

Magazine

SINHARAJA THE SPRING OF LIFE



Varying beauty

Ruwini Jayawardana

Running along an extent of 11,187 hectares from East to West, with a length of 21 km and a width of 3.7 km from North to South, Sinharaja is dubbed the biologically unique lowland rain forest in the country. This beautiful stretch of continuous greenery is home to a large number of rare and endemic flora and fauna as well as breathtakingly beautiful natural streams, springs, rivers and waterfalls. A large variety of trees, shrubs and medicinal plants (around 60 percent endemic) grows amidst the forest's range while inhabitants like leopards, giant squirrels, purple-faced leaf monkeys, leeches, reptiles, insects, water monitors, butterflies and other rare species (around 50 percent endemic) had chosen the green pastures as their dwelling.

Topographically the rain forest is situated in the middle range uplands, ranging from 270 to 1,060 meters in height. The forest looms from the Ratnapura, Galle and Matara districts in the interior wet zone of the south west of the island. Nestling on the Rakwana mountain range, this tropical rain forest had been noted and declared a National Heritage Wilderness Area, the only natural world heritage site recognized by UNESCO in Sri Lanka in 1989. It was also deemed an International Man and Biosphere Reserve (MAB) in 1978.

There are four main routes of access to Sinharaja: the Rakwana-Morning side estate road from the northeast, the Hindimma-Neluwa road from the southwest, the Deniyaya-Pallegama road from the southwest and the Kalawana - Weddagala road from the northwest - the most convenient for visitors from the city. Swarming with life and natural beauty, this evergreen sanctuary is rooted in legend and mystery.

Ancient epics relate that the name derived from the descents of the union between the lion king and a princess who lived in the depths of the forest. Thus Sinharaja was formed out of the Sinhala terms, lion (sinha) and king (raja). The forest is filled with an abundance of sights, sounds and activity. It provides an explicit experience not only for nature enthusiasts but is the perfect canvas for painters, the ideal laboratory for scientists and classic area for photographers to lark

around waiting to capture a shot at a novel angle.

Visitors will not find the journey arduous as tall trees hovering within close range make way for twisted pathways which are easy to follow on foot.

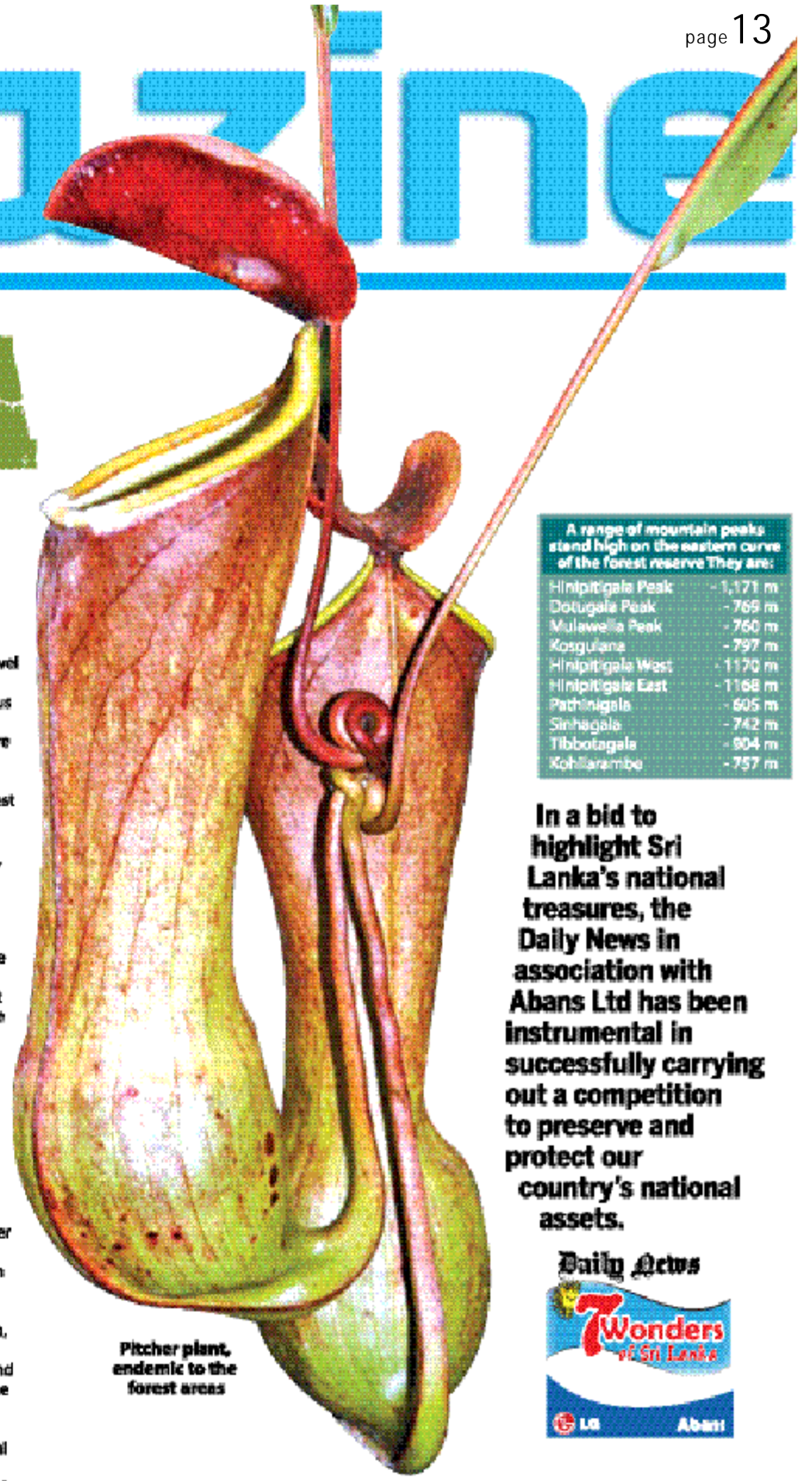
Below the canopy of the thickly curtained tree tops, the inside of the forest lurks in gloom and sets stage for adventure.

