

Visual Pollution : Another Eyesore

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We gather information from our surroundings through interaction of our sensory organs. The main sensory organ which has contacts with the surrounding environment is our eye. If someone's view or vista is covered by any unsightly elements or scenes that interfere, clutter, or intrude the beauty, it would become an eyesore. It is considered as a kind of pollution. We are all very much sensitive to water pollution, air pollution, soil pollution and sound pollution, but have you ever been concerned about visual pollution in your surrounding?

Let us focus on this special phenomenon of environmental pollution known as "visual pollution" in this article. Visual pollution is found both natural and built environment. The unsightly elements or scenes include natural factors such as smoke emitted from forest fires or windblown dust as well as man-made factors such as billboards to promote business interests, mobile towers and antennas used in telecommunication, above ground power lines distributing electricity, industrial smog released from large

factories, and open garbage dumps etc.

Variations and the diversity in our environment are determined by the location of various objects. For an example, unplanned public transport stations, open garbage dumps, large panels and stores, poorly planned buildings and transportation systems could create visual pollution. The increase high-rise buildings creates negative effects to the visual and physical characteristics of a city, which reduces the readability of the city, and destroys its natural environment. These are regarded as visual pollution objects, referring to all kinds of man-made features that affect the visual quality of urban surroundings. Similar to the other types of pollution, visual pollution is also largely man-made. The upswing of advertisements and improvements in communication technologies initiate huge and unattractive modules, such as billboards and mobile towers, that came to dominate the skylines of the urban areas. Human actions like littering, vandalism and improper waste disposal, also contribute significantly towards the

presence of unpleasant elements in the streets. Additionally, the construction of tall buildings in modern cities adds to the visual clutter, if they are not well planned before considering the overall city planning. The other main cause for visual pollution is the expansion of industries and high population density. Visual pollution destructs attraction of all objects in the environment. It may cause stress or depression to a person. Visual pollution may also reduce tourist attraction. Moreover, studies have revealed that the areas with high visual pollution are largely used for criminal activities.

Visual pollution is largely found in developing countries compared to that of developed countries. For instance, according to a group of scientists, billboards and outdoor advertisements contribute to 20.6% of visual pollution in a typical urban area of a developing country.

We know that songs or poems have basic characteristics or composition such as melody, harmony, and rhythm. In a similar manner, visual composition also has characteristics such as unity, rhythm, balance,

and harmony etc. Composition of visual environment is the arrangement of parts or elements to produce a conceptual whole. Visual environment is considered as having a three-dimensional composition. The basic elements could be in the form of lines, colours, shapes, sounds, words, etc., which give birth to different types of compositions. To understand it easily, colours can be taken as an example. Colours affect

stimulating effect, whereas purple stands for richness and importance.

Similarly, breach of rhythm in a certain system also causes visual pollution. Moreover, if shapes or volumes that do not suit the existing shapes and volumes of buildings in certain areas, these will obstruct ones' sight. The pictures given below show some situations and examples of visual pollution which occur in several ways.

Open garbage dumping

Open dumping of garbage must be banned in developing countries, and effective environmental legislation such as the implementation of the “polluter pay principle” for offenders, could be a vital mitigation exercise to curtail curbside waste disposal. Figure 1 shows how a water body is polluted in such a manner, though the birds feeding on garbage is not clearly visible to the naked eye. Figure 2, shows how the beauty of elephants is obscured due to the thrash that they are feeding on?

Man-made structures and constructions

Visual pollution, observed in urban areas makes human beings suffer indirectly from mental stress and illnesses in the long term. High rise buildings, while camouflaging the natural greenery in the surrounding areas, cause heavy visual pollution.



Figure 1: Open dumping of garbage in a water body.

people psychologically. There are different physiological responses generated by different colours, or in other words certain colours are likely to produce certain feelings. Dark colours or luminous colours mostly cause visual pollution. However, some mental reactions are individual and subjective to each colour. Examples of generally accepted colour responses such as blue and green colours have a soothing effect, while red in contrast, give signs of danger and warning. Yellow has a cheering and



Figure 2: A herd of elephants foraging for meals in the middle of a trash dump in Sri Lanka

Unplanned constructions and man-made structures spoil the landscape and natural beauty of the surrounding environment and one such example is shown in figure 3 which was taken near Sigiriya by Sulochana Ramiah Mohan early this year.



Figure 3: High rise building construction near to world heritage Sigiriya in Sri Lanka

Air pollution

When we hear the word, air pollution, it brings the visions of smokestacks and flowing black clouds to the mind. Air pollution comes in many forms such as burning of fossil fuels, industrial processes emitting particulate matter, such as sulfur dioxide, carbon monoxide and other noxious gases. Indoor areas can become polluted by emissions from smoking and cooking. Some of these chemicals, when released into the air, contribute to smog and acid rain. Short term exposure to air pollution can irritate the eyes, nose and throat, and cause upper respiratory infections, headaches, nausea, and allergic reactions. Long-term exposures can lead to chronic respiratory diseases, lung cancers, and heart diseases. Long-term exposures also can lead to significant climatic changes that can have far reaching negative impacts on food, water and ecosystems. Apart from all these detrimental effects, smoke can cause visual pollution to our eyes.

