

# The Role of the Environment in the Forest Livelihood Decisions of Malawian Villagers

**JOHN DUDLEY FORT**

I am conducting research to discover to what extent the environment enters into the livelihood decisions of Malawians living along the border of the Mulanje Mountain Forest Reserve. My research builds upon a 2008 dataset entitled, “The coproduction of land use and livelihoods in Malawi.” That project used quarterly surveys to measure household incomes from a suite of livelihood activities, including those which involve the forest. My project adds a qualitative dimension to the dataset by seeking the reasons behind forest livelihood decisions. Whereas the 2008 work quantified how much households earned from particular forest livelihoods, my work seeks to understand why those households decide to pursue or not



pursue those same activities.

My project is focused on three villages along the base of the Mulanje Mountain. Mulanje is a 3,000 meter massif which rises impressively from the plains below. The mountain has a 600 km<sup>2</sup> forest reserve which contains ecologically important species such as the



Mulanje Cedar (*Widdringtonia whytei*) and several miombo hardwoods (*Brachystegia sp.*). The mountain and its forest provide valuable environmental services to the surrounding communities; it is the source of 15 rivers and it is one of the few remaining sites at which to harvest firewood. The forest also serves as an important source for building materials and is a renowned location for harvesting traditional medicine.

As with many forests in Africa and around the world, the Mulanje Forest faces increased usage from rising populations along its boundaries. My research is designed to shed light on this usage by investigating local people’s decisions to use the forest from the perspectives of the users themselves. Specifically, I am curious to know how and to what extent concepts of “the environment” enter into the forest usage decisions of the people living around the mountain. The method I am using to understand these decisions is called Ethnographic Decision Tree Modeling. Based on the data collected from in-depth interviews, my research assistants and I will construct tree models for the decision to pursue or not pursue four different forest livelihood activities. These models will then be tested and revised using questionnaires administered to a larger sample of respondents from the same three villages. Once validated, these models will be analyzed for decision

criteria related to the environment.

At the end of our data collection period my research team will share our results with our research communities in order to allow them to see their forest use in a larger context. These results will also be shared with local NGOs and environmental policymakers. It is hoped that by generating insight into the ways in which forest users think about the environment this research will inform policies and programs which seek to conserve the forest and improve the standard of living among those people who rely on the forest for their livelihoods.



*John Fort is a masters student in the School of Natural Resources. This research is funded by a Tropical Conservation and Development (TCD) Field Research Grant.*