



Bellanwila - Athidiya Marsh Sanctuary

ON HOLD DUE TO EXTERNAL ISSUES beyond our control ...while the marsh is vanishing...

The Sri Lanka Wildlife Conservation Society has been appointed to the Steering Committee, consisting of the Department of Wildlife Conservation and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) to develop a conservation and management program for Sri Lanka's only urban wildlife sanctuary, the Bellanwila-Attidiya wetlands. These marshes are some of the last remnant wetlands that exists in the suburbs of the City of Colombo.

At one time they consisted of a large and expansive network of marshes, with a rich biodiversity. Today the increasing demand for land in the city, and in the suburbs has obliterated almost most of these marshes to scattered pockets that will also eventually go under development. This is one of the major reasons why the Bellanwila-Attidiya marshes should be protected, managed and maintained, since they are some of the last remaining extant expanses of marshes of the tropical monsoon, low country wet zone of Sri Lanka.

Other important factors are:

- a) It is an important stop over for migratory birds due to its situation along their flyway, maintaining the marshes as a pristine habitat is vital to their survival.
- b) It is an important drainage site for flood control.
- c) The close proximity of the marshes to Colombo City, and other highly populated urban and suburban centers makes it an ideal location to promote environmental education and recreational activities for visitors.
- d) There is also an increasing City, urban and suburban human population in Colombo and its vicinities.

Hence it is essential for aesthetic, spiritual, health and recreational reasons, natural areas are designated and managed for the well being of the populace as well as to provide refuge for the displaced local wildlife.

Located in the Southern outskirts of Colombo the marshes are about 372 hectares (approximately about 1,000 acres) in area. The lush and verdant environment of the marshes creates a salubrious habitat for many species of animals.

Ecologically it is one of the last remaining natural habitats for many species of invertebrates and vertebrates displaced by urban and suburban development. It provides valuable resources to migrating birds for them to complete their annual migratory cycle. The marsh supports a wide variety of water birds in small numbers, and is an important roosting site for herons and egrets.

Biodiversity: Over 168 species of birds have been recorded from the marsh. Of the diverse array of invertebrates found in the marsh, 77 species of butterflies and 37 species of dragonflies have been recorded. A thorough study and survey of the invertebrate diversity needs to be initiated. The waters of the marsh is also home to over 44 species of fresh water fish, of which four are endemic to (only found in) Sri Lanka. Nearly 30 species of amphibians (frogs & toads) have been observed in the marsh of which 4 are endemic. There are also

a considerable number of reptiles and mammals in the marsh. Otters, hard shell and soft shell terrapins, many species of snakes and lizards, and even the rare and endemic golden palm civet have been spotted in the marsh.

The Bellanwila-Attidiya marshes for a long time has been an attractive location for naturalists and bird watchers. Even far back as two decades ago it was a venue for the ardent bird watchers to observe some of Sri Lanka's diverse and beautiful bird fauna

Status: Eventually due to the successful lobbying by environmental groups the marsh was declared a Sanctuary in 1990. Most of the marsh is owned by the State and, managed by the Department of Wildlife Conservation (DWLC), yet there is still a considerable portion of it which is owned by private landowners, including the Bellanwila Temple. Though the marsh has been declared a Sanctuary it is still used by people to fish for finfish and shrimps, livestock grazing (domesticated water buffalo, cattle, goats and pigs), cutting of reeds, shrubs and other plants for fuel and for agriculture.

Threats: The most obvious and damaging threat to the marsh is the **continuing dumping of raw garbage** into it. Another serious threat is the effluents and pollutants released from the nearby garment factories into its' waterways. These **factory effluents** discharged to the local drains flow into the Bolgoda canal, and have resulted in major fish kills. These fish kills have decimated the local populations of several species of fish, including two species endemic to Sri Lanka, *Aplochelus dayi* and *Ehirawa fluvtilis*. The economically important freshwater shrimp *Macrobrachium rosenbergii*, have almost been exterminated in the marsh. The dumping of domestic waste along the adjacent roads has also caused serious pollution problems. Most of the larger trees have been cut down for firewood resulting in reduced nesting places for the birds and other animals. There is also a considerable amount of **hunting** of large water birds going on, particularly with snares, nets and catapults. **Egg-collecting** is also a threat to the bird populations in the marsh. Some of the development projects in surrounding areas also illegally encroach into the marsh from its periphery. If the Bellanwila-Attidiya marshes are to survive to the new millennium, the garbage problem needs to be resolved immediately. Otherwise the long term repercussions to the ecology of the marsh will be most severe.

Concurrently a major effort must be made to promote the sanctuary as a place for public recreation and education.

FUTURE: A conservation and management plan integrating the communities in the vicinity of the marsh will be developed for its long term survival. A Nature Center to further public awareness and education will also be established. With such an integrated approach it is hoped to make the Bellanwila-Attidiya marshes one of the most visited sanctuaries in Sri Lanka.

This will ensure that the marsh will continue to be a vital and dynamic component of the life support systems of the Greater Colombo area.

