

Wanton rape of the Muthurajawela Wetland Sanctuary

Biodiversity conservation vs political vote bank

by Florence Wickramage

Nature in all its fury unleashed its wrath at the recent floods and earthslips at Ratnapura due to environmentally unfriendly human activities. Hot on its heels is the threat of forging ahead with the Upper Watershed Hydro-Power Project at Kotmale which according to experts would destabilise the central highlands. Against this backdrop is a fight for nature's survival from the clutches of power hungry politicians duping innocent public at Muthurajawela. "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned" - in this instance it is Mother Nature who is threatened under short sighted policies of development at any cost as against sustainable development.

Now do we hear alarm bells ring as the wanton destruction of the environment gains ground? Nature and humans are intertwined and interdependent for survival. The Environment Foundation Limited (EFL) has sought the intervention of the 'arm of the law' for 'Justice for nature', when their appeals to authorities concerned to stop the ecological, geographical and biodiversity destruction of the Muthurajawela Wetland Sanctuary fell on deaf ears and blind eyes. The EFL is supported by private land owners in the area among whom are Rev. Fr. Francis Jayasinghe, Paul Perera and Mala Bernadine Ranasinghe.

Attorney-at-law EFL, Ms. Pamoda Rajakariya told the writer that private land owners have complained about harassment at the hands of political henchmen who under threat have wrenched their lands for illegal encroachers. EFL's written complaints to the Police OIC at Seeduwa, the Chairman of the Central Environment Authority (CEA), the Director General of the Department of Wildlife Conservation (DWLC), the Minister of Environment and Natural Resources and the Inspector General of Police to stop this destruction have received no responses so far. The only response was from a Director/Asst. Director of the Environment Ministry who had drawn the attention of the Director General DWLC requesting a report on the present "land grab" at Muthurajawela.

Historical background

The name Muthurajawela is of recent vintage of a marsh situated in the Gampaha District which is surrounded by highlands in the south and the east, the Negombo Lagoon in the north and the Hamilton Canal in the west. Reports indicate that the present Muthurajawela is only a part of a larger area called Muthurajawela that existed some centuries ago. Dutch records during the Kotte period, state that Muthurajawela has obtained its name from a Royal Commissioner, himself a Princeling, Muttu Rajah or Mootoo Rasa who had been appointed by King Weera Parakrama Bahu VIII (1477-1497) the King of Sri Jayawardhanapura, Kotte to supervise paddy cultivation in this area which then was called the "Rice Bowl" of the kingdom.

During the Portuguese period the earliest known reference to Muthurajawela is by a Jesuit historian named De Queyroz. It has been historically proved that the cutting of the Canal to Negombo, now known as the Dutch Canal, had caused the impregnation of the soil of the area with salt. This canal was originally cut by King Weera Parakrama Bahu VIII of Kotte to connect Kotte with the Port of Negombo. Queyroz further records ".... he ordered to be dug by man strength a broad and deep canal of six leagues navigable by boat from Cota to Negombo, making the lands bordering this strait salty, because of the tides by the bar at Negombo with damage to him and his vassals....inhabitants of the Al Cur (Alut Kuru Korale) of the Seven Korales lay siege to Kotte for three months...."

Agreeing with Queyroz Sir Paul E. Peiris in his "Ceylon - Portuguese Era" states that "after the death of Sapumal Kumaraya, King of Kotte, his brother Ambulugala Kumaraya succeeded to the throne as Weera Parakrama Bahu. It was during his reign that the canal was cut. He goes on: "The effect of the opening of this canal was disastrous to the rich stretch of Muthurajawela fields, which now became subject to submersion by salt water from the Negombo Lake; indeed, the loss inflicted on the inhabitants of Alut Kuru Korale was so great that they rose in revolt and besieged the king in his capital". However large tracts of land had been under cultivation and bumper harvests had been recorded for quite a long time before the reign of King Weera Parakrama Bahu VIII".

