

B u i l d i n g w i t h t h e E n v i r o n m e n t

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Architecture has nothing to do with buildings, but more so with man and man's reaction to or respect for the elements, the climate etc.

In Asia, the cradle of most great civilizations and philosophies men respected nature. The Architecture of Sri Lanka as argued by me in a paper published in 1982 "is not Architecture of buildings, but that of levels and terraces, each affording a different experience". The monuments of the past are replete with brilliant examples of a sensitive man adapting his physical statement to blend with nature. This we do not need to explain in detail, but any individual visiting the sites would observe the meditative quality of this respect.

The need to respect nature was taken further in the declaration of large land areas for use as parks, for the Sanga, and to locate Forest Monasteries The first comprehensive environmental statement made anywhere in the world was by Arhat Mahinda to King Devanampiyatissa in 250 BC, when he stated that the environment belonged to all living beings not only to man. The Asian attitude towards living in harmony with the environment is totally different to the western concept of man always wanting to exploit nature for the primary benefit of man. This concept of greed and a need to exploit it all in the short term totally disregarding

environmental degradation, will eventually affect and be detrimental to all mankind.

Sri Lanka has excellent laws that protect the environment but they are presently being amended and changed to allow for the exploitation of the precious resources, many of which are non-renewable. The document titled 'Regaining Sri Lanka ' prepared by the Government of Sri Lanka is a short term methodology for the total exploitation of the fragile resources of this country which will spell long term environmental degradation of a scale we have not seen in the past. But then who cares as long as someone gets rich in the process. Much is talked about sustainable development but how sustainable is sustainable development when the engine that drives it is based on profit. This aspect of environmental degradation in Sri Lanka was highlighted in by this author in a paper to the first annual sessions of the OPA in 1988.

Eco-tourism, a new buzz word being thrown around has no meaning other than being a word in fashion. It is according to some the latest methodology for survival, for sustainable tourism. This argument presupposes that for sometime at least tourism was unsustainable. Tourism as a force with no limit on carrying capacity, is unsustainable and let us not for a moment run away



with a different view. Tourism intrudes, it penetrates and also corrupts and changes the social fabric of a people it is exposed to, especially if there is a cultural difference. The negative aspect on the social fabric of a people is never measured in economic terms. It is the potential lack of respect that needs careful study and the monitoring if it is to be successful at least in the short term.

Today adventure tourism, nature tourism, etc is being lumped in the same basket. We are also told that eco tourism will address the poverty issues in the buffer communities (many of whom have been planted by some political colour) in the vicinity of the protected areas. It is obviously a desperate bid by aid agencies bankrupt for ideas fishing in the mud. Most studies prove that no project supported by aid agencies has alleviated poverty, a statement confirmed today by ILO in its report for 2003. Poverty on the other hand has increased, as money is pumped in during the short duration of a project and the tap is closed immediately after. The foreign consultants, the local consultants and advisors get rich, while the people disorientated and weaned away from their traditional vocations to do menial jobs related to the project, get poorer and are far worse off than they were before.

If eco-tourism is meant to be environmentally friendly tourism, why do we in the name of this tourism invade the National Parks, the National Parks that were set up to function as refuges for animals, the only habitat they have and will have in the future. How can jet skiing in the Dambulu Oya be environmentally friendly, when it pollutes the water, disturbs the peace and quiet of the country side and disorientates the fauna in the vicinity? How environmentally friendly is the conversion of a temple built for worship into an art gallery?

In fact, I visited Dambulla many years ago as a child. It was time when there were no electric lights. The interior was dark and dimly lit, but a continuous cool draft, kept your body temperature low. It smelled of rancid oil, and the boundaries or the edges of the caves were not visible. It was this concept of limitlessness that impressed me most. As ones eyes got accustomed to the dim light of the oil lamp, more shapes began to emerge and strewn across the floor of the cave, were a number of devotees in meditation and prayer. Little lamps flickered here and there giving the impression of fireflies in a stationary dance. The atmosphere was electric and moving. I still see it as though it happened yesterday. The impression is engraved deep inside me.

Today, in a magnanimous gesture, we have decided to present the paintings to the world, the Dambulla cave temples are lighted up with electric lamps. It is no more a place of devotion, as it has been converted into an art gallery and museum. A space devoid of feeling, a place that reveals all its boundaries and edges at first glance, it does not project its mysterious qualities anymore. The space has been given over to the insensitive visitor at the expense of the owners of the tradition, the devotees, the real heirs to the great Buddhist tradition. What happens at the Dalada Maligawa in Kandy is even more disgusting. Here foreigners are herded into the inner sanctum "Just to see", while the innocent devotees who have traveled many miles often on foot to worship at the shrine are kept at arm's length. Unfortunately this totally disgraceful spectacle can be witnessed only in Sri Lanka. Is this eco tourism?

