
Sri Lanka: politics in forests

Forests are trees. Forests are biodiversity. Forests are wildlife. Forests are lands. Moreover, forests are politics. Development is clearing of forests. Conservation means more and more consultancies. Protection means a wider and wider gap between the forest and the communities. Regarding the forest issue, the context in Sri Lanka is not much different from this reality.

The recent development initiatives promoted by the government aimed to open the country's economy will be very destructive to the forest in general. Aquaculture development projects have already destroyed about 4000 hectares of our mangroves since 1989. According to a survey performed in 1982 we had only 8000 hectares of mangroves left. Although we were not able to stop aquaculture in the north western province, since 1994 we have managed to stop aquaculture development in the southern province.

A number of "development" projects which implied the clearing of 8000 hectares of forest to give place to a baby-corn plantation in Balaharuwa, in the Uva province in 1998, the logging of 25000 hectares of similar forests in the Monaragala district of the same province in 1997, the destruction of 5000 hectares of another forest for a pineapple plantation in Bibila, in Madagama also at Uva province in 1991, and the clearing of 2000 hectares of forest for "Rambutan" plantation, were stopped as a result of successful protests carried out by environmental groups and the public against those depleting activities.

Attempts are currently being made to allocate lands in national parks among the government's political supporters within the framework of the forthcoming presidential elections. The subdivision of 1200 hectares of forest in Lunugamwehera National Park, 800 hectares from Wasgomuwa National Park and 500 hectares from Ritigala Strict Nature Reserve are major cases which have generated heavy protests.

The government which ruled the country from 1970 to 1977 is responsible for the clearing of both dry zone and humid zone forests which affected about 77000 hectares of the virgin Sinharaja Forests. As a result of the protest against this destruction, the project was stopped, but the infrastructure already established for the destruction of the forest allowed the people involved in the project to continue carrying out their activities with the government's support until 1988.

A forestry sector Master Plan was prepared by the Finnish "cooperation" agency FINNIDA in 1986. The plan suggested that all the dry zone forests -which are about 800-1000 years old- should be harvested. The plan also stated that many humid zone forests did not play any essential role and needed no protection, since Sri Lanka would get the monsoon rains twice a year even without forests. Environmental groups, among which the Environmental Foundation, protested so strongly that they were able to stop World Bank funding support for the proposal. Moreover, in 1988 the government declared a logging ban which is still in force.

The second Forestry Master Plan process started in the year 1991 and after a 5 year process, a document was published. But nowadays it has become a white elephant. Even if a new forest policy was adopted in 1995, the current activities show that reality completely differs from what is

established by the law.

A recent proposal of the Asian Development Bank recommends the setting up of tree plantations in an area of 1000 hectares, and the creation of joint ventures for commercial logging. These joint ventures will be provided all kinds of concessions, including facilities to import the latest equipment for logging and for processing machinery, such as new timber mills. About one third of the ADB funds under this proposal have been allocated for the commercial forest management component, which comprises both forests and plantations. It is the most recent initiative for the promotion of commercial forestry in Sri Lanka.

The logging ban established by the government is being evaded by illegal logging. Politicians, bureaucrats and many powerful people are behind the mafia which rules it. Every day more than 75 lorries transporting roundwood come from Monoragala District, where most of the forests are available today. This mafia operates with the support of the local government officers and the forest officers.

Every now and then the government reacts, and adopts absurd steps to solve the problem of the illegal felling of trees, trying to turn it into a legal activity. For example, the Jack tree -a fruit tree- is protected under the food act, and felling it has always been considered an offence. Nevertheless, last year the government removed this law. Just after this, more than 100,000 jack trees were felled within a month's time. When the government reacted and regazetted the law, the damage was already done.

For many politicians and bureaucrats forests are just trees and lands. But for communities forests are water, air, food, shelter, medicine, and providers of other basic needs. Therefore what Sri Lanka needs is a forestry sector which respects the communities and their lifestyles. We cannot achieve this until we get away from the current dominating bureaucracy, politics and consultancies.

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