



# Forest conservation policies to safeguard Sri Lanka's remaining forests

The people of the so-called undeveloped past loved mother nature with boundless attachment. In that relationship of co-existence, no destruction was caused by them to the environment. Knowingly or unknowingly, it was in fact, a land use method that helped protect and conserve forests.

At that time settlements were common in the Dry Zone, but relatively few in the Wet Zone and the hill country. So the forests and water catchment areas there were quite safe. Even when the administrative capitals of the country later moved to the Wet Zone, there was a vast area of forest cover

The deforestation of the hitherto protected Wet Zone forests accelerated with the expansion of coffee, tea and rubber plantations in the hill country. But the negative impacts caused by this made the British authorities soon realize that deforestation needs to be controlled. For this purpose, forest officers were appointed under Government Agents in the 1870s. The Forest Department was established in 1887 with the appointment of a Forest Conservator, on the recommendation of a report on the Forests of Ceylon. Today, the law applicable to the Forest Department is the Forest Ordinance, which was passed in 1907 and is still in use today.

approval of the Legislative Council, the custody of all the forests in the country was placed under the Conservator of Forests.

This policy was changed in 1934, delegating forest management to both Government Agents and the Conservator of Forests. But problems did not arise because the law was enforced by both parties to ensure the protection of forests. Then in 1952, the control of forests less than 500 acres (200 ha) in the Dry Zone and less than 50 acres (20 ha) in the rest of the country were placed under the control of Government Agents, while all the remaining forests were brought under the control of the Conservator of Forests.

Ministry of Wildlife Resources and Environment issued Circular No. 05/98 dated 01.07.1998, placing forests only less than 200 acres (80 ha) in the Dry Zone and 20 acres (8 ha) in the Wet Zone, under the control of Divisional Secretaries.

Subsequently, Circular 5/2001 transferred the management of all remaining forests under the control of the Divisional Secretaries to the Department of Forest Conservation for the protection of forests. Accordingly, the Department of Forest Conservation has been entrusted with the management, improvement and protection of the remaining forests in accordance with the National Forest Policy. Although the scientific management of these forests is vested in the Department of Forest Conservation, the District Secretaries and Divisional Secretaries can exercise the powers vested in them under the Ordinance for the protection of forests. Furthermore, a procedure has been introduced through Circular 02/2006 issued in 2006 for the release of any land belonging to them for any development work, if necessary.

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### New circular on remaining forests

In 2020, Circular 1/2020 was issued revising the law and replacing the aforementioned circulars, allowing District Secretaries and Divisional Secretaries to use any remaining forests which are not under the Department of Forest Conservation, the Ministry of Wildlife Resources and Environment or any other government institution, for economic purposes or for any other fruitful activity.

Through this Circular, 10 land areas which should not be used for other purposes have been identified. These include environmentally sensitive areas such as rivers and streams, as well as areas with steep slopes, water catchment areas, elephant corridors and areas which are of archaeological, historical or cultural importance.

Another 5 specific areas have also been identified as land areas which should not be selected for any other activity. These are:

1. Proposed areas for the conservation of biodiversity and forest cover according to the environmental policies of the government.
2. Areas which need to be conserved in order to protect threatened species of flora and fauna.
3. Areas which have been identified for future development projects of the government.
4. Areas

which should not come under development for special particular reasons.

5. Proposed areas for community participation and social forestry projects.

### The forest cover of the country

According to reports, the total forest cover at the beginning of the 20th century was close to 80% of the land. However, at present, the forest cover has declined to a mere 29.2% of the country, which is about 2 million hectares.

Of this forest area, about 1,335,400 hectares that include 65 protected forests, and forest reserves, as well as one national heritage site, come under the control and management of the Department of Forest Conservation. The various Protected Areas under the Department of Wildlife Conservation include approximately 1,136,440 hectares of thick forests, bushland, grasslands and wetland areas. They include National Parks, sanctuaries, natural reserves, strict nature reserves and elephant corridors. There are other areas which come under the control of both these Departments which include some remaining forest areas as well.

