

FORTNIGHTLY NEWSLETTER

A Savana Forest into a Rubber plantation Story of Land Grabbing in We-Eliya

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nce it was a Savana Forest. It gave new grass due to the forest fires time to time, providing ideal habitat for the elephant population. Those who serve "Kuda Kataragama Shrine" in Soragune, cultivated some lands for their living. They had no conflicts with the elephants.

Today it is denuded and become a Rubber plantation owned by few elites, politicians and companies. Electric fences are being erected putting people and elephants in one side and saving the Rubber plantations.

Soragune Shrine has sold the lands to few companies. Over 1000 hectares has been cleared in less than 2 weeks without following any regulations.

Regulations required to do an EIA for clearing of more than one hectare of forest and converting them to other uses. But, no EIA has been conducted. Central Environmental Authority was silent on the destruction. Commissioner of Buddhist Affairs was also silent.

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We- Eliya Forest in Haldummulla area is the catchment for Weli Oya which provides irrigation water for more than 7000 families downstream. Proposed Bohagapattiya Sanctuary is located next to the this forest.

Mr. Laksman, a chena cultivator said that elephants use to come to the village only during the dry months before. But now elephants come to village every evening around 5 pm. The tusker has no shade to hide and his land has become the only hiding place.

Weli Oya river brings top soil eroded from the mountain slopes cleared by the Rubber cultivators and filling the Weli Oya water diversion reservoir.

Soragune Forest which has been sold to Alpha and Omega company for building a Golf Course and a hotel project is already marking boundary with concrete posts around 682 acres of the remaining forest patch in the area adjacent to the We- Eliya.

A watcher who is among 6 others guarding the land said "We are living in the huts made on roof tops. More than 40 elephants live in the Soragune forest pass us every day. If the Soragune Forest is destroyed, elephants will come to our villages i.e Dadayampola, Ranwanguhawa, We Eliya etc.

According to the people it is the head of the Shrine who has sold this land to outsiders together with the "Rajakariya" for the Shrine. Some local politicians in the Haputale area are behind the scene.

According to the National Building Research Organisation, Haldumulla is a earth slide prone area. However District Coordination Committee has not taken action to stop the clearing of We- Eliya forest.

Massive land grabbing has become a common problem in Sri Lanka under the current development paradigm. They do not respect to the laws and regulations as they have the backing from the political authorities. These land grabbing put the poor communities more vulnerable and become a threat to the local livelihood, local economies, social structure, culture & beliefs, the natural resources and the environment.

Silence of the respective authorities make people unhappy, yet helpless. However, nature will not tolerate such destruction. It will aggravate the natural disasters, human elephant conflict and upset the lives of the human being.

It is time for the authorities to break the silence before the land grabbers destroy the natural stability of the country.





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