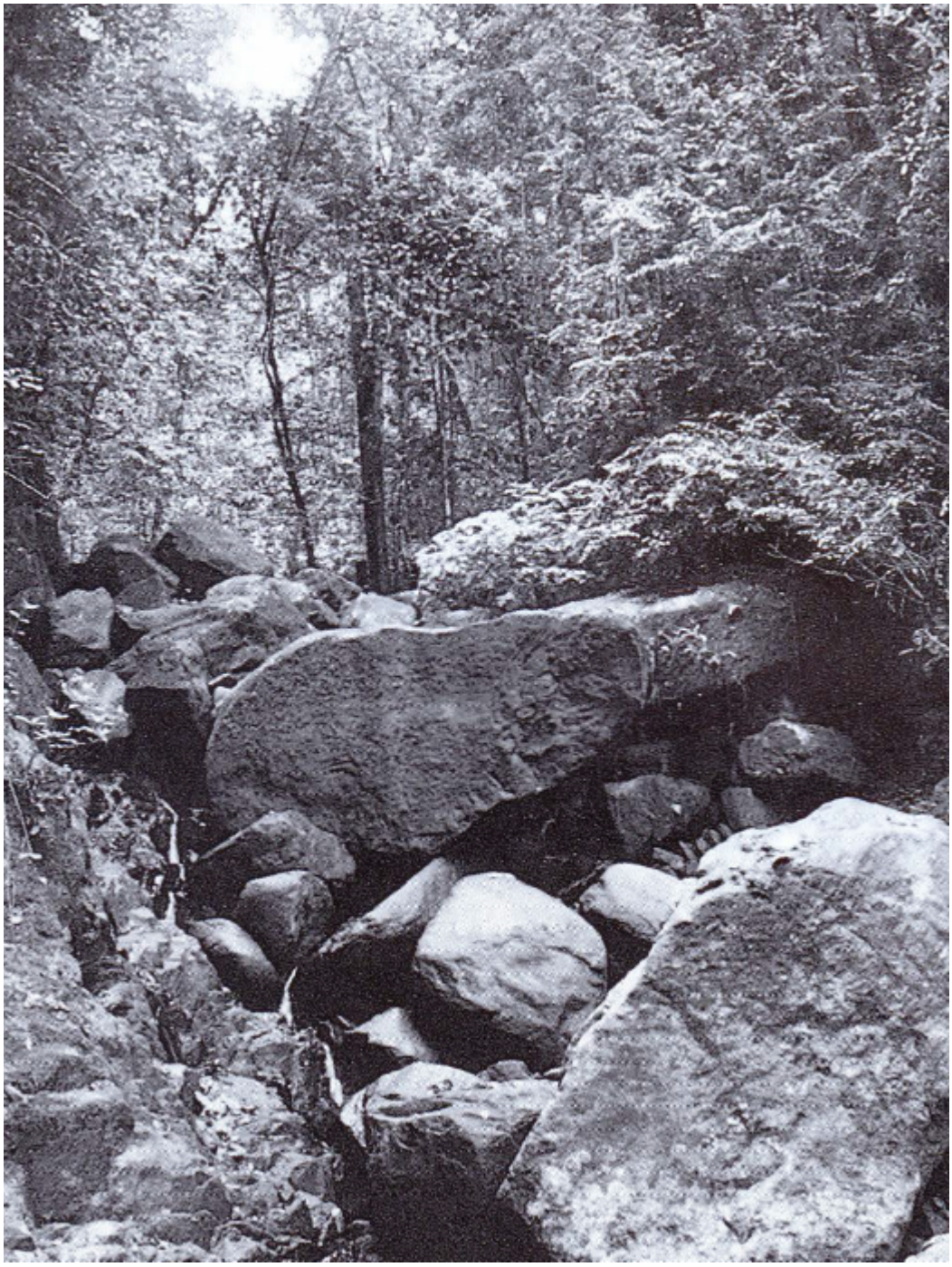
The Fate of the Lion King Forest

Posted on

From a wild life expert’s notebook by Ravi Prasad Herath



Just as there are no lions left in Sri Lanka, the Sinharaja forest which bears the lion king’s name, may be disappearing too. Legend has it that the Sinharaja forest was the last refuge of the lion in Sri Lanka. Before the 70s, elephants lived there too. Since 1974 nothing has been seen of them as the jungle area between Sinharaja

and Adam’s Peak has become settlements.

Where is the Sinharaja forest?

