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Villages in, elephants out!



Story and pix by Nimashi Amaleeta

Upon receiving an invitation from the Sri Lanka Wildlife Conservation Society (SLWCS) – a Non-Governmental Organisation, which was extended exclusively for The Nation, to assess projects hosted by them in the Wasgamuwa area, I was apprehensive as I had little knowledge of the organisation's agenda and also, was not keen to attend the event unaccompanied. On the other hand, views of a certain well-known environmentalist contributed to my hesitation.

However, it was that unsolicited advice from the environmentalist, who interestingly, had neither associated with the NGO personnel nor witnessed their projects that provided me with the necessary nudge to embark on the quest.

The critic proved to be more wrong than right. The projects I witnessed were indeed commendable.

What is SLWCS?

The SLWCS is a US based organisation welded with the desire to preserve and conserve biodiversity of Sri Lanka. It was initiated as an NGO in 1997 and registered as a Voluntary Social Service Organisation with the Social Services Ministry in Sri Lanka in 2003. So far, the SLWCS has taken on many initiatives, but the project Saving Elephants by Helping People (SEHP) is of particular interest to me.

"Basically, our idea is to fence villages in and elephants out," says the Society's Operations Director Chandeeep Corea. This concept is somewhat different to what was adopted by the Wildlife Conservation Department (DWC). They fence around National Parks to confine elephants to the Park. However, scientific research carried out by Dr. Prithiviraj Fernando and the likeminded have revealed that 70% of an elephant's range falls outside the Park. "Therefore, to comply with this understanding we adopted the concept of fencing on eco-social boundaries, as opposed to the Park administrative boundaries," explains Corea. An eco-social boundary falls on the transition areas between natural forests and the built-in agricultural complexes. Such boundaries border the village rather than the Park.

The project

"We had two pilot sites for this fencing programme. We selected the villages Weheragala and Pussellaya in the Wasgamuwa area in 1997 and 2002 respectively," say Project Manager Chinthaka Weerasingha and Operation Research Assistant Upul Karunasingha. This project is unique as it empowers rural communities while balancing ecosystem protection with economic development.

Immediately following the erection of the fences, the villagers saw the many benefits available for them. "They are grateful for the fences. They have now formed a 'Fence Committee,' which is charged with the duty of cleaning and maintaining the fences regularly," adds Karunasingha. Interestingly, prior to the erection of the fence, each family had to spend Rs. 6800 on average, per annum, to keep elephants from entering the villages. This cost accounted for the purchasing of crackers, kerosene, etc., to deter the elephants. Following

the erection of the fences however, this figure has remarkably come down to just Rs. 500 per annum for a single family. This fee is collected by the Fence Committee, for maintenance. "People have also shown a remarkable shift in attitude due to our support. No more elephants are killed in these villages," he further comments.

Curbing human elephant conflict

Having witnessed the success of the fencing project and the concepts on which it was adopted, the DWC has solicited the SLWCS to undertake similar projects in other villages prone to the human elephant conflict. Accordingly the SLWCS constructed yet another fence around the Lahugala village in 2006, which too is proving to serve the purposes as expected. Presently, the SLWCS is looking into a similar project in the Mahaweli C Zone, in a joint venture with the Sri Lanka Mahaweli Authority. "In effect we have constructed a fence as long as 44 km. This endeavour, however, is rather costly. So far, the project has cost us Rs. 45-50 million. We receive funds from the Born Free Foundation as well as Elephant Conservation International," comments Corea.

"We have also expanded our endeavour by teaching English to rural students. A couple of foreign volunteers, particularly from England, USA and several European countries, implement the programme. We even get people from India and Pakistan," explains Project Manager Weerasingha. The English teaching programme has proved to be a success in many villages in the area. The principals, teachers and the students, The Nation learns, are very supportive of the programme.

Another initiative

The SLWCS has recently embarked on yet another initiative of buffering villages by constructing live fences. "We planted citrus species in the Himbiliyakada village. We gave 65 families 10 plants of an orange species hailing from Bibile. The project, however, was initiated only eight months ago, so it is still in a pilot stage," Weerasingha explains. These plants effectively provide two buffers. On the one, citrus is not consumed by elephants, thus it acts as a physical buffer. On the other, citrus provides alternative means of income to the villagers. Thus, it also acts as an economical buffer, says Weerasingha. The endeavours of the SLWCS have been commended and filmed in recognition by the leading institutes like YATV, Animal Planet, and Doc TV of Germany, and even certain local state owned TV stations have provided coverage for them.

