

# Alternative livelihoods that protect forests and villagers

The Ecosystem Conservation and Management Project (ESCAMP) is currently implementing a number of successful programmes to conserve and maintain the declining forest cover in Sri Lanka. Accordingly, the underlying objective of the Ecosystem Conservation and Management Project (ESCAMP) is to conserve and sustainably manage selected ecosystems in Sri Lanka. To this end, ESCAMP is currently successfully implementing a number of programmes to minimise the adverse effects caused to the forest by the villagers living in close proximity to sensitive ecosystems. One strategy to meet this goal is to introduce them to alternative livelihoods.

These programmes are implemented with the full support and participation of the people living in the respective areas since their specific needs are considered before solutions are implemented.

Another objective of such interventions is to promote the benefits of ecosystems and bolster the nature-based tourism industry, thereby uplifting the living standards of the community residing in the buffer zone surrounding forests.

According to ESCAMP's, Environmental and Social Safeguards Specialist Dr. Dunstan Fernando, "The majority of the people living in the forest and the surrounding areas are dependent on the resources of their environment. They harvest yams, leaves, fruits, bees' honey, and various commodities, such as herbs and firewood, from the forests around them. Their economy is tied up with some of these commodities. We saw this in the Hurulu area as well as the Sinharaja Forest Reserve where the attention of our Project is directed at. But it is illegal to get some of these things from the forest. Also, in such cases, such issues go as far as court proceedings. But what will they do for a living when the economy associated with commercial goods breaks down..."

ESCAMP worked to provide alternative livelihoods as a solution to this problem..."

To date, the Project has undertaken a number of activities to improve livelihoods after discussions with groups that have been formed as community-based organisations. Animal husbandry can be described as one of the successful livelihoods introduced as such. The rearing of dairy cattle, goats and chicken has so far been done in a number of villages. Here, the Project has donated animals to the expected beneficiaries in, and at present people of Palugaswewa and Asirigama are successfully implementing such projects.

Home gardening is another option. The main purpose here is to earn a living or earn an extra income. Therefore, more attention has been paid to plants such as jackfruit that can be used as food as well as fruit. This can also meet the firewood requirement of the house from the garden, thereby reducing the collection of wood from the forest.

Another livelihood practiced in the Sinharaja forest area is the production of Kithul treacle and jaggery. These are among trade items from which considerable revenue could be generated.

Also, directing villagers to the sale of flowering plants is another alternative livelihood. There is also an opportunity to sell semi-finished coir brushes and brooms in another area. Sewing training and bee-keeping have also been implemented in other areas.

The ESCAMP Project has also been able to take the concept of home stay, one of the most sought-after lodging in the tourism industry today, to the villages located in forest areas. Facilities have been provided to set up home stays in Kanneliya Which is in the Kudawa area of Sinharaja. It is expected to provide facilities for tourists who wish to stay in a rural home. Accordingly, a comfortable room and bathroom facilities have been constructed in selected houses for tourists to reside. Around Rs. 200,000 per unit has been provided under the Project for infrastructure for this purpose.

There is another important social issue identified in this context. The challenges that people face when starting new livelihoods are the lack of initial capital and problems associated with marketing their end products. They have the knowledge and ability to make a living.



**Upul Nalaka**  
Homestay Entrepreneur  
Kanneliya



**Nadeesha Jeewanthi**  
Environment-friendly Bag  
Manufacturer - Sinhagama, Habarana



**Sanjaya Madhushanka**  
Duhansa Acquarium  
Kanneliya



**Sarath Abeysinghe**  
Cultivator - Wathupalagama



**K.W. Nilanthi**  
Jam Manufacturer  
Koralegama

Sometimes they have the money to make an investment, but they are not inclined to take the risk.

Interestingly, most of the people currently involved in these livelihood development activities are women. More than 55% of the total number of beneficiaries are women. Within this context, the Project is also promoting gender equality through such interventions.

A follow-up on these activities is also due to take place after the Project period. For this, the contribution of the officers of the Forest Department and the Department of Wildlife Conservation will be obtained. Getting organised and working together as community-based organisations is contributing towards sustainability and future expansion.