In fact, Sri Lanka had an eco tourist platform prior to the boom of the late 1970's and early 1980's. Hotels were small. They reflected the culture of Sri Lanka both in material and form. But all this changed when Sri Lanka ventured into the mass tourism market. Eco tourism has no place in the mass market. The Second Tourism Master Plan (this author was one of the consultants) deduced that the carrying capacity of Sri Lanka was 650,000 tourists above which the every day lives of the average Sri Lankan would be affected. With much persuasion and amid protests from the Ministry, this figure was raised to 750,000, a figure, which is above the carrying capacity of the island. Singapore with its 5 million visitors was cited as an example. But Singapore is only a city, a big supermarket, an efficient and artificial creation, a Disney land and Sri Lanka a country with an Urban and rural population is totally incomparable. The Ministry of Tourism in its wisdom has now decided to increase the number of visitors to a million. A policy that spells long term doom, and total destruction to the environment. As eventually this tourism will destroy the very environment the tourist came to enjoy and then he will move to another destination.

The increased numbers of tourists and the increased number of rooms will further reduce prices. Instead of 10 persons paying 1000 US\$ per night, we are foolishly opting for a policy of a 1000 persons paying 10 US\$ a night. This very shortsighted policy is against the basic principles of eco tourism, which requires that the numbers are controlled to well within the sustainable

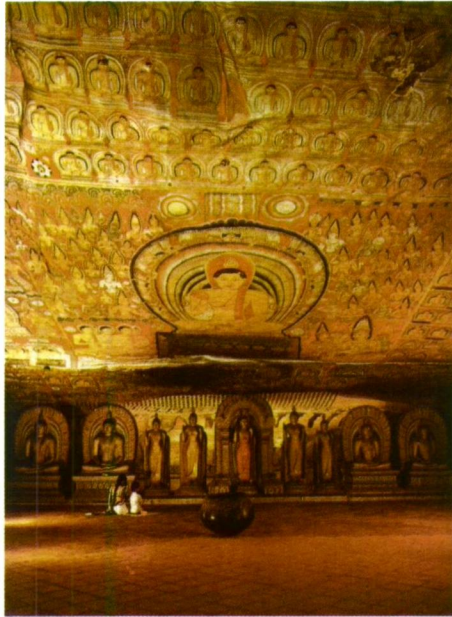
levels. In 1982 the average hotel received 80 US\$ per room night. Twenty years down the line the same hotel is receives 40 US\$ per room night, considering inflation this means that the room and the meals are free. A free holiday subsidized and paid for by the citizens of Sri Lanka.

The increased numbers of interested parties entering eco tourism will within a short period of time have the effect of destroying the very reason tourists visit the island. Primarily, because in real eco tourism the visitors, will be taken to the last available hot spot of bio-diversity, by experts in the field. We should not forget that these special areas are preserved to this day because many remained inaccessible and unknown. But with the increased numbers and with experts as guides, the sites will be easily accessed and these special sites will soon be destroyed. The Malkoha and the Horned lizard will follow the Dodo bird.

Real eco-tourism should not even leave a foot print on the ground. For example, how sustainable will the 2 acres habitat of the tiny purple frog be if it has to cope with visitors trudging through it? Sorry, we will not tell you where this habitat is as we want to protect the tiny purple frog, we want it to survive.

It is therefore advisable to stop using words that have dubious meanings and talk about responsible tourism. A tourism that is responsible, a tourism that respects the bio-diversity and the eco-system. A tourism that respects the cultural differences of people. It is in the face of this effort that we should be examining the topic in question.

Some of our experts have suggested that we emulate countries like Costa Rica. which has been focused as the best practice model for Sri Lanka to follow. Costa Rica has no Dept. of Wildlife or Dept of Forests. So it has recently created a Bio-diversity secretariat to administer its sparse wildlife and extensive forest reserves. Even though Sri Lanka has a Dept. of Wildlife and a Dept. of Forests, we have been advised to dilute them and instead form a Bio-diversity Secretariat. Stupid but then every move is calculated to someone's advantage, in this case exploitation of the precious recourses will be through a single department. To comment on some of the disinformation on this concept it would be opportune to examine the country mentioned in greater detail.



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a. Costa Rica

Costa Rica has large bauxite deposits at Bonita and aluminium smelting is an important industry. Small quantities of gold, silver, manganese and mercury are also mined. There are only 5000 indigenous Indian most of the others were killed off by the Spanish invaders. Despite a good environmental reputation, reckless economic development has contributed to extensive deforestation. Pasture land now covers some 45% of the territory. The plantation owning families are the wealthiest group, owing most of the land. Most Costa Ricans are urban. Official statistics claim 19.7% of the population live in abject poverty. Tourism grew strongly in 1998, supported by a 4 million US\$ government publicity campaign.

Costa Rica has a land area of 51,000 sq. km (or 19,714 sq. miles), a total population of 5.7 million and a forest cover of 54%. This compared to Sri Lanka which is 64,740 sq km (or 24,000 sq miles) and total population 18.5 million and a forest cover of only 18%. How does the best practice model fit into Sri Lanka, it does not.

How does one relate to a country like Costa Rica where a glass container of honey is hung daily outside the ecolodges to attract the humming birds? A zoo. Even though the incompatibility of this artificial best practice model has been pointed out, Sri Lanka carries on regardless, may be it is the advantage to a few that overrides it all ●

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