

Fighting Deforestation in Sri Lanka

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The focus on Sri Lanka's deforestation and the conservation of forests this year can be traced back to widespread discussions about deforestation in Wilpattu National Park back in 2019. Deforestation in Wanathawillu, Anawilundawa and Sinharaja has been the recent focus of discussion. However, reports of more deforestation and illegal commercial or developmental projects have been reported from many parts of the country. Since then, the topic has become affiliated with politics and certain political figures. The blame game has advanced amid the lack of political authority.

The forest cover of Sri Lanka in 2019 was reported to be 16.5 percent, down from 29.7 percent in 2017. According to Dr. Ravindra Kariyawasam, in 1882, the country's forest density was around 82 percent. Between 1990 and 2000, Sri Lanka lost an average of 26,800 hectares of forest per year, which amounts to an average annual deforestation rate of 1.14 percent. In total, between 1990 and 2005 alone, Sri Lanka lost 17.7 percent of its forest cover.

Controversial Legal Moves

Recently, environmentalists have taken issue with the Sri Lankan cabinet's recently announced plan to revoke Circular No. 5/2001, which protects the country's Other State Forests (OSFs), and transfer jurisdiction for these protected areas from the Forest Department to the authorities at the divisional and district levels. Amid the public uproar, further discussions are to be held, with the cabinet instructed to form a committee to investigate the potential negative impacts of the move, and to gather feedback.

According to RMCM Herath, Sri Lanka's land commissioner general, the "circular will not be revoked immediately. It will happen step by step. The Forest Department, the Wildlife Conservation Department, the Land Commissioner's Department, the Land Policy and Planning Department, the Land Survey Department, the Land Reforms Commission and other relevant authorities will together consider the best way forward."

While the formation of a committee is exemplary, "the step by step" approach to revoking the measure makes it urgent for environmentalists and other stakeholders to analytically observe the committee's recommendations and decisions. The circular safeguards around 500,000 hectares of OSFs that are not otherwise protected. As these

forests are used by animals, especially elephants, as migratory corridors, their segregation into agricultural lands might lead to increased elephant-human conflict, thus again adversely affecting the economy and livelihoods of communities living in the area.

Also sparking debate were provisions made under the Extraordinary Gazette 2192/36 of September 10, in which the government planned to issue legal documents confirming ownership to eligible claimants who have occupied state lands, for agricultural or any development activity, without possessing formal documents. Coupled with the attempts to revoke Circular No. 5/2001, the protection of OSFs appears to be in danger. On a positive note, the Extraordinary Gazette allowing persons to occupy state lands has been cancelled amid complaints that the gazette promoted people to illegally take over lands, hoping for the granting of official land deeds. However, the damage caused to forest patches during the few days the Gazette was in force has not yet been calculated.

The Politics of Forest Protection

The current government has committed to increase Sri Lanka's national forest cover by 30 percent during its term in office. Under the "Vistas of Splendor" plan, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa has emphasized the need for a sustainable environmental policy and emphasized the need for sustainable development.

The ongoing deforestation in Sri Lanka needs to be tackled and mitigated if the country is to reach the 30 percent target. Given such a goal, news of the deforestation of protected areas is a nightmare for conservationists and environmentalists. The construction of the Neluwa-Lankagama-Deniyaya Road, along with deforestation in Anawilundawa in order to establish a prawn farm, caught the attention of social media and several interest groups. Furthermore, the involvement of a few newly elected parliamentarians was reported, creating an uproar from the public. Investigations are underway.

The issue has caught the president's attentions as well, and Rajapaksa reiterated that development has to take place without harm to the environment. However, the diffusion of the president's aims and vision to the relevant political authorities and bureaucratic authorities seems questionable, amid incidents of deforestation and increased human activity. Development projects within forest areas have failed to produce environmental assessments, and make little effort to steer clear of illegal intrusion.

Election promises, a lack of political authority and a lack of sustainable strategies have led to the blind advancement of unsustainable development projects. This needs to be evaluated and altered accordingly, through a process in which each point of authority will be held responsible from the political level to the bureaucratic level.

The Need to Promote Sustainable Development

Rajapaksa, addressing members of the Viyathmaga network of professionals and academics last month, once again emphasized the importance of a development that safeguards the environment. He underscored the necessity of sound policies to support that vision. To that end, we can incorporate Professor Mohan Munasinghe's theory of Sustainomics, where sustainable development requires balanced and integrated analysis from three main perspectives: social, economic and environmental. In pursuing economic growth, equal attention should be paid to the social and environment aspects as well. If any of these three pillars is given unequal attention, development will be asymmetrical.

Sri Lanka needs sound policies in which present resources can be used to their maximum extent rather than clearing forests to open up new land. For example, the need for more agricultural land is a fallacy, Hemantha Withanage, executive director of the Centre for Environmental Justice (CEJ), insists. The country has no shortage of farmland. "It doesn't take a genius to see there is so much that is fit for farming that is not being used properly," he said in a recent interview. Withanage further explained that the majority of farmers are no longer engaged in chena cultivation (also known as shifting agriculture), because it hasn't proved to be profitable.

"They have no transport systems, storage or sales," Withanage said. "What's the point giving them more land with no systems to deal with the harvest? What we lack isn't land. We lack infrastructure."

Public Responsibility

Civic awareness, knowledge and progressive attitudes are all imperative for combating climate change. Global leaders have come together to control rising global heat and even the children in many countries have spoken up, actively participating in the fight against climate change. Some of the irrational arguments and statements of citizens that have been popularized recently in Sri Lanka's mainstream media suggest an attitudinal gap as well as of a lack of knowledge about the significance of forest conservation and management. In search of economic prosperity, the majority of Sri Lankans seem willing to give a green light to the over-utilization of environmental resources.

However, Rajapaksa has repeatedly affirmed Sri Lanka's commitment to eco-responsibility. "The ancient governance of Sri Lanka was built on the concept that the ruler is never the owner of the land; he is merely its caretaker on behalf of his countrymen and all living beings," Rajapaksa told the Plenary of the United Nations Summit on Biodiversity on September 30. His pledge to act as a trustee of the planet and its resources for future generations comes at a vital time, as climate action and sustainability needs to be the foundation of governance across nations.

Reflecting the president's pledge, Sri Lanka must aspire to align its development framework with sustainability goals, while simultaneously encouraging civic sentiments that are supportive of environmental conservation.

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