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<td><strong>Author(s)</strong></td>
<td>B. Mohan Samarasinghe</td>
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A Call For Sustainable Development:
Media's Dual Role In Environmental Conservation
Plus Economic Growth

By

B Mohan Samarasinghe
A call for sustainable development:
Media’s dual role in environmental conservation plus economic growth


BY

S. Mohan Samarasinghe
Ceylon Daily News - Editorial
The Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Ltd.
Colombo
Sri Lanka
The Forest,
With boundless compassion
And endless life-giving qualities,
It protects all living beings
And provides shelter
Even to those who destroy it with an axe,
- The Lord Buddha
The Democratic Socialist Republic of Shri Lanka

Vital statistics

Size: 65,610 square kilometres
Location: 880 kilometres north of the equator, off the southern tip of India.
Population: 16.9 million.
Density: 265 persons per square km.
Life expectancy at birth: 67.6 male; 70.9 female
Literacy rate: 87.2 percent.
Languages: Sinhala, Tamil, English. English is now being promoted as the link language between the Sinhala and Tamil speaking populations. Annual per capita income: US dollars 360.
Ethnic groups: Sinhalese 74 percent; Tamil 18.1 percent; Muslims 7.1 percent; Burghers and others 0.6 percent.
Religions: Buddhism 69 percent; Hinduism 15 percent; Christianity 8 percent; Islam 8 percent.
Labour force: 46 percent agriculture; 29 percent industry and commerce; 19 percent services.
Climate: Lowlands: tropical, average 27 degrees Celsius;
Central hills: cooler, with temperatures dropping to 16 C. degrees. The southwest monsoon brings rain to the western, southern and central regions from May to July, while the northeastern monsoon occurs in the north and east in December and January.
In this final decade of the Twentieth Century, Sri Lanka's future is at crossroads.

With sights set on achieving the status of NIC (Newly Industrialised Country) by the year 2000, the nation seems to be marching along the path of rapid industrialisation, anticipating an accelerated growth in the economy, coupled with new employment opportunities and an export oriented production base.

Economic indicators, particularly over the past ten years, point towards a noteworthy growth of the country's production base, with Sri Lanka now having diversified from its traditional agricultural economy, to one that handles value-added export commodities such as garments, electronics, furniture, etc.

Simultaneously, a close look at the country's environmental performance during this time period indicates a drastic decrease in concern and a rapid all round deterioration of the natural and healthy atmosphere which Sri Lanka used to boast of in the not so long past.

Needless to say, the nation's undisputed commitment towards rapid industrialisation had taken its toll on her natural surroundings, resulting in frequent and increasingly hazardous damages to the environment - among them, persisting droughts, inland soil erosion, coastal erosion, pollution of natural waterbodies, pollution of the air and a drastic decrease in the island's forest cover.

Heeding the worldwide call for immediate environmental conservation, Sri Lanka too began taking seriously the problem of the degradation of her surroundings, by the early 1980s. Due largely to our exposure to the international media, followed by an educated minority calling for a task-oriented environmental programme for the nation, authorities have now installed a permanent system of conservation into government, giving priority to the subject as never before.

The Sri Lankan media has played a crucial role in the prevailing enlightenment and continues to devote time and space in publications and airways towards the cause.

What is perhaps noteworthy here is the media's successful handling of its dual commitment - of facilitating national development via rapid industrialisation and of preserving the environment for the survival of the present and future generations.
Being limited in publications and electronic information channels, none of the media here have been in a position to devote itself entirely to the subject of environment. It has therefore become essential for the media here to strike a balance between the call for economic growth and conservation. Hence, the prevailing call by the Lankan media for environmentally sustainable development!

Sustainable development in Sri Lanka calls for an end to all forms of environmental terrorism, demands corporate commitment towards the conservation cause, requires education and propagation of information which will promote the cause at grassroots level and envisions a system that is built on economic and environmental excellence.

Sri Lanka's forestry sector provides a good example of sustainable development, as called for by the media and understood by the authorities.

