

11/03/01 Sunday Times

# Coal should have come a decade ago

The news item 'CEB in dilemma over coal plant' (The Sunday Times, February 4) succinctly identifies all aspects of the problem.

The story demonstrates evidence of environmental mismanagement in setting up a coal power plant.

Any textbook on environmental management would show the procedure to be followed in development activities.

A good Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) needs to take into consideration not only earth, air, water, animals and plants, but also the people, their cultural and religious heritage and their daily activities.

An EIA generally leads to an Environment Management Plan (EMP), where the mitigation measures are in place to reduce the impacts. Before the EMP is finalised there are a few rounds of community consultation and a public display of the draft plan. Naturally, the revisions will take into account the concerns of the community,

and introduce further measures. Assessments and community consultations should be objective, transparent and far from vested interests and political influence. All conflicts should be amicably resolved and the process completed according to a time-table.

Coal power should have come to Sri Lanka about a decade ago. The best site for a coal power plant is in the south, away from potential terrorist attacks. The plant would provide employment to the southerners.

The emissions could be controlled with filters or other means and cooling ponds could reduce the impact on fisheries.

CEB engineers should have worked closely with environmental scientists (e.g. Department of Environmental Science, University of Colombo) throughout the process.

CEB failed in community consultation, communication and public education, and hence in developing a



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meaningful EMP. The inability to consider alternative sites and approaches is a result of inadequate options in the Feasibility Study.

A case study on the coal power plant in Sri Lanka, outlining the problems, issues and procedures that should

have been followed could be the subject matter of an MSc. thesis in Environmental Science.

All Australian coal power plants have gone through this process.

Today all major development activities require an EIA, and minor activities such as laying a pipeline require a review of environmental factors for approval. In developing the 2000 Olympic site at Home Bush Bay, a team of sociologists, ecologists and communicators managed the issues on industrial contaminants and the endangered Green and Golden Bell frog at the site.

In Sri Lanka, we need to establish good environment management procedures and legislation.

If such procedures were in place, Mirisawatiya would never have been plastered and "completed" and all factories will be operating with a licence from the Central Environmental Authority.

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