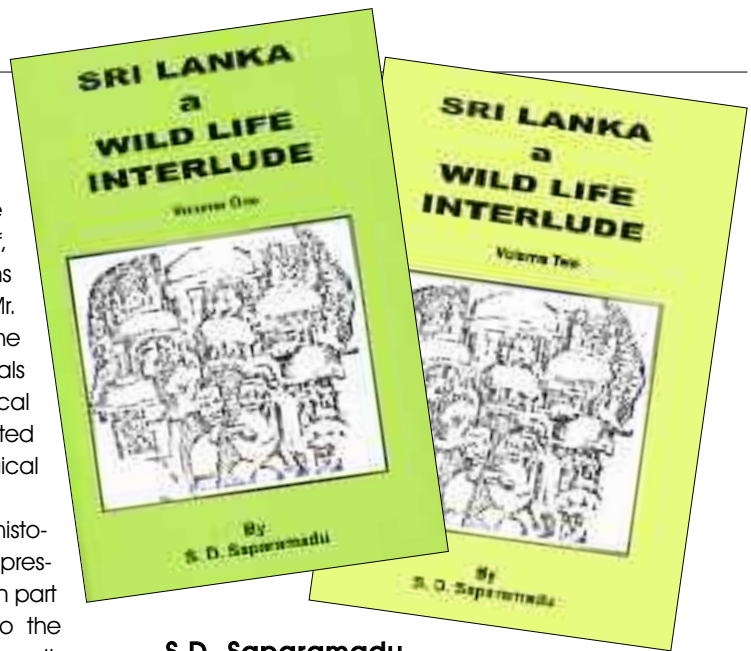


SRI LANKA: A WILDLIFE INTERLUDE. 2 volumes

Rex I. De Silva

The first of these two volumes contains the memoirs and thoughts of Mr. S.D. Saparamadu, Director of the Department of Wildlife Conservation (DWLC) from 1970-1975. The author concentrates on, but does not restrict himself, to this period. Here we read of the trials, tribulations and triumphs in the field of wildlife conservation. Mr. Saparamadu casts his net wide. Not only does he write knowledgeably about wildlife, but he also deals with such disparate subjects as religion, historical tsunamis in Sri Lanka, the pearl fisheries, protected trees, as well as on matters of historical, archaeological and geological interest.

The author presents a detailed account of the history of wildlife conservation from earliest times to the present. He considers that wildlife conservation has been part of our culture from ancient times mainly due to the benign influence of Buddhism. He relates many interesting incidents relating to the administration of the DWLC and the numerous obstacles faced in carrying out his duties. There are interesting insights into the "behind-the-scenes" politics, which sometimes helped and occasionally hindered him in the performance of his duties. There is a wealth of information on the island's wildlife and protected areas. He discusses the status of hog deer in Sri Lanka and whether the species has always been resident in the island or was introduced as some authorities speculate. He also recounts the almost-forgotten incident where the King of Nepal, while on a state visit to Sri Lanka, shot a sambhur on a poya night in the Wilpattu National Park. Mr. Saparamadu airs his perception of the human-elephant conflict, tracing its history which leads to his views on elephant management. There is a detailed account on founding of the Elephant Orphanage at Pinnawela - one of the DWLC's great success stories. The original purpose for which Pinnawela was created has now been realized in the Elephant Transit Home at Uda Walawe. On a personal note, I was pleasantly surprised to read that my father (Mr. Ian M. De Silva) was largely responsible for the creation of Uda Walawe National Park - something of which I was unaware. Reprinted in this volume is an article from LORIS (which in turn was reprinted from a daily newspaper) entitled "Uda Walawe - the Park that never was". This article



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questioned the wisdom of giving Uda Walawe protection. Today Uda Walawe is one of our more popular National Parks. The author, relates how he obtained funding to restore two tanks (Mandagala and Athuru Miithuru Weva) in the Yala SNR, in the hope that elephants and other wildlife would have sources of water during the drought. He was unwillingly forced to abandon the project due to opposition from a group of conservationists. He states that if not for the intransigent attitude of these conservationists "Several hundred elephants now dead would have been alive". Equally interesting is an account of efforts to persuade the DWLC to use fertilizer in the National Parks. These are but a mere sampling of material in the first volume. I leave it to readers to discover the other items of interest.

