The Uda Walawe National Park:
Where Wildlife supports People

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In the 1960s, the Uda Walawe National Park was hardly known apart from a few wildlife enthusiasts who had learned that it was a place of elephants, especially during the months of drought. It was no wonder. There were just 2500s of food, the elephants were shy and aggressive when encountered, and the six foot plus high Maha Gana (G luxury) that dominated the plains meant that even elephants were hard to observe.

When David Jayaweera was appointed as Wardener of the Park, he embarked on a mission to expand the road network, and increased them to 25 miles in distance. Even then, very few visited the Park. Quite often a week’s visitor would be less than 50. This is due to the fact that elephants are to be seen everywhere all year round, and during the months of drought in numbers that match the now well known Minneriya Gathering. In an extensive group of elephants, sometimes numbering over 200, would wander from the tank of Tissamaharama and wander down to the shrinking waters of the rivers, feeding on the grasses of its exposed bed. That was quite a sight especially to the fortunate few who would endure the priority of facilities available, just to see such sights, undisturbed.

At one time, there were no roads in Uda Walawe. It had nothing more than a cluster of small shops at the NT junction, just before the Uda Walawe Dam. The nearest hotel was in Kumbhulpala, to which poor rats were sent almost an hour’s drive. The Park had a couple of bungalows, Sinharaja and Weheragaha, and the Wildlife & Nature Protection Society had its Cinnamon Bungalows just outside the Park. Provision had to be brought from either Colombo or Ratnapura, and the nearest petrol station was in Galahoda, an hour’s drive away on the Ratnapura Road from Kumbhulpala, about the same time to the other direction. Extra fuel and water had to be taken in cans.

A few individuals had jeeps for hire, but most owners-drivers had other jobs as well, the lack of visitation hardly making this lucrative means of earning a living.

POPULAR PARK

Thirty years has made a huge difference to Uda Walawe. David Jayaweera’s extension of the road system within the Park meant that more of its areas became accessible to the visitor, who realized that there were more than just elephants in the Park. It became one of the best places to see a variety of Birds of prey (Hawks), the reservoir and waterholes attract a host of waders and other water birds, and a large number of migrant species are drawn to this refuge, during the season. There had always been elephants, a large number of them, but very few sightings of other big animals.

In addition, there were the domestic buffalo and cattle that are illegally grazed in the park. Their numbers now seriously threaten the park. There had been a few sightings of leopards, in areas close to the river and the last authentic recording of a bear was in 1972, by the legendary Lyn de Alwis, at Welheragaha (pers. comm.).

Today people visit Uda Walawe not just to see elephants. The past few months have seen them growing up to see leopards and two cubs that regularly appear on a nearby rock, in the early mornings and late evenings, to delight the onlookers with their play. The park is also best suited to the smaller cats – the Fishing Cat, Jungle Cat and Rusty Spotted Cat – who are seen with increased frequency. Deer have increased in number, though Sambar remains elusive. Also, there have been far fewer sightings of bears though they are reported to thrive across the border of the Park in the Bandarawela Proposed Forest Reserve.

A BONANZA FOR THE PEOPLE

Today, the Uda Walawe National Park is a popular place of visit for wildlife enthusiasts and others interested in seeing a National Park and its wildlife inhabitants. A large number of tourists visit the Park throughout the year, and there have been days when over 1,000 have been taken at the gate! The Park has three bungalows and an equal number of campsites, all well patronised. In addition, its network of roads has been increased considerably.

No longer is the place called Uda Walawe a collection of small shops at the junction. It houses numerous hotels and guest houses, including one hotel of star grade. Its shops have increased in number and scope. There are fuel stations and supermarkets in the near vicinity and in fact it lacks nothing that is required for a comfortable stay close to the wilderness.

There is a fleet of jeeps available for hire, with drivers who have intimate knowledge of the Park and are here to develop the range of abusive driving techniques that plague the visitors to Tissamaharama. In fact, being mostly local, they appreciate the role the Park and its animals play in giving them a livelihood. A few years ago, when there was a politically motivated initiative to illegally annex the Dalhousian Habitat Corridor, vital for the movement of the Park’s elephants and other animals, the jeep drivers led the local resistance to it.

PROTECTING THE GOOSE THAT LAYS THE GOLDEN EGGS

The present prosperity of Uda Walawe is SOLELY due to the National Park. Visitors, both local and foreign, are drawn there to see its animals and its wilderness. If there were no Park, there would be no hotels, shops or fleets of jeeps. As such, it is important that the National Park is protected and preserved.

Today Uda Walawe, and the other protected areas of Sri Lanka, are under threat. At Uda Walawe poaching, illegal encroachment and the illegal grazing of cattle and buffaloes, the latter with political sponsorship, is a serious threat to the park. It is alleged that there are close to 30,000 buffaloes in the Park and in the last two years the Maha Gas, vital food for the elephants, has grown. Elephants feed off the top of the Maha Gas, leaving the roots intact. Cattle and buffaloes feed from the root. If proof were needed of this, it can be seen in the areas around the Park Office, which are protected by electric fencing. Buffaloes and cattle cannot enter and a thick growth of Maha Gas is seen. In addition, controlled fires are necessary for the healthy regeneration of Maha…that is if it is not too late!

This is not just true for Uda Walawe, but for all the protected areas of Sri Lanka. The wild places and wild creatures of this country are part of cultural, aesthetic and environmental values, and are also of immense economic potential. It must be protected and managed correctly. Our Protected Areas have the ability to generate large amounts of foreign exchange for the country. Visitors, however, will only come to see wild creatures in their pristine habitats, and not to see domesticated species kept under environmental and habitat stress. This is a resource that can be preserved for future generations for thousands of years. We need to ensure their continued survival.