

Chased by a marsh crocodile.

This incident occurred at the start of my career.

The Wilpattu National Park was divided into eight divisions. I had started as a Third Grade Ranger in one of those divisions, called 'Pomparippuwa'. In those days we were not assigned vehicles for field work by the Sri Lankan government. We were left with the choices of cycling or walking.

Anyways, an old paddy field was located at the pathway which rendered it virtually impossible for a vehicle to cross over it. In addition, this pathway also composed of a sandy area of about 20 square kilometers which caused any vehicle to sink into the earth.

Normally, when we conduct a raid, the suspects will have to be brought before the court. In those days, we could only obtain a vehicle from the main entrance at Wilpattu National Park to transfer any suspects before the court. Thereafter, we had to walk when called upon the day of the hearing to the court on foot.

A 46-kilometer distance separated the Pomparippu area, where I was assigned, to the entrance of the Wilpattu National Park. We walked this distance every morning the day we were to be present at court. We only carried a backpack with documents and other necessities. We would stop for a quick rest and refresh at the Thalawila bungalow, located 7 kilometers from Pomparippuwa, before embarking on the remaining 39-kilometre walk to the entrance at Wilpattu, whose area was known as 'Hunuwilagama'.

A 'Kokariya Wila' (water tank) was located along the path after passing the Thalawila bungalow. This tank consisted of brackish water. The road in this area was particularly sandy, which resulted in your legs sinking into the ground.

One such morning, I embarked on the journey to present myself at court. At around 6:00 am I found myself at the Kokariya Wila. The day had barely begun to break and all I had in my possession were a few 'thunder flashes' used to intimidate and chase away wild elephants. All around me, there was not a soul in sight.

I barely noticed the huge Marsh Crocodile basking nearby. When I passed, the enormous reptile, around fifteen meters in length, jumped awake and charged at me. I was fortunate enough to barely avoid its closing jaws. I forced my legs to run as fast as possible on the sinking path, I looked around to see this ferocious beast still chasing me which filled me with even more terror. With all

the energy I could muster, I was able to put some distance between me and the fearsome predator. Looking back, I reckon this enormous crocodile chased me for more that eighteen meters.

Ever since, whenever I found myself on that path, I always kept an ever-wary eye for any crocodiles.

Vehan Sahanjith Weragama



Vehan Sahanjith Weragama joined the Department of Wildlife Conservation on November 1981, as a 3rd Grade Ranger when he was less than 20 years of age. After passing his 1st and 2nd efficiency barrier exams, today, he serves as an Assistant Secretary of the Anuradhapura Division. His loving family consists of his wife, daughter and son. They reside in at Galagedara in Kandy, whereas Mr. Weragama conducts his duties while staying in the Anuradhapura quarters.

Kahalle Pallekele Sanctuary

Kahalle Palle Kele Sanctuary is spread over the Kalagam Palata, Palagala and Kekirawa Divisional Secretariat Divisions in the Anuradhapura District of the North Central Province and the Galgamuwa and Polpithigama Divisional Secretariat Divisions of the Kurunegala District in the North Western Province. The boundary of the Matale District of the Central Province is located in the south east direction of this sanctuary.

The total land area is 216.9 square kilometers or 26690 hectares, which was declared on 1st July, 1980. Due to its location, settlements are located around the sanctuary and Hakwatuna Oya and Siyambalangamuwa Lake are also located in this vicinity. The road from Ibbangamuwa to Moragollagama *via* Polpithigama and the road from Galewela to Negama are the main access roads to the sanctuary. There are a number of by roads connecting Madatugama and Kekirawa via kalawewa are located in associate with this sanctuary.

The sanctuary was established in the vicinity of Hakwatuna Oya, Kalawewa and Balalu Oya with the aim of providing habitat to wildlife including wild elephants that have lost their habitats due to agricultural activities, settlements and development activities in the area under the Mahaweli 'H' Zone.

