

The Ecoagriculture Snapshots series highlights the work of different organizations around the world to implement ecoagriculture landscape management approaches.

Agroforestry in the Buffer Zone of Sinharaja Forest, Sri Lanka



The Sinharaja World Heritage Site is Sri Lanka's last remnant of virgin tropical rainforest. The districts bordering the Sinharaja forest are among the most densely populated in the country, but until recently very few families lived in the Sinharaja "buffer zone" directly bordering the forest reserve. There were no roads into the area, and the few established villages could only be reached after many hours of walking on forest paths. With little access to government services or external markets, these isolated communities depended on shifting cultivation, home gardens, and forest products for their subsistence.

But over the past 15 years, the promotion of low-country tea cultivation and the opening of new roads have set in motion dramatic changes in the Sinharaja buffer zone. Settlers have flooded into the area, attracted by the high profits offered by tea cultivation. Increased incomes have improved living standards, but have also provided tremendous incentive for the clearing of natural rainforest and even home gardens. The clearing of steep and fragile slopes has led to topsoil exposure, heavy erosion, and a loss of soil fertility. Erosion on lower slopes destabilizes the soil in upper regions and prevents the regeneration of forest cover, and there are already signs that the change in vegetation is affecting water flow.

Recognizing the seriousness of this problem, in January 2003 the Sewalanka Foundation, a Sri Lankan rural development NGO, started an agroforestry project for tea small holders near the Sinharaja forest. The project aimed to reintroduce a new buffer zone



Tea plantation bordering Sinharaja Forest. Source: Ajith Tennekoon

for the reserve by reducing the use of agrochemicals, introducing soil conservation measures, and increasing the diversity of the tea fields through intercropping. The program works in 22 villages north and south of the forest, and more than 500 farmers have so far taken part in the training courses offered.

Training courses for farmers focused on practices used in other parts of Sri Lanka but unfamiliar in this region. These include soil conservation measures like lock-and-spill contour drains, lead drains, bunds, green manures, mulching, shade trees, and hedgerows. The program promoted intercropping with the South Asian native tree *Gliricidia sepium*, which has multiple uses, including as green manure, shade, and fuel wood, and the shade-tolerant *Savandara* and *Arachis pintoi* to prevent soil erosion.



A training course for farmers in progress. Source: Ajith Tennekoon

The project also trains farmers in small business development, particularly in environmentally sound alternatives to tea, such as the collection, processing, and bottling of Sinharaja kithul (*Caryota urens*) treacle by community members, which is marketed as a Sinharaja Conservation Product through the Sewalanka Foundation.

These sustainable agricultural practices have slowly helped reduce the siltation of the Sinharaja watershed. More importantly, they have also increased

sustainability and productivity of tea production on already cultivated lands. These efforts have both helped reduce the need for expansion and further encroachment into the forest, and contributed to the ecologically sound economic development of this World Heritage Forest buffer zone.

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