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A Potential Threat to Sinharaja World Heritage Site

Green Gold Rush in the 21st Century:

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By Nimal Gunatilleke

Sinharaja, the jewel in the crown of Sri Lanka's natural forests, was once rescued from the jaws of destruction by a highly controversial selective logging project implemented in the 1970s primarily for the manufacture of plywood to make tea chests and furniture. At that time, this epic feat was achieved thanks to a collective effort by a cohort of dedicated environmentalists, religious leaders and scientists, both local and overseas, who were able to convince the then government that the long-term benefits by conserving this magnificent forest far outweighs the short-term foreign-exchange saving/earning project, whose sustainability was questionable. Looking back over 34 years, this decision to save Sinharaja from selective

logging at the scale it was planned had not only been a visionary accomplishment, but was also a forerunner to several land-mark decisions taken by the successive governments towards conservation and sustainable development of our natural heritage for the benefit of current populace without compromising the survival of the future generations.

The second threat to the survival of Sri Lankan forests, even more serious than the first, came as a contentious Forestry Master Plan in 1983. It proposed the creaming off of all the remaining

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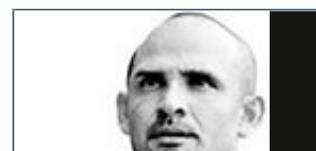
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natural forests under the guise of sustainable timber management. It was, in a way, a multiplied version of what was proposed for Sinharaja in the 1960s and implemented in the 1970s. Thanks once again to the conservation-minded public opinion that prevailed at the time, the original master plan had to be withdrawn amidst strong public voice against it. Instead, a natural forest conservation plan was prepared by the very same consultants, which was later approved by the government. The public opinion both local and international, against the original master plan was so strong and convincing that the revised master plan recommended a moratorium on selective logging of all natural forests, which is even valid to date. Another conservation friendly outcome of this revised plan was that the Forest Department of Sri Lanka established a separate unit known as the Environmental Management Division, mainly to address the issues of conservation of natural forests like Sinharaja.

As a result of all this, Sinharaja and most other conservation forests received much public attention. In particular, their biological value was disseminated far and wide, both nationally and internationally. Sinharaja became a house-hold name in Sri Lanka. Its biodiversity and conservation value has been included in educational curricula at the school level and other higher educational levels, and even in some international institutions. Consequently, its conservation value has well and truly permeated the society, in general.

The most recent reports on income generated from tourist visits for education and recreation to our protected area system as a whole has shown impressive economic gains. However, the real value of its services to Sri Lankans as a prime Natural Wilderness Area and to the world at large, as a World Heritage, is still very much under-valued, but just beginning to emerge. Continued studies, discoveries and research in Sinharaja over the past decades have increased our knowledge on its biological wealth, to some degree. A lot more remains yet to be revealed, particularly from little explored eastern Sinharaja.

Declaration of Sinharaja as a National Wilderness Heritage Area and its subsequent listing as a World Heritage Site under the UNESCO WHS Criteria xi and x of 2005 is now glorified history on which we are still basking. The darker yet unseen side of the story is that threats of encroachment primarily for tea and cardamom cultivation, construction of dwellings, illegal removal of plants and animals, pollution of waterways in the immediate surroundings from agrochemicals are 'worming in' at an accelerated pace from all sides of Sinharaja forest. The earlier threats to conservation of natural forests came as major internationally funded projects at a national level. The current threats to Sinharaja and other forests in the region are at the local level, unknown to the rest of the world, unless one is a frequent traveler to these areas or proficient in browsing the web and comparing recent satellite images with those of the 1990s taken by the forest mapping project under the British ODA (now DFID) project.



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All these are happening while impressive progress has been made on paper on the implementation of recommendations of the Forestry Master Plan through a series of internationally funded projects. In comparison, in the field however, there is little evidence that forests like Sinharaja are effectively protected, in accordance with the recommendations in the Revised Forestry Master Plan. On the positive side, it is a fact that visitor facilities have been improved in the major forest areas like Sinharaja, KDN and Knuckles. Yet, the protection and restoration/rehabilitation aspects, in my opinion, have not kept pace with similar impetus. It looks as though much of the efforts of the Forest Department in recent times had been channeled to cope with the ever increasing influx of tourist traffic at the expense of protecting the forests from unauthorized activities.

This brings us to the main topic of this article. There have been a number of newspaper articles, editorials, press statements and the like recently on a new road being cut on the eastern sector of the Sinharaja range from Illimbekanda to Sooriyakanda to join the villages in Kalawana PS with that of Kolonne. Unlike the western sector of Sinharaja, its eastern counterpart with all its aesthetic beauty and charm has been a neglected area for a long time by the conservation agencies as well as scientists, although the biodiversity of this area could be as rich as that of the lowland western sector, based on recent studies particularly of amphibians, reptiles etc. For a long while, since the 1980s, we have been campaigning to annex the remaining forested areas of the eastern sector of Sinharaja range to the National Wilderness Heritage area of Sinharaja, at every workshop that we attended, almost every publication we wrote on this subject and also in local newspapers and other media based on field visits to most areas in this Rakwana Hill range, at every opportunity we got.

