

# Devastation of Archaeological Resources due to Deforestation at Wilpattu National Park

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## Introduction

The Wilpattu National Park (WNP) is the oldest and largest National Park of the country, Sri Lanka. It has 60 lakes and tanks spread across 131, 693.7 hectares in the Northwest coast lowland dry zone in Sri Lanka (Jayawardana, 2015). In 1905 the area was designated a sanctuary and in 1938 it was upgraded to the National Park status (Hettiarachchi, 2010). The WNP spans across the North-western and North-central provinces in Sri Lanka, 30km West of the city of Anuradhapura and 183km North of Colombo (Chamila Weerathunghe, 2017). WNP is not only significant from an ecological standpoint but is also extremely rich in archaeological terms housing a number of ruins and artifacts dating back to various periods of history. The proximity to the ancient city of Anuradhapura has also been a factor contributing to the rich archaeological heritage of the area. Archaeologically important sites at WNP can be divided into five major categories based on the

artifacts, which were found; fossil sites, prehistoric sites, proto-historic sites, historic monastery sites and irrigation or agricultural sites (IUCN, 2006). In recent years devastation of archaeological resources has entered an especially dangerous, sensitive and complicated phase, as a large number of structures have been built on archaeological sites using heavy equipment that remove all cultural deposits down to bedrock, without any kind of archaeological documentations or supervision from institutions overseeing cultural heritage or urban-development planning. According to environmentalist, at present around 2500 hectares of this massive National Park has been destroyed (Wickramasinghe, 2018).

## Objectives

The overall aim of this study was to identify the devastation of archaeological resources due to the deforestation at WNP. Specific objectives were to find out the present situation at WNP, identify the

resettlements and new constructions, which conducted at WNP and to identify the existing management system.

### **Methodology**

In order to achieve the objectives of this study, the required data were collected both from primary and secondary sources. Primary data were collected by field observations and key persons interviews (Formal discussions were conducted with key persons who were in WNP). The other required secondary data collected using previous studies, related books, Internet, magazines and newspaper articles. One-inch maps (1:63000) published by the Survey General's Department were used to locate the studied sites. Qualitative methods were used for data analysis and mainly descriptive analysis was used for that. The surface recognition study was carried out to record the archaeological sites and their present status.

### **Results and Discussions**

The reality is shocking, giving a close-up view of the devastation and destruction of the oldest and largest National Park in Sri Lanka called Wilpattu. The devastation, tragically and unfortunately, has not been wrought by nature but by humans themselves, with callous disregard for the immense repercussions. According to the researcher's estimations and secondary data 2500 hectares of

forestlands in total have already been cleared away illegally up to now and currently, 650 acres of land have been cleared to resettle people and it has been found that 706 plots have been cleared while 131 houses are partly being constructed (Wickramasinghe, 2018). This is in direct violation of the National Environment Act.

The study found that the threat of WNP and the surrounding region mostly for archaeological resources first arose in 2009. This was due to the construction of two illegal roads. First road was built connecting Eluwankulama to Mollikulama, near the coastline that Prince Wijaya and his entourage is said to have landed. This coastal road is also about 130 feet wide and has gone through archaeological sites such as Pomparippu. The second road runs through the forest, cutting it in two and build that hugging the coastline, bulldozers have destroyed sand dunes and coastal vegetation causing massive soil erosion. The construction of roads destroyed some 300 acres of forestlands belonging to WNP. Some politicians and officials who, claims were behind this illegal settlement process have reasoned that the settlements are not being built on lands belonging to the Department of Wildlife Conservation (DWC) or Department of Forest Conservation (DFC). However, based on the field visits and subsequent analysis of maps by the researcher have clearly revealed

that illegal settlements have been built on a small section of forest land belonging to the DWC and on a much larger section belonging to the DFC. A 50-acre section of forestland that had been destroyed come under the Wilpattu North Sanctuary (WNS). Moreover, there is an important archaeological site at WNS, with artifacts dating back to the time of the Mohenjo-daro civilization. A total of 1,563 acres was entrusted to this sanctuary by Extraordinary Gazette Notification No. 8356. According to the Forest Conservation Ordinance, it is illegal to construct permanent or temporary settlements, roads, and farmlands in such a forest area. Human settlement of the WNP poses a direct threat to the conservation of all these vital archaeological resources.

There are total of 68 archaeologically important sites, four of which were Miocene fossil sites. Twelve sites belonging to the prehistoric periods (Paleolithic and Mesolithic) were also surveyed. Several sites represent evidence of both prehistoric and historic periods. Forty-two were identified as a combination of proto-historic and historical sites. A major finding was the Weeransole ruins (IUCN, 2006). This site, located near the Palu-vilandawa tank and this consists of three destroyed image houses and Buddha statues including two seated (Samadhi) and one standing statue. One of the destroyed Samadhi Buddha statues seated under the hood

of a Cobra, is of a rare type. This is the fourth known Buddha statue belonging to this posture found in Sri Lanka. It has also come to light that the settlement process may be in violation of the Antiquities Ordinance as according to Extraordinary Gazette notification No. 1152/14 of October 4, 2000, written permission has to be obtained after conducting an Archaeological Impact Assessment (AIA) prior to grind ahead with a settlement project. However, no such AIA has been obtained prior to building settlements after clearing forestland. Latest land violation was that 35 acres from Tabbowa sanctuary, Weerakkodicholai forest reserve and from Raalmaduwa to Achchimale archaeological reserve to carry out a pilot project for fruit cultivation.

The Pallekandal shrine itself predates the declaration of Wilpattu as a National Park in 1938. Today the vicinity of the church, which was surrounded by plants, and trees of the wilpattu was now full of rubbish. Because of the feast was at church in 2016, more than 30,000 people attended and more space for the people to set up tents was given by cutting trees (Fonseka, 2017). This is in direct violation of the Fauna and Flora Protection Ordinance.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

From the results of this study, the researcher realized that without taking

any legal actions the destruction of archaeological resources at WNP would be a massive problem for both Sri Lankan forest reserves and archaeological resources. Although the units remain empty at present, this housing project will result in an increase in the human population, which would in turn increase the stress to the surrounding resources. Clearing of the forest continues unabated with materials being brought in for the continuation of construction work and those damage the archaeological resources indirectly.

It is important to study the true extent of the impact to the archaeological resources using available maps from the Survey Department as well as conducting an analysis of the Gazette notification, which identify the exact environment boundaries and demarcations. Consulting Environmental Organizations, Civil Society Organizations, Archaeological departments and coordinating a joint effort to mitigate the damage is a must. Archaeological Impact Assessment (AIA) procedures should compulsory for any settlements, which, are conducted at archaeologically important places.

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