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Media Coverage Of Environment Issues In Sri Lanka

By

Carol Aloysius
MEDIA COVERAGE OF ENVIRONMENT ISSUES IN SRI LANKA

- By Carol Aloysius

Environment issues in Sri Lanka, although becoming increasingly important to the Media, are still having a hard time capturing headlines on the first page of a newspaper or being the most important newsitem on T.V. or radio news.

That they are being covered is no secret, since almost every newspaper whether in English or in the vernacular carry at least one newsitem or a feature or else even a picture relating to an environmental problem. And of late, with the country's environmental problems becoming more and more critical everyday, these newsitems have become more frequent and their lone more urgent.

It has been said that the, "good news about the state of the earth these days in that so many people in every continent are paying attention to the bad news about it".

This statement is particularly relevant to Sri Lanka, where most of the lead stories about environment are those relating to some tragic consequence of environmental abuse.

It is a pity that ever so often, natural and man made disasters relating to the environment such as cyclones, floods, landslides, pesticide poisoning seem to be hugging the headlines in newspaper and news bulletins instead of the actual causes that led to them. Causes such as the disappearances of our precious forest cover for example.

This once luscious tropical country has now lost most of the forests due to illicit felling for timber and fuel. Over 80% of the people in Sri Lanka live in villages and nearly all these rural people use fuel wood for cooking.

It is only now that the forest Department has begun special such wood forests and began an afforestation program.

In certain villages ignorant villages are said to torch the forests just to see that the forest burning. Despite regulations preventing illicit felling and fines for violating them, timber merchants continue to violate them since there is still not enough manpower to visit these remote forests and make on the spot arrests.

The results of this relentless rape are disastrous. From over 40% of forest cover about 10 years ago, due are now left with under 20% of forests area. In the North and rest which had over 50% of the islands forests, there is very little forest left and the balance is being overexploited so, unless new forests are grown with a vengeance, we will soon be a forest-less tropical island by the turn of the century.

An equally frightening problem is that of land degradation, studies by the leading Scientific Research Institute (the IFS) has shown that rainfall in Nawara Eliya are of our popular upcountry resorts has declined by 20% during the past 110 years. It is not surprising that reservoirs in Nuwara Eliya and nearby Bandaramela have begun drying up, resulting in an unusual phenomenon in this past of the country-shortage of water.

It is now a common sight to see people in some villages in Bandaramela carrying pots of water in their head, and hindging home walking miles to fetch their water.

Landslides which were probably unheard of in ancient times since old Sinhala Literature has no mention of them, is now a common problem.

Shifting of reservoirs and lakes is another serious problem - the culprit in this case being the Pines and Encalyptus trees that have no undergrowth, but have been cultivated for economic purposes.

The beautiful lake Gregory at Nuwara Eliya is one such victim of siltage, the top sail in the surrounding hills cultivated with Pines, making the lake a sill-bog.

Coral mining and land mining are equally serious issues yet they, like the silting of the reservoirs and felling of trees, get a prominent place in the media, only when they are involved in some crisis situation. When a reservoir runs dry for no apparent reason and public begin to complain
they have no water, then the newspapers sit up, send an investigative team if possible and try to get to the bottom of the cause. If not, no one in the media really bothers about the causes leading to such natural a man made disaster.

Rarely does the press or a group discussion on Environment on TV talk about why or how such problems occur. A TV newsreel would more likely show rescue operations taking place at say, a site where a landslide has occurred, or put the spotlights on an affected families giving a first hand experience of the incident, instead of getting an Environmentalists’ comments as to how and why it occurred in the first place, and how it can be prevented in the future. Many landslides in our country occurred due to erosion of the land and the cultivation of tobacco on the slopes.

Cannot this be pointed out by the media? Unfortunately the tobacco Moghuls who are responsible for lung cancer among other things, are responsible for bringing in valuable exchange into the country. So the government remains silent - and so does the pro government media. Right now the media though willing to take the message of environment, is not able to do so effectively because of restraints within and without their establishments.

Within their respective establishments, journalists face obstacles from even their own editors when it comes to writing or publishing a good story on environment. If the Editor is not interested in the subject, then the reporter concerned might just as well throw away his story into the waste paper basket - since the most amount of prominence it will get is as a single column news item in an obscure place in the paper!

So where does a journalists covering environmental issues stand in such an event? This is another issue I would like to raise.

In fact I'll will go as far as to suggest that administrators and newspaper barons are also briefed and motivated on environmental issues in a seminar like this one. If not this exercise would be in vain.

To return to the role of the media in dealing with these issues in Sri Lanka, we do have a few success stories - in spite of our many obstacles to push through our stories into the lead place!

There was for example the proposal by the government to build a coal fired thermal power plant in Trincomalee last year. This would have resulted in the raising of the sea level due to the raising of the temperature of the water by about 7 degrees resulting in numerous environmental problems, apart from killing the fish breeding in this waters. The NGO ‘sand the residents of Trinicomalee stromed the newspapers with protests and demanded that their voice be heard through articles, letters to the editor, editorials, urging the Government to turn down the proposal.

The Media supported the cause with a will and almost every paper was unanimous in its stand: the coal fired station must not be put up.

Eventually the Government did abandon this proposal - bowing to the will of the public and pressured by the newspapers; even through the economic and even scientific case for the power station may have been a reasonable one.

History repeated itself again when shortly afterwards a similar proposal was made to set up the sation in south at the Dikwella area. Once again the environmental NGO’s banded themselves together into a consortuim to protest against the proposal.

Called the ‘Anti coal fired power plant’ campaigns, the group lead by a Bikkhu sponsored several meetings and rallies in the villages that would be affected if the plan went through. They explained to them the environmental, social and economic implications of such a project.

All there rallies were well covered by the media. Among the southern organisations’ in the campaign was a federation of around 7000 fisholk also would have been most affected if the plant did come up as they would have lost their livelihood, since the flushing of heated water into the lagoon would have sent the temperature of the water up by about 7 degrees. Unfortunately today a lot of space in our papers is being use for reports on the North East conflict. Hopefully the war is ending. And while the issues of Development still take pride of place, we can expect environment issues to become unincreasingly covered by the media, now that we have government commitment, with a
separate Ministry of Environment and Parliamentary Affairs being set up, and a whole series of new sector have been framed under the amended National Environment Act certified by our President Premadasa last year. The newly amended Act which has some 15 regulations on required standards to maintain and control the quality of environment and to prevent and control pollution in the environment, should give more food for thought to the media which can work together with the Central Environment Authority on the country to ensure that these regulations are strictly adhered to by industries, and so prevent another environment hazard that has so far had relatively little impact here in Sri Lanka - industrial pollution.

To conclude, I want to give you a list of the number of articles I found on Environmental issues in our English papers for one month December 1991, I counted 61 articles in all from brief news items to lengthy features from poems to cartoons. They appeared on every page - from the front page/new pages/features/science/ and even children’s and women's pages.

If you added this to the number that appeared in the vernacular pages. I'm sure the number would be treble the amount. I can't give you a listing of news items in Environment by the Electronic Media for the same month, but as you can see they were all well covered.