Sri Lanka: The Wanniyala-Aetto make use of their right to return to their forest

The Wanniyala-Aetto ("forest beings") are the indigenous people of Sri Lanka, gentle hunter-gatherers who have lived in a sustainable relationship to their tropical forest environment for the past eighteen thousand years.

Having survived 2,500 years of settlement of their island, first by Sinhalese and later by Tamil migrants from India, five centuries of Portuguese, Dutch and British colonisation, and two world wars, the Wanniyala-Aetto were evicted from what was left of their ancestral forests by the Government of Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka became independent in 1948. The new Government set about reorganising the country. With funding from the World Bank in 1955, it began construction on the Gal Oya Dam, which flooded the Wanniyala-Aetto's best hunting-and-gathering lands, including their best honey-bee sites and favourite forest caves.

Most of the people were resettled in rehabilitation villages in agricultural areas. But their wisdom keeper and spokesperson, Uru Warige Tissahamy, led many of his people deeper into the forest. In 1977, the World Bank provided the Government with funding for the construction of a huge hydro-electric irrigation project involving the country's largest river system, the Mahaweli Ganga. The river's water was diverted for hydro-electricity, and channelled into reservoirs and irrigation canals. Vast areas of the rain forest were logged, and 11,000 hectares of the Wanniyala-Aetto's last hunting-grounds were clear-cut. Thousands of Sinhalese and Tamil settlers moved in.

Then, at the stroke of midnight on November 10, 1983, the Government evicted the Wanniyala-Aetto from the last remaining stand of their forest homeland, declaring it a catchment area for three new reservoirs financed with Official Development Assistance (ODA) from various foreign donor agencies including USAID. These reservoirs were created to provide irrigation water for so-called "green revolution" intensive agro-production of rice in paddy fields at the edge of the forest. The Government designated the area of forest between these reservoirs as the Maduru Oya National Park which was then set up under the World Conservation Strategy jointly managed by WWF International - World Wildlife Fund for Nature, IUCN - The World Conservation Union, and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

The Wanniyala-Aetto were forced to resettle into three different districts, splitting up their community and destroying the highly-integrated social structure on which they traditionally depend. These resettlement areas are situated outside the forest, in rice-growing areas totally unfamiliar to and unsuitable for their traditional swidden agriculture, which has become impossible and it is hard for them to grow enough food in the tiny plots they have been allocated. Suffering human rights abuses and maltreatment of every kind, they have also been banned from hunting and gathering in the forest. Presently, a few men have a hunting permit in a small area of the park, but those who do not have it risk fines or prison sentences if they are caught hunting. Over the past few years, three hunters, all with permits, died from shots received from park wardens.

Today only 2,500 Wanniyala-Aetto survive. Their very ancient culture, spiritual traditions, ethnobotanical medical knowledge, and ecological expertise in the management of tropical forest fauna and flora are on the brink of being lost forever. But they have not lost the recall of their land. "I was born in the forest. My ancestors come from here. We are the forest beings, and I want to live and die here. And even if I were reborn only as a fly or an ant, I would still be happy so long as I knew I would come back to live here in the forest" (Uru Warige Tissahamy, 97-year old elder Wanniyala-Aetto wisdomkeeper).

For this reason, over twenty years after having been evicted, one hundred indigenous Wanniyala-Aetto have resorted to their legal right to return to their own land. The park wardens have threatened to take to court those who have returned to the park in an attempt to make them leave once again.

Various organizations are appealing for support for the Wanniyala-Aetto people and propose writing to the President of Sri Lanka asking for the Government to allow those Wanniyala-Aetto who so desire to return immediately to their lands, to hunt for their personal consumption and gather the fruits of the forest in the park without fear of eviction, harassment or violence. (The letter should be addressed to: Her Excellency the President of Sri Lanka, Mrs. Chandrika Bandaranaike-Kumaratunga, Presidential Office, Colombo 1, Sri Lanka, Fax: +94 112 4333 46)

Article based on information from: "Los wanniyala-aetto regresan a la selva", 21 Oct 2005, Survival, http://www.survival.es/news.php?id=1114 ; "The Wanniyala-Aetto", Global Vision, http://www.global-vision.org/srilanka/