The current situation with respect to the general area through which the proposed road is to be made, as I understand, is as follows: Based on a presidential directive issued on 10 August 2001, all state forests bordering Sinharaja, Knuckles, Sri Pada Range and Kanneliya-Nakiyadeniya-Dediyagala (KDN) have apparently been vested with the Forest Department. These may be the forests that were formerly administered by the Provincial/District Councils in Ratnapura, Galle, Matara, Kandy and Matale (aka GAs' Lands) and located in close proximity to the above protected areas. Another presidential directive, based on a report by a cabinet appointed committee to look in to the lands released between 2002.01.01 to 2004.03.01 by the Land Reform Commission, had been made to the then cabinet in July 2004 to acquire a list of 16 forested properties totaling 2,488 ha in Ratnapura, Galle and Matara districts. Among these that are of immediate relevance to this 'road issue' in eastern Sinharaja range are Illimbekanda (567 ha), Morningside (55ha) Aberfoil Estate (191 ha), Hayes Estate (137 ha) and Gongala area (138 ha), a total of 1,088 ha. A further cabinet decision for the same purpose has evidently been made on 22 July 2009.

Since then the relevant government agencies, mainly the Land Reform Commission (LRC) and the

Forest Department, have been engaged in negotiations on the most parsimonious mechanism and the terms of transfer of these lands through physical boundary surveys and meeting the legal requirements of the transfer process. It is learnt that the Chairman of the LRC, in a more recent letter to the Forest Department, had informed that he has been receiving numerous complains about illegal activities and encroachments in LRC lands located near the perimeters of the Sinharaja World Heritage Site. As such, the LRC chairman has apparently requested that the Forest Department take necessary steps to acquire these lands for conservation of Sinharaja for its national heritage value. The LRC would subsequently be making claims for compensation. The lands listed in the LRC chairman's letter include 12 parcels of land in Ratnapura district and four in Matara district. On the part of the Forest Department, we understand that the physical surveys have now been almost completed and tracings of final village plans (FVPs) have been prepared. Apparently, what remains to be done now is to legally acquire these lands under section 38(a) of the Forest Ordinance with the concurrence of the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources.

In spite of two presidential directives, a prime minister's directive and at least two cabinet decisions to acquire these lands vested with the LRC, all these governmental level administrative procedures have been going on for well over a decade or so. Regrettably, this process is still far from complete. In the mean time, land clearance for tea cultivation (Green Gold for these cultivators) is going on at an alarming rate all round Sinharaja, while forest understory clearance is expanding in eastern Sinharaja for cardamom cultivation. An excellent yet depressing account of the illegal activities going on in and around two selected villages - Kudawa (NW Sinharaja) and Warukandeniya (Southern Sinharaja) is given in a post-graduate thesis later published as a book in Sinhala titled "Sinharajaya Sanrakshanaya" by Mr. Harsha Perera, a dedicated conservationist and an attorney at law. His account was based on authentic quantitative information gathered himself between 2002 and 2003. Based on my own experience similar, if not much more, harm to the forest goes on all round Sinharaja, particularly because of the craving for land primarily to grow green gold -TEA.

Returning to the eastern Sinharaja road issue, a few weeks ago in the company of a small but very knowledgeable group of local explorer-scientists, I walked from the Sooriyakanda end of this proposed road trace along its entire length (about 3-4 km) to Illimbekanda and back. At the Suriyakanda end, the road trace starts as a motorable gravel/grass road, at first through a mature forest area under-planted with cardamom, which carried sign posts on either side of the road in Sinhala warning that the land is managed by Sinharaja Organic Farming Company and that trespassers to the land would be prosecuted. Beyond this point, the road continued through a former estate road with several still functional culverts over meandering forest streams. The road from here continues as a well-traversed foot path, through a mosaic of primary and regenerating secondary forest in different phases of growth after the tea cultivation had been abandoned decades ago. It reminded me of an abandoned logging road [skid trail] in western

Sinharaja. Under the shade of the primary forest fragments, luscious cardamom cultivation is again visible. Between these forest fragments are pathana grasslands on either side of the footpath that are subject to periodic fires. At the Illimbekanda end of the trace too, it runs through a mosaic of primary and regenerating forest with good canopy cover. This entire path has been laid through one of the most beautiful valleys with breath-taking views of the verdant eastern-Sinharaja range on one side and the equally green towering Beralagala - Handapanella range on the other. The whole region is the headwaters of Delgoda River which eventually feeds the Kukule Ganga with a nationally important hydro-power facility downstream.

This landscape, with a mosaic of mature and regenerating forests interspersed with grasslands, encompass about 1000 ha of LRC land in this area. The area serves as an important corridor facilitating movement of animals between the two parallel mountain ranges viz. Eastern Sinharaja and Beralagala-Handapanella. This cloud forest area is the only home in the world for at least 12 Endangered and Critically Endangered animal species. It also provides critical habitats for a total of 30 animal species deemed to be threatened with extinction by the IUCN Red List. A large number of plant species endemic to Sri Lanka are also found in this area. If the proposed road becomes a reality, the small-holder tea cultivation and cardamom cultivation under the forest canopies will expand at a rapid rate from its current level. We noticed recently constructed cardamom curing facilities at the Suriyakanda end of the road trace. There is also a possibility of unplanned ecotourism development in this aesthetically beautiful area with panoramic views.