Ask an average Sri Lankan and, while he will be proud of it because of the association of the name of the forest with that of the Sinhala people, he will be vague about its location.

The boundaries of the forest have shrunk ever since man began to explore and inhabit Lanka’s interior. Now reduced in area, the forest embraces the range of lowland lying across a line drawn on the map from Galle to Ratnapura. The length of the forest from the eastern to the western end, is about 21 km and its width only seven km. It is about 22,000 acres in area.

The first written reference to the Sinharaja forest is in the 14th century when Ibn Battuta in his journal describes how he reached the Adam’s Peak range (north of Ratnapura) after trekking through the forest. In the 16th century, the Portuguese recorded the names of hamlets in and around the forest’s borders. Botanists only began to take an interest in the forest during the British period.

Since Galle (not Colombo) was the premier port until a century ago, travellers used well-trodden paths through the forest from the coast to Adam’s Peak. Even then it was recognized that the forest of the Lion King was losing its majesty. In a surveyor’s report prepared in the 1870s, the forest was described as “very much eaten by chenas on the north and northwestern sides and the truth of the matter is that nearly all of the Kukul Korale (then part of the forest) is one immense chena.” A chena is forest land brought into cultivation by the slash and burn method.

Sinharaja is situated in the wet zone which means that the monsoons have little influence on the rainfall pattern as rain is spread throughout the year. Tropical rain forests are regarded as one of the most valuable environmental systems in the world. Under the UN programme, Man and the Hemisphere, Sinharaja is categorized as a tropical lowland forest in the Indo-Malayan region. The National Heritage Act of 1988 proclaimed the Sinharaja Forest as a national heritage, protected by the Ministry of Lands.

There are a variety of cane creepers found in the jungle. This is Calamus rotang.

The jungle is excessively humid, generally between 60 to 95 percent. The trees preserve themselves by emitting the excess water through their leaves. A nature’s cure. This function of the leaves has determined their elongated shape with a tapering point. Some of the plants have flowers and fruits on their trunks. The dense growth records around 24,000 plants to one hectare of land. More than 95 percent of these plants are less than a metre in height and they form the ground layer.

The annual rainfall is between 150-200 inches. Rainfall is heaviest in April, May and June; there is no clear dry season. The temperature is around 23-27 degrees throughout the year.

Spread through the area is an intricate drainage pattern. Rain water is naturally absorbed and this water floods a network of rivulets and streams. The forest is the feeder area for both Kalu ganga (river) on its northern boundary and the Gin ganga

on its southern side. These two rivers water the wet zone and are vital for the maintenance of the environmental equilibrium there.

The leaves of most of the plants are colourful, varying from a pinkish red to a purple. This foliage adds an ethereal beauty to the jungle. The outer layer in the tender leaves encourages reflected sunlight thereby protecting the jungle from the strong rays of the sun.

Wild fruits abound in the forest.

The low slopes are mostly located in the outer region of the forest. The commonest vegetation there is of diptorocarpus
zeylanicus and *diptorocarpus hispidus* which can grow to over 45m in height. However, most of those trees are dying out now due to the ill-effects of deforestation and there remains only secondary vegetation. *Cleichenia linearis,* a fern, covers the ground.

Plants growing at a medium elevation on the higher slopes are the most widely spread vegetation in the Sinharaja forest. *Nasua fernia, deena gardneri* and *nesuathammitesii* are the commonest. Plants growing in the upper inclines are quite different and are smaller in size. Of the identified flora of the Sinharaja forest reserve at least 75 per cent are indigenous plant varieties. There are approximately 267 varieties which are natural plants of this forest area, while about three varieties are found only in Sinharaja. Certain plants have not yet been identified by botanists.

The fauna of the Sinharaja forest has never been the subject of serious research. Although research work commenced in 1982, it was limited to the western portion of the forest. There is information on approximately 285 varieties of animals of which about 61 are indigenous. Mammals are not as common as in the dry zone forests. Leopard is sighted occasionally but the main sightings are of deer, sambhur and wild boar.

Inhabiting the ponds and streams are the “water dogs” (otters) which live on fish and water snails, and the mongoose, ran hothambuwa. Monkeys indigenous to Sri Lanka are mostly found in the perimeter of the forest. It is believed that 19 of the 21 indigenous varieties of birds also live there.

The streams are inhabited by at least 11 varieties of fish, several of which are rare. The galpandiya sticks to a rock with its mouth and is commonly found in flowing streams. There are 14 varieties of reptiles and at least six of them are indigenous.

