

SUMMARY

The history of forest management in Sri Lanka can be traced back to the beginning of the country's recorded history. There is no doubt that, even prior to then, forests would have played a major role in the lives of inhabitants. Buddhist philosophy has had a great influence on forest and wild life conservation in the country. The chronicles of Sri Lanka and stone edicts record the profound importance given to forests by the country's rulers, including their reservation as national parks and as hermitage forests for the use of forest monks.

In this report, an attempt has been made to review critically the historical development of forest management approaches in Sri Lanka; to describe the environmental, social and economic importance of these forests; to trace the history, impact and future plans of the forest plantation sub-sector; to discuss the possible linkages between natural forest conservation and management; to examine the history of forest research work; and finally, to examine options for the possible integration of forestry with land-use planning. In so doing, it is hoped that the influence of political will, the impacts of growing populations and of conflicts over land-use, and the effects on forestry of the varying expressions of the concept of "development" will become apparent.

In the historical development of forest management in the country, it is quite evident that the early Sinhalese rulers were mindful of the need to conserve their forests and their wildlife with the principal objectives of providing stable environmental conditions and forest products; provision of continued supplies of water for agricultural purposes through a complicated nexus of irrigation reservoirs, channels, streams and rivers; to develop the art of home garden agroforestry; and to provide habitats for wildlife. Also in the minds of the rulers was the need for forests to act as a barrier against foreign invaders. The old kingdoms resisted capture by foreign powers mainly because of the protective barriers provided by the forests and the deftness of the local soldiers in the art of jungle warfare prevalent in those times.

Forest management fluctuated between extremes of forest conservation and forest exploitation during the course of the country's history. With the subjugation of the country by the British in 1815 came the almost total des-

truction of the central montane watershed and catchment forests and home gardens. This clearance met both colonial security concerns and allowed the large-scale planting of coffee, and later tea. More enlightened British foresters who came later, realising the need to protect and manage the forests of the country, advised the Government to appoint a Conservator of Forests and set up a Forest Department to scientifically manage the forests. The first Conservator of Forests was appointed in 1887. Subsequent to this date, some form of forest conservation was practised with certain forest management rules. Later, a start was made to manage the country's forests scientifically.

In the meantime, however, forests continued to be denuded by uncontrolled timber exploitation and shifting cultivation known as *chena* cultivation, the lifestyles of rural people were considerably changed, and poverty spread to rural areas, especially in the dry and montane zones. A desperate attempt was made by the Forest Department to stem further forest loss, but this was not easy. In addition to the changes in lifestyles, new ideas of development and social standards had also taken root in the country.

From 1948, after the country regained independence, in order to keep pace with development and to supply the needs of an increasing population, a large number of development projects were launched. In the beginning, most of these took the form of large-scale irrigation and settlement projects in several parts of the country. Some of the old irrigation works were restored and developed, leading up to the massive Accelerated Mahaweli River Development Project of the 1980s. All these development projects were at the expense of the environment – mainly the forest cover which dropped steeply – making it obligatory for the Government to conserve and manage the remaining forests more carefully. Thus, the development processes begun in 1948 resulted in a state of extreme forest exploitation and destruction once again, but this time the loss of forests in a spatial sense was much larger than in the 19th century.

The closed forest cover dropped from about 70% at the turn of the century to 44% in 1956, 26% in 1983 and 24% in 1992. Meanwhile the population had more than trebled. Although concerted efforts were made to put back forests on the eroding central mountain regions now in tea, political intransigence on the part of one small political group has slowed down these efforts.

In response to the rapid depletion of forest cover and the marked reduction in growing stock, the Government imposed a logging ban in natural forests in 1990 which is still in force and there is evidence of some increases in new forest growth as a result. Hence, the tide has turned once again towards a policy of forest conservation, the main objectives being to increase the extent and economic value of the country's forests, and to conserve their biodiversity and genetic resources for the benefit of future generations. The logging ban, coupled with the decline in forest clearance after Mahaweli, should result in a reduced deforestation rate.

As for people in forests, the few Veddhas who comprise the remnants of the last tribe of forest dwellers in Sri Lanka have been allotted a parcel of a forest in the eastern part of the country. However, they hardly practise their traditional jungle pursuits and have more or less been absorbed into the farming community. Peripheral village farmers living near forests who practise agriculture and other pursuits depend only on a few items of value from the forest proper. These are mainly fuelwood, palm syrup and sugar, and indigenous medicinal plants. This situation makes natural forest management, by whatever method, easier in Sri Lanka than in some other countries where entire forest tribals have made the forest their permanent home and are totally forest-dependent.

Meanwhile, the large areas of forest plantations established in Sri Lanka are being managed to meet the needs of the nation, along with imports and timber from the large areas of non-forest vegetation in the country, including rubber and coconut plantations, home gardens and miscellaneous plantings. The current policy for the forest plantations sub-sector is to raise forest plantations on the shifting cultivated lands, degraded and abandoned tea estates, and in other critical areas such as grasslands, coastal sandy areas, the montane zone and other derelict lands.

Since the start of a National Forest Inventory in 1979, the country has received substantial foreign assistance, both financial and technical, to undertake diverse and comprehensive programmes of forestry development activities.

The unique Sinharaja tropical humid forest was listed as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1988. Conservation plans are now being undertaken and

conservation management plans are being prepared for the country's natural forests. This will be an on-going concern.

Forest research is carried out by the Forest Department country-wide. It has recorded several achievements in the past, in the fields of silviculture, timber utilisation research, and management operations. The Forest Department Research Branch is now a storehouse of valuable research information. Forestry research is now receiving the support of universities, especially in the important fields of forest ecology, biodiversity and conservation of natural forest ecosystems.

Plans are being implemented to bring in the private sector to support forest development, principally in the forest plantation sub-sector in order to speed up the rate of reforestation in the country. Efforts to make agroforestry a standard forestry development strategy throughout the country by making it attractive to rural farmers, is well advanced.

The "all benefits" sustainable management of natural forests is still a distant dream. It is felt that it may be more appropriate to adopt a wise, thoughtful and pragmatic management policy for the natural forests in view of a complex of issues, including people pressure on forests and the prevailing socio-politico-economic situations near to and around the forests. The management of forest plantations under new management plans continues as far as possible in a sustained manner with respect to timber. Modern computerised management planning based on strategic planning is being undertaken, having replaced the earlier conservative, classical Working Plans systems. However, some caution will be needed to prevent over-cutting through these new computerised management plans, especially in the case of commercial fellings and pre-commercial fellings. Ground-checking and supervision will be important.

Due to certain aspects of Sri Lanka's colonial history in the period 1815 to 1948 and deforestation for development after that, it is difficult as yet to integrate forestry into the developing Land Use Planning System for the whole country. Rather, they have to move together in a parallel process linked to a new National Land Use Authority that should be established at the highest possible decision-making level. Since some thirty-three agencies and several

ministries are involved in land-use operations or decisions, it is considered that this Authority should be above any one ministry. The final goal, however, would be to make forestry an integral part of a National Land Use Planning System, but this should evolve in such a way that it does not upset the environmental balance and other goods and services presently being provided by the existing forests.