Kahalle Palle Kele Sanctuary is rich in biodiversity in terms of its size. Public lands as well as private lands may be located in a sanctuary declared under the Fauna and Flora Ordinance. However, if any construction or development work is to be carried out on such private lands, the approval of the Director General of the Department of Wildlife should be obtained.

There are about 50 villages in the Kahalle Palle Kele Sanctuary and many villages around the sanctuary boundary. All these villages existed before the declaration of the sanctuary. These ancient villages are located in the vicinity of small lakes and home gardens such as coconut, banana and fruit are also cultivated here. The Ritigala reserve is also located close to this sanctuary.

The climate of the sanctuary is dry throughout the year and the annual temperature of the sanctuary is around 32 degrees Celsius. Rainfall occurs during the months of April-May and October-November of the year and there is a long dry climate from June to the end of September. Monsoon rains from November to January. Annual rainfall is between 1450 mm and 1650 mm.

There are four main streams in the Kahale Palle Kele Sanctuary. Moragolla Oya flows into Kalawewa from the eastern slope of Kahalla. Hakwatuna Oya flows from the southern slope and Mee Oya flows from the western slope of Pallekele. The main source of water here is Siyambalangama Oya. In addition, many tanks such as Balalu Wewa, Bogahapattuwa Wewa,

Adiyagala Wewa, Divul Wewa, Ulpath Wewa, Rambewa Wewa and Millagoda Wewa have been constructed for agricultural purposes.



Kala wewa

The sanctuary is home to 256 species of plants, including high canopy primary forests, low canopy mountain ranges, middle tier forests, shrubbery, wetlands, paddy fields, and mountain ecosystems. A large number of species associated with these ecosystems are found here.



Many species of mammals, fish, reptiles, amphibians, birds, butterflies, insects and mollusks are found here. Elephants, bears, black monkeys, leopards mouse deer,,loris and pangalin are endangered species. Deer, sambur, wild buffalo, fox, toddy cat, mongoose, porcupine and giant squirrel are some of the other species that live here. The Kahalle Palle Kele Sanctuary is home to 150-200 elephants and about 10 tuskers. Abandoned chenas, tanks and teak plantations are the favorite habitats of the elephants. During the day, elephants roam freely in the shade of trees in the bush.



In the evening they come to the grasslands in the lakes and meet the water requirement from the lakes. The grasslands as well as the teak plantations provide them with excellent food.

The sanctuary is home to a large herd of deer and several herds of sambur. They can be found in the lower layer forest as well as in the upper layer forest. Seven or eight leopards as well as several bears live here. About 427 species of birds are recorded in Sri Lanka, of which about 189 are migratory birds. There are about 236 species of migratory birds living in Sri Lanka, 34 of which are endemic to Sri Lanka. Many native as well as migratory birds can be identified in the Kahalle Palle Kele Sanctuary. Many of these bird species can be found in the primary forests. Chena lands, scrublands, wetlands and reservoirs are their habitats.

About 171 species of reptiles are recorded in Sri Lanka, of which about 75 are endemic. Many species of reptiles can be seen in the Kahalle Palle Kele Sanctuary and many endemic species are endangered. Among 45% of all species endemic to Sri Lanka are reptiles. Star tortoises, lizard species as well as water monitor, iguana, crocodile as well as gecko species can be seen here. There are also many species of snakes such as sand viper, python and cobra.

One hundred seven (82) species of fish are recorded in Sri Lanka. Of these, 20 species are recorded from the Kahalle Palle Kele Sanctuary and 4 of them are endemic species. Forty-seven (47) species of butterflies are found in the jungles of Kahalle Palle. Five (5) of them are endemic species and 3 species are endangered. Blue Moment, Common Banded Peacock, Blue Admiral are some of the endangered species. Common Indian Crow, Bush Grown are endemic species found here. Many of these butterfly species are also found in the scrubland in the sanctuary.

Kahalle Palle Kele Sanctuary is a very important sanctuary located between the North Western and North Central Provinces. The sanctuary is home to a wide variety of species, including elephants, and consists of a number of wildlife-friendly ecosystems.



