

OIL PALM - AN ALTERNATE CROP FOR RUBBER ?

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As there were several articles written to the newspapers by various authors on the good side of planting oil palm in the rubber areas of Sri Lanka, the RRISL felt like indicating its point of view on replacing large extents of the rubber plantation in the wet zone of Sri Lanka with this so called "wonder crop".

It must be emphasised here that there is only about 150,000 ha of rubber plantations left in the country at present, though there were 202,000 ha towards the end of 1970's. These plantations are mostly in the areas where other crops cannot be planted due to the very steep terrain and also due to the presence of rocks and the bed rock within a depth of 3 feet of soil.

Europeans at the beginning of the 19th century have wisely decided to plant rubber in these areas purely because of the environmental friendliness of the crop. However, with the beginning of the Korean war the rubber planting programmes have been accelerated due to the demand developed for NR in the world.

It is very well known that soil erosion is minimised in these areas due to the presence of rubber plantations which are always associated with cover crops planted to minimise soil erosion in these steep hilly lands. But, any other crop planted in such steep terrain conditions would have affected the thin soil layer on those rocky hills by now, thereby exposing the rock surfaces which are useless for any agricultural purpose. It is also very well known that the earth-slips have also been prevented in such areas because of the rubber cover.

The fact most of the authors of articles written in favour of oil palm plantation have forgotten is that the main purpose served by rubber plantations to Sri Lanka is the protection of its environment by providing a forest cover without which the power crisis faced by the country today would have been very much worse. It is an accepted fact in Malaysia that oil palm trees transpire the highest amount of moisture compared to other agricultural crops and hence there are government restrictions in Malaysia to plant oil palm in paddy growing low lands of the country. The rubber plantation prevents not only water shortages by providing a thick forest cover over and above the less than 18% forest cover remaining in Sri Lanka today, but also protects the remaining little forest reserves in the country by catering to the firewood requirement for domestic cooking and also for industrial purposes such as tea drying and also as the fuel in lime, bread, brick and tile kilns scattered all over the country. In addition to this rubber industry provides the necessary timber for chemical treatment to be used in the furniture and construction industry. But from the trunk and branches of oil palm so far no other use have been reported from anywhere in the

world. They are not suitable as the fuel wood for kilns because of their fast burning nature and the low caloric value.

Countries like Malaysia and Indonesia can keep on growing oil palm in rubber areas because still they have over 60% forest reserves well protected in their countries. Hence, following Malaysia and Indonesia blindly in this aspect can cause a big damage to the eco-system, if not implemented carefully and under scientific observation.

It is also true that a scientific organisation has given a report to replace rubber with oil palm without even consulting the RRISL. But the correct way should have been for that particular group of scientists to consult the scientists of RRISL who know better about rubber plantations than the experts trained on other crops. Hence, it should be mentioned here with regret that the above mentioned report has been prepared and submitted in an unethical manner.

Even this report has strictly recommended the plantation of oil palm in an area just sufficient to meet the local palm oil need which is imported from Malaysia. but, uprooting 5-6 year old rubber trees raised at a cost to the nation by some of the plantations, even before marking the tress, to replace with oil palm is a national crime.

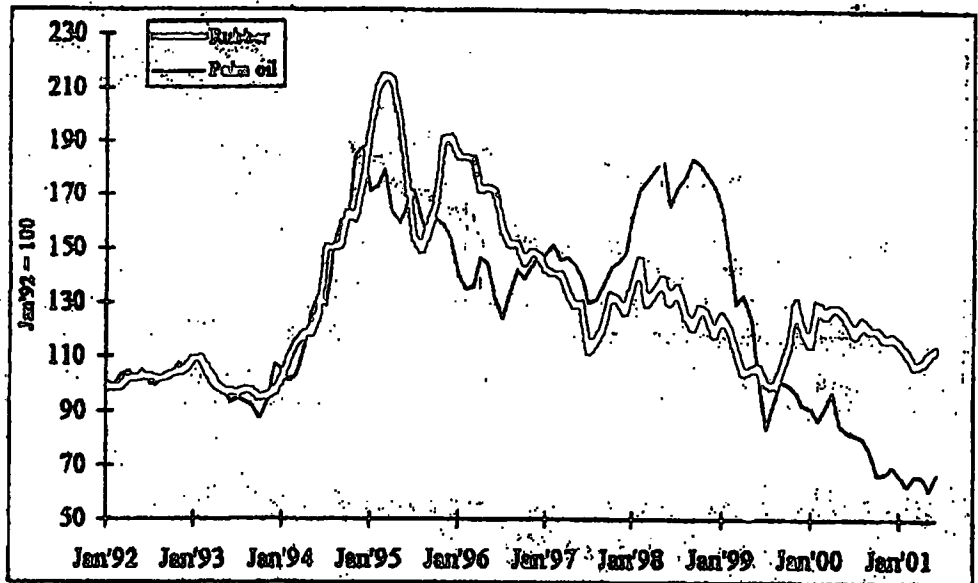
RRISL strongly accepts the fact that plantation of oil palm need much less labour compared to rubber. But, according to the commodity prices reported in the latest International Rubber Study Group Bulletin, it is clearly seen that the price of palm oil in the world market is declining much faster than rubber during the past couple of years. Hence, deciding to plant oil palm in the country at such a situation could bring in disastrous results not only to the economy of the country, but more severely to the highly precious environment of this small island. It is completely untrue that a bad future for rubber is advocated by international organisations. The correct picture is that though years 2000 and 2001 were bad for rubber due to declined demand for tyres caused by inflation in USA and in European, the future is going to be bright.

As most of the people are aware, there is hardly any value addition possible in palm oil industry, other than converting Palm stearin oil into margerine and soaps. Crude Palm oil has no demand neither in margerine industry; and nor in toilet soap industry. But the rubber has been adjudged the most value addable raw material produced by this country which can also provide highest employment generation. Hence, is it worth considering the few extra cents earned by palm oil industry today in the country comparing the present price of raw rubber, keeping aside all the other valuable contributions made by rubber plantation and the rubber based industry to the nation?

Oil palm growers of Malaysia have reported that planting oil palm to yield less than 14 MT of oil per hectare per year is not economically feasible as a plantation crop. It is doubtful that the oil palm plantation at Nakiyadeniya over the past 30 years have yielded that target even in the maximum cropping period of the plantation. When the situation is such why are we diversifying environmental friendly

and highly value addable rubber plantation with a crop which cannot be expected to bring miracles to the country as reported by some people who pick up ideas from various places where the palm oil plantations have been expanding due to constraints faced by them while planting rubber.

Prices of palm oil and natural rubber Jan'92 – Jun '01



Source: IRSG

The paper presented by Dr Pushparajah, a leading Soils Scientists of Malaysia, at the Planters' forum held in July 2001 clearly indicates that growing oil palm purely for extracting oil is not a useful exercise even for Malaysia for the future leaving out many other benefits possible from the rubber plantation. Even the environment pollution caused by palm oil industry is more severe according to him, compared to the pollution caused by the rubber factories. It is not a smallholder crop as well. Hence, we strongly feel that under no circumstances that trial plantation of 3,000 ha. of oil palm granted in the rubber areas should be extended even by a small fraction without carefully considering all the above mentioned pros and cons of oil palm plantations in the country and also without consulting the RRISL which is set up nearly a century ago to protect the valuable rubber plantation in the country.