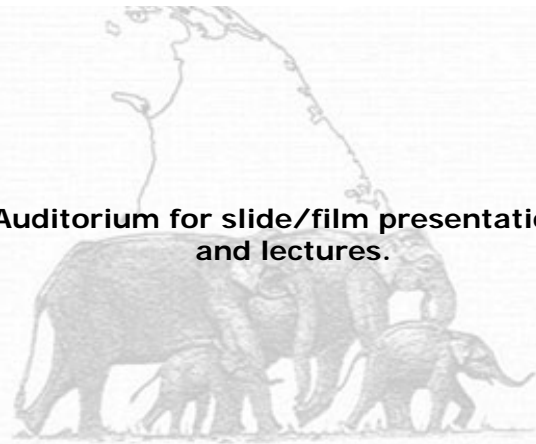
The Sri Lanka Wildlife Conservation Society along with the other two members of the Steering Committee are totally committed to attaining this goal to protect the Bellanwila-Attidiya Sanctuary for posterity

Once established, the Nature Center will have the following facilities to conduct a variety of educational and recreational programs (bird watching, etc.) geared to the needs of various public, social and academic groups (the photographs are examples of what some of these facilities might look like). Facilities:

- An auditorium to present films/slide shows and lectures



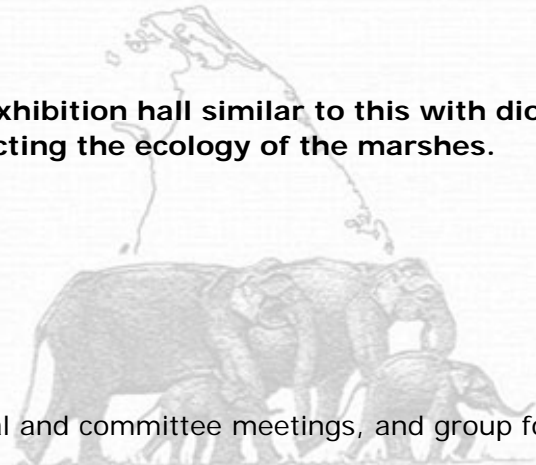
Auditorium for slide/film presentations and lectures.



- Trained staff to conduct interactive environmental education & recreational programs.
- An exhibition hall depicting a continuous diorama of the marsh ecosystem on the walls, and several live and preserved exhibits of the fauna & flora of the marshes for closer inspection and one-on-one learning of its biodiversity.



An exhibition hall similar to this with diorama depicting the ecology of the marshes.



A conference room for discussion groups, organizational and committee meetings, and group forums.



Conference room for meetings, discussions and workshops.



- An Indoor lounge with a scenic window through which several closely situated bird feeders can be observed for scientific observations and leisure purposes.
- A gift shop. Arts & crafts from the local people as well as books, magazines, posters and other publications and items pertaining to nature will be on sale at the shop.
- Toilet facilities for men and women.
- Conveniently located in the premises, outdoor and indoor picnic facilities.
- Parking facilities.
- A network of elevated boardwalks leading into the marshes from the Nature Center for non- invasive observation of the marsh ecosystem and its wildlife.
- Hides, bird blinds and towers at several key points for non-obtrusive observation of wildlife. Canoe rentals - local dugout canoe rides in the marsh canals for closer experience of the dynamics of the marsh ecosystem.



Watch towers for non-invasive observation of nature.



Elevated boardwalks for non-invasive observation of wildlife.

- An overnight camping site with facilities for the intrepid naturalist who wants to observe the nocturnal wildlife of the marsh. Laboratory facilities for research projects such as bird banding, bird census, behavioral studies, and biodiversity surveys.
- The Nature Center will be a place where people could come to learn about environmental concerns and how to ameliorate such negative effects by good environmental stewardship, and just for relaxation.

Target Groups:

- School groups (all academic levels: kindergarten to university)
- Pre-school children
- General public
- Academics/Professionals Bird watchers

- Recreationists Tourists

The benefits of establishing a Nature Center are:

1. It will stop the illegal encroachment, misuse, and polluting of the sanctuary.
2. Involve the local people by providing the following economic incentives: Food & beverage services Guides Security Dugout canoe rentals Direct employment at the Nature Center Arts & crafts Suppliers
3. Help develop environmental awareness.
4. Promote public participation in conservation issues.
5. Provide facilities for scientist to conduct research programs
6. Be a model for other Nature Centers to be built in other sanctuaries
7. Promote ecotourism. The Nature Center and the Sanctuary would be an interesting and educational place to go on a one day outing for people, especially for school children in the city and suburban areas considering its close location to Colombo. One of the primary goals of the Nature Center is to help develop the next and future generations of environmental conscious citizens of Sri Lanka.

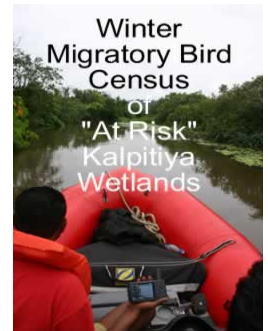
Updates to SLWCS website

[Video and Image Banks](#)

- [Video and Image Banks](#)

- VOLUNTEERS NEEDED -[Winter Migratory Bird Census](#), [Elephant and Leopard Research and Teaching English](#)

- [Travel and Support Conservation](#)



VISION: To help protect and conserve the diminishing biodiversity of Sri Lanka and to make the local and international community aware of its endangered status.

MISSION: To enable communities to balance ecosystem protection and economic development by pioneering a model for sustainable conservation.

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