The main threat to the sanctuary is the use of the land for agriculture. Clearing of the forest by the settlers pose a threat to wildlife habitats as well as exacerbate the human-elephant conflict. Cattle are being sent to sanctuary, leaving elephants and other wildlife facing food shortages.

Also, although poaching in the sanctuary is prohibited under the *Fauna and Flora Protection Ordinance*, poaching is still practiced here at least occasionally. There are many medicinal plants in this sanctuary. Among them are Sandalwood, Aralu, Bulu, Mee, Olinda, Elabatu, Elanedun, Wadakaha, Rasakida, Kohomba, Aloe vera, Adathoda, Kapu Kinissa, Venivel, Watake and Walkaduru. Unauthorized activities such as sand mining, felling of trees for firewood, etc., cause damage to the natural resources of the sanctuary and their depletion. Attempts to use the sanctuary

for various development activities and attempts to encroach on the sanctuary are another threat to the sanctuary.

Unlike National Parks, there are no provisions in the Fauna and Flora Protection Ordinance for tourism in the sanctuaries. A sanctuary is a place where wildlife habitats are protected. Doing anything that could harm wildlife habitats in a sanctuary, destroying nests, destroying chicks and eggs, and killing animals is strictly prohibited.



Wilpattu National Park

Wildlife Reserve areas in Sri Lanka were declared under the Fauna and Flora Protection Ordinance in 1938. The wildlife reserves are divided into several categories.

- 1) National Parks
- 2) Strict nature reserves
- 3) Nature Reserves
- 4) Sanctuaries

The first three sections include only government lands and are known as "National Reserves". A sanctuary can include both government and private lands. Currently, about fourteen percent of the island's total land area is declared as "wildlife reserves."

Of these protected areas, the National Parks are the closest to the public. This is because the public has been provided with the necessary facilities to see and enjoy the animals that live in them. There are twenty-six national parks in Sri Lanka. Wilpattu Park is also considered a "National Reserve" as it includes only government lands. The distance from Colombo to Wilpattu National Park is about 180 km.



Park entrance



Park head office

The "Villu" is land that is too swampy to cultivate. This low-lying area is surrounded by an elevated area like a high wall and in the middle is flooded during the rainy season. "Pattu" is a set of villages,

several sub- divisions or divisions. Accordingly, this area is called "Wilpattu" due to the presence of many villus.



Kala Villu.

Wilpattu is divided into two sections for ease of management.

- 1) Wilpattu National Park
- 11) Wilpattu North Sanctuary

The area of Wilpattu National Park is 131667.1 hectares. The extent of Wilpattu North Sanctuary is 624 hectares.

These lands are generally grasslands, jungles, sand dunes, lakes and tanks. During the months of January-February is a dry season while it experiences inter-monsoon rains from March to April. From May to early September there is a wet dry climate with a long dry season. Then it rains for the whole period from September to December. The average annual temperature is 27 Celsius while annual rainfall is 1000 mm.

There are about 40 Villus within the Wilpattu. These are mostly freshwater bodies. Some of these are saline, although not superficially associated with the sea. The wide sloping beaches around the villus are home to a wide variety of aquatic birds and mammals and are called valuable "feeding areas." These are known as the main villus.

The swamps in the Wilpattu National Park can be defined as the flood plains separated from the periodically dry rivers. It has been identified that the limestone located in an area of approximately 24 km from the coast is different from the limestone found in the Jaffna Peninsula. The western strip of the lowlands is also composed of sea sand and is rich in sedimentary rocks. The sand and

red clay rocks between Palagathurai and Kudiramalai are also rarely found in other parts of Sri Lanka. The central area is abundant with natural water holes and Villus.

The soil in the western hemisphere is very barren with reddish-yellow markings. It is low in organic and mineral substances. The soil in the eastern region is fertile and contains mineral deposits. They are reddish-brown in colour.