Involving the youth in wildlife conservation

The Sri Lanka Wildlife Conservation Society (SLWCS) embarked on a series of innovative, outdoor environmental education programmes, especially catering for school children. The first of these programmes was held in collaboration with the Wildlife Society of the S. Thomas' College, Mount Lavinia. The workshop was hosted in Wasgamuwa of the Matale District. The programme spanned over four days, from August 27 to 30, 2007. Nine students between the ages of 13-19 and two teachers participated in this pilot programme.

The programme strived to increase environmental awareness among students by exposing them to various recreational activities like hiking, night hikes, birding, observing insects, butterflies, large mammals, etc, survey programmes like fence and tank monitoring, stakeholder analyses regarding the human elephant conflict issues and the basics of the preparation of Geographic Information System (GIS) maps.

"What we want to impart with is the real picture of conservation in Sri Lanka. Any member of the public has access to a National Park. They are allowed to view wildlife. But apart from the privileged researches, university students, NOGs and the like, only a very few would have the opportunity to get involved in conservation approaches," SLWCS Operations Director Chandee Corea explains. "We believe in active involvement." In essence, he recollects the following phrase to sum up the sentiment: "Tell me, I will forget. Show me, I may remember. Involve me, and I'll understand!"

Master in Charge A.E.N. Fernando and Assistant Master Asanka Perera of the Wildlife Society of the STC shares with The Nation, the following thoughts: "This programme is indeed commendable. In fact, our society

is one of the oldest – if not the oldest, societies in school. We organise field excursions during every school vacation. We have visited many National Parks (NPs) in Sri Lanka. Also, our students have willingly contributed to the betterment of these Parks. We put up name boards, gifted trackers with shoes, jackets and the like, refurbished old visitor centres, conducted presentations for other schools, etc.” They continue, “However, we find this programme to be unique in many ways. Although we have visited several NPs, we have never hiked inside forests, haven’t observed birds, butterflies, insects so closely, and we have never spent nights in tree huts. Also, we haven’t analysed environmental issues so closely and never conducted stakeholder analyses. In that sense, we believe this programme is indeed worth participating in. We are glad we did!”

Commenting on the potential of the programme Corea says, “We hope to expand this programme. However, everything will depend on the outcome of this pilot programme and the funding capacity of the SLWCS. In future, we hope to target leading private schools (both girls’ and boys’) and international schools.”

Recommendations

The programme was indeed commendable, given the fact that it was conducted for the first time in Sri Lanka. It was trial and error. However, having closely monitored the programme, The Nation identified many areas of improvement that could be incorporated in future programmes of similar nature. The Nation recommends the following points.

First and foremost an ‘outdoor’ programme should essentially mean ‘outdoor.’ Outdoor experiences could be achieved in many simple ways. Students should be encouraged to sit, recline, have meals, etc., on grass, sand and stone platforms as opposed to letting them sit on comfortable chairs at tables. Group activities should be carried out in the open. Also, students should be allowed to prepare posters, do presentations, debate on various topics and enact dramas related to the subject. Such components are extremely crucial to deliver the intended ‘outdoor’ experiences. On the other hand, this would bring latent talents and leadership qualities to surface.

Programmes are best suited to be carried out on a group basis. However, the grouping of students should be conducted strictly by the organisers, rather than by the teachers or letting the students group up as they wish. Grouping by organisers would essentially cut down on the forming of discrete student cliques, which otherwise would lead to various discriminations. Once the groups are formed, activities should also be carried out to build-up team spirit.

Students should be encouraged to take down proper field notes, and these in turn should be inspected. Students should be given the liberty to use a desired language. The medium of instruction should not necessarily be English.

Last but not least, most village communities associated with National Parks in Sri Lanka are rural and underdeveloped. Students thus, should be made aware of these settings, and guided in such a way that it does not endanger the culture and socio-economic sensitivity of such communities.



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