

CHAPTER 4

THE SOCIAL IMPORTANCE OF SRI LANKA'S FORESTS

4.1 Introduction

In a country like Sri Lanka with a long tradition of forestry practice and management, and of forest and wildlife conservation supported by royal and government patronage, the social values of forests are many, and include:

- local use of forests;
- tourism and recreation;
- scientific study;
- religious retreats.

4.2 Local use of forests

Forest peoples

There are probably no more than a thousand true forest tribals now living in Sri Lanka. Those that remain constitute the Veddha people, found in the east of the country. There they have been “given” a block of forest to enable them to pursue some of their forest-based activities – although whether they really do still pursue them is debatable. In fact, many Veddhas now earn quite a lot of money from foreign tourists. Some of them are also permanently employed in agriculture and even work as paid workers in the Forest Department's afforestation projects, for instance in the Co-operative Reafforestation Scheme.

The absence of forest-dwelling tribes from remaining forests should enable Sri Lanka to manage its forests as is done in developed countries. Of course, people living on the borderlines of forests, or in villages within forest boundaries, do need to be able to gather limited non-wood forest products. The chief ones are medicinal plants and honey which have been used as part

of the indigenous medical system since ancient times. But even these people are primarily farmers. Living near the forest, they make use of a few goods from the forest that benefit their lives, but they are not forest-dependent as such.

Non-forest rural peoples

The present Forest Ordinance continues to allow the free collection rights for fallen fuelwood and minor forest produce that were first incorporated in the Forest Ordinances of the British period. This satisfies some aspects of the social needs of rural people who live in or on the periphery of forests. As the latest on-going studies show, only about 7% of the fuelwood needs of people come from forests and most of this comes from the operation of these rights. The bulk of fuelwood consumed by people in the country comes from non-forest vegetation. This is a healthy sign both from a forest and environment viewpoint because it suggests that there will be little pressure on forests for fuelwood.

Studies have revealed that, on average for the whole country, rural people do not have to walk more than one mile to fetch the fuelwood needed for their domestic chores (Wijesinghe, 1981). Thus the fuelwood situation in Sri Lanka is better than in some other countries. However, fuelwood is still the major domestic fuel in the country and is likely to remain so for a long time. As the population increases and forest resources are depleted, the fuelwood situation may deteriorate. This suggests that countrywide increases in the planting of agroforestry home gardens through participatory methods may be of high social importance, since it would further reduce the efforts and cost needed to obtain fuelwood.

People's participation is at the core of the new AsDB-funded participatory forestry project which includes components of establishing block plantations, agroforests, watershed forests and countrywide amenity plantings. This project will also no doubt improve environmental conditions, thereby demonstrating the value of grassroots participatory approaches to forestry practice. People will be made beneficiaries under this project.

4.3 Tourism and recreation

Many forests are visited by the public, including students, for recreation purposes with permission from the agencies in charge. Some blocks of mixed forest plantations raised by the Forest Department are no longer being managed for timber because of their location near cities, and their amenity and micro-environmental values. Some of those which straddle the highways entering cities now serve as picnic spots for school children, family groups or the general public. Here the Forest Department provides facilities for picnicking that blend with the surroundings of these forests. A good example is the picnic site in the Badagamuwa area which is now a well-stocked, high-canopied, mixed forest just outside the town of Kurunegala in the north-west intermediate zone.

In addition to Forest Reserves, approximately 14% of the country is gazetted as protected areas, mainly National Parks. Apart from local visitors, these also attract large numbers of tourists.

4.4 Scientific study

Student and environmental groups use the forests for study purposes. Since forestry was included as a subject in curricula on the initiative of the Forest Department, student visitation of forests for scientific study has increased.

In a new development started in 1988, strictly-protected, unique natural forests are being opened for regulated visits, mainly for the purposes of scientific study. One such forest is the Sinharaja Forest Reserve in the south-west which is listed as a natural World Heritage Site with UNESCO. It is also declared a National Wilderness area under the Sri Lanka Wilderness Areas Act. More forests are being earmarked for listing as World Heritage sites. However, it takes a long time to secure approval for such a listing and some new interventions are needed to quicken the process. Sinharaja listing started with the despatch of colour slides to UNESCO in 1983, and took nearly five years. One reason for the delay was because part of Sinharaja had been exploited for the supply of logs to a giant plywood/chipboard/furniture complex in the 1970s. This followed a feasibility study done on the advice of a World Bank expert (Rajapakse, 1974; Nanayakkara, 1985). Scientific studies conducted in

Sinharaja have subsequently helped in obtaining assistance from international agencies for intensive forest conservation and management of Sinharaja and other unique forest ecosystems, thus increasing their social importance as well.

Often it is found that many forests, especially those in the dry zone, cover the ruins of old civilisations which are of great archaeological importance and provide archaeologists and other serious study groups with a seemingly endless source of material. Ritigala Forest Reserve, a high peak in the dry zone, is a striking example and has been declared an Archaeological Reserve. Apart from ruins, this forest has many distinct vegetation types which are also of interest to students and scientists.

4.5 Religious retreats

The Forest Department, which is the custodian of about two thirds of the forests of the country, issues permits at a very nominal fee for small blocks of natural forest which are termed hermitage or *aranya* forests, for the use of Buddhist forest monks as residential places for meditation. This is one of the practices that has come down from the days when Sinhalese kings ruled the country. It is also a good method of forest protection and no illegal fellings take place in such forest blocks. In some instances, resident monks have assisted the Forest Department to enrich blank areas with indigenous species in adjacent forests. No cultivation is carried out in these forests, and there is a good rapport between the monks (some of whom are from foreign countries) and the local Forest Department staff. The practice is one that should be encouraged, even though the areas involved are small.