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Bellanwila Attidiya Sanctuary Under Threat

By *Nirmala Kannangara*



The Department of Wildlife Conservation (DWC) has come under severe criticism for aiding and abetting encroachers within the Bellanwila-Attidiya sanctuary.

According to environmentalists, attempts to get the illegal land fillings and encroachers removed from the sanctuary have fallen on deaf ears, as politicians have backed these illegal land fillings and encroachments.

Director, Environmental Conservation Trust, Sajeewa Chamikara said that although the environmentalists were able to stop mass scale destruction to the sanctuary earlier by initiating legal action they are yet to remove encroachers and stop illegal fillings that are taking at a snail's pace.

"The best example to this illegal filling is the famous Bellanwila car park and the land beyond it that houses many buildings including a vishramshalawa. This illegal filling is still taking place and the DWC is in deep slumber. Although they claim that they are taking legal action against the encroachers and illegal land fillings, I challenge them to tell us as to whether what action they have taken against the Bellanwila priest," claimed Chamikara.

According to Chamikara, although this sanctuary is a natural water retention area, it has now failed to absorb the excess water and control floods due to the illegal land filling and encroachments.

Bellanwila-Attidiya marshy lands with an extent of 372 hectares was declared as a sanctuary on July 25, 1990 but the DWC's failure to protect it over the years has reduced the number of migrant and endemic birds.

According to Jagath Gunawardena, Attorney-at-Law specializing in environmental law, it was President Ranasinghe Premadasa who declared this Bellanwila-Attidiya marsh as a sanctuary in 1990 under the recommendation of minister Ananda Tissa de Alwis.

“Although there were requests to declare this area as a sanctuary since the mid 1970s, it never happened. It was Renton de Alwis who wanted us – a young group of environmentalists – to make a report on the importance of this area. Hence we formed the Society for the Environmental Education and did a study to find out as to how important this area was. When the report was submitted to Minister Ananda Tissa de Alwis, it was handed over to then Prime Minister R. Premadasa. Once he became the President, he immediately declared this area a sanctuary which was a longstanding requirement,” said Gunawardena.

Speaking further, Gunawardena said that it is shocking that the DWC is not supported by the other agencies to remove the encroachers from the sanctuary.

“Although new encroachments and land fillings are not taking place now the damage has already been done by the encroachers and those who filled the lands. Unless these parties are not removed immediately, it could be a big issue in the days to come as they are now trying to expand into settlements. Even electricity has been provided to them,” added Gunawardena.

Gunawardena further queried as to how the Chief Prelate of the Bellanwila Rajamaha Viharaya carry out illegal fillings to expand the temple lands for free.

“The Buddhist monk is giving a wrong example to his disciples. Knowing that it is illegal, how can a Buddhist monk commit this wrongdoing. Although it is as such, no one is objecting as Ministers and Parliamentarians and backing the monk. The illegal filling is still going on even though this has been highlighted in the media,” said Gunawardena.

Meanwhile, Sajeewa Chamikara said that it was surprising that the DWC allowed extending the land filling at Malini Bulathsinghala Mawatha and the entire wetlands adjoining the Bloods Lake to construct factories and houses.

“These illegal encroachers have even constructed a road network within the sanctuary. Haramanis Mawatha, A. Karunaratna Mawatha and Vikum Pedesa are some of the roads that have been constructed illegally. In addition, around the Weres Ganga too houses have come up speedily,” added Chamikara.

He further said that it is reported that a large numbers of endemic fish and birds and migrant birds that were found in the Bellanwila-Attidiya sanctuary during 1990s have now come down considerably due to the devastation.

“During 1990s there were around 168 varieties of birds including the three varieties of endemic birds – gira maliththa (Lorikeet), Heen Kottoruwa (Small Barbet), Hisa Dumburu Demalichcha (Brown Capped Babbler) that were identified in this sanctuary. As a result of illegal fillings and encroachments, this has now reduced to 88 varieties,” said Chamikara. According to Chamikara, it was during the last UNP regime the illegal land fillings within the sanctuary started.

“It was Samson Silva, that first allowed his supporters to encroach on the sanctuary. All attempts by the Department of Wildlife Conservation during that period and the environmentalists to stop this failed as the then government turned a blind eye to the destruction. He did this to obtain preferential votes for him. It is the same with the Bellanwila temple as well. Little by little, they too filled the sanctuary and by now they have filled more than four acres. The temple car park, flower boutiques and even the vishramshalawa is now housed in this illegally filled marshy land that is part of the sanctuary,” he said.

According to Chamikara, Ministers Dinesh Gunawardena and Patali Champika Ranawaka too are to be blamed for the illegal encroachments as they too have helped to destroy the sanctuary.

“Minister Gunawardena too helped the temple to encroach on the land and make a car park while Minister Patali Champika wanted to clear a part of the sanctuary and give the villagers some lands for paddy cultivation. Although Minister Gunawardena was able to help the temple to encroach the land, we were able to stop Minister Patali Champika from clearing up the sanctuary lands and distributing among his supporters for paddy cultivation,” said Chamikara.

According to Chamikara, the discharge of water contaminated with chemicals and garbage from factories and offices to the Bolgoda Lake too has become a threat to the sanctuary.

“The Central Environment Authority (CEA) and the DWC is to be blamed for turning a blind eye to this mass scale destruction. Although the environmental organizations have made several requests to the DWC and the CEA to take legal action against those who discharge contaminated water and garbage to the river, they are reluctant to take any action against the wrong doers knowing that they have political clout,” added Chamikara.

Meanwhile, he said that the proposed Weres Ganga Development Project would bring severe threats to the marshy lands.

“Once the canals are widened from this project the water levels in the marshy lands would reduce during the dry season. This would directly impact the natural habitat of the several species found within the sanctuary,” said Chamikara. However, an official in Sri Lanka Land Reclamation and Development Corporation on conditions of anonymity said that widening the water ways would not make the marshy lands dry during the dry season but added that it would greatly help the people downstream to avoid floods in future.

“Just because the waterways are going to be widened that does not mean the water levels in the marshy land will go down and will be too go dry during the dry season. This theory is wrong,” said the official.

According to the official, the Defence and the Urban Development Ministry does not want to destroy the environment and would not take any hasty decisions that would harm the natural habitat of the species in the marshy lands.

“We are yet to start the project and surveys are currently underway to ascertain as to how this could be done. We also want to stop illegal fillings. If the environmentalists are claiming that this would hamper the environment and its natural habitat let them come and talk to us. We are ready to listen to them as we do not want to do any development work that would harm the environment,” added the official.

Director General of DWC, H. D. Ratnayake said that strict legal action would be taken against the illegal land fillers and even against the encroachers as this sanctuary has to be preserved especially for the migrant birds and other species that are only found in this area.

“We have already taken some encroachers to courts and are waiting for the ruling. Once we get the ruling we will act on it and remove all encroachers,” said Ratnayake.

When asked as to what action they have taken against the factories that release garbage and water contaminated with chemicals to the waterways, Ratnayake said that he was not aware of it but added he would take stern action against those who contaminate the waterways.

“I will act on this and even the CEA too has a responsibility to look into this. They too have been vested with powers to take action against the law breakers,” added Ratnayake.

All attempts to contact Chairman CEA Wimal Rubasinghe and the Director General for a comment failed, as they were not contactable. The other officials declined to make any comments claiming that they are not supposed to give detail to the media.

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