
[Sri Lanka: Organic tea endangers Sinharaja virgin forests](#)

The greenery, wet soil and pure water springs brings you the impression of virginity. Darkness in the forest and sounds of birds and insects create a different world. You can experience this in Sinharaja, which is the most famous virgin forest in Sri Lanka. It houses the highest number of species and the highest endemism rates in Sri Lanka. The National Conservation Review of the country's natural forest carried out from 1991 to 1996 recorded 337 species of woody plants in the sample plots that were inventoried. Of these species, 192 (57%) are endemic and 116 (34%) globally threatened. Because of its importance, Sinharaja Man and Biosphere site was declared a World Heritage site by the UNESCO in 1989.

The forest spreads in a total area of about 72,000 acres through Western, Sabaragamuwa and Southern provinces, from which 22,000 acres constitute the core area. Until 1972 the forests' total area reached over 120,000 acres, but unfortunately it was reduced by logging activities between 1972 and 1977. Then the activity was stopped thanks to the work of the Wildlife and Nature Protection Society-Sri Lanka and some concerned individuals. Since then, the logged areas have regenerated with giant trees and the secondary forest is luxurious.

As many other forests in the country, Sinharaja Forest has also been subject to heavy encroachment. Thousands of acres have been cleared for tea cultivation since British Colonisation times. After independence, a policy of nationalizations was applied and these lands were taken by the Land Reform Commission in 1974. Tea cultivation was stopped but in 1999 problems started again due to the release -for organic tea cultivation- of 62 hectares of dense forest adjoining Sinharaja.

Natural organically grown products are not new to Sri Lankans, nor to the people in many other tropical countries. They are available in the forests and even in home gardens. These kinds of products have a great demand in the North and tea is one of them. Foreign demand for organic products can have negative environmental effects on untouched lands in Southern countries. The threat to Sinharaja is another event under this series.

Sinharaja Plantations Organic (PVT) Ltd., is set to clear 62 hectares of lands in Sooriyakanda village in the Rathnapura district, close to Sinharaja, to grow organic tea, flowers and vegetables for the international market. This area holds virgin forest, secondary forests and cardamom and tea bushes as undergrowth. Cardamom is a valuable spice and a natural organic product, which generates incomes for 50 families of the Ilumbakanda village, located near the site. Additionally, these forests offer the environmental service of generating water for the Delgoda Ganga River, which is used by the population of the Ilumbakanda village and other down stream villages.

Nevertheless, the Board of Investment -a government body- has already approved this project, in absence of any Environmental Impact Assessment. Since this forest has been playing a major positive role for the Sinharaja unique ecosystem, its clearing would provoke a severe impact to the Sinharaja World Heritage site, and would mean the loss of the cardamom gatherers' livelihood.

Villagers' organizations, together with environmental groups, are vehemently opposing this project. It

has also been denounced that a very powerful Cabinet Minister is supporting it due to his relationship with the project proponent. Defenders of the forest hope that the Chief Minister of the Sabaragamuwa provincial council denies the permission for the project. At the same time, they are urging UNESCO and other concerned people to take actions to protect this unique habitat.

By: Hemantha Withanage, Environmental Foundation, 22/2/2000