The green polonga (viper), considered to be a colourful reptile, is an indigene found mostly around bamboo groves by the waterways. The depathnaya which spreads its fangs from its tail lives beneath the soil. Non-poisonous reptiles are often found in the decaying leaf layer. Most of the serpents found here are darker in colour due to environmental factors.

Although the destruction of this magnificient rain forest with its rare wild life has been officially halted, the damage has been done. Since 1907 the forest was administered by the Forestry Department and in 1926 it was declared a reserve. Ten years later the policy was abandoned.

In 1957 the Forestry Department completed an aerial survey and information gathered from it revealed the economic value of its timber. The Kosgama Plywood Factory was built with the economic enterprise in view.

The rape of Sinharaja was begun between 1972-77 when the Sri Lankan government collaborated with Canadians to clear 4,000 acres of forest using modern machinery. About 600km of roadway was built for the transport of heavy machinery and felled timber through the forest. These activities affected both the large trees and the low undergrowth. Large trees were felled while the undergrowth was crushed by machinery and falling trees. The forest became barren. Mahogany trees were introduced to fill the gap but proved unfavourable. Between 1983 and 1984, the department of forestry took steps to remove most of the mahogany.

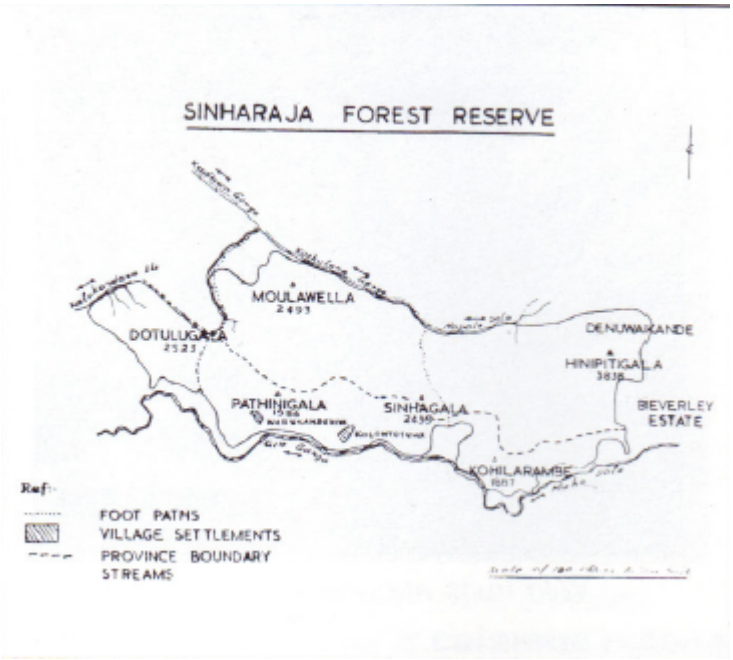
For generations the economic life of the inhabitants of the bordering villages of Sinharaja forest was woven around the forest. They tapped the kitul trees and obtained its juice which formed the base for their produce of jaggery and treacle. The ha} tree was another useful tree to the villager; its bark was used to prevent kitul juice fermenting and converting to toddy. The fruits were used in the preparation of sweetmeats.

The cane creeper also provided the villager with raw material for cottage industries. The variety of cane creepers found in the jungle were used to produce cane chairs, baskets and tats. The thudarena creeper 1s also used for this purpose.

A useful household condiment, nutmeg, is found in abundance in the jungle. Both kekuna and dorana provide the villager with a fragrant powder for incense and oil for lighting. The beru and bata leaves are a useful form of roofing and, of course, the timber for house building is also found in the forest.

Trees and herbs of medicinal value are common in the forest. Venival geta is an antedate for tetanus; iruraja and vanaraja are rare herbs of medicinal value. A edible plants supplement the villager’s meals. Mushrooms of different varieties are a delicacy and various leaves form the nucleus for the daily malluma (greens).

Thus, through the years man and the forest were in close bondage. Most of his needs were fulfilled by the jungle yet today man has turned out to be the arch enemy of the forest. Daily it dwindles under his violation. Poaching, gemming, chena cultivation, and the encroachment of settlers continue although illegal.

While the forest suffers, so will man at its demise. There are still virginal areas in a natural state. They must be preserved so that the fate of the lion in Sri Lanka does not befall the Sinharaja forest which means so much, not only to the Sinhala race,

but to all the people of this planet.