

**Report on Potential Environmental Aspects of Renovations
done by the Forest Department
along the road leading from the ticket counter to the
Doranaela-Wathurawa Entrance to the
Sinharaja World Heritage Site & Core Zone of the
Sinharaja Biosphere Reserve**

by
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(former members of the National Man and the Biosphere Committee)

Following review visit undertaken on 22nd January 2019



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Picture taken outside the ticket counter on 23/07/2013 where the road starts

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I. Introduction

The Forest Department (FD) currently operates several entrances to the Sinharaja World Heritage site and Core Zone to the Sinharaja Biosphere Reserve (Figures 1a &1b). Renovations are currently being done along the 1600m road that leads to the Doranaela-Wathurawa Entrance to the Sinharaja World Heritage Site (WHS) and Core Zone of the Man and the Biosphere Reserve (Figure 1a), which according to FD records has been opened for visitor use in 2004. Due to the heavy rains received by this area, and the high embankment on the eastern side of the road which drains the rainwater onto the road, this road had been rendered unusable due to extensive soil erosion. The uneven surface created by gully erosion and the exposed boulders and stones along the road as well as a few earth slips have caused danger to the visitors especially during monsoonal rainy periods. Reportedly, several visitors have been subject to falls due to the poor state of the road. As such the FD has commenced a complete renovation of the road under the Ecosystem Conservation and Management Project (ESCAMP).

Due to the sensitive nature of the Sinharaja Forest and its high biological value, which is acknowledged by its recognition as a World Heritage Site (WHS), several persons from the media as well as Conservation NGOs have expressed their concerns about the new impacts that the renovations would have on the Sinharaja WHS. Consequently, the Forest Department requested an informal independent view of the renovations being done. This was undertaken on a voluntary basis by Prof. IAUN Gunatillaka and Dr Jinie Dela on 22 January 2019.

a. Background and historical aspects

The present road leading to the Doranaela-Wathurawa Entrance (now being repaired) and beyond into the interior of the forest was established initially in 1971-72 by the 'Sinharaja Mechanised Logging Project'. At the time this was a 20 ft wide road used to transport logs from the interior of the forest in tractors and huge logging trucks (Rajapaksa Report, para 171, p83).

Since the logging of the Sinharaja forest was suspended in 1977, and it was declared a Biosphere Reserve in 1978 by UNESCO, the logging road was used by researchers to access the Research Station (built with funding from the National Science Foundation[NSF]) and

the nearby research accommodation facility (established by March for Conservation during the 1979-1981 period). These research studies contributed towards designation of Sinharaja as a Natural World Heritage Site in 1988. All traffic to the interior of the forest (by researchers accommodated at the Research Station as well as visitors and school children to the Sinharaja WHS) from the Kudawa entrance has been along the very same 'logging road', located along the periphery of the Sinharaja World Heritage Site as well as the Core Zone of the Sinharaja Biosphere Reserve (Figures 1a & 1b).



Figure 1a: Map of the Sinharaja Forest with road being renovated depicted by a Red Line
(Map provided by the Forest Department)

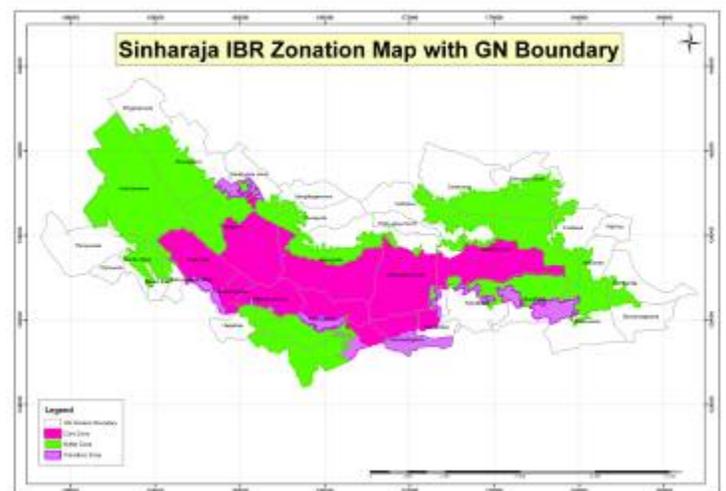


Figure 1b: Sinharaja Biosphere Reserve depicting Core Zone (purple) equivalent to the legally defined Sinharaja National Heritage Wilderness Area (source: MAP submitted to UNESCO for the 2013 SBR Periodic Review)

b. Survey description

Observations were made by walking from the ticket counter to the Doranaela-Wathurawa Entrance to the Sinharaja WHS and back along the 1600m existing road which is being renovated to observe the activities being undertaken and any impacts they had on the forest. Discussions were carried out, with the trail guide from a bordering village as well as several nearby villagers who are assisting with field research in the Sinharaja forest at present, to obtain the views of local people about the road renovations.

II. Investigation of concerns expressed about the road by the media and NGOs

The following concerns about the renovations have been expressed by the media and NGOs as having a significant impact on the Sinharaja Forest.

