



17th Commonwealth Forestry Conference Vote of Thanks

A speech by

M.P. Sarath Fernando, Conservator General of Forests, Sri Lanka

Hon. Mahinda Rajapakse, Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, Hon. A.H.M. Fowzie, Minister of Environment and Natural Resources, Your Excellencies, Mr. P.M. Leelaratne, Secretary, Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources, Mr. Tim Rollinson, Chairman Standing Committee on Commonwealth Forestry Commission, Prof. Jeff Burley, Chairman, Commonwealth Forestry Association, Distinguished Participants and Invitees, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have been entrusted with a simple task that is to propose the vote of thanks on behalf of the organizers at the conclusion of the Inaugural Session of the 17th Commonwealth Forestry Conference.

However, I would like to take few minutes of your time to give you some insight into the forestry sector in Sri Lanka. Our forefathers lived in harmony with the environment, where the main focus was on the temple, the village, the tank and the surrounding forest areas. They undertook their livelihood activities with utmost care with out disturbing the environment. However this balance was lost later due to the increase of population, and so called development activities undertaken without much concern for their environmental impacts. Therefore at present Sri Lanka is at a cross road, where the environmental degradation has become a major problem for the well being of the people of Sri Lanka. The forest cover also has reduced drastically during the last century, which resulted in loss of biodiversity, occurrence of frequent natural disasters such as floods, landslides, droughts etc. The recent destruction by Tsunami also has clearly shown the futility of not taking into consideration, the impacts of destruction of nature while undertaking so called development activities. Some people along the coast destroyed mangroves and other vegetation, mined corals, and removed natural sand dunes. Most of these people perished during Tsunami, while their neighbors who did not resort to these types of destructive activities survived. I got information that, owners of a hotel in the Southern coast removed a natural sand dune between the hotel and the sea in order for tourists to have a better view of the sea, Tsunami raised this hotel to rubble. I think this conference with the theme "Forestry's Contribution for Poverty Reduction" will be of great importance to Sri Lanka at the present time.

I would also like to say few words about the Forest Department of Sri Lanka. This Department is one of the oldest Departments in Sri Lanka, and was established in 1887. I am the 45th Head of this Institution, and four of my predecessors are also present here today. I am very proud to be the Head of this Institution, which has a set of dynamic professional foresters, who dedicate their efforts to the cause of forestry in Sri Lanka. The forest officers undertake various activities to conserve and develop forests in Sri Lanka with the prime objective of conservation of the forest areas for the well being from the future generation of Sri Lanka and also to provide require goods and services from the forest for the economic well being of Sri Lanka's population. We are criticized quite often for various aspects some time these criticism are warranted but most of the time not. I can assure you that, we are making a good effort under trying circumstances without any fanfare. I think , I have taken enough of your time on these aspects, and now I should adhere my original task that is to propose the vote of thanks.

Ladies and Gentlemen, first of all, I like to give my great appreciation to Hon. Mahinda Rajapakse, Prime Minister of Sri Lanka for accepting our invitation to be Chief Guest at this inaugural session, and to deliver the inaugural address. Thank you Sir, for adjusting your busy schedule to accommodate our request. I also like to thank Hon. A.H.M. Fowzie, Minister of Environment and Natural Resources for your presence here today despite a very busy schedule. I can remember Sir, when I discussed first, regarding this conference with you, you only said to me, “please make a very good show”. I think these words inspired everyone of us, who were in the Organizing Committee to dedicate their efforts to make this conference a success. I would also like thank Mr. P.M. Leelaratne, Secretary, Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources, who was a tower of strength in giving various suggestions, guidance and assistance as Chairman of the Organizing Committee. My sincere thanks also goes to the other major partner in organizing this conference that is to Mr. Tim Rollinson and his team from Standing Committee on Commonwealth Forestry and Prof. Jeff Burley and his colleagues from Commonwealth Forestry Association for the preparation of a very interesting programme well suited to the theme of the conference, inviting some distinguished speakers for plenary sessions under various sub themes, and also screening the voluntary papers and selecting the best, which are scheduled to be presented during the group sessions of the conference.

Ladies and Gentlemen, my gratitude also goes to invited speakers, who accepted our invitation to participate in the conference. My sincere thanks also goes to all the distinguished delegates from all over the world who have arrived here for this very important conference. I would also like to thank the distinguished invitees, for your presence here today after accepting our invitations. I like to give my appreciation to all the members of organizing committee, as well as all the colleagues of the Forest Department, who helped in making this event a reality. My gratitude also goes to the private conference organizers, Ace Travels and Convention Ltd., and Director General and Staff of BMICH for making all the necessary logistic arrangements for the conference. My appreciation also goes to Mr. Arun Dias Bandaranayake, who compered during this session and also to officer in charge of the police post and his staff for security arrangements.

I wish the conference a success and hope that this will culminate with a set off recommendations, which will help the cause of forestry in the world by way of showing the way forward in increasing the “Contribution of Forestry for Poverty Reduction”.

Finally, I request the distinguished participants from various countries to make this opportunity to stay over in order to visit some of our historical and scenic sights.

Thank you