

Environment research centre opened in Dodanduwa

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Ambalangoda special correspondent

Following the soft opening of the 'Environmental Research Centre' at Dodanduwa on the South Coast, affiliated to 'Southern Province United Environmental Media Association', a workshop seminar on 'Coastal Ecology, Mangrove Biodiversity, and Sustainable Use of Ecological Resources' was held recently for its member media persons and representatives of the community.

In order to promote sustainable environmental conservation programs and to persuade the community participation, Environmental Media Association have already launched a program to form rural level environmental committees. The members of the Environmental Committee of Dodanduwa affiliated to Media Association also attended this workshop seminar conducted at the Environmental Research Centre sponsored by 'Coastal Research and Education Program' under 'March for Conservation' of the University of Colombo, recently.

Opening the workshop seminar, Professor Suki Ekaratne, Dean of the Faculty of Zoology, University of Colombo, referring to the importance of media in educating the general public, said media could play a very crucial role on the attitudinal changes of the Sri Lankan society. Sense of belonging was unfortunately lacking strongly among the members of present day generation, he said.

Environment around us was fast degrading but few were conscious of it, he said. All members of community, clergy, both the young and the old had to unite and make a concerted effort to conserve the environment and its resources for the future generations as well, he said. Viable strategies had to be found to safeguard the public resources of the country such as rivers, lakes, lagoons, sea, beach stretches, coral reefs, forests and air, he said. Awareness programs of this nature were indispensable in the present context, he said.

Marine sanctuary of Hikkaduwa was a national heritage but the management of marine sanctuary was in disarray as law and order were not properly implemented, he said.

In developed countries, nobody was allowed to remove anything from the sea bed but unfortunately in Sri Lanka, the sea and the beach had become the hunting ground of each and everyone, he said. Even for scientific research, on marine ecology, permission had to be obtained from the relevant authorities, he said.

Office of the Department of Wildlife Conservation was housed in a dilapidated building and no basic facilities were provided for the few officials operating at Hikkaduwa, he said.

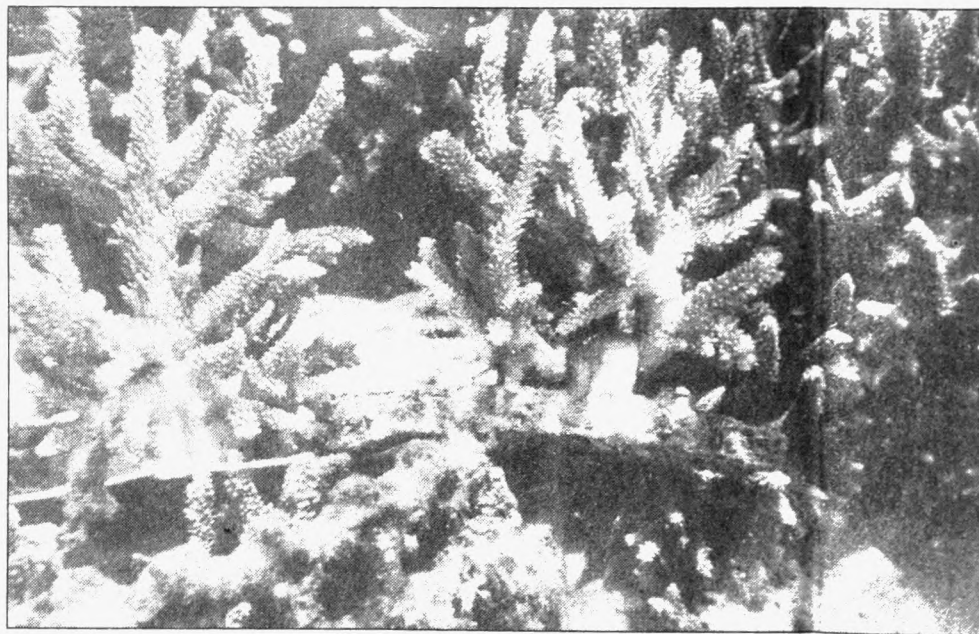
Referring to the 'management plan for Hikkaduwa marine reserve' formulated by him and his team of scientists from Colombo University, he pointed out the major issues causing management problems in Hikkaduwa marine reserve.

Lack of visitors centre, Wildlife Conservation Officer lacking facilities, unmanaged visitor pressure on the marine sanctuary, glass-bottom boat, feeding of coral fish by boat operators, effluents from tourist hotels such as garbage, sewage etc. filling up of the reef lagoon with sand were some of the major issues, he cited.

