

The Last Rain Forest of Uva

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At the eastern edge of the Uva Province hill country, hidden at the bottom of a beautiful, remote valley east of Lunugala, near the village of Udakiruwa, there is a unique and unknown rainforest with large stands of Hora trees.



Normally forests with Hora or *Dipterocarpus zeylanicus* trees are found in the Southwestern wet zone areas of Singharaja, Galle and Ratnapura, but the local microclimate in the Uva valley has created conditions suitable for large stands of Hora trees of more than 40 meters in height that grow in the valley. There are also some very large Doona or *Shorea* trees. On the upper slopes of the valley, where conditions are drier, different kinds of trees such as Jack-fruit grow.

The climate in the valley is humid and cool, probably due to winds and a brook called Kiri Oya meanders through it. The Kiri Oya or “Milk River” is named after its whitish colour, due to minerals leaching out of the white soils in the valley.

The altitude of Udakiruwa village and the main forest is about 500 meters, the same as Kandy town. The village consists of about 50 houses and is relatively prosperous due to its Betel nut cultivations.

There is one wild elephant left in the valley, the sole survivor of what used to be a herd of twelve a few decades ago. There are also Sambar deer, Barking deer, wild boar, and fishing cats as well as Grey Hornbills and Black Eagles.

Although the main forest is mostly state owned forest, there are also large parts which are privately owned. The main threat to the forest is the conversion of private forest land (which used to be cultivated as *hena* slash and burn cultivations decades ago) to rubber tree plantations. Due to rising prices of rubber, this has already happened in a few places around the Udakiruwa village and also around the Pallekiruwa village. Last year a forest patch of a few acres with 25 meter high Hora trees was cleared along the Kiri Oya river right in the middle of the main forest area and now rubber trees have been planted here (see picture). A larger patch of forest was also cleared on the slope to the west of Udakiruwa village.



Rubber tree plantations are monocultures and are comparable to deserts: instead of a great variety of plants, insects, birds and animals, only one species, the rubber tree, is found here to the detriment of all the other species. Rubber latex is used in

the manufacture of car tires, and the mass usage of cars leads to further pollution and destruction of the environment.

Villagers regularly burn the slopes of the valley to create grassland that is used for hunting and cattle grazing. It is obvious that several areas of former forest are now grassland due to past logging and frequent burning. There are also plans for a road between the villages that could further open up the valley for developments that could be adverse to the forest.

The Udakiruwa rain forest is said to be the largest natural rainforest left in the mountains of Uva province. Elsewhere in the mountains of Uva, such as in the nearby Lunugala valley, the forests have all been cut down and converted to tea, pine, eucalypt and rubber plantations. The Udakiruwa rain forest and valley is therefore a kind of natural museum that reminds us of how Uva province looked in the past before the large scale plantation industries were started by the British.

Disappearance of the rain forest here will reduce water supplies downstream and in the low country. The Kiri Oya is one of the two main tributaries of the Kumbuk Oya that flows through the Monaragala District. In areas in the valley where the forest has been cut down and replaced with grasslands, the streams quickly dry up after rains whereas on forested slopes the streams continue to run.

Although cutting down forest can support short term economic development at the individual and regional level, in the long term there will be a great loss to the economy on the communal, national and international level because of reduced water supplies, soil erosion, lost flood controls, disappearance of plants and trees that are of great medical and horticultural value, loss of tourist revenue due to loss of scenery and wildlife.. The forest, with its majestic 40 meter high Hora trees with huge trunks and lush undergrowth consisting of shrubs and smaller trees also act as a large carbon-dioxide sink, reducing global warming.

Protection of remnant rain forests such the ones in the Udakiruwa valley is therefore of great importance.

Not only are the Hora trees unusual here but also various other plants that normally occur in the Southwest wet zone areas such as *Freycineta walkeri*, *Asplenium nidus* (Bird nest ferns), *Dorstenia indica*, *Chirita zeylanica*, *Leptaspis urceolata*, *Elatostema surculosum*, *Daemonorops fasciculatus*, *Ophiorrhiza nemorosa*, *Gomphandra tetrandra*, *Amomum spp.*

Several wet zone epiphytic orchid species such as *Agrostophyllum zeylanicum*, *Flickingeria macraei* and *Schoenorchis nivea* grow on trees in the valley and the elusive leafless, saprophytic orchid *Aphyllorchis montana* grows on the forest floor.

Pattana areas with lemon grass (*pengiri-mana*) cover some areas of the slopes. Plants specific to mountain pattana grasslands such as *Centranthera indica* and *Exacum trinervum* grow here.

The valley runs from north to south, parallel to the Lunugala valley. It is situated west of the Bibile – Monaragala road and east of the Lunugala – Passara road. Over the hill ridge to the east of the Udakiruwa valley the southeastern low country starts, and starting with the mountain ridge on the western side of the valley there are the tea, pine and eucalypt plantations of the mountains of Lunugala and Badulla. The largest areas with Hora stands are around 7° 2'44.37"N & 81°14'2.74"O between the Udakiruwa and the Weragoda and Pallekiruwa villages. There is also an area of Hora forest further downstream in the valley, south of the Pallekiruwa village (around 6°59'29.82"N, 81°13'42.10"O). The valley and its forests can be viewed in great detail through Google Earth.

It would be a great loss to the Sri Lankan natural heritage if this beautiful, unique rainforest would be lost to rubber cultivation and other developments which have a short term benefit, but lead to a great long term loss. Hopefully naturalists will pay more attention to the area and call for greater protection so that future generations will be able to enjoy the natural splendors of the valley.

Pictures at:

<https://plus.google.com/photos/113447755795718581160/albums/5846902201896742785?authkey=CJmams23xo79DA>