Commenting on this, Dr. Dunstan Fernando further says: "Although there may be some shortcomings due to the current COVID epidemic, this programme is running successfully as it has been implemented everywhere, and on the other hand, it is a good deed that enhances the relationship between the environment and human beings..."

Reflecting on the past, resident of Wathupalagama Mr Sarath Abeysinghe, says: "I come from a family of cultivators. Many people from our villages gave up cultivation work in the 1990s because of the threat from wild elephants. They looked for, and found, other employment. I also joined the Army and served for 22 years. I retired after the term of my employment. At that time, the threat from wild elephants to our village was at a very severe stage. Attempts were made to construct an elephant fence but we were not able to do it. But, we were able to construct an elephant fence with the cooperation of the ESCAMP Project. It was constructed with the participation of the community. Through that, the elephant threat to the village was reduced."

He goes on to state that, "We took up cultivation work again after the human - elephant conflict was resolved with the support of ESCAMP. People began to re-cultivate the abandoned farmlands. Former cultivators also came back to cultivation work and started cultivating crops such as Ulundu (black gram) and Sweet Corn. I selected the cultivation of Ulundu. With the opportunity thus provided, I tried to get the best price for my harvest. I saw that Ulundu could be sold for higher prices in Jaffna. I got a good harvest and a good income with my first crop. Many people got a good income. We are very happy about being able to cultivate again..."

This is how Ajith Wickramasinghe, the Chairman of the United Bindunu Ela Farmers' Association, clarified how people who were dependant on the forests are now winning in life through bee-keeping.

"Our village was also faced with the wild elephant threat. Even though we were in great need of an elephant fence, it was not implemented properly. But, we were able to restart building the wild elephant fence with this Project. The village has protection now."

In former times, people in our village used to go to the forest and cut wood, make mamoty handles, sell them and live on the money thus earned. But, now people of our village do not harm the forest. They do not even gather firewood. They do their cultivation work. The people of our village do not need Government jobs. We were provided alternative employment

opportunities by the ESCAMP Project. They are, home gardening and bee-keeping, among others. Our people now earn from those alternative lifestyles. As a villager, I also selected bee-keeping. The required know-how and equipment were provided by the Project. There is a good demand for bees' honey. It can be marketed easily. The other thing is that, with my employment, what I get from bee-keeping is an extra income. Now the income level of my family is at a considerable level. I can even train others who need training in bee-keeping..."

Nadeeka Jeewanthi, the Chairperson of the Sisilasa Community-based Organisation of Sinhagama, says that new sources of income have been generated through the alternative livelihoods introduced by the ESCAMP Project. "There are 150-200 families living in Sinhagama. Their livelihood

was cutting firewood in the forest and selling the firewood. That is how they earned their daily income. But, it was not a fixed income. On the other hand, those people suffered a lot because cutting firewood in preserved forests is against the law. Government officials caused many problems for those villagers. After the introduction of the ESCAMP Project, we acted through our Organisation. There, an alternative livelihood was introduced instead of cutting firewood in the forest. The Project gave us aid for that. Members of the Organisation were directed to various paths of generating income. Twenty chickens were provided for those who liked keeping poultry. A kit of necessary tools was provided for those who liked home gardening. Several sewing machines were provided for those who were trained in sewing."

