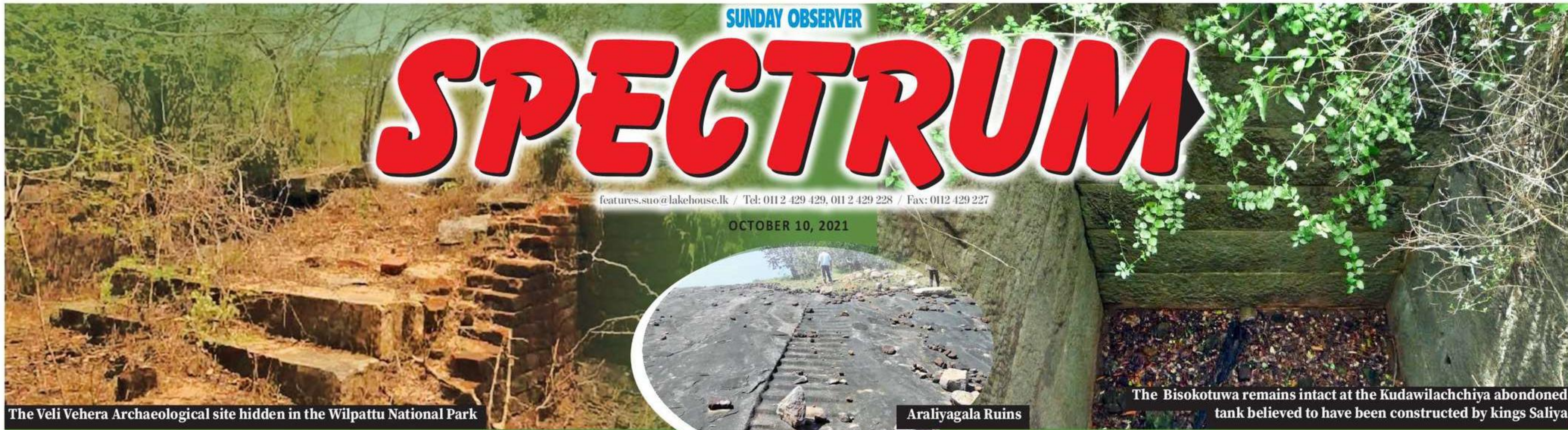


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The Veli Vehera Archaeological site hidden in the Wilpattu National Park

Araliyagala Ruins

The Bisokotuwa remains intact at the Kudawilachchiya abandoned tank believed to have been constructed by kings Saliya

No protection for archaeological monuments hidden in the Wilpattu forest cover

BY NIMAL WIJESINGHE

The Wilpattu National Park lies on the northwest coast, and belong to Northwest, North - central and Northern Provinces. The Park is bounded in the north by Moderagam Aru river and in the south by the Kala Oya. The Park was established on February 25, 1938 after declaration as a sanctuary in 1905. The total extent of the park is 1, 31,879 ha, and is divided in to five blocks, which were declared during various periods of time.

The Wilpattu National Park (WNP) is the oldest and largest national park in the country and gained the status to a national park in as a result of the civil conflict for three decades, the WNP was closed from December 1988 until March 2003. Leaving the national park in the grip of poachers, vandals' timber racketeers bounty hunters and illegal sand miners.

Important ancient background

WNP is not only significant from an ecological standpoint but is also extremely rich in archaeological terms housing a hundred or more ruined sites and artifacts dating back to various periods of history. The proximity to an ancient city of Anuradhapura has also been a factor contributing to the rich archaeological heritage of the area.

The WNP can be considered amongst the best examples of dry zone protected areas in Sri Lanka in terms of its pristineness as a result of the species and habitats biotope types being largely undisturbed by anthropogenic factors. The area around the park is sparsely populated with very few rural settlements. In addition, due to the park having been closed for more than three decades as a result of the battle against terrorists, the tourist figures are also very low and inflow of tourists is on gradual increase now and again slowed down due to covid-19 endemic.

Unexplored prehistoric sites

The Wilpattu National Park is one of the least explored areas of the country despite it being documented in some ancient inscriptions and proto - historic crematoriums. A total of around 150 archaeologically important sites have been found - four of which were Miocene fossil sites. Twelve sites belonging to the prehistoric periods, were also surveyed. Several sites represent evidence of both prehistoric and historic, periods. Forty - two were identified as a combination of proto - historic and historical sites.

