



Forest Village – Picture by Nihal Fernando.

The Need for Community Involvement in Forestry Development in Sri Lanka

V. R. Nanayakkara
Conservator of Forests

At the turn of the last century, Sri Lanka with a population of 3.5 million had a dense natural forest cover of around 70% of the total area of the country. In the year 1953 with a population of 8.1 million, this forest cover had dwindled to 50%, and in 1981 with a further increased population of 15 million to around 28%. Also, according to the 1981 population census, districts with the highest % population increases were ironically districts having the highest % forest covers, probably because of migration from cities, e.g. Mullaitivu, Vavuniya, Mannar, Trincomalee and Polonnaruwa. This alarming trend in deforestation had to be arrested necessitating the application of fresh thought and fresh strategies towards increasing the country's vegetative cover in the form of forest, non-forest trees and agro based plantation crops.

Traditionally, man made forests were raised in the country by the Forest Department on grasslands, shifting cultivated lands, degraded and abandoned tea estates, and by the conversion of degraded dry zone jungle under the Burmese "Taungya" or Cooperation reafforestation scheme. The planting was done by the Forest Department itself and excellent results have been achieved with the country achieving self sufficiency in her timber and fuelwood needs, at times even exporting some timber.

With population increase now running at 1.7% and more and more natural forest lands being cleared for large irrigation and development schemes, and competing claims of land tenure on lands only nominally available to forestry, the Forest Department finds itself in an ever increasing difficult position to obtain large contiguous lands for man made forests. The Department small as it is (professional staff officers only 40), has set itself an ambitious target of planting about 20 million trees every year as man made forests, which is a high figure by third world standards on a per capita or per unit area of country basis.

The strategy that is being adopted under these circumstances now, is to plant in addition, trees on lands which do not belong to the state, which are marginal, which are privately owned, and on lands belonging to organizations other than the Forest Department. In order to achieve these goals it has been found necessary to enlist the cooperation of persons in other organizations and by and large the cooperation of all rural people living in the country. This means the cooperation of the whole community. In short, what is referred to as social forestry has to be practiced and eventually community forestry where groups of people or communities in different locations in the country get together to plant trees for their common good. This is also in keeping with Sri Lanka's National Forest Policy of 1980, one objective of which is "To involve the local community in the development of private woodlots and forestry farms through a programme of Social Forestry".

Sri Lanka has had a tradition of Social tree planting with family participation in the past under the Sinhalese kings when the traditional Kandyan "Ge-watta" or home garden system was developed in the Wet Zone of the country. In that system homestead tree planting was practiced where families on homesteads grew shade, ornamental, timber, fuelwood, fruit and other food, and medicinal trees, shrubs and herbs in their gardens on a 2 or 3 tiered basis. In other words, they practiced what could be termed doorstep agro-forestry. Hence, introducing social forestry to other areas of the country would not be a problem, and it is being undertaken under the farmer's woodlots programme of the new Forest Department/ADB Community Forestry Project in a scientific manner.

Community forestry however poses some problems because of the absence of a tradition of communal tree planting for common benefit as Sri Lanka did not have the need for it in the past because of its extensive forest cover and established sustained self producing home gardens. However, the need is sure to come, and it is a good augury that the Community Forestry Project has an important component of community woodlots where community participatory societies like Gramodaya Mandalayas will take it upon themselves to establish agroforestry woodlots to meet the needs of the community. This will pave the way for Farm forests at a community level where agriculture and forestry are practiced side by side on a larger scale.

The classic example of Community Forestry of course was in China after the revolution when wave upon wave of China's masses marched forwards and planted the vast denuded country-side with trees spurred on by the now famous Mao tse Tung thought — "Plant the countryside with trees". Thus, (1) all roadsides, (2) sides of waterways, (3) sides of homesteads, and (4) boundaries of villages or communes were planted with rows of trees at even spacing giving rise to what was termed "4 around" or "4 sides" plantings giving a criss cross effect to the vegetation. In this example, all able people including children acted as one community in planting China's countryside.

The other noteworthy examples are the 2 Koreas North and South, where Village Forest Associations or Cooperatives have established large extends of plantation forests under community forestry programmes. Community Forest is also being developed in India, Nepal and Thailand. In Thailand localized Forest Villages have been established where the local rural community is dependent on the forest and thereby need to improve and manage the forest on a sustained yield basis for its own survival and development. Here the people are necessitated to live in harmony with the real environment in these locations which is the forest, an excellent course of action from a conservation point of view of natural ecosystems. In all these countries community involvement has become necessary for the communities well being by sheer necessity, and spectacular results have been achieved.

In Sri Lanka fortunately fuelwood and timber are still available in satisfactory quantities, but the twin adverse effects of forest degradation and forest denudation which no forester likes to see, are taking their toll especially in the name of development and agriculture and because of an annual population increase of 1.7%. Recent studies have shown that rural people in the country do not have to walk more than one mile to gather their fuelwood, and not all day as in Nepal and some parts of India and Pakistan.

The latest FAO forest inventory of Sri Lanka has revealed that some kind of forest vegetation covers 42% of the area of the country, with "High Forest" or "Dense Forest" with a canopy cover of over 75% amounting to 28%,

and the balance 14% comprising of "Open Forest with a canopy cover of 45% to 75%" and "Scrub and Grass" with a canopy cover of 0% to 45%. These include forests under the charge of the Department of Wildlife Conservation. Unfortunately today closed canopy forests in the Northern and Eastern Dry Zone have become a high risk zone for Foresters and it may be necessary to convert some of them into Forest Villages on the Thai model, and some into high density valuable Teak plantations under the Burmese "Taungya" model, with local community involvement. Nevertheless it is necessary for Sri Lanka to continue to maintain her forest cover at current levels for both environmental, aesthetic and economic reasons, and this could be achieved only jointly by harnessing the support of rural communities, and the support of state agencies like the Forest Department, Police, and District Administrations.

Studies have also revealed that contrary to the popular lay belief that the forest provides almost all the timber and fuelwood requirements of the country, in fact the forest provides only 50% of the timber requirements and only 20% of fuelwood requirements. 50% of timber and 80% of fuelwood come from the large Non Forest and Agro based industrial wood resources of the country. Non forest includes scattered trees, scattered woodlots, home gardens, trees along roads, railway lines and waterways, live fences, forest fallow, trees in public places and shade trees on estates. Agro based industrial wood resources include Tea uprootings, rubberwood, coconut residue etc. This finding gives strength to the strategy of using community involvement in tree planting through Community Forestry and Social cum Doorstep Forestry in order to manage, maintain and also extend these Non Forest and Agro based wood resources. By the turn of the century the country's population would be over 20 million and land for large man made industrial plantations will be hard to find community involvement in planting trees and blocks of trees as forest would have come to stay.