The Dutch period refers to a Resolution adopted in the Council of Ceylon of June 1767 during the time of Governor Falck.. "even from the earliest period till shortly before the arrival of the Portuguese, the area had consisted of fertile fields the best calculated for the culture of



Muthurajawela Sanctuary



Large extents of mangroves cleared.

grain... the Portuguese have commenced a channel through this province from the lake of Negombo to the river Kelani for inland navigation". Governor Falck had given orders to Dissawe Costa to undertake the work of restoration, "to cultivate and plant this extensive land of about four thousand morgen lands with about two acres of ground each morgen", (about eight thousand acres in all). Sir Paul Peiris in his "Ceylon and the Hollanders" records: "at Colombo, de Costa took up the improvement of Muthurajawela which was expected to ensure a sufficiency of rice for Colombo..." The work was completed in 1767.

The British thereafter "realizing the importance of

reclaiming Muthurajawela as a source of food supply, and as early as 1802, Garvin Hamilton, the agent of revenue and Commerce cut the Hamilton Canal to the west of the tract and cross channels to connect it with the Dutch Canal to get fresh water floods to wash off the salt. The result was disastrous. At high tide, salt water from both the Kelani river and the Negombo lagoon now entered the entire area; ... the fresh water floods during the rainy season remained stagnant in the low lying areas and failed to neutralize the salinity which kept building up during the dry months". In 1919 for the first time the Director of Agriculture F.N. Stockdale and later in 1925 the Harward investigation and report documented scientific studies of chemical analysis of the soil in different areas and at various depths.

Since independence successive governments had planned to develop Muthurajawela in an effort to transform this "Waste Land" into an agriculturally more productive area, or to utilize it for expansion of Colombo and its suburbs. In the meantime wildlife enthusiasts and researchers became alarmed and feared that progressive reclamation and development in the marsh will deteriorate and eventually destroy the wetland. While the question of reclamation against conservation was being debated during the last decade, encroachers continued to move into the marsh and increased its number of squatter families.

Present status

The Muthurajawela Wetlands including the Negombo lagoon was declared as a Sanctuary under the Fauna and Flora Protection Ordinance of 1996. This criteria was developed under the International Convention for the Protection of Wetlands also known as the Ramsar Convention. Further Muthurajawela Sanctuary has received international significance and is also listed among the Asian Wetlands in 1989. It functions today as a "green lung" for the metropolitan area.

Biodiversity

The marsh and the lagoon in extent 6000 ha. are inter-dependent ecological systems forming one contiguous wetland which represents a large area of brackish water swamp marshes, mangrove swamps and fresh water marshes and shallow pools merging into an estuarine lagoon. In addition a large variety of aquatic plants, reeds, a combination of sedges and grasses and the recently introduced shrub-like Anona Glabra thrives extensively. Hundreds of years ago, a lagoonal environment had prevailed in the area. The open canal waters are very rich in phytoplankton and algae. The marsh plants provide food for a variety of fish-eating birds and carnivorous fishes. The delta zone of the marsh filled with mangrove forests serve as nursing and feeding grounds for a variety of economically important fish, shrimp and other species.

The Muthurajawela Marsh and the Negombo Lagoon wetlands are important habitat to a large variety of resident bird species including a wide variety of water birds, both resident and migratory species. In 1955 the largest number of Glossy Ibises (87) had been recorded at Muthurajawela, the highest to be recorded in the country. The Glossy Ibises were regarded as an extinct species in Sri Lanka during the first half of the 20th century. The Pallas Grasshopper-Warbler spotted in 1872 was again discovered in 1997. The Blue-Tailed Bee eater, Whiskered Tern, Water Bill and the rare Black-capped Purple Kingfisher are among water birds recorded in the area.

Conflict

The rape of the Muthurajawela sanctuary is now or backed by a politician. Within the past few days around 5000 illegal and unlawful encroachers have moved into a vast expanse of 300 acres in the Kindigoda village within the declared "Muthurajawela Sanctuary". The land parcelled into 2 to 10 perch blocks is sold at minimal rates with the higher price at Rs. 25,000/- An application is sold for Rs. 10/-. The encroachers have already cleared valuable marsh land and have callously cut down large tracts of mangroves. Several insanitary squatter huts have mushroomed with more coming up. "Causing disturbances, damage or destruction of wildlife, both animal and plant, clearance and/or break up of land, ignition of fire and erection of buildings, permanent or temporary and occupation thereof are prohibited and such activities constitute offenses punishable under the provisions of the Fauna and Flora Protection Ordinance".

(Pictures courtesy: EFL)



Illegal occupants



Muthurajawela name board



Mushrooming illegal squatter huts