Panama Lagoon Under Threat

by Hafsah Sabry

The Panama Lagoon is one of the most productive lagoons in the Ampara District in the East Coast of Sri Lanka. To which the tourism and industrial activities have caused threats to the environment and the fishing activities of the native people living in and around the area. Villagers are obstructed from their daily work such as Chena cultivation and fishing due to the construction of canals in Panama, Arugam Bay by the Sri Lankan Navy.

The land in question has been taken over by security forces on government initiation to be sold for foreign companies and businessmen in the tourist industry. Despite the claim that the villagers owned the land for many generations since 1850.

Government authorities are trying to convince the villagers that even though the lands have been held by people for generations as their own, they have to be acquired by the government for development purposes evicting people from the area.

"Traditional, Tamil and aboriginal Vedda villagers live in peace and unity in the area," said one of the villagers who resides close to the Panama Lagoon. It still continues creating immense hardships to the communities depriving them of their agricultural-based and non-timber forest product collection activities which are the main livelihoods of these people. The villagers are not allowed to enter these areas for Chena cultivation or for any other purposes.

The waterway from Panama Mahawewa (tank) to the lagoon runs through this forest area and the hotel and canals built by the navy has also been located in the forest strip between the land and the sea at the end of this forest," said the Environmentalist and the Director for the Central Environmental and Nature Studies CENS Ravindra Kariyawasam.

Fishing using motor boats in the lagoon is prohibited in order to protect the nature and the biodiversity of it. The villagers use Gill nets, cast nets in their fishing activities, whilst, the Vedda villagers only use their hands, baskets or small fishing rods to maintain and remember their traditions and cultures which were followed by their ancestors. They also believe that the lagoon and their fishing activities belong to the Pathini Goddess, a temple located close to the lagoon area which is the reason why they use their bare hands for fishing purposes, claimed the villagers.

Although the Panama fishery society has 106 members, only 27 members are involved in lagoon fishery on a regular basis. About 45 species of fish belonging to 31 families, four species of shrimps and the mangrove crab, Scylla serrata are harvested from the lagoon. The total production of this lagoon was estimated as 7405.88 kg/2nd/yr. The productivity is high in the lagoon compared to the highly productive Negombo estuary which has an annual productivity of 72.9 kg/hour.

Even though the lagoon is considered to be one with a high bio-diversity the mismanagement, and the ignorant of environmental values by relevant government authorities has resulted in allowing many industrial and tourism activities in the area endangering nature.

Out of the 1220 acres of land seized in this manner imposing threats on the environment and livelihoods of people 835 acres are forest lands owned by the Department of Forest Conservation. The lands located in Ulapassa and Egodagaya are Dry Zone forests comprising valuable timber trees like Palu (Manicaria hebecandra), Weeru (Drypeteselaparia) and Ebotu (Diospyressemum) were also taken under the custody of the security forces.

The navy in 2012 responded to the concerns of the environmentalists over the issue of land seizure in the country needs a camp for national security but the question remains as to why a national security camp would be necessary after the war. "There were no such camps during or before the war," said Kariyawasam.

With the construction of tourist developments in the area the lagoon is contaminated by concrete and cement used for construction which also results in the destruction of crab and prawn harvests. In the meantime, the 'lagoon mouth' which should be opened to mix with the sea salt water once a year to maintain its natural habitat is also being blocked, obstructing the brackish water to get mixed with salt water.

In addition to the environmental and habitat changes, the navy had built many elephant fences obstructing the elephants from getting into the construction areas leading them to take the lagoon route for travelling and migrating to Yala. "Elephants taking the lagoon routes through the villages where people reside will definitely trigger human-elephant conflict in the area in future," he added.

Furthermore, the lagoon exhibits seasonal fluctuations in productivity due to environmental changes as well as the use of illegal mesh sizes and unauthorised activities have caused a number of environmental issues in the lagoon whilst, political influences have also become a threat to the status of fishery in the lagoon. Hence, suitable management and policies and land use practices should be introduced to ensure the sustainability of the lagoon ecosystem.

According to the 1996 Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Act No. 2, the lagoon is managed by the fisheries management authority. While this is being implemented, development or any other form of construction work cannot take place without the approval of the authority. Meanwhile, the current construction work in Panama is being carried out without consultation with authorities managing the lagoon. The construction work carried out by the Navy is also in violation of Clauses 14 and 31 of the Coast Conservation Act.

Even though the security forces are using the forest area under the Forest Conservation Department, legal approval has not been obtained so far from the Forest Conservation Department or any other authority required for implementing such development activities damaging the forest. In such a backdrop, it should also be mentioned that the Forest Conservation Department has no authority to permit the use of forest lands for construction of hotels.

Sri Lankan Navy

The Navy media spokesperson captain Akram Alavi told The Sunday Leader that he completely denies the allegations leveled against the Sri Lankan Navy of grabbing the land from people as the land in question was under the Sri Lankan Navy for a long time and was acquired legally with the approval of the Defence Ministry and the Urban Development Authority USA, adding that there is no environmental issue with the cabanas or the tourism activities in the Panama Lagoon area as the environmentalists claim.

However, owners of hotels and cabanas constructed in the Panama lagoon claim that the uniquely styled cabanas on concrete pilars are made with eco-friendly materials and face a picturesque lagoon. The cabanas offer views of the dense forest where Wild elephants, deer, wild boar, and peacocks frequent, without threatening the nature.