Surprisingly however, we are not aware that any Initial Environmental Examination or a full scale Environmental Impact Assessment has been made to assess the possible impacts of road construction in close proximity to a World Heritage Site taking the above environmental factors and biological features into consideration. Furthermore, as per the World Heritage Convention Guidelines, the state parties are expected to notify the World Heritage Centre of any developments taking place in, around and adjacent to the reserve, before any new development activities are to take place. If we take these issues lightly and ignore them, there is a possibility that Sinharaja would be placed in what is called the 'danger list' of World Heritage Sites. World Heritage Convention defines dangers as those that can be 'ascertained', referring to specific and proven imminent threats, or 'potential', when a property is faced with threats which could have negative effects on its World Heritage values. Unless the agencies concerned take timely corrective action, Sinharaja could fall into the ignominious 'danger category' as a result of the potential threats from green-gold prospectors. This could negate its heritage values under which Sinharaja was first listed as a World Heritage Site in 1988 which are the following:

i) be an outstanding example representing significant ongoing ecological and biological processes in the evolution and development of terrestrial, fresh water, coastal and marine ecosystems and communities of plants and animals (criterion ix) and,

ii) contain the most important significant habitats for in situ conservation of biological diversity, including those containing threatened species of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation (criterion x).

In this international year of forests declared by the United Nations, one of the main objectives, among others, is to increase the global extent of forest cover from today's 13% to 20%. Unfortunately, in Sri Lanka, we are laying a foundation to go in the opposite direction in the name of accelerated but unsustainable development.

It was only last year that Sri Lanka managed to get the Central Highlands, viz., Peak Wilderness-Horton Plains-Knuckles complex, listed as the second Natural World Heritage Site, conditional upon submission of a co-ordinated management plan to UNESCO within a specific period of time. Evidently, tea, vegetable and cardamom cultivation within this Central Highlands protected area and in its buffer zone will be discouraged in this proposed management plan. While such a management plan is being prepared for the listing of one World Heritage Site, it is indeed ironical that the more established sister site is potentially being threatened due to protracted bureaucratic procedural delays resulting in inaction at the field level in countering the green-gold prospecting and other such detrimental land uses.

Timely intervention of the conservation minded public, not once but twice, saved Sinharaja and other such forests, (i) harbouring rich and unique biodiversity, (ii) providing intangible but invaluable service functions of soil and water conservation and environmental amelioration, and also (iii) earning much foreign exchange by way of attracting overseas visitors, from the chainsaws of the loggers. The difference on this occasion however, is that it is not an internationally funded project that threatens the very existence of Sinharaja and other forests of similar nature. It is the slow but steady encroachment of cultivators of green-gold who are inadvertently doing the damage. The gravity of this can be seen if one cares to look at the more recent satellite pictures on Google Earth of Panilkanda/Aningkanda range and Nildeniya in Deniyaya area and Pidurutalagala, Kandapola-Seetha-Eliya and Meepilimana forest reserves in the central mountains. Similar fate will befall Sinharaja and other forests unless the highest authorities of the country can make a visionary move to safeguard these valuable natural assets, not only for our own survival but also that of future generations.

The need of the moment is to expedite all the procedures to transfer the designated forest areas in eastern Sinharaja without any further delay to the Forest Department by the Ministry of Environment. The potential adversity resulting from inordinate delays in implementing presidential directives and cabinet decisions on time should be turned to an opportunity in this instance in expediting the legal process and meet the obligations already set by the highest authorities of

the land.

The Forest Department in turn, could take swift measures to establish a Range Forest Office in a suitable location in Suriyakanda area in close proximity to the forest reserve with several beats to look after the entire eastern sector including these new acquisitions. Once these administrative procedures are completed, the entire area could be annexed to the existing Sinharaja National Wilderness Heritage area and strengthen the protective functions all round the reserve. This is probably the only way out to save Sinharaja at this critical juncture. Done properly, it will once again be seen as a model World Heritage Site for Sri Lanka.

Would our temptation for green-gold in the short-term, lead to the destruction of the crown jewel and eventually kill the goose that lays golden eggs? It is the bounden duty of all conservation-minded people, local and overseas, to rally round to protect Sinharaja from a third assault on her life during our lifetime.

As conservation scientists, we have collectively done so far what we could to highlight the conservation values of this unique forest and the threats to its existence. The legendary British Prime Minister Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill had said that the scientists should be on tap and not on top. I wonder who should then be on top on this issue of unsustainable management of our natural resources – politicians, bureaucrats, social scientists or economists or all of them together. If so, it is over to them to take a visionary decision once more at this crucial juncture when not only the fate of Sinharaja but that of the other forests too, is hanging in the balance.

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