In addition, 28 irrigation structures such as a combination of proto - historic and historical sites, 28 irrigation structures such as ruined tanks including Kudawilachchiya under innovation and abandoned paddy lands were also identified by now.



Conveyance canal of Kuda Vilachchiya tank now under renovation in the Wilpattu National park

One of the major findings of the archaeological surveys has been the discovery of the Weeransole ruins. This site, located near the Palu Vilandawa tank consists of three destroyed image houses and Buddha statues including two seated (Samadhi) and one standing statue. One of the destroyed Samadhi Buddha statues seated under the hood of a Cobra believed to be Naga King Muchalinda is of a rare type. This is the fourth known Buddha statue belonging to this posture in Sri Lanka. The first settlers, King Vijaya and his clan selected the fertile lands of the Kala Oya and Modara Ganga flood plains for their settlements and agriculture Activities. Before them, prehistoric man had used the beaches and the areas around the natural lakes or "Vila" as hunting and settlement grounds.

Although this area had an ancient civilisation, it is one of the least archaeologically explored areas with attention only being paid to inscriptions and proto - historic crematoriums. A significant amount of legend and history has been associated with the huge National park and its immediate surroundings are yet to be systematically explored.

Tammanna Nuwara, here Prince Vijaya landed in about 600BC and founded the Sinhalese civilisation, is said to be between Kudiramalaya point and Moderagama Aru river mouth. It is believed that Vijaya and his followers landed here and rested by placing their hands on the ground, which were then stained red. Modern soil surveys indicate a strip of red colour soil running north and south along the western coastal belt of Wilpattu, which emerged from the sea level a million years ago.

According to legend, Vijaya married Kuveni, the Yaksha Princess, whose palace lies in ruins at Kali Vila. Galbendi Neeravia which is located north - east of Maradanmaduwa, tank, is supposed to be the place where prince Saliya, the son of King Dutugemunu, lived with his bride of low caste, Asokamala, some 2000 years ago. According to legend Kudiramalaya point is believed to be a landing place for Vijaya. At the extreme point there are ruined buildings made of bricks corals and limestone. The site has been heavily damaged by bounty hunters and due to natural weathering process, such as strong sea waves wind and erosion for centuries.

Developing knowledge on history

Foreign and local experts such as Begley (1981), Bell (1904), Brohier (1929, 1934), Deraniyagala, (1955, 1957, 1958, 1960a, 1960b, 1972a.) Hawkey (2002), Nicholas (1963), Paranavitana, (1956, 1970), Seneviratne (1984), Sitramplam (1990), and Wattala (1979) in De Silva and Karunaratne, (1979) have directly and indirectly contributed in developing the present knowledge base on the ancient Wilpattu civilisation and archaeological sites. However, it is not an easy task to launch archaeological surveys and excavations in a landscape of 131,879 hectares covered with thick jungle.

