

COCONUT, THE TREE OF LIFE

— By —
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The coconut tree is often called the tree of life because every part of it is useful to man. Some time ago, coconuts were the island's third most important export crop. However, the situation has changed drastically today as a large number of coconut trees have been cut down to make room for houses and factories. The gravity of the problem has compelled the Government to clamp a ban on cutting down coconut trees without a permit from an authorised person. It is a timely move to save them from extinction. If we go on cutting down coconut trees indiscriminately, we might have to import coconuts from India or the Philippines.

Coconut trees can be seen along the coastal belt of Sri Lanka. They were vigorously cultivated in the Coconut Triangle between Colombo, Kurunegala and Chilaw. Even in the Coconut Triangle more and more houses and factories are coming up. As a result, the country is not producing enough coconuts for local consumption and export. Therefore, every effort should be taken to plant more coconut trees in the island.

Different cultures had different names for the wonderful palm tree, but they all translate into one thing: the tree of life. Linnaeus, the 18th century Swedish botanist who set up a system by which all plants are named, called the palm family "Principes" meaning the princes of the plant kingdom. The word "coconut" is derived probably from "coco," the Portuguese term for monkey. Botanically known as "Cocos nucifera," coconut has become an indispensable part of our meal.

In fact, coconuts are used more than bread which is the staple food of many people. Unlike bread, coconut gives us sweet water, milk, wine, and cooking oil. Sri Lankans know how to make coconut milk by mixing coconut meat and water. It is mainly used in Asian curries, Fijian kokoda, Filipino ginataang-bilobilo, Samoan lu'au, Ghanaian corn boiled in coconut milk, piri-piri chicken from Mozambique, Hawaiian chicken luau, Brazilian vatapa, and Caribbean coo-coo.

Pleasant drink

Thambili water is a nutritious and pleasant drink very much popular among tourists. Most Sri Lankans drink the water direct from the nut but foreigners prefer to use straws. Even coconut water is supposed to be nutritious. During World War II, coconut water was injected directly into wounded soldiers, instead of saline.

The shredded coconut is used to make Sambol which is a delicious dish in hotels. We do not throw away the coconut shell because it can be used as fuel. People make different kitchen utensils using the coconut shell. The coconut fibre is used to make ropes, brooms, door-mats, and mattresses.

The sap is used to make treacle and jaggery. Coconut flowers and tender leaves are mainly used for decorations. Mature leaves are woven for thatching roofs and making fences. Ekels are used for decorative and utilitarian purposes. Even the coconut trunk is hardy and water resistant.

During the colonial period coconut wood was used to make railway line sleepers. The wood is also used to make furniture and as rafters in constructions. In rural areas the coconut roots are used as tooth-brushes. In some countries coconut trunks are used to make canoes.

Unlike other trees, the coconut palm provides almost all the necessities of life such as food, drink, oil, medicine, fibre, timber, thatch, mats, fuel and domestic utensils. What is more, coconut trees provide important environmental services to prevent soil erosion, control in coastal regions, wind protection and shade for other crops.

The Philippines, Indonesia and India are the world's leading coconut producers. They grow coconuts in large plantations. In Sri Lanka large coconut plantations are very few. As a result, it is grown as an important crop by small



farmers. In the Indian province of Kerala, millions of families depend on coconut plantations for their income.

Straight trunk

An average coconut tree grows up to five metres in height. It has a slender but strong straight trunk ringed with horizontal ridges. Unlike in many other trees, coconut roots are visible at the base of the trunk. The tree has a crown of leaves at its apex. The leaves are large and they measure at least three metres in length. Each leaf looks like a large feather. Coconut flowers are enclosed in sheaths which open as they bloom. Female flowers are found at the base and male flowers rest on the spike.

Coconuts can float for months even in salt water until a high tide deposits it on a beach where it takes root. After some years the tree produces green nuts which hang from the top. Picking coconuts needs some skills. As the tree is fairly tall, you cannot pick them easily. In Sri Lanka there are coconut pickers who know the art of picking ripe nuts. In Sri-ngrn you find some unusual coconut pickers. They are well-trained macaque monkeys.

They take only ten minutes to pick the ripe nuts from a tree. Young monkeys are captured in the wild and taken to special schools where they follow a six-month course in picking coconuts. The tuition fee for each monkey is around \$130. The trained monkeys usually live for about 20 years but they work only for about ten years.

Potent spirit

Of the hundreds of users proverbially claimed by Sri Lankans for their beloved coconut trees, a few of them are not permitted to bear fruit. They are tortured and put to greater use to yield the sap from their beautiful flowers. The product is a sweet and pleasant beverage when first drawn from the tree. When fermented, however, it becomes a highly-intoxicating drink called toddy. When toddy is distilled you get a potent spirit called arrack which is a heady drink on which you can get exceedingly drunk.

Coconut leaves and flowers are used at wedding, religious and thovil ceremonies. At a Poruva (dais) ceremony, pots of rice are kept at the four corners and brass pots with coconut flowers stuck in them. At Thovil ceremonies the artistes dance carrying coconut flowers. They believe that demons are scared of coconut flowers. When there is a raging epidemic in the village, a coconut splitting contest takes place.

The coconuts used in the contest are of special breed with a shell of twice the thickness of ordinary coconuts. Two players step forward from each side. Then one player throws a coconut to the other side. The opponent's business is to hit the flying coconut with the one in his hand and break it. If he is successful in cracking the flying coconut, he becomes the winner. As a child I have witnessed many such contests held in the outskirts of Matara.

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