Successive governments over the years realised the importance of forestry and the environment and the need for controlled and sustainable development in order to minimise further forest destruction in the face of expanding population and economic growth.

Sri Lanka's current population of 17.4 million is estimated to reach 20.5 million by the year 2000. The current economic growth rate is 5 percent. Simultaneously, the island's forest cover, which was 70% of the land area at the beginning of the century, decreased to 50% by the time the country won independence in 1948. According to latest statistics, today it stands at 24%.

Hence, the need was highlighted for strong social forestry and agro-forestry extension programmes and for the protection of forests from illegal loggers, utilising both state and people's support.

Several policies and strategies were adopted both by the Forest Department and the Department of Wildlife Conservation, which safeguards the forests, and by the Central Environment Authority, for broader environmental protection countrywide. The current five-point forest policy promulgated in 1968 express the need:

* To maintain, conserve and create forests for the preservation and amelioration of the environment, soil and water resources and for the protection of the local flora and fauna when they are required for aesthetic, scientific, historical and socio-economic reasons.
* To ensure and increase as far as possible the supplies of small wood for agricultural requirements and fuelwood for domestic consumption.
* To maintain as far as possible a sustained yield of timber and other forest produce for general housing, industrial, communications and defence requirements of the country.
* To work the forest to the highest possible economic advantage as is consistent with the foregoing objectives.
* To involve the local community in the development of private woodlots and forestry farms through a programme of social forestry.

According to the Sri Lanka Forest Department, the strategy for including community participation was institutionalised in the department by the creation of an Extension cum Community Forestry Division and the start of state-sponsored Community Forestry and Rural Integrated Social Forestry Projects. By this, agro-forestry, though age-old in Sri Lanka as an "art," was placed on a modern, scientific footing.

The writer recently observed first-hand and wrote about the Sinharaja Conservation Project, one of Sri Lanka's most successful contemporary environmental conservation projects. It is important not only to share this success story with other writers on the environment, but it is important also to emphasise the project's commitment to sustainable development, as promoted by the media of the nation.

Sinharaja Forest - or the Forest of the Lion King - is today considered Sri Lanka's most important primeval forest and one of the world's last remaining virgin wet-zone wilderness ranges.

Not only is Sinharaja home to a dazzling array of flora, birds and reptiles, most of which are endemic to Sri Lanka, but the forest is also backyard to some 5,000 people inhabiting 22 villages which border the wilderness. Despite having always commanded attention as a breathtakingly beautiful wilderness and an ecologically crucial patch of forest, Sinharaja has been subjected to continuous encroachment by humans, which includes the legal and illegal felling of trees for timber.

Absorbed in 1989 by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site, Sinharaja is 11,187 hectares of continuous forest, placed in four administrative districts in the heartland of Lanka. In 1978, UNESCO declared Sinharaja a Man and Biosphere Reserve.
(there are 47 such reserves now being maintained in Sri Lanka), and by an Act of Parliament in 1988, it was declared a National Heritage Wilderness Area.

Considered the watershed of Lanka's wet zone, the forest discharges a never-ending outflow of crystal-clear water to feed at least five of the nation's primary rivers. With no permanent dry season, this highly moist region received 3,800 to 5,000 millimeters of rain each year, making this evergreen forest a nation's major catchment, storage and release area of water.

With over 5,000 people relying on the forest primarily for their sustenance, forest authorities are now trying to educate the inhabitants of surrounding villages on the implications of tapping the forest for domestic needs. Launched in 1987, the Sinharaja Conservation Project was created with assistance from the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD) to protect the forest from encroachers and nearby inhabitants.

Of the 22 villages surrounding Sinharaja, two are right in the middle of the forest. According to forest officers, none of these villages is more than four generations old, an indication that the inhabitants came from the outside and settled here this side of 150 years. With the exception of some cross-country traveler, who used a few tracks that fell through the forest, researchers believe that the place was largely free from mankind until the arrival of these dwellers; which they say has contributed to the fact that the Sinharaja is one of the world's few remaining virgin forests.