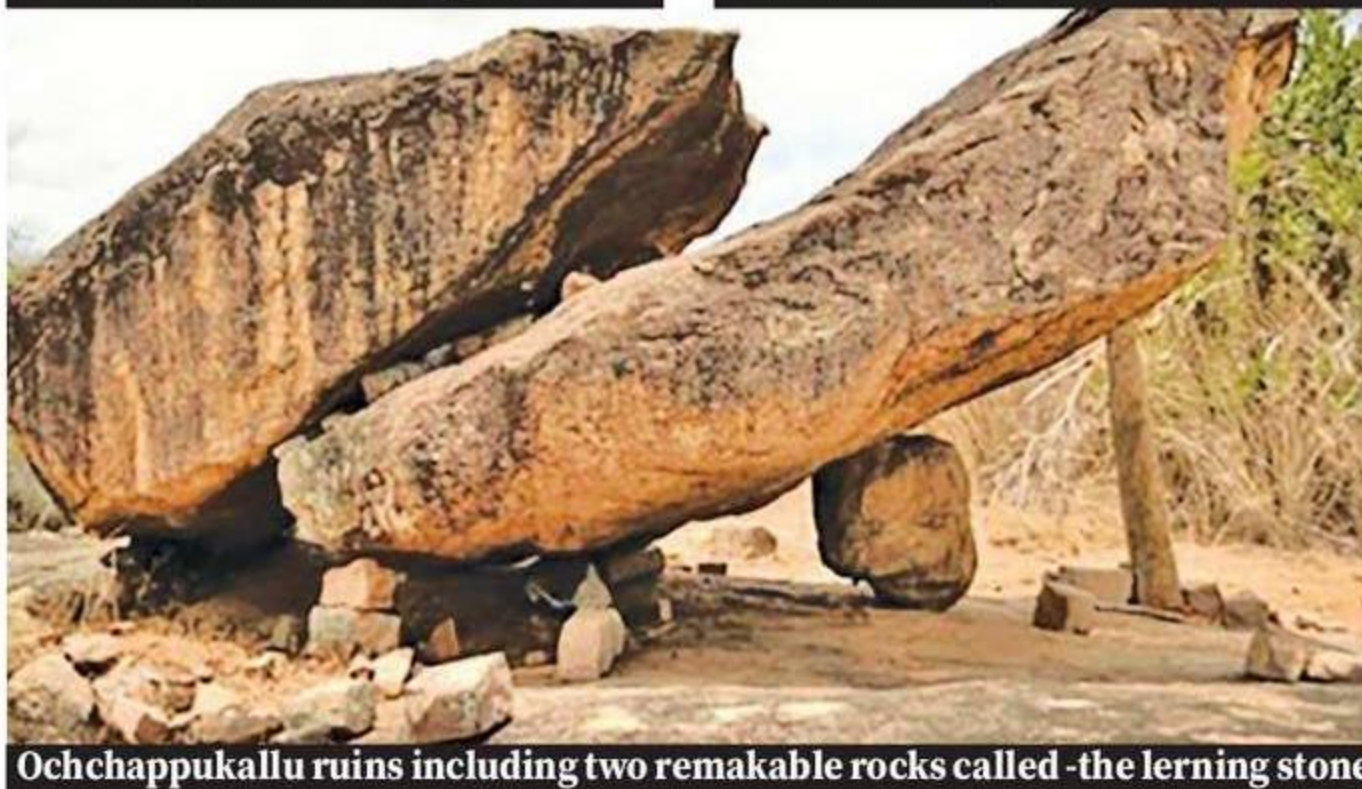
In the meantime, the irrigation department is now on a move to unveil another irrigation marvel to the nation, that is Kudawilachchiya abandoned tank, known to be older than 1,900 years believed to have been constructed



Buddha statue founding Uppane archaeological site in Wilpattu



Buddha statue seated under the hood of Naga King Muchalinda from Weeransole ruins in Wilpattu national park



Ochchappukallu ruins including two remarkable rocks called -the learning stone

during the prince Saliya and Asokamala era. This is supposed to be the first ever evidence of the hydrological knowledge of ancient Sri Lankan irrigation technology that can be proved with the evidence. It is believed that around 1,900 years ago the son of king Dutugemunu the prince Saliya had lived in Galbendi Neeraviya situated in the National Park landscape in southeast direction of historic Maradanmadu tank in Wipattu. The archaeology department in collaboration with the Irrigation department has planned to preserve the Bisokotuwa and other ancient aquatic technological mechanisms being discovered for future.

Ruined monasteries were found from the forested areas associated with large rocks, of which two sites (Ochchappu Kullu and Veheragala) were found to contain inscriptions. All these sites have been excavated and destroyed by bounty hunters.

The Ochchappu Kallu rock inscription is still well preserved but Veheragala inscriptions are heavily weathered and limited to a few lines. There were several inscriptions recorded from the WNP. An inscription of Kanitha Tissa (167 - 186) found on the rock of Ochchappu Kallu and ten - cave inscriptions belonging to 2-1 CBC were recorded in the vicinity of the site. In addition, one of the inscriptions belonged to "Raja Kanasha" which was unknown to chronicles such as the Mahawansa and Deepawansa.

In Sinadiyagala, which is a rock about 11/2 miles from the Moderagam Aru, river mouth, there is another inscription of king Vasaba which describes a scene of the granting of Kalapahanaka tank (breached Karaban Kulama) to the Dakkhina Vihara in Anuradhapura.

