



ASSOCIATION FOR TROPICAL BIOLOGY AND CONSERVATION

THULHIRIYA DECLARATION

RECONCILING DEVELOPMENT WITH CONSERVATION OF SRI LANKA'S ECO- CULTURAL HERITAGE AND DIVERSITY

BACKGROUND

Sri Lanka is home to over 8,000 species of plants and animals of which more than 1,600 species are endemic to the island and extra-ordinarily concentrated in the aseasonal wet zone of the island with still more, particularly those among lower groups of plants and animals, yet to be described. Sri Lanka is also recognized as a part of an evolutionarily significant biogeographic region in the whole of South Asia, well supported by emerging phylogeographic studies. In the seasonally dry zone of Sri Lanka, a hydraulic civilization based on complex and unique cascade systems of irrigated agriculture extending over a period of at least 2,500 years, is recognized as 'Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System' for its proven eco-cultural and economic sustainability over centuries.

THE PROBLEM

Much of the rain forest habitats remaining are degraded, fragmented and isolated among densely populated human settlements and with threats of further encroachments. The seasonally dry zone of the island has been subjected to several waves of accelerated development programs over the past several decades. As a result, human-animal conflicts as well as health issues in human settlements such as chronic kidney disease of unknown etiology have emerged posing a number of major environmental threats affecting livelihood security in a changing climate.

Large-scale accelerated development programs are being continued without giving due consideration for likely furthering of the already prevalent environmental and health issues. The biodiversity and ecosystem service values cherished in traditional agricultural systems are being replaced in most instances by these rapid development initiatives.

DECLARATION

The 350 participants from 29 countries who attended the meeting of the Association for Tropical Biology and Conservation Asia-Pacific Conference held in Thulhiriya, Sri Lanka, from 10 – 13 September 2019, organized under the theme: “Bridging the Elements of Biodiversity Conservation: Save-Study-Use” seek to reconcile developmental activities with conservation of Sri Lanka’s eco-cultural heritage and diversity through the following recommendations:

- 1. Declaration of habitat corridors for conservation of biodiversity,***
- 2. Recognizing the need to integrate ecosystem valuation into Environmental Impact Assessments of developmental projects, and***
- 3. To enhance conservation of the Mannar Basin land- and seascape***

This declaration focuses on the three issues stated above, and we urge the government to pay serious attention to the following recommendations:

- 1. Declaration of ecological corridors for conservation of biodiversity,***
 - i. To recognize the need to establish ecological corridors for linking fragmented biodiversity rich habitats.
 - ii. To identify, map and designate such corridors as ‘protected habitats’.
 - iii. To ensure that there is no conflict between economic corridors and ecological corridors.

2. Recognizing the need to integrate ecosystem valuation into Environmental Impact Assessments of developmental projects

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- i. Comprehensive Environment and Socio-cultural Impact Assessments (EIAs & SEAs) should be conducted while learning lessons from Mahaweli and other similar development projects.
- ii. EIAs should incorporate the valuation of biodiversity and ecosystem services.
- iii. Mainstreaming economic valuations of biodiversity and ecosystem services into national planning and decision making for implementing **all** national, regional and local development programmes.
- iv. Take urgent steps to build the required human capabilities, while enhancing the skills needed for achieving NBSAP targets.

3. To enhance conservation of the Mannar Basin landscape

- i. We strongly recommend the Sri Lankan Government to take appropriate action to enhance its efforts to protect the littoral area extending from Puttalam to Mannar and beyond, particularly along the sea bordering the Wilpattu National Park and associated forest reserves.
- ii. Initiate action to identify a representative area of the Mannar basin within Sri Lanka's jurisdiction to undertake urgent measures to conserve its nature and riches, while addressing the rights of the communities whose livelihoods are dependent on the activities within the region and paying due attention to security concerns.

Thulhiriya, Sri Lanka, 13 September 2019

The Participants