According to the officers, although there is plenty of water, none of the villages is able to sustain itself, particularly in the production of rice. Therefore, villagers have acquired the habit of encroaching, relying on the forest for their sustenance. In doing so, they tap the Sinharaja for 'kitul' (a sugar producing tree), firewood, cane (for the manufacture of furniture), resins, domestic construction material and anything else they need that the forest can provide.

According to Ananda Wijesooriya, who is a Divisional Forest Officer in charge of the forest area to the north of Sinharaja, the government of Sri Lanka and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Nature Resources have channelled Rs.10 million towards the Sinharaja Conservation Project; a two-pronged approach to educate the villagers on the importance of this place and to keep them from exploiting it for commercial or domestic purposes.
Says Wijesooriya: "We realised that the only way to protect the forest from the people is to keep them from encroaching. But we also realised that we could not simply ask them to stop doing so without first providing them with an alternative source of income.

Forest Department officials tackled this problem by developing a two kilometre wide buffer zone along the boundary of the declared wilderness area, where systematic planting of profit-generating trees like 'kitul' and cane has already begun. Also, villages have been encouraged to grow profit-yielding trees in their gardens, like papaya and mango, and bordering villages have been provided with facilities to cultivate tea on a home-garden basis.

'"The idea is to meet the requirements of the villagers half-way. Now they need not come as far as the forest looking for what they require," forest officer Wijesooriya explains.

Of course, he understands that these trees planted in the buffer zone will take another decade or so to be profit-yielding to any of the villagers, but this is just where the education comes in. According to the officers, after much labour they seem to have won the confidence of the villagers.

'"At first it was difficult for them to understand why we wouldn't let them chop a branch from a tree in the forest," Wijesooriya explains. '"To them it was a forest like any other, and therefore they felt they had a right to help themselves to what the forest offered."

'"Still, perhaps they don't understand the ecological implications we talk about. But they do know now that a few people are trying like heck to preserve this place and they have realised that there is indeed something sacred about this forest."

He added: "May be we haven’t converted them all. But we certainly have reached the younger generation, who understand preservation much more than their elders. They love this forest which is their backyard and they respect it a lot.

What should also be noted here is that these officers have achieved this transformation without evicting or relocating a single family from their original homesteads.

The officers, meanwhile, carry the message to every doorstep in every village. School children from the border
villages are now given guided tours of this majestic wilderness, perhaps teaching them much more than they would ever have learned from merely playing in the Sinharaja Forest.

The above is an example of how sustainable and populist conservation methods have been successfully adopted in certain sectors of the Sri Lankan environment. The media is indirectly responsible for such achievements through the efforts made at highlighting the necessity of similar programmes and once accomplished, by giving acclaimed publicity to such programmes.

The above example generated much response, when it was highlighted over national television, in newspaper articles, editorials, and international magazines.

The same cannot be said, however, on all sectors of the Lankan environment. For over a decade now, the local media have been highlighting the plight of residents of Ratmalana, a highly polluted urban residential area in the outskirts of Colombo, where uncontrolled industrial development is now taking its toll on the environment. Repeated criticism over the media have led authorities to do little about this crisis, perhaps being guided to a large extent by the lobbying of national level industries which have set up shop in the area. Attached, you will find just one example of the media's attempt to pin-point the prevailing conditions, and an appreciative reply to the newspaper by a resident of the area, hoping some change will come their way soon.

On the contrary, the media's long-winded campaign to stop coral mining along the country's coastal belt has paid off handsomely. The government recently banned all forms of mining of coral. Not resting there, the media quickly began explaining to the public that there were other alternative substitutes for lime (calcium carbonate) generated through the burning of coral. The country has vast resources of dolomite, which can and must be used as an effective substitute, the media pointed out, making sure that coral mining was not taken up again.

Sri Lanka's media is alive to the global and national problem of environmental deterioration and from the looks of it, will maintain its momentum during the years to come. What it must remember at this crucial juncture is that at a time when the country is encouraging rapid industrialisation and a fast-paced growth, its responsibilities as 'watch dog' will be more so than ever before. In this light, it is obvious that the media will have to dedicate more attention and time to the cause of conservation.