Though 22 villages surround the forest, only two: Wanukandeniya and Kolonthotuwa, are located within the reserve. For countless centuries the locals of the area have been living off the forest resources. Jaggery, a sugar product made out of the Kibul Palm a.k.a. *Caryota urens* is a traditional ingredient which is a popular source of income. In addition rattan and bamboo are also used in weaving baskets, mats, bags, boxes and many other handmade products.

The annual temperature reaches 23.6 C while the rainfall range is of 3,000 to 6,000 millimeters. Another feature is the forest's tropical monsoons which bring in the rain from May to July and October to December. The rivers Koskulana Ganga, Maha Ganga, Kudawa Ganga, Maha Dola, Pitakela Ganga, Gin Ganga, Kalukandawa, Gin Ganga, Napala Dola and Aranawa Dola, flow in branches along the forest floor.

A permit from the Wildlife department along with one of their guides is essential for to embark on a journey amidst the tranquil atmosphere of the forest. Join this expedition with plenty of time at hand to roam and experience the majesty of one of nature's most glorious creations.

Pictures by Tilak Perera



Pitcher plant, endemic to the forest areas

A range of mountain peaks stand high on the eastern curve of the forest reserve. They are:

Hinipitigala Peak	- 1,171 m
Dotugala Peak	- 769 m
Mulawella Peak	- 760 m
Kosgulana	- 797 m
Hinipitigala West	- 1170 m
Hinipitigala East	- 1168 m
Pathingala	- 605 m
Sinhagala	- 742 m
Tibbotagala	- 804 m
Kohliaramba	- 757 m

In a bid to highlight Sri Lanka's national treasures, the Daily News in association with Abans Ltd has been instrumental in successfully carrying out a competition to preserve and protect our country's national assets.



A Plea for Preservation

The Sinharaja Forest Reserve which had gained recognition as one of the most important natural habitats in the island and a major eco tourism destination in the island is administered by the Forest Department under the Ministry of Lands and Land Development. Some years back this area of fine greenery and natural habitat was in the brink of destruction under

the weight of illegal logging, gem mining and boundary changes. Privately owned land near the rain forest reserve had been cleared to make way for tea estates and oil palm plantations. Many of the endemic and rare species of flora and fauna were in danger of becoming extinct due to man's advances. Awareness campaigns and projects to conserve the world heritage site are

underway to protect and preserve the island's largest existing rainforest. Visitors are advised to refrain from bringing polythene, breaking off branches, carving their names on the bark of trees and making loud noises during their tours. These rules effectively carried out reflect the present situation of the forest. Let us hope that many more generations will be able to enjoy the allure hidden within the forest sanctuary.

- Nilma

Scientifically significant

We prepared an action plan on how to make people aware. Seminars work out a very little. People mug up what lecturers say, leave, and nothing happens afterwards. So we thought about giving them hands on experience. We thought it's practical to start with school-goers."

Sarath Kotagama, first professor of ornithology in Sri Lanka, is one living witness behind the Sinharaja as a World Heritage Site. He recalled his experiences as far back as 1970s.

"The Government appointed a committee to probe whether this rainforest was appropriate to be designated conservation. The committee concluded that the scientific evidence is inadequate to make Sinharaja conservation. We had to prove Sinharaja's value scientifically. It was the starting point of many challenges ahead."

The Government was willing to provide all the facilities but Sinharaja turned out versatile for scientists of many disciplines. The research was on the top gear and scientists stumbled upon many a rare feature in Sinharaja. Issue

"One such discovery is magnet diversity. It was in fact news to the world. Your compass does not show directions properly because of the magnet diversity. And we further discovered that the forest is the habitat for many endemic flora and fauna. Finally we ended up with more than enough evidence to influence the Government to go ahead."

The team worked day and night for months. Many university students were on the job. In the end it did not become just another conservation site; 1978 saw it being designated as International Man and Bio-Sphere Reserve, and Sinharaja reached its pinnacle when it was declared as UNESCO World Heritage site in 1989. Sinharaja is surrounded by 22 villages, and the residents used to take whatever they want from the forest.