1. The road being constructed by the FD is illegal.
2. There is conversion of a foot path into a broad 8ft road by using JCBs which damage the forest when a 4ft road would suffice.
3. The road widening and renovations will lead to vehicles using this road in the future – which will have a negative impact on the forest
4. Non-use of an alternate route through Pitakale village which should be rehabilitated for use by visitors instead of the logging road.
5. The stretch of road that is being rehabilitated/renovated is replete with wildlife - particularly birds and primates.
6. The forest is being fragmented by construction of the road.
7. Closure of the road has necessitated the use of another road for visitors to access the forest on foot which is not suitable for tourists or school children.

III. Observations

1. There were no signs of a "new" road being constructed. What is occurring is the renovation of the existing logging road for the convenience of visitors on foot, and as such it is not an illegal activity.
2. Figure 1a indicates that the road being repaired is on the outside of the boundary of the Sinharaja World Heritage Site and the Core Zone of the Sinharaja Biosphere Reserve. This road was originally built for the Sinharaja mechanized logging project (Photo 1) in accordance with the Forest Department's felling rules leaving a stream reservation for the Dorana eli.
3. The area of the forest where the renovation of the old logging road is being currently done was widened about 10 years ago in sections by laying two lanes of concrete paths along the widened road (see photos below). Two large culverts also have been constructed during that period but no appreciable damage to the biodiversity has been reported as a result of these renovations. Therefore, it is of our view that the present construction work which is merely building on work done earlier in the recent past would not contribute to significant loss of biodiversity.
4. The area of the forest rich in biodiversity, which is most popular with bird watching tourists, lies beyond the Doranaela-Wathurawa Entrance gate (i.e. inside the WHS and Biosphere Reserve Core Zone boundary). The road being repaired leads upto this point.

5. There is no perceivable widening of the existing road, and hence there is no apparent removal of trees on either side of the road being renovated. There is apparently a restoration of dysfunctional drains on either side of the logging road in order to facilitate proper drainage, thereby reducing the erosion impact on the road surface that is being prepared, for easy and safe travelling of visitors on foot.
6. The exposed boulders and stones on the road are being removed by JCBs, and the stones were being used at other points on the road to stabilize it. This is justified as the road cannot be repaired without this activity.
7. While there is forest belonging to the FD on either side of the road being repaired, this situation is of long-standing. Hence the present renovation work has not significantly fragmented the forest. The restoration of a highly dilapidated road (which was reduced to a badly maintained foot path at some places, and renovated with concrete lanes in other areas along this road previously), would provide safer travel (on foot) to thousands of both young and elderly who visit this forest annually (see photos below).
8. Accordingly, the closure of the road is inevitable for some time to enable carrying out activities connected with the renovations.

Sinharaja access road repairs and status through the years



Photo 1: A 20 ft. wide logging road was built during the Canadian-funded mechanized logging project for log haulage by Hey's trucks (21.25 ton capacity 230 h.p.) (Source: Prof IAUN Gunatilleke)



Photo 2: Concreted road and road widening in early 2000 (Photo: Prof IAUN Gunatilleke)



Photo 4: Badly eroded sections of the road in 2018 prior to renovation (Photo: Prof IAUN Gunatilleke)



Photo 3: The road in 2013 during the periodic review of the Sinharaja Biosphere Reserve by Dr Jinie Dela with report submitted to UNESCO
(Source: Dr Jinie Dela)



Photo 5: At the entrance to the Sinharaja WHS during the 2013 Periodic Review of the Sinharaja Man and Biosphere Reserve carried out by Dr J D S Dela for the National MAB Committee for submission to UNESCO
(Source: Dr Jinie Dela)



Photo 6: Existing road renovations with ESCAMP funds –2019
(Photo Prof IAUN Gunatilleke)

