

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 Some of the laws regulating natural resource use in Sri Lanka are outdated, contradictory and overlapping.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.

No government agency or NGO ever took an interest in solving the pathetic status of the farmers. It was during this time [that] IUCN came to the village as a 'silver lining in a dark cloud'. It was a blessing that [SVBC] came to the village to strengthen the voices of the villagers. A new era dawned when SVBC brought Dilmah into the village.

—Kulawansa, President of village marketing cooperative, Knuckles

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. *Chena* was prohibited, most large-scale cardamom production ceased, and the government took action to acquire privately held land within the KEPA.

The declaration of the KEPA (see map) was rightly seen as a victory for conservation. The downside, however, was that the process of designation involved little consultation with the local people who would be most affected. The restrictions on land and forest use, for example, reduced the incomes of some villagers by up to 40%. Many private landowners also had no choice but to sell their land to the government

at predetermined prices. Inevitably these changes caused tensions among villagers, landowners and the government.

SVBC has adopted a three-pronged approach to strengthening the voice of Knuckles stakeholders in planning and decision making: 1) creating and strengthening channels for local people to interact and communicate with decision makers; 2) building relationships with the private sector to mobilise support for developing alternative livelihoods; and 3) creating space and capacity within official policy-making processes for meaningful participation by other groups.

Two key project structures have been created to support this approach: a project office in the KEPA and a project steering committee chaired by Sri Lanka's Conservator-General of Forests, with members drawn from government agencies, the private sector and civil society groups. Sri Lanka's Forest Department has also established a dedicated Knuckles Forest Conservation and Extension Unit.

SVBC is working in partnership with various civil society organisations and business groups in Sri Lanka. The Sewa Lanka Foundation, a national NGO, has been involved in assessing capacity needs and conducting participatory appraisals at the project's 11 pilot villages in the KEPA. The Merrill J. Fernando Charitable Foundation (MJFCF), the charitable arm of Dilmah Tea, has added value by supporting village cooperative marketing societies and local entrepreneurs, as well as an agricultural improvement programme run by the local government horticulture research station.

A number of private landowners in the KEPA have also helped the pilot villages through educational support programmes. IUCN Sri Lanka has supported SVBC with financing for ecotourism activities. Lastly the

institutional support of Sri Lanka's Forest Department, both through the project steering committee and in the field, has done much to make project's activities more efficient and effective.

SVBC's achievements

Socio-economic assessment As part of its work to strengthen the capacity of stakeholders to communicate, SVBC has supported a broad socio-economic assessment of the pilot site by the Sewa Lanka Foundation. This was conducted in partnership with the *Dumbara Surakinno* (Protectors of Knuckles), local community-based organisations set up in forest-fringe villages in 1991 by the Forest Department.

Besides producing valuable information for project partners, the assessment helped to build local trust and ownership of the project. It also helped to revive and strengthen the previously weak *Dumbara Surakinno*, leading in 2006 to the formalisation of three of them as NGOs with more than 150 members in total. SVBC has since helped to reactivate or re-establish eight more groups with more than 350 members, and has provided training in planning and management for more than 40 of their leaders.

Alternative livelihoods With support from the private sector, SVBC has encouraged entrepreneurship as a way of building alternative livelihoods for forest-dependent communities. The project has worked closely with MJFCF to extend its Small Entrepreneur Programme (SEP) to Knuckles. Under SEP, originally designed as a mechanism to support post-tsunami reconstruction, grants totalling some US\$20,400 have been given to 42 recipients to produce tomato boxes, make clothes, buy walking tractors and invest in other productive activities.

Promotion of ecotourism At its first meeting, the project steering committee suggested that ecotourism could offer a viable livelihood alternative to Knuckles communities. Since then SVBC has helped the *Dumbara Surakinno* formulate an ecotourism promotion project with a development grant of US\$22,200, and has provided training in ecotourism to 20 of their members. Under the ecotourism project, the *Dumbara Surakinno* are working with the Forest Department to establish an information centre and collect data on tourist arrivals in Knuckles.


