The subdivision of Valapu - bim in Palasa is mentioned in an inscription of King Kassapa IV (848 - 913) near Malimadu in the WNP in which the village Kerelagama or Venulagama was assigned to a Hospital at Anuradhapura.

Other inscriptions recorded from the park are; Timbiriwewa rock inscription of King Kumaradasa (508 - 516 AD), Andaragollagala inscription



Debris of THE Kuveni palace located in Kali Villu

of King Dathotattisa II (667 - 683 AD), and an inscribed pillar of the 10th century at Pattiya Eliya.

Ruined Stupas found in Tammanawala, Kimbula Ketugala, Veheragala, Ochchappu Kallu, Naypena Guhawa, Hunuvila Gama and Kalivila have been damaged by Bounty hunters. The stupa at Jumbula ketigala near Thimbiriwewa has been completely demolished without any trace of bricks on the rock, but brick fragments can be seen in the forest below the rock.

Ruined pillars

Legend suggests that the ruined pillars near the Kali Vila "are the remnants of the palace of Kuvini". During a current survey, a ruined Stupa a few meters north of these pillars were observed. The present Wilpattu interior road network runs through the site and near the Stupa and also through the foundation of the structure. Therefore, immediate action has to be taken to prevent further destruction of this Site. Veheragala and Naypena Guhawa are somewhat further south from the present road network and hence these sites are not protected. None of these sites in the National park have been declared or Gazetted as archaeologically protected monuments.

The Weeransole ruins near the, Palu - Vilandawa tank consist of three destroyed Buddha statues, including two seated (Samadhi) and one standing statue. A well-preserved Samadhi statue was moved to the Wilpattu park entrance (Hunuvilagama) during the 1980s by army officers, and can now be seen in an image house. This statue is similar to the Samadhi Buddha statue in Anuradhapura. One of the destroyed Samadhi Buddha statues seated under the hood of Naga king Muchalinda, is of rare type.

Similar Buddha statues have been previously recorded from the Eastern Province, two from Seruvila Mangala, Rajamaha Vihara, off Trincomalee and one from Kantale sugar plantation, and are currently displayed at the archaeological Museum in Anuradhapura. This is the fourth Buddha statue belonging to this posture found in Sri Lanka. A broken lotus pedestal which belongs to the standing Buddha statue also can be seen at the site.

The head and arms of the statue were found to be missing and no inscriptions indicating the same



THE WILPATTU INTERIOR ROAD NETWORK RUNS THROUGH THE SITE, THE STUPA AND ALSO THROUGH THE FOUNDATION OF THE STRUCTURE. THEREFORE, IMMEDIATE ACTION HAS TO BE TAKEN TO PREVENT FURTHER DESTRUCTION

have yet been discovered at the sites. The site has also been excavated and destroyed by bounty hunters, and requires urgent conservation action to stop from decaying.

The total park extent is 1,31879 hectares. There are 8 divisions in within the park and it is learnt the staff presently available for guarding, making raids, developing field work, bungalow maintenance, administrative and finance management is not at all adequate. This merge staff of around 85 is not at all strong enough to prevent growing unwarranted illegal sand mining, timber racket poaching, chena cultivation encroaching the forest reservation, trespassing etc. and in enforcing law on vandals and all sorts of culprits. There is vandalism, around 10,000 families living in 135 boundary villages of Wilpattu National Park.

According to the Wildlife Department information sources no full-scale survey for discovering archaeologically important sites and protecting them have been conducted in collaboration with the Archaeology Department. According to the Puraviya Chakurawartha Venerable Ellawala Medhananda Nayaka Thera, is around 300 archaeologically important sites situated within the park premises and majority of them are covered with thick jungle sans access to them.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has initiated a lengthy survey aimed in documenting sites of cultural and archaeological importance Funa and Flora varieties abandoned and water sources at its best. There are around 100 safari vehicles at the service of tourists and due to dearth of wild life staff the safaris are travelling in interior of the park without wild life guards, guides or field assistants to take any responsibility. It is said that the WNP needs more wild life rangers, field assistants, volunteer guides paid from check roll, and trained bungalow keepers altogether to an extent of minimum work force of 150 immediately, for the well-being and the protection of the national park including archaeological sites.

