

Environmental Conservation Activities Need A School Level Approach

Douglas B. Ranasinghe

(Former President WNPS-Sri Lanka)

During my 40 years as an activist on conservation matters in Sri Lanka, it is my contention that, Environmental Conservation matters need a School level approach to ensure sustainable protection of the Environment.

Mahatma Gandhi once quoted: **“There is enough in the Environment for people’s need, but not for their greed.”** Hence Children should be emphasized from the school age, to utilize environmental resources in a sustainable manner as world resources are limited. Also they should be taught to appreciate the beauty of nature, the Jungles, Fauna and Flora.

As a committee member (and later it’s president) of the Wild life and Nature Protection Society of Sri Lanka (WNPS), which is the oldest (116 years) conservation society in the Island, we approached the problem in the following manner.

First, an “Action Committee” was formed in 1976 to study and recommend ways and means to get the students involved in environmental conservation matters. The committee’s recommendations were as follows :

1. To form, “Student’s Nature Clubs (SNC)” in selected schools in each districts.
2. To publish a Nature Magazine in Sinhala(a native language), where, environmental related articles of experts as well as students would be published.
3. To provide printed material on subjects of Fauna and Flora for them to get a better knowledge of the subjects other than what is taught in schools.

The General Committee of the WNPS approved these Suggestions and took immediate action to implement them.

The First Nature Club was formed at Kalutara District in the Western Province of the island and by 1980 there was 60 SNC in the island. Normally a science Teacher of the school, who is interested in environmental conservation matters, was made the Patron of the SNC. The committee constituted of student from grade 6 upwards. Later a Handbook for” Student Nature Clubs” was prepared giving details of the constitution, projects that could be implemented etc.; At present we have over 400 SNC s in schools in almost all the districts in the Island. Also it has to be mentioned that in some districts, Patron Teachers have got together and formed their own “SNC Patron Teachers Association” to ensure

continuation of the clubs in the districts and to implement combined projects such as Reforestation of Denuded forests in their districts, Joint Nature Camps, Environmental Surveys and other Nature Projects.

The second recommendation of publishing a Nature Magazine was implemented simultaneously. The name of the magazine was "WARANA" (Which means, Magnificent Elephant), which is a bi-annual magazine that has been published continuously (and to add a personnel note, I have been associated as editor of this magazine from the inception from 1976). Initially, Department of Education of Sri Lanka purchased 6000 copies of this magazine annually and distributed among all school libraries in the island.

This Magazine has created a great impact on Administrators and Policy makers. On one instance, an Environmental Minister confessed personally to me, that when as a student, this magazine helped him to appreciate nature and the importance of protecting the environment.

To implement the third recommendation of the action committee, the society published a book on birds titled "ASIRIMATH KURLU LOKAYA" (which means, The Wonderful World of Birds) which, describe the behavioral aspects of birds, descriptions of the Sri Lankan Endemic Birds etc. (On a personnel note- I have authored this book in 1976. This publication motivated me to write and translate over 20 books on the subjects of environment. In 2009, I published a book titled, "THE WONDERFUL WORLD OF BUTTERFLIES").

One of the most knowledgeable ORNITHOLOGISTS in Sri Lanka, who discovered the SERENDIB SCOPS OWL, a new owl for the world of science which was acknowledged by BBC and CNN, was also motivated by this book. He has mentioned that this book on birds was a constant companion when he was a student and rekindled his interest to study birds.

Also it was observed that in Sri Lanka birds had only English names given by British and few names in the native Sinhala language, WNPS published a book titled SRILANKA AVIFAUNAL LIST giving names to all birds in Sinhala as well (I was a co-author of this book). This helped the students as well as others interested in birds to better understand and recognize the birds.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), recognizing the good work done by WNPS funded a project to establish butterfly gardens in 100 schools in 10 Districts in 2007. This project was completed successfully. It helped students to identify butterflies and also identify **Host & Nectar** plants for butterflies so that they could ensure the butterflies thrive in their districts and not fall into IUCN red list.

Furthermore, after the success of the IUCN project, the UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME (UNDP), funded to implement a Bio-Diversity project in 10 schools in NuwaraEliya district, the district in the highest (7000ft) elevation. We followed the Landscape System discussed at IUCN congress in Barcelona in 2008 and in addition to a Butterfly garden, a Herb garden, Fruit and Timber garden as well as a Plant nursery was established in these schools. Furthermore to attract Amphibians and other fauna we established a pond in each school, placed artificial bird cages or nest boxes, bird baths and bird food tables as well as compost bins to provide organic fertilizer for the plants.

At the end of the year we found that these school became Mini Nature Reserves and Principals, Teachers and students commented that they came to a dust infested school earlier, now they feel that they are coming to a Natures Paradise

Finally these activities were shown on T/V Channels and publicity given in printed media creating and enthusiasm among the public to protect our environment. Hence a motivated student, (the future leaders of a country), play a major role in protecting a countries environment.