Last year, as a result of 'El Nino' over 80 per cent of coral had died but replanting of corals was 75 per



Professor Suki Ekaratne, Dean of the Faculty of Zoology, University of Colombo explains the importance of mangroves to some members of the Media Association at the Mangrove habitat of the centre, during the field teaching session on mangroves. (Ambalangoda special correspondent)



Professor Suki Ekaratne and a team of scientists of the University of Colombo had successfully replanted Staghorn Corals on the sea bed of Hikkaduwa Marine Sanctuary. Corals are seen growing with multiple branches. More than 80 per cent of corals are dead at the moment in the under water marine sanctuary due to 'El Nino' effect and other reasons. Replanting is 75 per cent successful according to Professor Ekaratne. (Ambalangoda special correspondent)

cent successful, he said. In order to implement Hikkaduwa Marine Reserve Management Plan effectively, he said the assistance and cooperation of Pradeshiya Sabha, hoteliers, glass-bottom boat operators, dive school operators, vendors on the beach, and researchers were necessary, under the guidance of Wildlife Conservation Office.

Referring to the glass-bottom boats which damaged the reef to a large extent, he said that it was recommended that glass-bottom boats and visitors

should be allowed only to specific areas where there were permanent buoys for them to anchor temporarily for showing coral and fish to visitors and the anchors had to be installed, he said. Similar to the control of jeeps in a wildlife park, only a limited number of glass-bottom boats should be allowed, within the marine sanctuary.

Steps must be taken to expedite the installation of



To symbolize the soft opening of the Environmental Research Centre of Dodanduwa affiliated to Southern Province United Environmental Media Association, Environmental Manager of Kandalama Hotel, Ravi de Silva hands over a plant to the Managing Director of the Centre, S. Abeydeera Gunawardena. Manager of the Centre, Ranjith de Silva and the representatives of the Community Based Environmental Committee are also in the picture. (Ambalangoda special correspondent)

the proposed sewage system while the silt, garbage and sediments from the nearby canals of Hikkaduwa would be trapped before entering into the marine sanctuary, he said. Coral rehabilitation should be continued with more involvement of officials of Department of Wildlife Conservation. Many slides on coral reef biodiversity were shown during the session on marine ecology.

Environmental Manager of Kandalama Hotel, Ravi de Silva speaking on 'Garbage Disposal Methods' said at the United Nations Conference on Environmental and Development known as 'Earth Summit' held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, a Global Guideline Document - Agenda 21 was formulated on large scale environmental issues and activities to achieve sustainable development.

Regarding the disposal of garbage three R principle was agreed by the participants. Reduce garbage, Reuse garbage and Recycle garbage was the "Three R System", he said. Certain solid wastes such as glass, plastic, paper and polythene and metal could be recycled and reused, he said. Use of natural resources could also be reduced, he said. Majority of the people in Sri Lanka were not civic conscious and dumped mixed garbage on the road sides. Garbage could be considered as a resource and no hightech methods were required for recycling garbage in home gardens, he said.

"Educating the younger generation on the importance of environment and sustainable development was of paramount importance. People should be made aware of the environmental issues by media. When Government authorities and private sector institutions were negligent on attending to environmental issues affecting the community, media could intervene in exposing them for the benefit of the general public", he said.

Referring to Environmental Conservation Programs launched in an around Dambulla through

Kandalama Hotel, he said now Kandalama Hotel was considered internationally as an environmentally friendly hotel in the Asian region. At the beginning, some arm-chair critics had resorted to numerous allegations but Kandalama Hotel had become a show piece in the region, promoting eco-tourism. A session on birds of Sri Lanka was also held for the young members who joined the environmental research centre. Arrangements were also made to conduct a survey on the fauna and flora in and around Dodanduwa lagoon with the assistance of Ravi de Silva and some resource persons by the young members of the Environmental Research Centre.

Field session of mangrove habitat was also among the activities organised during the day.

President of Southern Province Untied Environmental Association, W.T.J.S. Kaviratne said all those who were keen on environmental conservation of the area should be grateful to S. Abeyweera Gunawardena, the Managing Director of Environmental Research Centre for allowing the premises owned by him to be used for research work of Southern Province Untied Environmental Media Association.

Research centre was a long felt need of the Environmental Media Association and using this centre numerous conservation programs would be launched throughout the Southern province, he further said.

In every village and town where the environment was threatened, community based environmental committees would be formed affiliated to the Media Association, he said.

He requested member media persons of the Association scattered in the Southern province to expose all forms of environmental hazards through media.

The Secretary of the Environmental Media Association, Nelson Kodithuwakku, Somadasa Abeywickrama and the Manager of the Research Centre Ranjith de Silva were also spoke.