The second volume is mainly a digest of selected articles and notes which appeared in the (now defunct) Ceylon Wildlife Bulletin (later renamed the Sri Lanka Wildlife

Bulletin). There is a total of almost 400 articles, most of which were written by the field staff of the DWLC. Some of these notes dealing with Departmental news and administrative matters will probably be skimmed through or be unread by most readers. The majority of articles however deal with wildlife conservation and natural history. Many of these are of extraordinary interest. A random sampling includes articles on black (Axis) deer in Wilpattu, dwarf elephants, black panthers in Sri Lanka, sloth bears, sea-turtles, pythons, the Devil Bird, white wild boar etc. Especially interesting is an account of a male sambhur mating with a female buffalo. There is also an account of the death of photographer Eric Swan who was killed by an elephant several decades ago in the Somawathiya Chaitya area.

Regrettably, both volumes contain several solecisms and errors. Many words are misspelt. Several scientific names are either misspelt or do not follow the standardized format. Adjacent words occasionally run together without a space separating them. It is incorrectly stated that the Jurassic era is the "oldest period in the Earth's geological history". I am unable to agree with the author's statement that the two species of crows have dwindled in numbers and should therefore be granted "absolute protection".

Despite some shortcomings these two volumes contain a veritable treasury of information on wildlife the history of the DWLC and natural history. Readers will certainly find their contents to be of immense interest and value.

Globally threatened birds pay for their sex

A new study published in the leading ornithological journal *Ibis* has revealed that for the vast majority of bird species, there are more males than females. The discovery suggests that populations of many of the world's threatened birds could therefore be overestimated, because scientists often base population estimates on counts of males.

Males are usually more brightly plumaged than females and the males of many species sing to attract mates and defend territories making them easier to hear and therefore count. Researchers then take this as an estimate of the number of breeding pairs, critically assuming an equal number of males and females in the population. But is this assumption a valid one? This study suggests not.

After carrying out a comprehensive review of hundreds of scientific papers, Dr Paul Donald of the RSPB (BirdLife in the UK) concluded that in the majority of bird species studied, there are more males than females.

"Most species have male-skewed sex ratios, but a wholly unexpected finding was that the rarer the species, the more highly skewed towards males the population sex ratio becomes," says Dr Donald. "This means that many of the world's rarest species may be much closer to extinction than we previously thought, because the number of females is lower than the number of males. It is much easier to save a population with an excess of females than one with an excess of males."

But why does this happen?

"It's not that females are producing more sons than daughters, because at hatching the sex ratio is generally equal. The only possible explanation is that females do not live as long as males", Dr Donald adds. "As generations grow older, they become increasingly dominated by males as more females die off."

One possible explanation for this higher female mortality is that females may experience higher physiological stress. In many bird species females are the dispersing sex while the males stay closer to home and in migratory species it is often the females that fly the furthest despite being smaller in size.

But why do more threatened species have such strongly skewed sex ratios?

"One possible explanation is that many threatened species are endangered because of introduced predators, which have been shown to kill females when they are incubating eggs in the nest."

Backing up Dr Donald's argument, some studies have found that populations of threatened species in New Zealand have reverted back to a more balanced sex ratio after predators were removed.

Because most bird population estimates are likely to be overestimates, it is crucial that researchers take the sex ratio into account when devising strategies for saving globally threatened species.

Photo: Stitchbird: one of the threatened species known to have a male-biased sex ratio. *Pic by Stefan Greif.*

- **BirdLife International**

