

Our plight is this. We are found only in Sri Lanka and nowhere else on this planet. This makes us a very unique component of Sri Lanka's fauna. Very few of Sri Lanka's wild animals can claim to be as biologically significant as us. Despite our uniqueness we have been disappearing rapidly from everywhere we live. In fact, our numbers have declined so sharply, that in 2006 the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) listed us as one of the twenty-five most endangered primates in the world. That means that we are in danger of going extinct and disappearing from this earth forever. That is our plight. And Sri Lanka stands to lose a unique and biologically significant national treasure. It is sad that many of you are not even aware of this problem.

Now that you know, the question is do you want us to go extinct? Convinced that the response would be a resounding "No", particularly from those who follow the Buddha's teachings of compassion towards all living things, a group called Friends of Kalu Wandura (or Wanduru-Mithuru) decided to take action. This group travelled through areas that we live, to contact us and to speak with people about our dwindling numbers. It turned out that deforestation was the most serious threat to our survival. This was because we rely almost entirely on trees for food, shelter and all of our other needs. The felling of trees by people to build their homes and commercial areas (urbanization) was robbing us of a place to live and leaves and fruits to eat.

Urbanization also created other problems for our survival. When we were forced to come to the ground to move from one place to another (due to the lack of trees), we were sometimes killed by domestic dogs and speeding vehicles. We were also stoned, chased and occasionally shot at when we entered your home gardens looking for food. Deforestation and urbanization explained why our friends did not find us in large areas of our former range during their survey. This indicated that we were already going extinct in certain areas of our range. If this situation continued it would be a matter of time before we disappeared forever.

Despite the grim news, our friends found that they still had the opportunity to save us from extinction. That opportunity arose when our friends discovered our home—a fairly large forest patch around the Labugama- Kalatuwawa reservoirs, where we could be protected. This forest patch was the catchment area for the water used by millions of people in Colombo. Because of its importance to people our friends felt no one would cut this forest down. Hence it was an ideal site for our long-term survival. So our friends established a field station close to the catchment in early 2009, and launched a project to promote our conservation and survival. The project included scientific research and public education.

Project Objectives and Methods

The primary objective of the project's research is to discover the indigenous trees that we use most often for food and other purposes. With this information our favorite species could be replanted in deforested areas to increase the space we needed to multiply and reverse the trend towards extinction. The main objective of the education programme is to make people

aware of their cultural traditions and other important information, like the reasons for our plight, our unique biological significance, and laws of the country that protect us. Our friends felt that awareness of this information would help promote community support for our long-term survival.

In order to achieve their research and education objectives our friends have been working with some of our groups and people that live around our forest. They have been observing us each month since May 2009 and recording the trees we use for food and other purposes. To achieve the public education objectives our friends have launched several activities designed for people of all ages and all walks of life. They have conducted conservation-oriented lectures to make school children aware of our plight and the importance of our survival. To cater to the interests of older residents, our friends first conducted a survey with the help of community leaders. The survey provided information which was used to develop an education program suitable for adults.

Current Status

Preliminary results of the research programme have provided our friends with some very interesting insights into our lives. For example, the trees that we use often for food and other purposes are different even when we live in territories that are next to each other. In this respect we are no different from human families who have different dietary habits even though they live in homes next to each other! Another interesting feature is that we rarely use the shrub layer and most often spend our time in trees taller than about 25m. This meant that we prefer tall primary forests and are not well adapted to secondary forests or deforested urban areas.

The education programme developed by our friends includes a newsletter, which the survey indicated would be a useful tool to promote conservation awareness among adults. Newsletters are distributed every other month to local residents on topics like conservation, biodiversity, endemism and climate change. Our friends have also visited people's homes for discussions about issues like the apparent conflict between people's cultural traditions for compassion towards living things and modern-day trends of economic development. The schoolchildren's programme has included the presentation of conservation-oriented lectures to several hundred students of primary and secondary schools. These lectures were followed by art, essay, cartoon and poetry competitions supervised by school teachers. The winners of these competitions were awarded prizes during a public exhibition held recently at the Kahahena temple, which is close to the project's field station.

Our friends have made considerable progress in achieving their research and education objectives, but much remains to be done. They have promised to continue their work until they achieve their ultimate goal of ensuring our future survival. Our friends have been supported by several foreign organizations like Conservation International, Mohamed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund, Smithsonian Institution, and Margot Mash Foundation to help promote our future survival. And we ask for your support as well to protect us from disappearing forever. Please help us survive into the future.

By Batahira Kalu Wandura

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