

# The clean-up of Beira has begun again!

By Saman Indrajith

Pix by Arjuna Samaraweera

It has been said for decades that restoring the highly polluted Beira Lake is an impossible task. And the authorities concerned continuously turned a Nelsonian eye as it was very expensive and difficult to achieve. The polluted landmark of Colombo city has been as an eyesore to the public for years. The Beira was the garbage dump of the city.

Complaints made by the public about the pervasive smell emanating from the lake have fallen on deaf ears; the letters and the articles appearing in papers about the hazardous condition of its water have been stoically ignored.

Owing to the complexity and high expenditure, many foreign institutions did not bother to involve themselves in restoration the lake.

After all it was an impossible task.

But, now the authorities have finally started to clean-up the lake and take remedial measures to prevent further pollution. No one clearly knows how the lake got its name. However, there are three possibilities according to historians and legend. The first is that in 1521, a Portuguese army captain called Lopo de Brito noticed a stream - a tributary of the Kelani River, that ran through a fissure on the ridge of the hills presently called Hulftsdorp, Wolfendhal and San Sebastian. It ran along what is now the railway line and the railway yards at Maradana and from there to the sea. It is said that Captain Brito had assigned an engineer by the name of Beira to dam that stream to form a lake for security purposes. Beira had dammed the stream at a place known today as Dam Street.

The second is that, the lake was named after a Dutch engineer called De Beer who had built moats and water defences of Colombo Fort, around 1700. The third is that, the name Beira was derived from the

famous place called 'de beer' where the boats were berthed. Many have taken it for granted that the first possibility is the most possible one. However, the name Beira first appeared in a map only around 1927. Until then it was called 'Colombo Lake' or simply 'Lake.' The entire lake has been divided into four lakes namely; East Lake, Galle Face Lake, South West Lake and West Lake. Whatever its beginning may be, it is recorded in history books that it served as a defence against attacks and was gradually developed by the Dutch and the British rulers. During the British regime, the lake was a centre for social, leisure and commercial activities like boat racing, fish-

The lake forms one of the greatest attractions of Colombo and by its margin stand some of the most delightful residences in the island whilst its water afford the favourite and healthful recreation of boating in all its branches." (a research conducted by Ravindra Wijewardene for the Diploma in Journalism at the University of Colombo in 1997)

Furthermore, the lake was connected to a network of navigable canals extending to the Kelani River and Negombo to the North and the Bolgoda lake, Panadura River and Kalu Ganga to the South and these provided excellent inland transportation facilities.

then brought into the McCallum Road warehouses, blended and repackaged and taken back into the harbor in barges through the lockgates, to ships awaiting cargo in mid-stream berths.

However, with the provision of alongside berths and container terminals in the port, the Beira Lake lost its role and the port had no use for the Beira. The lake was neglected.

The neglect of the lake started in the last decade of the 19th century with the reclaiming of certain parts of the lake to build structures, new roads, a boat yard, a

Beira itself has become a public hindrance. Its color and the stink coming from the lake are very unpleasant and the water is a health hazard.

Mr. B.G.K. Ariyaratne, the Chief Resident Engineer of WS Atkins International Limited, a co-consultant of the Beira Lake Restoration Project, said that it had been estimated that 7254 households in the catchment area including 289 community gardens were discharging wastewater and sewage from, wash areas, toilets, and cooking areas into storm sewers by unauthorized connections. There are also many leaking or overflowing sewers and manholes and the effluent from these sources too end up in the storm sewers. During rainy seasons the run-off water passes through garbage piles and brings nutrients, organic matter and slit into the storm sewers. The Army Camp located on the side of the lake and the General Hospital are two other potential source of contamination. The Ceylon Cold Stores continues to discharge its oil and grease into the lake. Similarly, the garages, service stations, hotel located within the catchment area discharge either oil or grease or both into the storm sewers.

To assess the degree of contamination of the Beira lake, samples of its water had been compared with other well-known water bodies in Sri Lanka, namely the Parliament Lake, Kandy Lake, Bolgoda Lake and Labugama Reservoir. The results had shown that the water of the Beira Lake was the worst affected.

Comparing the lake with a natural lake, the Deputy General Manager of the Sri Lanka Land Reclamation and Development Corporation Gemunu Alawattegama said that

the bad smell and color of the lake had become a sore to the public.

