

TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM OF PANAMA VILLAGE IN EASTERN SRI LANKA

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Traditional knowledge is also referred to as indigenous knowledge, indigenous ecological knowledge and traditional ecological knowledge. Noted author, Barry Lopez defines it as "vast and particular knowledge . . . garnered from hundreds of years of . . . patient interrogation of the landscape."

Anthropologist Ellen Bielawski defines it as "practical strategies; what's worked and what hasn't. It is not a static one but is both cumulative and dynamic."

Today the value of traditional knowledge is increasingly understood and the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit (1992) recognizes the importance of traditional knowledge to environmental management and development. Even the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources of Sri Lanka has drafted a national policy on indigenous knowledge.

In Sri Lanka too there is a vast body of traditional knowledge and this paper is based on a study carried out in 2003 following the 'rapid rural appraisal' approach, on the knowledge system of *Panama Village* situated 16km south of *Pottuvil* and *Arugam Bay* in eastern Sri Lanka. This village is one of several places in the island where the traditional ways still persists.

The agrarian community of people (5000) of the isolated village *Panama* possesses a time-tested knowledge base that is intimately linked with nature. Their agricultural calendar including pest control, synchronized with the annual climatic cycle is based on accumulated environmental knowledge. Rice farming and *chena* practice as well as diary farming are harmoniously done. Seafood and forest products such as honey and wild fruits supplement this agriculture. This has given the village self-sufficiency in food.

The indigenous medicine, handicrafts and the traditional event '*ankeliya*' are parts of the traditional knowledge system.

A unique feature of this knowledge is that it is entwined with local beliefs that reflect reverence for nature in this isolated, harsh environment. The importance of the traditional knowledge system of *Panama* is that, it has helped the people of this village to the sustainable use of the area's natural resource base for centuries.