No sensitivity towards environment

It is evident that nearby settlers, security personnel and local governmental authorities have very little environmental awareness and sensitivity towards maintenance and protection of the park. This inhibits their ability to effectively coordinate and take decisions that would help manage the park. Illegal deforestation contributes to accelerated loss of biodiversity and archaeological values because of habitat reduction and destruction. The majority of settlers are acutely unaware and lack environmental consciousness.

There are two major rivers bordering the survey area - Moderagam Ara and Kala Oya. In adequate pomparippu Ara is one of the major tributaries of Kala Oya starting in the southern parts and flowing through the area. It is partly connected to the Kala Oya and also separately flows to the gulf. Nearly 205 water bodies found in the 1:63000 survey maps (Marichchikkaddi, Kudiramai, Kala Oya and Kalpitiya) lives within the park premises. Among them 87 sites can be traced as tanks and most of them were abandoned, while some are still functioning. Several water bodies, which are erroneously called as "Vil" are supposed to be tanks where the ancient bunds still exist. Twelve marshy sites, which are located

downstream of the tanks, can be identified as ancient paddy lands. In several locations, we were able to record two wild rice species (*Oryza rufipogon* and *Oryza rhizomatis*). Rest of the locations are natural water bodies such as Vil and water holes. Cotton plants (*Gossypium arboreum*), which was the plant associated with the Vijaya - Kuveni legend, was recorded near broken crossway of right bank of Pomparippu Ara. Twenty-six sites of irrigation structures, including ruined tanks are also located during this in the park.

Many people think that gold and other treasures lie hidden within the archaeological ruins in Wilpattu. This encourages nearby residents or organised gangs and racketeers from outside to venture in to the national park searching for riches. It is observed that almost all the significant sites had been looted and are in need of urgent conservation action. Treasure hunters not only destroy existing archaeological ruins, they become familiar with the area and might indulge in further nefarious activities. Therefore, the findings made so far can be used as baseline data for future detailed exploration, and also to priorities conservation action. It is vital to document and publish the available information of this unique ancient civilisation in obscurity for awakening public awareness.

On the other hand, the Government has started the construction of lower Malwathu Oya multi-purposes reservoir project based on the proposed lower Malwathu Oya reservoir adjoining the Thantirimale boundary of the Wilpattu national park. It is the plan of the Government to construct a historic Thantirimale centric tourist zone including a modern city.

In this context more tourists both local and foreign will visit Thantirimale and the adjoining Wilpattu national park to witness the wildlife and the archaeological sites. As such the preservation of nearly 300 archaeological monuments and debris now in obscurity found in the thick jungle sans suitable accessible road facilities becoming vital. The ongoing Kudawilachchiya tank renovation project also going to be a popular tourist attraction in time to come.

However, the priceless and precious archaeological resources are now facing hard pressure from unwarranted human activities. It has been reported that encroachment taking place along the southern and the south western border of the Wilpattu National Park is mainly by people engaged in subsistence agriculture and for human settlements.

Another threat is being posed to the archaeological findings of the area as unscrupulous bounty hunters have destroyed a significant proportion of these invaluable and history making resources in their growing quest for treasures hidden among the ruins. A further threat is that caused to the archaeological finds in the National Park as unscrupulous bounty hunters have destroyed a significant proportion of these resources in their quest for treasures.

It is understood that except for the exploratory survey executed by International Union for Conservation of Nature, no any local or world heritage organisation has conducted a full-scale survey in Wilpattu National Park in Conversation with the wild life Conservation department and the archaeology department for recording the monuments which had been devastated by treasure hunters and other surviving places to take immediate conservation action.

Following the IUCN research under a program namely, "Supporting Wilpattu National Park and influence zone Management in Sri Lanka" Being commissioned by German Federal Ministry for Economic Corporation and development with department of wildlife conservation working as the main technical implementing agency has been launched.

The program with the duration period from 2019 - 2022 aims in enhancing the Wilpattu National Park's infra-structure supporting interagency coordination better patrolling to thwart poaching securing and rehabilitating habitats etc. The Government of Germany extends financial support valued at 8 million Euros to complete the project as an initiative.