



**BY SHALUKA MANCHANAYAKE
AND GAYAN NARANDENIYA**

There are a number of forest systems in Sri Lanka that have been designated as national parks which are rich in great biological value. They have been designated as national parks in order to provide them with greater protection, given their high ecological value. Among them, the Yala National Park that borders the Indian Ocean is the most visited and second largest national park in Sri Lanka.

The Yala Park consists of five blocks and they have individual names such as, 'Ruhuna National Park' (Block I), and 'Kumana National Park' or 'Yala East' for the adjoining area. It is situated in the southeast region of the country, and lies in Southern and Uva Provinces.

The park covers 979 square kilometres and is about 300 kilometres (km) from Colombo.

History

In 1560 Spanish cartographer Cipriano Sanchez noted Yala in his map "is abandoned for 300 years due to insalubrious conditions". Also, former Chief Justice Sir Alexander Johnston wrote a detailed account on Yala in 1806 after travelling from Trincomalee to Hambantota.

On March 23, 1900 the British Government proclaimed Yala and Wilpattu reserves under the Forest Ordinance. Initially the extent of the reserve was

389 square km between the Menik and Kumbukkan Rivers. At that time the reserve did not bear the name Yala. The Game Protection Society which is now known as the Wildlife and Nature Protection Society was instrumental in establishing the reserve.

Yala was designated as a wildlife sanctuary in 1900, and along with Wilpattu, was one of the first two national parks in Sri Lanka, having been designated in 1938. The park is best known for its species of wild animals. It is important for the conservation of Sri Lankan elephants, leopards and aquatic birds.

The national park is in the dry semi-arid climatic region and rain is received mainly during the northeast monsoon. The mean annual rainfall ranges between 500–775 millimetres (mm) while the mean temperature ranges between 26.4 °C (79.5 °F) in January to 30 °C (86 °F) in April.

Sanctuaries

There are six national parks and three wildlife sanctuaries in the vicinity of Yala. Among them largest is the Lunugamvehera National Park.

The park is situated in the dry semi-arid climatic region and rain is received mainly during the northeast monsoon. Yala hosts a variety of ecosystems ranging from moist monsoon forests to freshwater and marine wetlands. It is one of the 70 important bird areas in Sri Lanka.

Yala is home to 215 bird species including six endemic species of Sri Lan-

National parks of Sri Lanka

THE TWO BREEDING CROCODILE SPECIES OF SRI LANKA, MUGGER CROCODILE AND SALTWATER CROCODILE, INHABIT THE PARK. THE INDIAN COBRA AND RUSSELL'S VIPER ARE AMONG THE OTHER REPTILES

ka. The number of mammals that have been recorded from the park is 44, and it has one of the highest leopard densities in the world.

The Yala area is mostly composed of metamorphic rock belonging to the Precambrian era and classified into two series, Vijayan series and Highland series.

Reddish brown soil and low humic gley soil are prominent among six soil types. Yala is in the lowest penepain of Sri Lanka, which extends from Trincomalee to Hambantota. Topographically the area is a flat and mildly undulating plain that runs to the coast

with an elevation of 30 metres close to the coast while rising in the interior to 100–125 metres.

Monsoon

The Yala National Park has a variety of ecosystems including moist monsoon forests, dry monsoon forests, semi deciduous forests, thorn forests, grasslands, marshes, marine wetlands, and sandy beaches.

The area under forest cover mainly consists of Block I and rangelands of open parkland (pelessa grasslands) including some extensive grasslands. The forest area is restricted to around



the Menik River while rangelands are found towards the sea side. Other habitat types of the Block I are tanks and water holes, lagoons and mangroves and chena lands.

More species of mammals are resident in Yala National Park including Sri Lankan elephants. About 25 leopards are estimated to roam in Block I. The elephant herd of Yala contains 300–350.

The Sri Lankan sloth bear, leopard, elephant, and wild water buffalo are all threatened mammals at Yala.

Although water buffaloes are indigenous to Sri Lanka, most populations contain genes of the domestic stock or have descended from feral populations. Toque macaque, golden palm civet, red slender loris, and fishing cat are among the other mammals that are found in Yala.

The reptile fauna recorded from the park is more than 40 and six of them are endemic. Sri Lankan Krait, Boulenger's Keelback, Sri Lankan Flying Snake, Painted-Lip Lizard, Wiegmann's Agama, and Bahir's Fan-Throated Lizard are the endemic species.

Endangered

The coastal line of the park is visited by all five globally endangered sea turtles (Leatherback Turtle, Olive Ridley, Loggerhead Sea Turtle, Hawksbill Turtle, and the Green Turtle).

The two breeding crocodile species of Sri Lanka, Mugger Crocodile and Saltwater Crocodile, inhabit the park. The Indian Cobra and Russell's Viper are among the other reptiles.

In the water courses of Yala, 21 freshwater fish are found. The fish population in the perennial reservoirs contain mostly exotic food fish Mozambique Tilapia.

Poaching, gem-mining, logging, encroachment for agriculture, and free-roaming domestic livestock are the main threats to the park. Three wardens have been killed in clashes with poachers.

Gems are mined along the Menik River and holes created by gem mining, which extend up to 30 metres, can be seen along the Kumbukkan Oya. In Blocks III and IV, the encroachment is severe by chena cultivators.

The turtles are caught in fishing nets and the fishermen also litter the beach with debris. They have also set traps inland and dig up turtle nests. In the absence of hand-weeding, which was practiced until the 1950s, the transformation of interior grasslands to scrub jungle is unavoidable.

Tourism has created problems in the past, such as vehicles harassing wild animals. The issue is most severe in Sithulpahuwa where thousands of pilgrims visit, leading to a great degree of commercialisation.

The Department of Wildlife Conservation has taken some conservation measures such as management of grazing lands, conservation of small water ponds, and eradication of invasive alien species. A 40 kilometre long electric fence was erected to prevent elephants from moving into nearby villages.