"Its artificial large size does not match with the contributing catchment area. The lack of natural vegetation within the water surface and its surroundings is also another factor. There is no circulation of water within the lake. And the lake is located within a highly urbanized area," he said.

Explaining the restoration strategy, Mr. Ariyaratne said that the whole project would take 10 years to complete according to the master plan.

The project has been divided into two main phases. During

the first four years, unauthorized sewer connections to the lake would be disconnected, and reduced, he said. A new tunnel system to carry the sewage will be laid from behind the Inland Revenue Building upto a pumping station at Slave Island, and this tunnel will run upto the Polwatte Pumping Station. The capacity of the existing sewer system will also be increased, he added.

Mr. Alawattegama said that phase two of the project is to dredge and strengthen the embankment. The South West Lake will be dredged and about 0.7m. material will be removed from the lake bottom using suction dredges.

"After that we will aerate the water of the South West lake; this will actually purify the water as it will mix with the air."

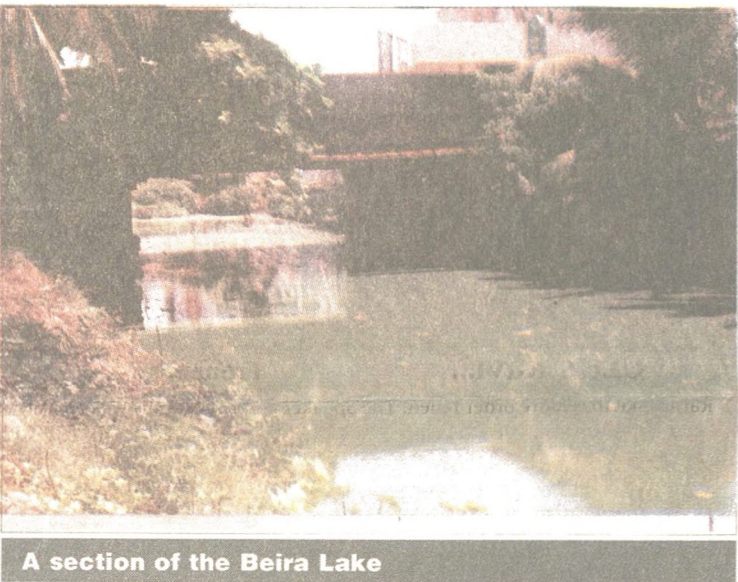
In the meantime, the water level in the West Lake, Galle Face Lake and the South

West Lake will be reduced by adjusting the gates at the spillway," he said.

"We hope to finish the dredging and aeration of the South West Lake by the end of this year," he added.

The ultimate goal of the whole project is to restore the lake to its former glory. "Then the aesthetically improved lake with recreational facilities will be a place for pleasure," Mr. Ariyaratne said.

Artist's view of the Beira Lake from the Galle Face Green (1845)



A section of the Beira Lake

ing, water sports, parties, festivals, and social gatherings. The affluent sector found that the banks of the Beira offered a graceful setting for their elegant bungalows.

Hence, and the evenings took on a festive air with parties, recreation activities, social and cultural functions, balls etc. The lake became a centre for commercial activity and as well as a notable enchanting leisure resort.

John Desdamith, an officer of the Ceylon Artillery, has described the Beira Lake as follows:

"The lake of Colombo was a fine place of water supplied by several small tributary streams and extend from the sluices of the Fort four to five miles in a North-easterly direction.

When the original port development was carried out in the late 1800s, there were only mid-stream berths in the Port. The Beira Lake was a necessity for the export of tea and rubber. The designers and the developers of the port created the Beira Lake by providing lockgates and a spillway to keep the water at a level 1.8m. higher than the sea. The quay wall was constructed on one side to enable the barges to navigate. A series of warehouses were built in the space between the quay wall and McCallum Road. Chests of tea came to Colombo by train. A special basin was constructed alongside the railway line to unload those tea chests directly into the barges. These barges laden with tea chests were

play ground etc. The maintenance of the lake too was gradually abandoned, and this caused an influx of illegal settlers. They polluted the lake in three ways, first by using it as an open sewer and garbage dump and by illegal filling. The city's population increased rapidly and led to the deterioration of sanitary conditions of the catchment area. The more than one thousand storm-water outfalls, carried sewage, waste water, organic matter, nutrients, silt etc., into the lake during the dry season, and much more during the rainy season which, caused the degradation of the lake as well as siltation.

Due to many years of pollution and the use of the lake's banks for the disposal of garbage, the