Local dialogue and joint action The project's socio-economic assessment highlighted a lack of knowledge among villagers



A village consultation in the KEPA. Photo © Shantha K. Hennayake



LEGEND

 SVBC pilot area	 Tropical evergreen forest	 Coastal vegetation
 Provincial boundary	 Tropical montane forest	 Savannah
 River	 Tropical semi-evergreen forest	 Irrigated intensive agriculture
 National capital	 Tropical moist deciduous forest	 Irrigated agriculture
 Provincial capital	 Mangrove forest	 Waterbodies
	 Shrubland	 Settlement

Land cover map of Sri Lanka showing the KEPA, SVBC's pilot area. Land cover is based on the South Central Asia Map, prepared under the Global Land Cover 2000 Project (<http://www-gem.jrc.it/glc2000/>).

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 incorporated into the decision-making structure for a protected forest.

To promote direct local involvement in managing the KEPA, the project has supported preparation of a joint forest protection action plan. Developed by forest officials, village members and other stakeholders, the plan is aimed at curbing forest offences in the KEPA through joint monitoring, enforcement and protection by the *Dumbara Surakinno* and Forest Department staff. The plan is expected to reduce forest offences in the KEPA, which are already declining as a result of the project's work to mobilise communities and build alternative livelihoods.

National forest governance dialogue Decision making at the national level, where policy for the KEPA and other forest areas is determined, has begun a modest transformation under SVBC's influence.

Space for inputs and participation by other stakeholders has started to open up, largely through the efforts of the project steering committee. Originally envisaged as an advisory body, the steering committee has actually made a more substantive contribution to the project through its live link with the field site.

The steering committee's most recent contribution was its role in organising a national workshop on forest governance in October 2008 at Colombo. Much of the discussion at this workshop concerned the gazette of 2007 mentioned above. Besides introducing a new governance structure for the KEPA, the gazette also gives a much larger role to Sri Lanka's Central Environment Authority in enforcing forest laws in the KEPA. This has created some confusion over the division of authority between the Authority and the Forest Department. Participants at the meeting agreed that a multistakeholder consultative committee should be appointed to review the new provisions and identify any gaps or deficiencies.

and private landowners about the KEPA's extent, management and goals. To tackle this constraint, SVBC proposed the formation of a local multistakeholder forum to discuss and comment on the KEPA management plan. The Forest Department and other stakeholders supported this idea, and the first Knuckles Forum, organised by the Sewa Lanka Foundation, was held in June 2007 (a

second meeting was held in 2008).

The Forum brought together all of the KEPA's major stakeholders, allowing them to air their ideas and concerns. Participants found the forum so useful that they agreed to make it a permanent feature of the institutional landscape. A gazette was issued later in 2007 which, amongst other things, established a new governance structure for the

It is a miracle that SVBC was able to establish the Knuckles Forum and get all top Forest Department officials down to listen to the issues of the ordinary villagers and the private landowners like us. We would not have been able to do this without the project.

—Chular Ratwatte
Private landowner, Knuckles

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 August 2008. These are now being implemented together with continued support for vegetable cultivation and marketing.

A central pillar of SVBC's strategy for ensuring sustainability is to strengthen the *Dumbara Surakinno*. Besides supporting the participation of these groups in the joint forest protection action plan, SVBC recently conducted an assessment of their capacity needs. This will be used to develop an intensive capacity-building programme aimed not just at community members but also at other

private and public stakeholders.

Lastly SVBC will explore ways of building and sustaining the national forest governance dialogue it has started. In view of the success of the project steering committee, SVBC has put forward the idea of transforming it into a national forest governance working group. Much work remains to be done before this idea can become reality, but SVBC has provided ample time and space for Sri Lanka's Forest Department to appreciate the benefits of a national multi-stakeholder process to promote collaborative forest management.

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The inaugural Knuckles Forum, June 2007. Photo © Kelum Prabath



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