With World Heritage site declaration, their opportunity became illegal. A World Heritage site might go unattended, and sometimes gets damaged by the natural force - man. Villagers alone can harm the forest. Professor Kotagama and his team had to take up this challenge too.

"We employed many youngsters from the village for many conservation tasks. We made them feel the priceless value of this asset."

Shortcomings, however, were incessant. The World Heritage Site became more of a picnic for the average tourist than something to be preserved. They didn't know - or may be didn't care - the damage they do to the nature by littering. Not only the villagers, then, the whole mass had to be made aware of the value of this asset; something you can't achieve overnight.

"We prepared an action plan on how to make people aware. Seminars work out a very little. People mug up what lecturers say, leave, and nothing happens afterwards. So we thought about giving them hands on experience. We thought it's practical to start with school-goers."

A team of scientists pulled out all the stops - once and for all - for a period when Bull dozer and Timber Jack were a common sight to the villagers - because Sinharaja was just another plot of land for commercial logging back then.

- Sachitra

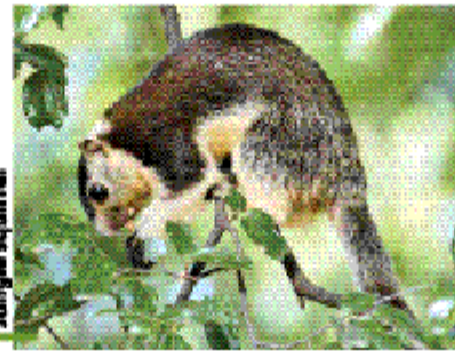


Prof. Sarath Kotagama

Sinharaja's rich biodiversity



Blue Mormon



Jungle Squirrel



Blue Mormon



Orchid

Triping to the rainforest that is still clinging onto its title of the first and the only UNESCO world heritage site for a natural wonder, the Sinharaja Rainforest in Sri Lanka is definitely our pride and joy. One of the last remaining forest reserves in the island, about 830 species of endangered and endemic flora and fauna species call it their home.

Visitors to the reserve are often greeted by the endemic purple-leaf faced monkey, the reserve's most common mammal, endemic mongoose species and three species of squirrel encompassing the dusky-striped jungle squirrel, the flame-striped jungle squirrel and the western giant squirrel. However, the threatened species of mammals are the leopard *Panthera pardus* and Indian elephant *Elephas maximus*.

About 21 of Sri Lanka's 45 endemic amphibians or reptile population make Sinharaja forest their home and interesting varieties of insects that are pending classification also make their home here. The Sinharaja Bird Wave also offers exciting bird sightings where 21 of Sri Lanka's 26 endemic species have been recorded here. However, some can only be seen on the reserve's difficult-to-access eastern fringes. The endemic birds include the Ceylon Spurfowl, Ceylon Junglefowl, Ceylon Wood Pigeon, Ceylon Hanging Parrot, Layard's Parakeet, Red-faced Malakoa, Green-billed Coucal, Serendib Scops Owl, Chestnut-backed Owllet,

Ceylon Grey Hornbill, Yellow-fronted Barbet, Ceylon Small Barbet, Crimson-backed Flameback, Black-capped Bulbul, Spot-winged Thrush, Ceylon Rufous and Brown-capped Babbler, Ashy-headed Laughingthrush, Ceylon Blue Magpie, White-faced Starling, Ceylon Hill-Myra, Ceylon Scaly Thrush, Ceylon Scimitar Babbler and Ceylon Crested Drongo. Indian sub-continental endemics include Malabar Trogon and Ceylon Frogmouth. Naturalist Gehan de Silva Wijeyeratne and renowned ornithologist Prof. Sarath Kotagama also profess to document the bird wave and find Sinharaja the best reserve for bird watching.

According to the IUCN, Sinharaja has two types of vegetation including 'dipterocarpaceus' in the valleys and lower slopes and secondary forest with shrub and grasslands as a result of agriculture. Unfortunately, as the population of the 20 villages that are dependent on Sinharaja for the livelihood increases, there is an alarming threat of encroachment despite numerous UNESCO protection laws. Out of Sri Lanka's 830 endemic species, 217 trees and woody climbers are found in the lowland wet zone and out of the 139 that have been recorded, 16 are rare like the palm *Loxosoccus Rupicola* and *Atalantia rotundifolia*. The villages depend on the beneficial plants and trees like the 'kithul' palm for jaggery manufacturing, cardamom for spice, 'wewal' for cane, 'dun' for vanilla and incense and 'wenwal' for medicine.

As a forest friend, it is vital that we preserve and protect Sinharaja for the future generations as many of Mother Earth's creatures live in this forest. Here are some simple steps you can do when visiting it:

- ✓ Do not venture too close to the animals and don't disturb them or make a noise that would scare them
- ✓ Going with a guide is better as you will get good trekking advice
- ✓ Take your litter with you and dispose in an environmentally friendly manner
- ✓ Make sure you don't take anything from the forest except photographs and the wonderful memories of Sinharaja.

