

TRAILS THAT THE WILD MEN TREAD

Synopsis of the 1st quarterly meeting for 2021 of the Ceylon Society of Australia Colombo Chapter (CSACC) held on 27th February 2021 at the OPA Auditorium, Colombo

Sunela Jayawardene

CSA CC President Tony Saldin introduced the guest speaker Sunela Jayawardene as a leading environmental architect (*Time* March 2007; *India Today* 2008). Her award-winning hotel projects include Jetwing Vil Uyana, Rainforest Ecolodge and Colombo Court. She was the first Chairperson of the Federation of Environmental Organizations of Sri Lanka. Her book, *The Line of Lanka, Myths and Memories of an Island*, explores Sri Lanka's legends and myths. Here is the text of Sunela's speech:

Today, as our familiar wilderness is being compromised by overcrowding and deforestation, to find true wilderness, one has to be on foot. Now, it is the only way to discover and protect the gifts of the jungles. As convoys of a new breed of 'wild men' in their powerful 4X4 vehicles, plough down ancient foot-paths and cart tracks, in their quest for driving thrills, not only is the archaeological value of these ancient pathways being diluted but also, this harsh approach destroys potentially, precious biodiversity. In this era of dwindling wild country, 'going off the beaten path' responsibly, can only mean hiking the hard way, with little comfort en route.

When I was asked to speak of wilderness trails to this august assembly, my mind sped to August - that month, which I await each year. It is when the Kachaan wind drops; that dry, desiccating wind that sweeps down from the North west, and is the forerunner of the winter of our Dry Zone. When this wind ceases, the danger of falling branches in the forest reduces. August is the best time to walk in the Knuckles Range and throughout Sri Lanka's Dry Zone. Then the mountain trails are no longer slippery, the sandbars are dry enough to camp on and the chance of a flash flood is slim. Even on the most benign of our rivers, the chances of a flash flood exist. I recall the old Tracker Menika's, tale of the ghosts of the Kumbukkan Oya, heralding a flash flood.

Jungles are my kryptonite. I wonder about this longing for the jungles —how ingrained is it? How wild are we? Is it learned values or a natural affinity that has been suppressed? As a child I think I learnt to love the jungles from my father's best friend, Upali Senanayake. I eventually learnt to sit still and watch the jungle like he always did, rather than let the jungle watch me pass. Time in the jungle became a passion or was I just a wild child? I hung around Trackers, Bungalow keepers Poachers and wildmen. I recall some of the great trackers: Hendrik Appuhamy, Seedrik Appuhamy, (P)Fakirdeen, Sarath, who died in the Wilpattu massacre in 1985, Sumanadasa, Muthubanda.... From them I learnt to test the wind, read the clouds and the sun, animals tracks and alarm calls. I

learnt to follow the gaze of a primate troupe's sentry, pick up the smell of an elephant in musth or the hysteria of mating bears. I will always be learning trees and medicinal plants.... I listened, read extensively on jungle craft, worked in the zoo — obsessive indeed.

In the early 1990s I ran a program for the Department of Wildlife Conservation called, Wild Lanka, an Introduction to the Wilderness. My fellow guide was my friend, Commissioner Cedric Martenstyn - wild and fearless jungle man extraordinaire. Crawling into crocodile dens, night hikes on Horton Plains, spelunking or Caving, but we lost him to the war in 1996. I had learnt so much and realised how little I know.

Sri Lanka has distinct seasons despite being a tropical country, due to its geography of a central mountain massif. To me, this is a clear calendar for hiking — if you live in Sri Lanka avoid being a tourist and plan your travel around the monsoons. But despite all the skills & plans nature cannot be predicted. The last time I camped in Yala, unseasonal rain swamped our camp in August, and we sat under canvas, getting up every few minutes to tip water out. But the rain wasn't our problem — we camped in grove of Ma Dhun (*Syzygium cumini*). Beautiful trees, but they were laden with fruit and sloth bear love that fruit. Every mongoose scuffle and piggy grunt became a bumbling bear, heading for the Ma Dhun and accidentally stumbling on us. A wonderful campsite but we should have avoided it while it was a magnet for bear, but the light was slipping, and we didn't have time to find another campsite.

Everything changes when you are on foot and all you have is a stick. But what do you prefer? Tucked safely in a cluster of jeeps or being awe-struck with every step, beneath a magnificent forest canopy? Sri Lankan jungles are beautiful but have many dangers: elephants, buffalo, mines, trap-guns. Therefore, a sharp sense of place is important when you're on foot. There is no getaway, so a safe campsite is helpful. Finding a campsite by 4pm is a rule I try to adhere to. Ready for bed by nightfall is not a bad thing as it gives you an early start, before the heat of the day. The jungle is most wonderful when on foot for what you can see and do. From the details in caves that can only be crawled in to, vibrantly coloured lichen on a tree trunk, some rarely seen insect or even simply sitting in a tree.

But I'm terrified as the jungles of Sri Lanka are disappearing before my eyes. For our children to learn about their environment, Discovery or NatGeo is never going to be as good as the real thing. Jungles are addictive. I am addicted, my children are addicted, and I have a granddaughter who deserves the luxury of our forests. The question is, will our future genera-

tions have the luxury of forests? Sadly, our children's heritage is being stolen. Our wildlife is under serious threat from the State as we are faced with ecocide by our elected guardians. Sadly, we have a leader who doesn't seem to understand or care that piecemeal land grabs for hotels, roads, factories and outdated mono-cultures, such as corn (for which 5000 acres of forest have been decimated in Ampara District), damages ecosystems. Not just the forest that is being accounted only for its timber value, but in the process, so much more is being destroyed.

Roads are on offer to the poor — even in areas where roads exist! Precious habitat is value-less: the road through the Knuckles, from Meemure to Ranamure, despite contrary promises, cannot be built without extensive damage. This is valuable monsoon forest is rich in unexplored archaeology. And for wild-life, roadways translate to fragmentation: the partitioning of forests into small blocks that are dangerous for animals to cross. For the first time in the history of our island, the chieftain of the Veddha people, Uruvarige Vanniale Attho is suing the Government for deforestation. In his words, We don't need even a grain of salt... please protect these forests! Can we all take up this gentleman's plea? Help the fight to conserve highly valuable land. Please support organisations such as the CEJ, EFL and WNPS and protest this ignorant and greedy leadership.

Or Rewild! Buy land that is valueless and plant it with indigenous species. Because, if we don't each make an effort and reform, the Anthropocene will end. Some of the wild species will recover, as they have in Chernobyl, taking over the human landscapes that our species can no longer live-in. Then, it is the human species that will be left behind when Noah's Ark II, sets sail.

A lively question and answer session followed. The vote of thanks was delivered by Hon Treasurer Asoka de Silva.

