

Abstract

The Kaya forests, located in Kenya's coastal landscape, are sacred forests of the Mijikenda community. These forests are peculiar multi-functional socio-ecological production landscapes that are rich in biodiversity. More than half of Kenya's rare plants are found on the coast, many of which are found in these sacred forests. Due to the rich diversity of flora and fauna, the Kaya forests provide an array of ecosystem goods and services which support human wellbeing and livelihood systems. Consequently, a study was conducted in Kilifi and Kwale counties on the Kenyan Coast, mainly inhabited by the Mijikenda community, to determine how sustainable use of biodiversity in the Kaya forests contributes to effective area-based conservation of biodiversity. A mixed-methods approach was used involving both qualitative and quantitative surveys. Representatives of 375 households drawn from 31 villages were interviewed using semi-structured questionnaires. Thirty-one Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), one in each village, were also held with key informants (herbalists, rainmakers, Kaya elders and experienced indigenous farmers) who are the main custodians of indigenous knowledge. The results showed that the Mijikenda community ensures sustainable use of biodiversity through domestication of wild foods and medicinal plants. Additionally, the solid cultural values and traditional resource governance system (Kaya elders' council) that connects the community were important for sustaining traditional knowledge and biodiversity, and promoting collective activities that enhance information exchange, sharing of ideas and networking. These collective activities likewise reinforce the cultural values of solidarity, collectiveness and harmony that promote integrated landscape management, and hence lead to effective area-based conservation of biodiversity. These integrated and holistic management approaches of the Kaya forests, if sustained, could in the long-term ensure that these sacred forests are well-connected and integrated into the broader landscape, hence sustainably conserving biodiversity while providing ecosystem services that support local livelihoods.