

Providing relief to Sri Lanka's abused landscapes

Sri Lanka, a country that once had an abundance of forest resources, has lost a large percentage of its forests due to short-sighted activities over the years.

Several large-scale development projects and other activities carried out during a long period of time have resulted in the eradication of several picturesque forests from the Sri Lankan landscape.

On the other hand, even as Sri Lanka still remains among the countries with the largest percentage of forests in the world, the demand for land is surging to meet the demands of an ever-expanding population. Due to these reasons, and as the result of gradual destruction, the forest area in Sri Lanka has decreased to 29.3% of the island's total land area.

These forests, which are scattered in various parts of the island are of various types, and the protection of them also needs to be varied. While large forest reserves such as Sinharaja, Knuckles, Peak Wilderness and Wilpattu are among the Protected Areas, there are other forests also that are high in biodiversity located in the Wet Zone.

With the exception of Sinharaja Forest Reserve and a few other forest reserves, other forests are smaller in extent, while the Dry Zone forests are generally larger. Most of these forests are managed by the Forest Department or the Department of Wildlife Conservation, and are subject to the relevant rules and regulations of these institutions. Whatever the size of these forests, the fact that they are being subjected to massive threats due to irregular and often irrational requirements is a sad matter for us as a country.

Island wide, forests are facing various threats such as planting crops, establishing human habitats, development activities, hunting of animals and the demand for timber and other forest products of commercial value.

One factor contributing to the indiscriminate abuse of the precious lands is that Protected Areas and other such forests are not found in isolation. Often, there are human habitats surrounding these forests with various forms of land use such as urban dwellings and villages, agricultural lands, reservoirs, irrigated land and roadways. Furthermore, the implementation of these activities is carried out by various state and private sector organisations with entirely different agendas while the plans for development are prepared by these same organisations. Also, both state and private sector organisations use land for agricultural, as well as other activities.

Even though all of these activities are planned and operated separately, all of them happen in the same geographical area. So, when these activities take place without proper coordination, challenges and issues are inevitable. Even though ambitious development plans are made for these areas, proper activation of such plans are often stalled due to the above-mentioned reason. For example, people may build living spaces or cultivate in the midst of elephant paths. Obtaining such lands or starting cultivations on them will lead to human-elephant conflict, as well as the clash between people and other wild animals. Apart from this, short-term thinking in land use planning could also trigger natural disasters such as floods and landslides.

The increase of illegal encroachments and cultivation of such land is seriously threatening the effectiveness of Protected Areas. Furthermore,

cultivation and establishment of commercial plantations in sloping watershed areas of the hill country is causing soil erosion in those hilly areas and the threat of flooding in the lower areas of valleys has therefore escalated.

The reclamation of wetlands - which has been done for a long time in the name of development - is another matter of equal seriousness. Many uninformed people think that the wetlands in urban and settled areas are useless tracts of land. While it is unthinkable that many decision-making officials of the relevant institutions are unaware of the need for and value of wetlands, it is even more alarming to note that such individuals often do not consider scientific advice due to their limited understanding and unwillingness to consider alternatives. As much as this can be understood, there are instances when reclamation of wetlands for urban development takes place even under those who are aware of the importance of the role of wetlands in sustaining life and maintaining ecological services.

Preparing plans jointly after considering all land areas as a whole, with the contribution of all relevant parties, is of utmost importance to avoid environmental issues that can be created by irregular urban and rural development as well as other land use.

All responsible parties should realise the crucial need to prepare a joint scientific plan for development work to be carried out for a sustainable future, and development plans should safeguard natural resources in the area while minimising environmental pollution and land degradation. The methodology adopted

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for land use in our island in the past could be taken as an example even today. This proves that making well-thought-out plans is not new to our country. For example, our traditional villages have been created under such a concept. Especially in the Dry Zone, the village is created centered on a water tank or lake.

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Furthermore, Sri Lanka's unique "Ellanga" water-management system is also another good example of strategic planning. Through that, several tanks were connected with each other and, after the first tank was filled, water was directed to the next tank in a scientific manner. Once this too was filled, the remaining water was directed to the next tank... and so on. Significantly, this prevents the waste of water, which was recognised as an essential natural resource, and this paved the way for maximum preservation of water.

The 'Gam Goda,' where the houses of the village were built, was located on high ground, while the spiritual center of the village - Dagoba - was situated at the highest location with the temple placed adjacent to the Dagoba. The part above the tank - Waw Ithathawa - was not cultivated to minimise the collection of silt and sediment in the tank. A separate area of jungle where the timber requirements of the village was fulfilled is located

separately. A village was carefully placed in a location in which day-to-day essentials could be produced from the surrounding environment system.

In contrast, there was another set of tanks named 'Kulu Weva' located away from the village, above the tank (Waw Ithathawa) and in the jungle. The purpose of those tanks was to maintain the groundwater level in the area and provide water for animals.

However, the administrative and economic development structure of our country was gradually changed during the colonial era. The self-sufficient economic pattern was changed to a plantation-based economy under British rulership. Even though the attention of the administrators was drawn towards forest conservation, massive deforestation took place at that time; forest-covered areas of the Hill Country, as well as other areas, were cleared and plantation crops such as tea, rubber and coffee were introduced at large scale.

At present, many development plans are operated by different government institutions in the same area. Several issues have arisen as these institutions generally pay attention mainly to their own core requirements (i.e. agriculture, road development, infrastructure, and so on). At the same time, many institutions concerned with development pay attention only to economic factors such as economic growth, profits and local productivity enhancement. Agricultural plans, water supplies, village and urban planning, as well as road and highway plans are among those concerns.

As attention is not paid much to damages caused to the environment and conservation objectives are not central in the

present operating system, problems and issues are unavoidable. Therefore, conservation is neglected forests and protected areas becoming a casualty of these short-sighted management plans. While development plans are drawn up and activated from time to time, the natural environment they operate in is abused to achieve short-term results.

An ecosystem is a place in which all environmental factors, lifeless or living, are bonded together. So, the need to plan all activities through a joint mechanism addressing development and conservation objectives (preserving natural ecosystems) has become the need of the hour. Wastage of resources could be prevented by utilising all resources in a more sustainable manner. Recognised by many countries at present, the most successful methodology for this is the 'Landscape Planning Methodology'.

According to Ecosystem Conservation and Management Project (ESCAMP), Project Director Anura Sathursinghe, "many environment-friendly innovations are included in the '2021 - 2030 Forestry Sector Master Plan' to be implemented in such a background. Within this context, more attention is to be paid to reforesting and rehabilitating degraded forests, nature-based tourism or environmental tourism, watershed conservation and controlling erosion, agricultural forestry, urban forest plantings, social forest plantings, mangrove conservation, nurturing wildlife living spaces, forestry science research, communications and capacity building and mapping forests among the major plans of forest conservation".

- Inoka Perera Bandara



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