



Growing demands for forest goods and services: Opportunities for Poverty Reduction

Address by

Hon. Fowzie M.P., Minister of Environment and Natural Resources

*Hon. Prime Minister,
Chairman of the Commonwealth Forestry Association,
Your Excellencies High Commissioners for the Commonwealth Countries,
Distinguished Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

I consider extremely privileged and honored to address you all, gathered here for the 17th Forestry Conference of the Commonwealth countries. I thank the Standing Committee Commonwealth Forestry Association, for selecting Sri Lanka as the venue for holding the conference. Some of you have come from distant places as far as North America, West Indies, Africa and Europe and of course many from the Asian region. To all of you I wish to extend on behalf of the Government of Sri Lanka and myself a very warm welcome. I trust you will have a very productive deliberation on the conference theme forestry for poverty alleviation, besides enjoying your stay in our country that has faced the challenge of tsunami bravely and actively engaged in rehabilitation efforts.

Your presence here today, is a testimony to your concern and interest on the theme of the 17th Commonwealth Forestry Conference, which matters the welfare and sustainable livelihood of the rural population mainly dependent on the forests as well as the conservation of our forest resources. Many members of Commonwealth countries especially in Asia and Africa are dependent on forests for their livelihood. Nearly 90 percent of rural communities in Sri Lanka are dependent on firewood for cooking; most of which comes from outside the forests. While there are probably very few who survive solely from forests, several hundred million people in the Asia- Pacific region earn much of their subsistence and or incomes, from non-industrial forest products, through collection, marketing or simply processing activities such as handicrafts, furniture making or food processing.

The utmost priority, for all of us is to work together in the protection and management of the natural resources, at the same time the forests – a valuable renewable natural resources available to the mankind – to play a significant role in uplifting the living standard and welfare of our people, especially the rural population dependent on forests. It is only such a measure where the local population benefits from conservation of forests that can guarantee the security and perpetuity of our forests. Any conservation measure that precludes peoples' participation in the management of forest resources is doomed to fail!

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,
Forestry sector in Sri Lanka has many linkages with other sector of the economy, mainly with household, energy, agriculture and industry sector and plays an important role in the protection of the catchment areas serving hydropower generation and in the protection of soil and water supplies. As per official statistics, the contribution of the forestry sector to the national economy is around 1.4% of the total gross domestic product. The statistics fail to recognize the non-market production of sawn wood, fuel wood, and various non-wood forest products. Further forestry also provides a number of other tangible and intangible benefits. The natural forests contain most of the biodiversity, and therefore serve a very crucial ecological function. Considering

all these facts, it could be said that the forestry's contribution to national economy is about 6 percent.

Sri Lanka has a long history of forest and nature conservation. Religious and cultural practices and social customs have accorded a prominent place for tree planting and nature conservation. In fact the venerated sacred Bo Tree in Anuradhapura is considered to be one of the oldest documented tree in the world. Traditional communities were built around village tanks, temples, irrigated fields and village forests, which formed the catchment of the tanks. Shifting cultivation too were practiced from time immemorial, a practice that was inevitable in the past but has no place in today's context and which is completely restricted now.

Our country, which in the past was rich in forest resources, is currently faced with the problem of meeting the wood and non-wood forest product demand of the local population. Nearly 80 percent of our land area was under forest at the turn of the century, when the population was low compared to just 24 percent, about ha today. Introduction of exotic crops mainly tea, rubber and coconut coupled with development schemes for irrigation, agriculture expansion and colonization were the main contributory factors for the reduction of forest cover.

Failure to recognize the true contribution of forestry to the gross domestic product has led to undervaluing and not giving importance to adverse social and economic impacts associated with deforestation and forest degradation.

Strict conservation measures such as logging ban and shifting cultivation, - through has had an adverse impact on the wood supply, both timber and fuel wood – in spite of the increased demand for wood due to rising population growth, has helped to ensure the conservation of our unique rich forest ecosystem. Our economy largely dependent upon agriculture exerts additional pressure on natural resources, demanding more land for cultivation and settlements accelerating deforestation and desertification.

Environmental degradation has adverse effects on the livelihoods of the rural population and all development should focus on the environmental dimensions and ensure that the development is sustainable in the long term.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The government's commitments towards conservation and improving forestry management have been explicitly expressed in the Ministry's policy on forests. The Ministry has made a valiant effort in the past to protect the forests, and at the same time has focused attention on participatory forestry for conservation of forests. The emerging picture of the forestry demands a constant vigil.

The pressure placed on the forests is immense, to mention a few- preservation, wood, non-wood products land for agriculture and settlements. Resolving these issues is vital for the country and the future generation to live in a better environment. The future direction in forest resources management should

recognize peoples' participation and ensure that forests play a definitive role in the sustainable of the rural population.

Your theme for the conference is very appropriate to many of the developing countries of the Commonwealth. I am anxiously looking forward with interest to read your conclusions and recommendations, which should receive earnest considerations by the international community and shape the future direction of forestry assistance.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,
For many of you coming here for the first time, you will find Sri Lanka a country of friendly people, tropical fruits, and sites of historical and cultural interest. None of you should miss visiting some of our historical sites, scenic coast, and the unique central landscape and carry the memory home.

Finally, once again I welcome all of you to the conference and our country, and wish you all a pleasurable and memorable stay, and wish the conference all success. I am particularly looking forward to read your recommendations on the role of forests in poverty alleviation and the strategies for achieving it.

Thank you for your kind attention.