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What is sustainability of swidden agriculture?

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The purpose of this study is to discuss on the conditions under which forest resource use and management are kept sustainable or not, with special focus on temporal analysis of location of swidden fields as well as their impact on the forest under various socioeconomic conditions, from the case of South-Western Ethiopian forest, where a small scale society (the Majangir, a Surmic speaking ethnic group) have been engaged in swidden agriculture (shifting cultivation) as well as honey collecting and hunting.

The Majangir used to live in small settlements which they often abandoned and moved within several years. They would clear swidden fields adjacent to their huts. Though their settlements and swidden fields were dispersed in the forest, reconstructed settlement location data in the last 100 years suggest that they had repeatedly settled at limited area while the rest of the forest had been kept uncleared, because several factors including water supply limited their settlement location. This traditional settlement and land use pattern greatly changed the recent 30 years in which they had settled into newly shaped large scale sedentary villages under the government policy. Sedentarization brought concentration of population and land use of agriculture around large villages and as a result, fallow period was shortened in such areas. However, most of small settlements that had been once dispersed in the forest were abandoned and reforested, so in effect sedentarization didn't make deforestation totally. As swidden agriculturalists generally prefer labor productivity to land productivity, it is reasonable to suppose that they preferred proximity for land selection at the expense of land productivity caused by fallow shortening.

It seems obvious that forest resource use among the Majangir had been sustainable both before and after sedentarization. It is probably not because they were aware of vulnerability of forest so that they consciously practiced limited resource use. Rather, it can be said that they fundamentally behave so as to maximize their labor productivity. It is likely that absence of market incentive and ethnic occupation of forest resource use (absence of ethnic competition over the same resource) were advantageous to make sustainable use of the forest. Recent movement such as resettlement of Ethiopian highlanders to villages in the forest and a plantation project planned by a foreign enterpriser, however, could menace indigenous sustainable resource use in the near future.

Keywords: swidden agriculture, sustainable forest resource use, commons, ethnic relations, Ethiopia