



Participatory forest resource management in Sri Lanka – Past, present and future directions

A paper by

Anura Sathurusinghe ¹ and Steve Hunt ²

¹ Conservator of Forests

² Team Leader, Sri Lanka Australia Natural Resource Management Project

Abstract

People of Sri Lanka have co-existed with forests for centuries, and have close cultural, religious and sometimes even spiritual relationships with them. The forests are considered as part of people's broader livelihood systems in many different ways, providing land base for agriculture and livelihoods in the form of products and income flows to the rural household.

Until the turn of the 19th century, Sri Lanka was almost entirely covered by thick forest cover. With the introduction of plantation crops by the colonial government, large-scale clearing of the natural forest commenced. The population increase and different development programs introduced during the post independence period further worsened this.

Early developments of the Forestry Policy in Sri Lanka did not pay any attention to the people's role in forestry development but focused on timber trade and export. In 1980, a new additional policy objective was introduced to policy to encourage local communities to plant trees in their home gardens and state land. This was further enhanced with the implementation of the Community Forestry Project (1982-1990) and Participatory Forestry Project (1993-2000). The national Forestry Policy which was introduced in 1995 has a strong focus on supporting people's participation in management of forests, as evidenced by one of the three policy objectives stated as: "to enhance the contribution of forestry to the welfare of the rural population, and strengthen the national economy, with special attention paid to equity in economic development". This has been put into implementation by means of different projects and programs. The Forestry Sector Development Project implemented by the Forest Department is presently focusing on establishment of legal boundaries of forests in addition to encouraging tree plantings and management by local communities in the form of woodlots and in home gardens.

The Sri Lanka Australia Natural Resource Management Project, which began in February 2003, is working with the Forest Department to develop and implement policy, legislation and practices to involve local communities in the participatory management of dry and intermediate zone forests and other natural resources. The Project is working towards the following objectives:

1. To develop viable processes and procedures to formulate and implement forest management agreements with local communities.
2. Based on the experience gained, to frame effective regulations to implement the new legislation.
3. Support for capacity building and institutional strengthening of the Forest Department to effectively implement a community forest management program.