Advertising and display material

Hanging wires, unsystematic display of billboards and unplanned buildings, as well as the display of banners for campaigning is a

Artificial lighting

The light bulb is the most transformative invention human beings have introduced to the planet. By flicking a switch or pushing a button, we can push back the mask that would naturally blanket our lives each night. We can work long after the sun sinks below the horizon. We can enjoy and roam in the cities until the hours

stretch to late night. However, the dark side of light bulbs is that the city's lighting system affects animal behavior as well as human health, and consequently the ecosystem. The biggest



Figure 4: Smoke emission from an industry causing air pollution and at the same time visual pollution

normal practice in major cities in developing countries including Sri Lanka. Figure 5 shows the heavy visual pollution in the city of Lahore, Pakistan. This practice remains uncontrolled, as there is no law to check the menace of visual pollution.

disadvantage is that it obscures the band of the milky-way, our home galaxy. According to "The New World Atlas of Artificial Night Sky Brightness", the inhabitants of Chad, Central African Republic, and Madagascar, are the least

affected by light pollution. In these areas, the band of our home galaxy - the “Milky Way, is clearly visible.

Light pollution is one of the two highest sources of mortality for hatching sea turtles along our coastlines. Light is an important navigation tool for sea turtles. According to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, when newborn sea turtles first hatch out on the beach they stay beneath the sand and wait to emerge until nighttime, after the temperature has cooled down and moonlight appears. But human interference through artificial light threatens to distort the sea turtles’ ability to navigate and survive. Hatchlings will unconsciously move towards the brightest area, which would naturally be the ocean, glowing from the reflection of the night sky. Due to artificial lighting, turtles may mistakenly follow the light shining from streetlights and buildings in huge numbers. When the sun comes up, a disoriented, land-locked turtle is dehydrated, overheated and are at an increased risk of mortality from fatigue, predation, and collision with vehicles. A recent study has shown that less than one-third of the world’s key biodiversity

areas have completely unspoiled night skies, while around one-half lie entirely under artificially bright skies. According to National

Curbside begging

Curbside begging is an eyesore to the public. Nevertheless, curbside “role plays” such as playing a guitar, street dancing and fancy dressing, can be encouraged for collection of money without causing a nuisance to the public.

Visual pollution related health problems

Rapid urbanization has enhanced visual pollution, deteriorating the quality of life in urban centres. Effects of exposure to visual pollution include, distraction, eye fatigue, decreases in opinion diversity, and loss of identity. Continuous exposure to visual pollution is believed to cause lack of sleep, mental irritability, and psychological



Figure 5: Visual pollution in a street in Lahore, Pakistan

Geographic (2019), 83% of the worlds population live under light polluted skies.



Figure 6: A hatchling sea turtle turns inland following manmade lights instead of seaward



Figure 7: Street beggars in India

disturbances in children as well as adults. Distracting advertisements and bright lights on billboards can cause traffic accidents or lead to an increase in stress levels among drivers. Visual pollution can intensify or generate stress and create an uncomfortable human occupation environment. Researchers have started exploring various dimensions of this new form of pollution.

How do we reduce the visual pollution ?

Many countries have enacted new laws to prevent visual pollution. For an example, in 1965 the first lady of the US, Lady Bird Johnson pioneered action against visual pollution on roadways. The “Highway Beautification Act of 1965” was implemented in USA because of her efforts. The US government also introduced the “Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991” which reduced visual clutter, providing funds for the creation, preservation

and conservation of scenic byways and biking trails.

Similarly, the city of São Paulo in Brazil also passed the Clean City Law (Cidade Limpa) in 2006 which banned the use of all types of outdoor advertisements, including billboards, transport systems etc.

All these measures have proven to work with a certain degree of success. They can serve as examples for other countries like Sri Lanka to address the issue of visual pollution. Although various regulations have been enacted to protect the environment, there seems to be no implementation strategy for such laws, for prevention of visual pollution in Sri Lanka.

We feel and recognize water, air and sound pollution, and act immediately on them. However, visual pollution is not felt in such a manner. Nevertheless, it has impacts on our mind. Unpolluted visual environments help to create a person with a healthy mind. Hence

let us commit ourselves to create a good visual environment to protect the beauty and peacefulness of our environment. Visual pollution is still to receive attention on a global level. The key to solving visual pollution lies in proper urban and suburban planning, thereby improving the environment and quality of life around us. Therefore, as individuals we should think of ways and means to contribute towards creating a visual pollution free Sri Lanka.

“Public space is a public property and we cannot pollute it with our personal intention”.



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