Towards a national forest policy

Some observations made at the public consultation on the draft forestry sector policy proposal on Dec, 30, 1994 by former conservator of forests, V. R. Nanayakkara.

In no way can this meeting be considered a public sitting to seek public opinion for the simple reason that those who are participating have to inform the director of the forestry planning and of the new Ministry of Agriculture Lands and Forests in advance as to which "relevant sector" of the proposal the participant wishes to comment on. The conclusion is that the entire meeting is an exercise to have an open mind on the subject and that the decision to be made is to be subject to whatever is needed in a public hearing without any restrictions on public opinion. If this is to be a meeting, the meeting should be extended to cover more than one day.

The heading "Forestry Sector Policy" should be dropped, and instead "National Forest Policy" be adopted which should also include policies for wild life which the forests carry and forms part of the forest economics in the country.

The policy paper is weighted heavily towards forest wood utilization, forest wood industries etc. part of "sector policy" which if implemented would only assist the task lead to forests in the country. This was the very reason why the Forestry Master Plan was criticized and rejected earlier by professionals, environmentists, NGOs, national minded citizens and the Forest Department itself.

3. The policy proposals for the management of natural forests, further, for utilization of crops. All natural forests should be utilized selectively, for genetic - genetic and biodiversity conservation and for maintaining environmental stability to all its meeting, in the country. The primary timber needs should come from the non-wood forests, the large extent of non-forest vegetation, and imports. Surprisingly, no compensation was made for these plantations having been recommended to compensate for forests cleared for agriculture.

4. The policy should be prepared taking into consideration the present forest and wild life situations in the country and the rapid deforestation and forest degradation trends in the country.

5. Sri Lanka should do totally the logging of timber in natural forests, and an action programme should be started to prevent all these natural forests in perpetuity. Logging of even plantation forests over 500 ft. not should not be permitted, and the planted forests allowed to regrow into mixed forests without simple industrial treatment.

6. Unique forest reserves such as Riligala, Kuduru, Sir Palag Adams, Horton Plains, Yala National Park, Polonnaruwa and Kaunikela deserve the status of world heritage sites such as UNESCO, and actions should be taken to have them declared as such by UNESCO. Natural forest reserves should be timed to follow the example of Australia, which already has such sites.

7. All coastal mangrove forest reserves should be protected adequately. None should be cleared for holds, or for any other reason whatever. Any plans for other projects planned in the vicinity of natural forests or other environment sensitive areas should be subject not only to EIA, but also to Participatory Appraisals of local level, before being approved by government.

8. On such conditions, mechanized logging equipment like chisels and dynamite logging equipment be used in fully natural and or through forest plantations by using such equipment is less total.

9. The quality of life of rural people should be enhanced by providing more employment and better avenues of income, such as timber. There are no forests which in Sri Lanka except the protected areas. The government should not be a policy of government to create a new breed of poor people by making small people totally dependent on the forest. Sri Lanka could take a lesson from Japan which has almost doubled forest cover because of its forestation and industrialization programmes.

10. People's participation has not been given weightage in the planning of agroforestry, urban forests, social forests, agroforestry, national Forest Policy, with long term land and tree tenure benefits.

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12. Environmental considerations and the need for considering biodiversity of both plants and animals should be apparent in all policies of policy makers in implementing the "National Forest Policy".

13. The new minister and his new secretary of the new government should be made correctly on the history of the master plan of the "National Forest Policy" is only one component, and how it was rejected because of the bias to towards forest exploitation as the means of the environment. The Forestry Master Plan revision process is a matter of careful scrutiny by the new government as around 50 million square meters or more can be spent on it, and as both foreign and local advice has been subject to question and not tend to safeguard the overall interests of the nation.

14. How many forest consultants were selected has also to be investigated especially those selected to advise on forest policy and Forestry Institution building for the LSL. It is only fair that the new minister and his new secretary are briefed correctly by those advising the ministry in order to rectify a bad situation which could spoil our environmental disaster to the country.

15. The main plan passed through the hands of three earlier minister prior to the establishment of the present Ministry of Agriculture Lands and Forests. One interesting aspect of this master plan is that it has all along been driven by highly paid foreign consultants into the bad situation, some of whom have dispensed more interest in their personal well being than in the donors or the country's interests, while their local contacts and advisors keeping the peels and the greeen have disabdly the best fine.

16. The Forest Department and the Department of Forestry are now under the Ministry of Agriculture Lands and Forests, which is not only an honour, but also a great loss for a forest authority to give effect to a sound "National Forest Policy". This is the need in most countries in the region. Even the UK has desacred its Forestry Commission and formed 1 a forest authority and 2 another separate organisation for forestry enterprises such as forest land wood industry. In a forest authority all forests would come under one umbrella.

17. Of the total area of the country covered under the charge of the Departments of Wild Life Conserva- tion and around 16% under the Forest Department. Such a forest authority should reduce not only vested interests in timber but also vested interests in game meat and the direct trade in timber, skins and hides. There should also be more staff responsible for forest and wild life protection.