



Welcome address by Mr. P.M. Leelaratne,  
Secretary, Ministry of Environment and Natural  
Resources

17<sup>TH</sup> Commonwealth Forestry Conference  
28<sup>th</sup> February-05<sup>th</sup> March 2005  
Sri Lanka

*Hon. Prime Minister,  
Hon. Minister of Natural Resources and Environment,  
Prof. Jeff Burley, Chairman of the Commonwealth Forestry Association,  
Your Excellencies High Commissioners for the Commonwealth countries,  
Distinguishes Participants,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

It is indeed a pleasure for me to have this opportunity to welcome you to this inaugural ceremony of the 17<sup>th</sup> Commonwealth Forestry Conference, which is jointly organized by the Standing Committee of the Commonwealth Forestry Association, Forest Department and the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources of the Government of Sri Lanka. On behalf of the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources and the Government of Sri Lanka I would like to extend my warm greetings and welcome all distinguished guests and the participants.

The Ministry of Environment & Natural Resources has the mandate to manage the Forest Resources and Wildlife in Sri Lanka. This responsibility is performed under the dynamic leadership of the Hon. Minister and through the Department of Forests and Department of Wildlife Conservation, which have decentralized systems of administration and management.

The Ministry willingly undertook to host this Conference - 17<sup>th</sup> Commonwealth Forestry Conference as the theme - Role of Forests in Poverty alleviation is very much relevant to us. I believe that this theme is relevant to most of the other developing countries in the Commonwealth as well.

The forest cover, world over, has decreased over the centuries and decades. This is attributed to population increase and related economic policies and resultant issues such as poverty, globalised trading, consumerism etc. that have led to overharvesting and degrading of forests and lands. Sound policies, planning and management have therefore become important in striking a balance between forest conservation and use of forests.

We are now in the process of implementing the 02<sup>nd</sup> Forestry Master Plan based on these policies.

The Forestry Sector Master Plan places particular emphasis on:

- Conserving the remaining Natural Forests to maintain wildlife and as reservoirs of biodiversity;
- Empowering people and rural communities to manage and protect the forests for multiple-use, mainly for their own benefit;
- Building partnerships in forestry development activities.
- Developing home gardens and other agro-forestry systems as well as forest plantations to meet people's basic needs and supply industrial wood; and

- Policy and legal reforms to provide an framework and strengthening the capacity of forestry institutions of both State and NGOs to achieve the Master Plan objectives.

Sri Lanka has moved from a position of abundant forest resources to that of forest deficient country over the years, and currently, it is largely dependent on non-forest wood resources and imports for meeting its wood demand. Forests of Sri Lanka, in addition to its production role plays a vital role in protecting the Environment. Our forests are rich in biodiversity, and therefore nearly 60 percent of the forests, about 40 percent of the total land area is declared as protected areas. Nearly 34 percent of Sri Lanka's population is employed in Agriculture Forestry and Fisheries that contribute to 14 percent of country's gross domestic product, which too makes it vital for conserving the land and water resources of the country prudently.

The issue of deforestation and declining forest cover is not unique to Sri Lanka. It is a common phenomenon in almost all the tropical countries. The livelihoods of many people who have been depending on the forests traditionally for wood and non-wood products for their own needs as well for subsistence have been endangered with the decline of forestlands. Further, drastic reductions in wildlife habitat, and degradation of watersheds have led to adverse Environmental consequences and demand conflicts among local population.

The idea we have in the past that the Forest Departments can conserve the forests with laws and regulations and policing by forest officers has failed and this is common knowledge and experience of foresters and general public in the developing countries. Forest Conservation, instead, is perviewed as a joint effort of the all the stakeholders. The necessity to actively involve the local population, one of the key stakeholder, in the conservation of forests is widely accepted today. Community Forestry and Joint Forest Management are practiced in many of the developing countries and Sri Lanka too has made progress in this direction.

About 10,000 ha, in Kanneliya, Nakiyadeniya and Dediyaigala forests in the South that were subjected to extensive logging in the past by the Forest Department and later by the State Plywood Corporation was declared as conservation forests in 2000 and has been included in the Man and Biosphere Reserves of UNESCO. The Forest Department has facilitated setting up of 17 village forestry organizations around the forests, and has mobilized their support in the conservation of forests. The Department conducts education and awareness programmes for the villagers in the periphery of the forests and assists them accessing micro-credit programmes for engaging in sustainable livelihood activities, as a measure of compensation for reducing their dependence on the forests.

Results of community forestry initiatives are encouraging. The forest officers have cordial relationships with the local people, and the people have recognized

the importance of the forests and they are voluntarily participating in the protection of the forests. This participatory conservation approach is successfully practiced in the virgin forests in the Sinharajah and the Knuckles Ranges and will be extended to more forest areas in the near future.

The conference is structured around 04 themes:

Changing World, Governance, Growing Demand for Goods and Services, and Stakeholder vision and capabilities.

The discussion on these themes are supported by keynote address, presentation by invited speakers, case studies and panel discussions. This methodology, I am sure will stimulate lively discussions with you expert inputs and real work experience from your countries.

You will also have the opportunity of observing the Sri Lankan best practice in forest management during your study visit to South and Sinharaja World Heritage sites.

The four day extensive deliberations of the Conference are expected to culminate with a set of useful and practical recommendations for all our countries to implement in the short, medium and long term. We look forward to your contributions towards this end.

Thank you once again for accepting our invitation to be in Colombo with us for this important Conference. I wish you a pleasant stay in Sri Lanka. We could assure you that our hospitality will be very much warmer than the warmth that you find outside this Conference Hall.

I wish the Conference a great success!

Thank you,