
Sri Lanka: The Forestry establishment still does not understand a forest

Together with many other organizations, we have once and again insisted on the need to remove tree plantations from the definition of forest, for the simple reason that plantations are not forests. But once and again the forestry establishment has insisted on including them as "planted forests" to adequate the definition to vested interests regardless of its scientific absurdity. The following extracts from a recent article by Ranil Senanayake sheds more light on the issue (the full article is available at: <http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/SriLanka/loans.html>):

"One of the reasons for the current debacle may stem from the fact that the 'Forestry' establishment still does not understand a forest. A forest, as all modern research is demonstrating, is an ecosystem where trees account for just 1% of the total biodiversity. Yet all forestry action in this nation is still focussed on cutting or growing trees. While the forestry institutions happily accepts all the money and responsibility of attending to our national obligations under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) the recognition of a forest as being comprised of other things than trees is still long in coming.

The international response to the loss of natural forest ecosystems is similar and can be seen in the massive global investment in forestry. However, a great majority of these revegetation programs around the world do not provide an environment that is hospitable for sustaining local biodiversity. A situation brought about by neglecting the potentials of local knowledge and local species. This neglect ensured that institutional forestry activity was centered on the growing of even aged monocultures of fast growing trees only.

This raises some interesting questions, what is a forest? what should be its social and ecological attributes? It seems that the word forest means different things to different people. Early in recorded history, Gautama Buddha (250 BC) provided an intriguing meaning when he observed that "A forest is the most benevolent of all beings, giving generously of all its life processes. It even affords shade to the axeman who would fell it". This reference to a forest as an entity reflects the current view of a forest as a complex integrated system or the view of the global, environment as an organized, self-regulating system. Very different to today's economic models, where it is seen only as a source of revenue. In an economic sense forests are collections of trees of varying timber value. This narrow perception has allowed application of monoculture, even aged plantations to meet with most global forestry needs."