

CHAPTER 10

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This document has attempted to illustrate the changing roles of forestry over the course of Sri Lanka's history, and how these have been linked to, and influenced by, the changing fates of Sri Lanka's forests. It is hoped that in doing so, it may point the way to the future role of the forestry sector in Sri Lanka's development.

Much of the country was once forested, and, despite the longstanding prevalence of settled agricultural communities, forests continued to dominate the landscape until the relatively recent past. But it seems that with increasing contact with the outside world, especially with colonial powers, the relationship of Sri Lanka's peoples with her forests shifted. Human populations increased, levels of forest exploitation increased, and many people suffered from a sense of alienation from the land or from the tiers of society that maintained control over that land. Forests were increasingly used for the short-term gain rather than for the long-term advantage of society at large.

As the nature of society changed, forests tended to lose value relative to other land-uses, although this was not necessarily true of individual forest products. The pace of change continues to quicken, and as it does so it threatens to outpace the rate at which the forest estate can change to cope with the ever-increasing demands placed upon it.

At the same time, there has been a worldwide realisation that the goal of development cannot be achieved without reference to the natural resources on which we all ultimately depend, and that development must take issues of equity on board as well. This realisation is only now beginning to be translated into action. In Sri Lanka's case, it is manifesting itself in an increasing concern for the fate of the natural forests and the importance of managing the forest estate sustainably, not just for timber but for a variety of goods and services, many of which have been badly neglected in the past.

The international importance of certain forests for the conservation of biodiversity is also now realised. Meanwhile, the complementary role of plantation forestry is now better understood.

The future of the forestry sector in Sri Lanka is secure, but there are likely to be changes. The dependence on external funding seems likely to continue for the time being, although if industrialisation goes to plan and the insecurity in the north abates, then there may be more national resources available too. Ultimately, forestry has to be treated alongside other land-uses on an equal footing, through the development of all-encompassing land-use policies that put the environment and sustainable development first. This may result in increasing areas of natural forest being dedicated to conservation or non-intervention, or to the production of forest products other than timber. At the same time, the area under forest plantation looks set to increase, but the plantations of the future will hopefully be designed more appropriately than many of those of the past.