per cent each), accounts for over 61 per cent of all recorded offences, indicating that livelihood-related land pressure rather than commercial timber crime dominates the offence profile in the Ampara Range. This is reinforced by the fact that 96.8 per cent of respondents cited livelihood needs, and 74.2 per cent specifically cited personal necessity, as their motivation, while over half reported only limited knowledge of forest law. Most

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respondents (58.1 per cent) acted alone and led their own activity (80.6 per cent), and none had any prior record of forest crime, again pointing towards largely individual, subsistence-driven offending rather than organised criminal enterprise.

Beyond the survey data, respondents also indicated near-unanimous acceptance that forests must be protected (80.6 per cent, with the remainder expressing no opinion) and a strong majority view that officials face no significant obstacles in enforcing the law (90.3 per cent, with the remainder expressing no opinion); together these responses suggest that, in the respondents' own account, weak enforcement is not perceived as an external constraint on official conduct so much as a matter separate from their own conservation attitudes. Reported political influence over respondents' own activities was minimal: only one respondent (3.2 per cent) reported any such influence, with the remaining 96.8 percent reporting none.

The interview data with key informants forest and wildlife officers, law-enforcement officers, a former offender, and a forest-adjacent resident provide thematic explanations that sit alongside these statistics rather than forming a separate analysis. Three themes emerged from the six transcripts. First, economic precarity was described by law-enforcement and resident informants as a driver of forest crime rather than a post-hoc excuse for it, framed as a "survival response" to

landlessness rather than opportunistic criminal behaviour; this corroborates the finding that almost all respondents (96.8 per cent) cited livelihood concerns as their main motivation. Second, informants attributed the persistence of forest crime, despite supportive legislation, to weak enforcement capacity arising from inadequate personnel and funding at the ground level, which may help explain why legal deterrence has not curbed the rising trend evident in Tables 1 and 2 over the study period. Third, although only 3.2 per cent of respondents acknowledged political influence over their own activities (Table 5), informants indicated that individuals with political affiliations in their communities have at times provided protection for larger or more organised instances of forest crime a pattern the survey instrument, addressing only individual respondents' own experiences, was not designed to capture.

Together, the quantitative and qualitative strands paint a picture of forest crime in the Ampara Range as a livelihood issue, and not an opportunistic one or one driven by profit. It also corresponds to the finding that the forest-related crime in similar agrarian context is caused by the scarcity of land and poor land-use practices rather than from the criminality itself (Azizan et al., 2017), and the chena-cultivation literature in Sri Lanka which considers encroachment as economic adjustment

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in the dry-zone agrarian system (Sandika & Withana, 2010). It contrasts with enforcement literature representations which typically point to organised forested syndicates as the main culprits (Mohd Noor et al., 2020): in Ampara Range, the more important trend is the subsistence nature of forest encroachments, where there is an undocumented and less visible layer of politically protected forest offending, indicated by the qualitative data but not strongly identified by the structured survey. Comparable socio-political constraints on enforcement, where politically connected actors are able to operate with relative impunity, have been documented in other forest-dependent economies (Nutakor et al., 2011). This apparent two-tier offending, with policing of the first kind (poverty driven offending, overt and well documented) and less overt, possibly protected (policed) offending, is a new finding of this study and would need further, more clearly triangulated qualitative in-depth work.

Remedies and Policy Implications

Read against the study's three objectives, the findings give a broadly consistent answer. On the socio-economic background of offenders, the profile is one of land-poor, low-income smallholders and wage labourers with limited education, rather than organised or affluent actors. On the role of these conditions in offending, the survey and interview data converge on livelihood pressure, rather than profit-seeking or political protection, as the

dominant pathway into forest crime in the Ampara Range, although the qualitative material suggests this visible pattern coexists with a less visible, politically protected tier of offending that the survey instrument was not designed to capture. On remedies and policy, the pattern of findings points away from punitive enforcement alone and towards land-access, livelihood, and community-participation measures.

These conclusions should be read with the study's limitations in mind. The quantitative sample is small and drawn from a single forest range, which limits statistical generalisation to other districts; self-reported responses on politically sensitive matters are also subject to social-desirability bias, which the qualitative interviews only partially offset. Future research with a larger, multi-range sample and triangulated official records would help establish how far the livelihood-driven pattern observed here generalises across Sri Lanka's dry-zone forest ranges.

CONCLUSION

The aim of the study was to explain about their own forest crimes and reasons why they commit them despite knowing that it is harmful to the environment and against the law. Several trends in the data strongly suggest a livelihood explanation: offending across this Range is concentrated among land-poor, low-income households primarily engaged



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in agricultural activities and/or wage work, and in relatively small groups or individually in order to acquire land and income; and not in organised, profit-oriented businesses. Previous studies in Sri Lanka have largely been based on remote sensing and national level policy analysis, this study provides range level, offender-centred evidence based on a range level survey and key-informant accounts to explain the human and economic conditions underlying the deforestation trends reported in the broader Sri Lankan literature. It also brings to light a two-level structure, a clear one that demands further analysis: the subsistence offenders that are easily visible, and the politically connected individuals that are involved in greater forest crime, but less so and less accountable.

On this basis, four broad measures are recommended for addressing forest crime in the Ampara Range. Forest-protection legislation should be enforced more consistently, paired with community education on the long-term ecological costs of forest destruction and the legal consequences of encroachment. Community participation in conservation and sustainable agricultural practices should be actively encouraged, with rural voluntary organisations supported as a vehicle for collective responsibility, given how many offenders in this study had no such affiliation. Alternative livelihoods through sustainable agriculture, eco-

tourism, or skills training should be developed for land-poor households so that subsistence needs no longer depend on forest exploitation. Finally, the legal system should be applied consistently to politically connected and corrupt actors implicated in larger-scale forest crime, so that enforcement is not perceived as falling unevenly on subsistence-level offenders alone. Taken together, these measures point to the need for closer coordination among forest officers, local government, and law-enforcement agencies in addressing both the livelihood-driven and the politically protected dimensions of forest crime identified in this study.

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