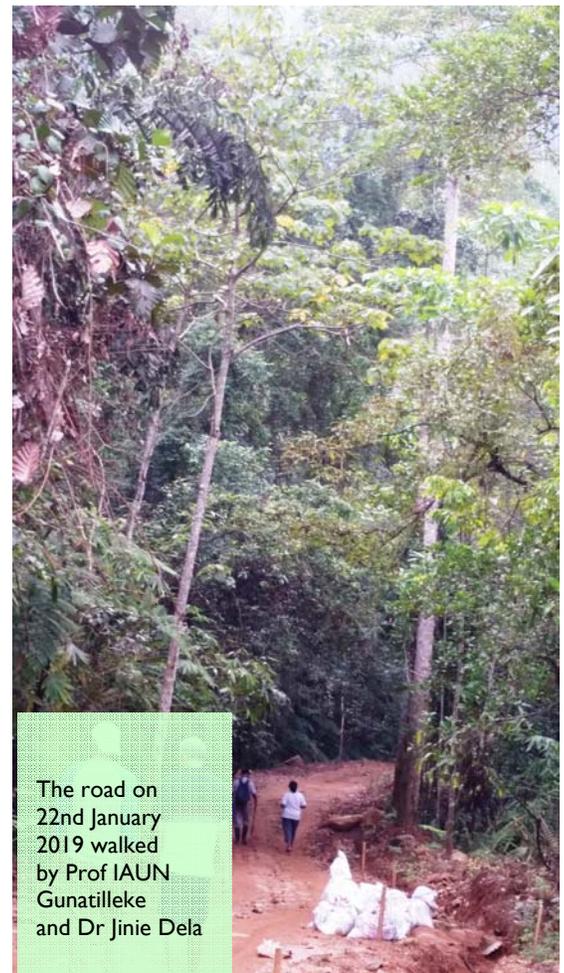


Photos 7: The road during the January 22nd visit



Photos 8: The road during January 2019

Photos 7, 8 & 9: Inspecting the road renovations done with ESCAMP funds – 2019 (Source: Dr Jinie Dela, photos taken during the review on 22nd January 2019)



The road on 22nd January 2019 walked by Prof IAUN Gunatilleke and Dr Jinie Dela

Photo 9: The surface of the existing road had been cleared during the renovation process but there was no indication of any tree felling on either side of the road.

9. Clarifications by the FD

The road being renovated will be used by visitors who are permitted to walk up to the Doranaela-Wathurawa Entrance gate only on foot (as done in the past). Only researchers staying at the research station or those who enter the forest for research or monitoring purpose will be permitted to use a vehicle beyond this entrance point (as done up to now).

10. Summary of observations:

The present report is on the potential environmental impacts of the 2019 renovation of the former logging road from Dorana Ela ticketing office of the Forest Department to the Doranaela-Wathurawa Sinharaja North-western entrance, which is about 1.6 km length, and has been the subject of much media and public scrutiny. Observations by the two independent reviewers confirmed that the road in question is not a new road, but an existing one being repaired for the convenience of thousands of visitors, including school children, walking at times in adverse weather conditions. There were no apparent signs of road widening. As some parts of this road had already been widened using concrete and culverts in the early 2000, the disturbance to the flora and fauna on either side of the road from the current renovation would be minimal and not a serious new threat to the biodiversity of the Sinharaja World Heritage Site and Core Zone of the Sinharaja Biosphere Reserve.

11. Suggestions

1. For aesthetic purposes (only) it would be good to consider whether paving the road with cement blocks is the most appropriate form of road paving in a rainforest environment for the future. Also it should be considered whether roots would cause the cement paving stones to be dislodged with time making the renovations redundant. These technical decisions should, however, be taken with advice from a competent engineer/person with expertise in this field who would consider the aesthetic aspects as well as the durability of the road paving and costs which are not addressed in this report.

2. Prof. Gunatilleke has already suggested to the forester at the Sinharaja forest (Mr. Wattegama) some remedial measures to preserve and enhance the biodiversity along the road in question. These measures could be implemented.

3. Expedite the formalization of the mandatory Management Committee of the Sinharaja Biosphere Reserve (as agreed to by the FD) with relevant key stakeholders including communities in the Transition Zone of the Sinharaja Biosphere Reserve. This will enable communication, consultation, information and concurrence for development work as expected from a Biosphere Reserve within the UNESCO World Network of Biosphere Reserves. This in turn will reduce the misunderstandings and misconceptions that could arise with regard to any development work associated with the Sinharaja National Heritage Wilderness Area, due to its high biological value and international recognition, and hence of concern to the conservation community.

Name and signature of the observers

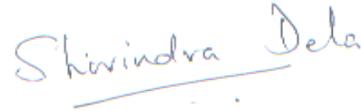
Name: **Prof. I A U N Gunatilleke**

Signature:



Name: **Dr Jinie Dela**

Signature:



Note on the Reviewers:

Prof IAUN Gunatilleke has been involved intensively with floristic research in the Sinharaja Forest Reserve since the early 1970s. Consequently, his work together with those of Prof. Savitri Gunatilleke greatly contributed to the declaration of the Sinharaja Forest as a World Heritage Site in 1988. They have been responsible for the long-term floristic monitoring of this forest as part of a global network of forest research plots, by which long-term studies on the diversity and functioning of forests was carried out under the sponsorship of the Centre for Tropical Forest Science (CTFS) of the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI). The results of these studies have been used for teaching and research training for both local and overseas interest groups in accordance with DESD Programme of UNESCO. He was a member of the National Man and the Biosphere Committee (which is currently being reconstituted) and is a member of the National Experts Committee on Biodiversity convened by the Ministry of Mahaweli Development and Environment.

Dr Jinie Dela was the Consultant appointed by the National Man and the Biosphere Committee of the National Science Foundation for preparation of the mandatory Periodic Review Reports on the Sinharaja Biosphere Reserve (SBR) submitted to UNESCO in 2003 and 2013. These entailed detailed reporting of how the SBR contributed to promotion of biodiversity conservation, sustainable development, and logistic support (through education, research and monitoring) as required of a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, as well as its management/ administration and links to community participation. She is a field biologist with experience of working in wet zone forests, was a member of the National Man and the Biosphere Committee, and is also a member of the National Experts Committee on Biodiversity convened by the Ministry of Mahaweli Development and Environment.