Therefore, it is imperative that these land areas are released for

other purposes only after a thorough investigation has been carried out according to the specified criteria. The Circular also specifies that this should not be an obstacle to reserving the land areas needed to achieve the target of increasing the forest cover to 30%, according to the policy of the government.

The most important factor to consider when enacting this Circular is to ensure transparency and strengthen the laws, and put a definite stop to the continuous destruction of forests being carried out through the abuse of power.

- Inoka Perera Bandara

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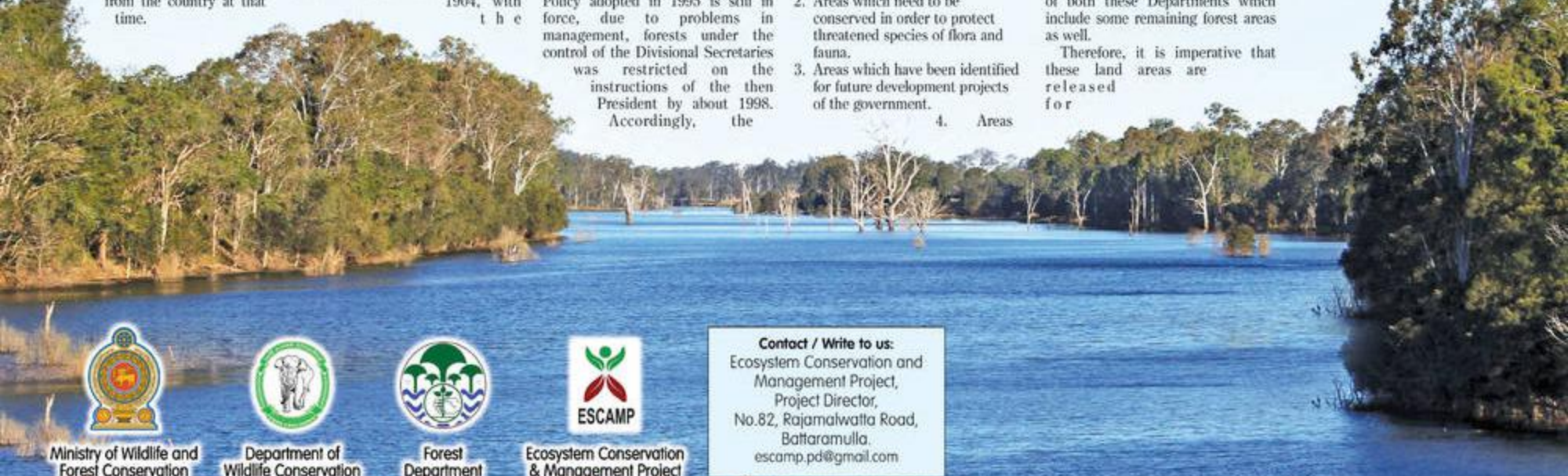
remaining in the mountain areas due to their importance as a defense strategy. Forests being primarily the property of the king was another powerful reason that helped protect them. However, during the British rule, forests were cleared for cultivation and timber was procured for government purposes from throughout the country. Exporting valuable timber was one of the ways of deriving income from the country at that time.

However, it was not until the 1995s that a 'National Forest Sector Policy' was adopted, with the primary objective of conserving forests for the benefit of future generations. That is the National Forest Policy that is in force even today.

Initially, some parts of the forests were in the custody of the Conservator of Forests while other areas were in the custody of the Government Agents. Subsequently in 1904, with the

After Sri Lanka gained independence, development projects such as agrarian colonies and the Mahaweli Development Project, as well as the use of land for agricultural purposes including Chena cultivation further contributed to deforestation. Therefore, an approach with a greater focus on conservation objectives was imperative for protecting the forests of our country.

Although the National Forest Policy adopted in 1995 is still in force, due to problems in management, forests under the control of the Divisional Secretaries was restricted on the instructions of the then President by about 1998. Accordingly, the





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