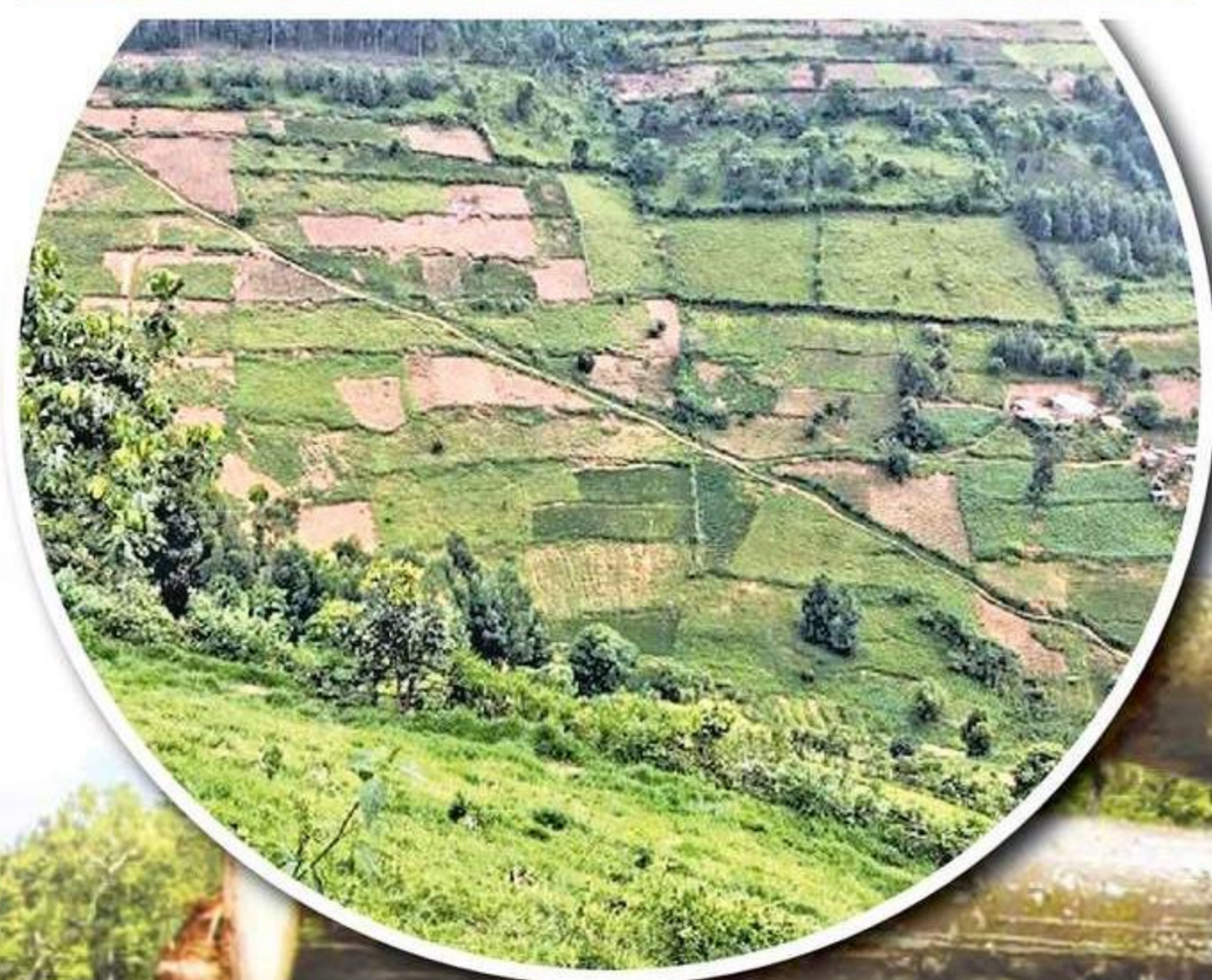
"Four people including me focused on an enterprise stitching bags. We are stitching eco-friendly bags. They are selling well. We can earn our daily income through this. Now we have earned good recognition. On the other hand, as we have saved our money through this Organisation, we should be able to do such things in the future. We like introducing alternative livelihoods to new people who join us..."

Many of the villagers who once made a living from the jungle have now become small entrepreneurs through the ESCAMP Project. As a village, they enjoy the honour of having recognised jobs.

Through it, they are quick to think anew and generate new sources of income. The villagers have used their lives as an example to show that ESCAMP has been successful as a project to uplift their lives while protecting the environment and the forest.

**Inoka Perera Bandara**

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Contact / Write to us:  
Ecosystem Conservation and Management Project,  
Project Director,  
No.82, Rajamalwatta Road,  
Battaramulla.  
escamp.pd@gmail.com