

# PEAK WILDERNESS: THE ANCHOR OF THE HIGHLANDS

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The central highlands deserve its importance as the heartland of the country. Bio-physically this is the most complex and diverse phenomenon. Viewing a transect running across the central highlands the necessity for maintaining an ecological equilibrium can be pointed out. Within the context of the overall physiography of the central highlands Peak Wilderness is of immense importance. First this is due to its location within the highland massif itself. This stretches to a distance of about 60 kilometres from west to east between 80° 27 and 80° 50, forming the anchor of the central highlands. Second, is its location, which forms a physiographic barrier segregating southern lowland from the inner massif. Agro-climatic implication of this segregation is related to the spatial differences in the distribution of rainfall, flora, fauna and human activities. Its fascinating natural set-up is blessed with an added superiority associated with the presence of Lord Buddha's foot print 'Sri pada'. About 2 million pilgrims annually climb the summit of Adam's Peak which is at an elevation of about 2237 metres to revere the foot print.

Environmentally, this fascinating forest range is a unique gift characterized by a high standard of endemism. Approximately, the area extent of the wilderness has been estimated to be about 22,400 hectares. The physiographic diversity of the wilderness as a whole accommodates a range of topographic features interspersed with rivulets and streams in densely dissected terrain to the south. This diversity, in association with the rainfall distribution and elevation offered conditions for the prevalence of a diverse plant communities. The diversity of its habitats has remained a unique condition for it to harbour the large number of communities which differ in terms their structure, composition and richness. The floristic diversity of the south facing steeply inclining terrain is able to maintain a morphological stability. In fact the greater susceptibility of this terrain to the heavy rains occurring during Southwest monsoons was attributed

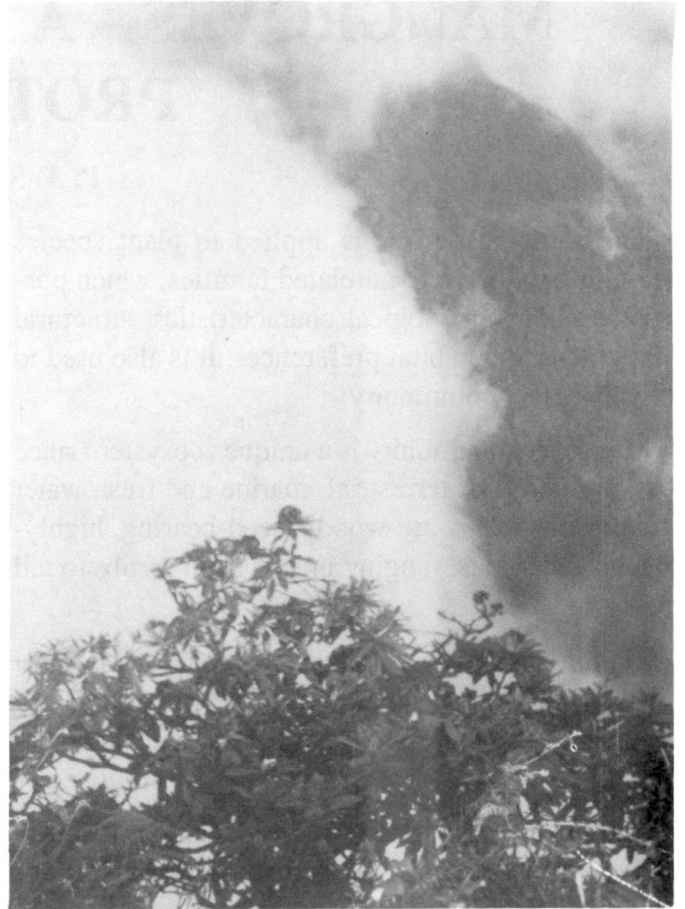
to its dense vegetation cover. The greater diversity in the vegetation communities has led to a presence of upper montane rain forests, pygmy forests, lower montane rain forests, lowland rain forests, riverine forests grassland and mashilands. In fact, among the plant communities of the natural forests these forest types are the remnants which need to be protected as treasures of Sri Lanka. The relic species both flora and fauna have been destroyed under the increasing pressure and destructive exploitation. The destructions caused from the adjoining lands and external forces has already led to a tremendous retreat of the wilderness. This retreat is greater in the south when compared with the north which is marked with estate boundaries. Nevertheless, when possible damages that could be done in future is taken into consideration none of the delineation are adequate enough to secure the wilderness area from further exploitations.

Detrimental effects of human interactions with the wilderness are related to the shrinking of the wilderness and denudation of the habitats. Both these forms have already damaged its wealth, while increasing its susceptibility to external changes. In this situation drainage is one of the heavily threatened and affected resources under the transitions which had taken within the wilderness itself and outside. The spine of the Peak range has been the drainage divide. Four major rivers of the country, namely Walawe, Kelani, Mahaweli and Kalu are fed from the waters discharged in this range. Its importance to the sustenance of drainage was not related to its dividing of rainfall, but to the provision of water throughout the years assuring a dry weather flow. The recession of the forest boundary to an elevation of about 2500 to 3000 feet means a heavy exposure and converting of forest land to other uses below this level. In fact this southern facies of the wilderness is extremely crucial because of the need for percolating rain during the rains to be released during dry spells.

The absence of forests on the midslopes has led to a high surface runoff resulting in flash floods in the downstream areas and sedimentation in the riverine areas. In addition, it has led to a diminishing of perennial rivulets, springs and streams, and drying out of the streams. Implication of such fluctuations in the drainage has resulted in adverse circumstances.

Irrespective of all these apparent affects, the fascinating environment of the wilderness area has been threatened under a continuing recession and denudation. Fringe affects related to the adjoining land use are often detrimental. Forest fire has been one of the major strategies to claim forest land first to 'CHENA' cultivation and then to tea. Forest enclosures are another strategy used to prepare the grounds for recession. Encroachment has continued, forcing the village to acquire the forest for land use. Timber logging and gem mining cause a tremendous impact on the forest. Contrastingly hundreds of traditional dwellers in some clusters who live along the southern fringe of the wilderness live on the forest. More than 600 medicinal herbs are gathered by the native physicians. As a habit, many of the forest fringers tend to grow medicinal herbs. Fruits and roots are gathered for consumption. Much of food habits are directly linked to the forest products. Kitul (*Caryoya urens*) itself is a prospective means of survival for many. Forest born products are the raw materials for home-based work. Evidences pertaining to these contradictory ways of managing the forest spatially differ. The positive interaction force us to explore the ways in which forests have been used favourably and sustainably for human survival and to identify the root causes for destruction of utilizations. Quite simply, more than the poverty it has been the human greed over land, most endangered species and valuable timber, that has threatened the Peak Wilderness.

However, the shrinking of the wilderness has taken place in the presence of supportive legislation. The recognition given to the protecting of forest through legislation goes back to a century or so. As has been indicated in Statement of 1885, felling trees or branches



of trees and destruction of young trees had been prohibited while the collection of non-timber products for consumption and also small timber for agricultural tools were permitted. What has been missing during the past is not legislation to support forest protection and conservation, but the implementation and the concern of the people over the forest. People's concern over the irreversible impact of deforestation and the damages caused under the recession of wilderness need to be broadened by creating an awareness. In the absence of awareness and participation, protective legislations and protection will remain non-practised. In fact the maintenance of the Peak Wilderness should not be taken as a local matter, but should be extended to all parts of the country which are affected by the threatened ecological equilibrium. Among the remnants of natural forests in Sri Lanka, Peak Wilderness deserve special attention for the sustenance of the production systems located below its periphery.