

Strengthening Voices for Better Choices in Sri Lanka

Helping stakeholders build a common understanding of forest governance needs and priorities

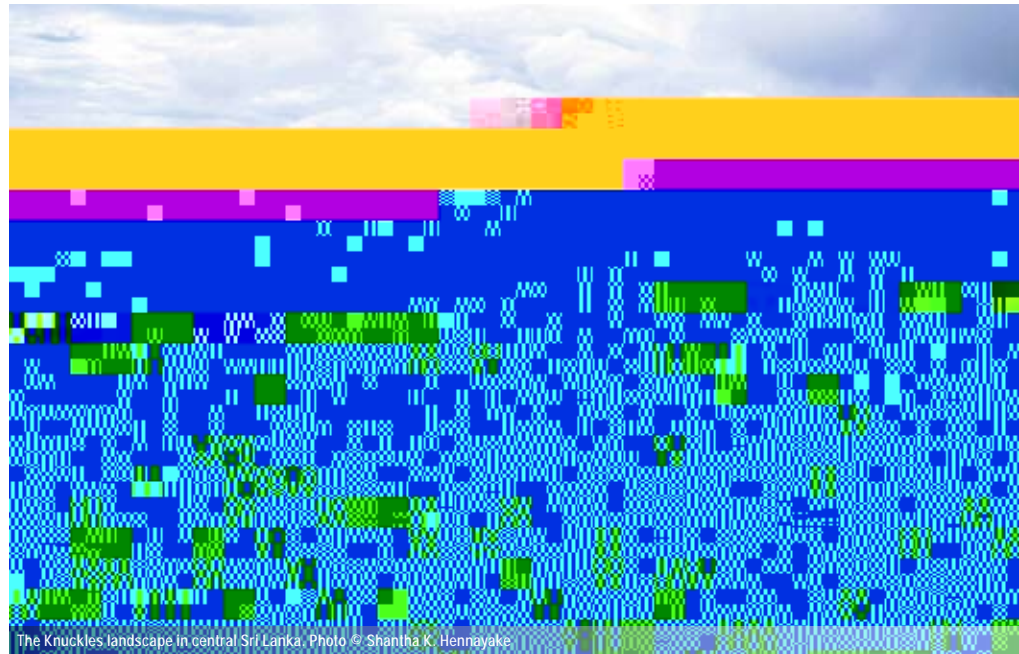
Forest governance in Sri Lanka

Rapid population growth has put great pressure on Sri Lanka's land and forests. Between 1900 and 1992 the number of people per square kilometre grew from 54 to 269, while natural forest cover declined from 70% to just 24% of the land area. Although the rate of population growth has fallen in recent years, widespread rural poverty and landlessness continue to put pressure on agricultural land, contributing to high levels of forest encroachment and conversion. The current rate of forest loss is estimated at 1.5% a year.

Effective governance of Sri Lanka's remaining forests faces several key challenges. First, although the National Forest Policy of 1995 emphasises the need for local participation in forest management, the required policy and legal framework for devolving meaningful authority to communities has yet to be put in place. Much of Sri Lanka's forest land remains under state ownership, and the responsibility and authority for managing this land are spread among different government agencies. The multiple and often conflicting interests at play contribute to institutional overlap and inefficiency.

Second, a related issue is that the regulatory framework for forests is inconsistent and lacks clarity to guide stakeholders in their actions. Some of the laws regulating natural resource use in Sri Lanka are outdated, contradictory and overlapping. Legal reform is needed, but it is a slow and difficult process, hampered by procedural delays and the difficulty of reaching a consensus amongst all stakeholders.

Third, a common problem across the natural resource sector in Sri Lanka is weak



The Knuckles landscape in central Sri Lanka. Photo © Shantha K. Hennayake

law enforcement and a lack of effective deterrents or sanctions. This is due in part to the inconsistent quality of the laws (and law-making process) themselves. It is also due to a lack of necessary human and financial capacity within the agencies responsible for enforcing the law. Lastly it stems from an institutional focus on forest protection rather than forest management, which has led to high policing costs, inefficient use of personnel, increased opportunities for corruption and disincentives for private tree growers.

Strengthening voices for better choices

In response to these challenges, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) launched Strengthening Voices for

Better Choices (SVBC). Financed by the European Union, this global project aims to promote improved governance arrangements that will facilitate sustainable and equitable forest conservation and management. In Sri Lanka, one of six project countries, SVBC is pursuing this goal at the Knuckles Forest in the island's central highlands.

IUCN has worked closely with Sri Lanka's Forest Department in the past to develop management plans for the Knuckles Forest and the Sinharaja Forest Reserve in south-west Sri Lanka. SVBC, however, is its first attempt to intervene directly in forest governance in the country, using a tripartite approach involving government, civil society and the private sector.

The Knuckles Forest is an important reservoir for biodiversity, providing habitats for nationally and globally endangered species such as the Sri Lanka leopard (*Panthera pardus kotiya*). As the upper catchment forest of the Mahaweli River, Sri Lanka's longest river, it also provides critical watershed services for farmers in the lower plains region.

For decades the government of Sri Lanka has been concerned about encroachment and degradation of the Knuckles Forest. Illegal logging, tea and cardamom growing, shifting cultivation (chena) and other activities have steadily eroded forest values, though not without social and economic benefits. In 2000 the declaration of the Knuckles Environment Protection Area (KEPA) brought these activities to a halt.

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KEPA. All management decisions must now go through a multistakeholder committee, the Knuckles Environment Protection Area Management Committee (KEPAMC). This is the first instance in Sri Lanka of community-based organisations being formally incorpo-

Future activities of SVBC

SVBC in Sri Lanka can look back on several years of solid achievement. In the 10 months it has left the project aims to consolidate its achievements and ensure that its beneficiaries have the capacity to manage and sustain project activities.

In the KEPA, SVBC will continue to develop alternative livelihood opportunities, including ecotourism. A number of priority ecotourism activities were identified by villagers at a tripartite workshop in the KEPA in