Point Kudiramalai

Geographically, it is located 30 km west of Anuradhapura on the North-West coast. It also extends across the border between the North Western Province and the North Central Province. It is bounded on the north by the Modaragam Aru, on the south by the Kala Oya, on the west by the Portuguese and Dutch bays, and by the open sea. The sanctuary, from the coast to the interior, located entirely within the Northern Province. It is adjacent to the park and is separated by the Modaragam Aru.

Wilpattu is also considered as a historical land of Sri Lankans. That is with the accidental landing of Prince Vijaya at the port of Thambipanni or Kudiramalai, a border of Wilpattu. Accordingly, not only the origin of the island's settlements but also the foundation of the state culture may have fallen in this area. Wilpattu in Anuradhapura, Puttalam and Mannar districts is rich in ancient ruins, legends and folklore.



Ruins of the kuveni's palace

According to legends, the ruins of the palace of Kuveni who wed to Prince Vijaya can be seen today in the "Kali Villu" area. According to a book authored by Ven. Ellawala Medhananda Thero, the palace where King Saliya, the son of King Dutugemunu, and his bride Ashokamala, who lived two thousand years ago, are said to have lived, the water pools, the ruins of the royal pavilions, etc., are also still exist at the Weerangoda and Galbendi Thiraya areas in the northeastern part of Maradanmaduwa. Namely, the kingdom of Viladagoda, built around 161-131 BC, is also located in this area. This Kingdom is located at Aluthgama Junction, about 17 miles from Puttalam-Anuradhapura Road, at the border of the Wilpattu Sanctuary. This is a special place as there are many historical Buddhist relics here including the "Viladagoda" temple built by Prince Saliya. There are also stone pillars, caves of various sizes, cave drips and monolithic inscriptions in Brahmi script etc.

The Pomparippu area which belongs to the Wilpattu National Park is also an area with archaeological importance. The reasons primarily influenced for the selection of the area for excavations are:

- 1) It is located very close to the Indian mainland and therefore, to obtain reliable data on what happened during the cultural periods of the island due to the constant cultural and trade relations between the two areas from via the harbour and the north Indian coast.
- 11) Ecological similarity that have frequently caused the migration and establishment of settlement of the agricultural communities.

The area near the west coast of the northern part of the island is known as a prehistoric cemetery. This is a protected area located in the dry zone and can also be reached by a road from Puttalam to Ilavankulam. It is bound Kala Oya by south and the ancient Galge Vihara by the east. Most of the cemeteries in Pomiparippu are extensive. Excavations have also unearthed potteries with ashes. Through this research it was possible to get some idea of the technical knowledge of the people at that era. The ruins of an ancient temple at Point Kudiramalai have also been found and the ruins of the Palagathurai harbor used for shipping have also been found. Today, there is an ancient church that holds annual rituals. From the above information it can be seen that a lot of important historical records and monumental inscriptions and ancient fields, monuments and human cultural objects are hidden in the Wilpattu area. Therefore, Wilpattu National Park is one of the oldest and most important protected areas in Sri Lanka.

In terms of flora and fauna, due to the forests in the Western side, bushes, grasslands, and villus in the middle of the park and drainage systems in the center of the park, there is high biodiversity and ecological value here. It is home to 31 species of mammals, including *Rhodentia* sp. and *Chiroptera*

sp., endangered mammals including elephants, bears, leopards and wild buffaloes. Among the herbivores, the elephant is the least densely populated, followed by the spotted deer. It is around 3,500 in numbers. Meanwhile, under the sanctuary management of the National Park, attempts have recently been made to make the elephant habitats suitable (enrich) for the animals by cultivating grasses etc. Also, populations of local and migratory birds can be seen here.



Considering the vegetation in this area, there are 3 types of vegetation namely coastal grassland, lowland and coastal vegetation. About 73% of the park is forested or scrublands and the rest is open habitat. The coast is about 5 Km in extent and is a low-lying area while rainforests can be found in the middle with grown trees.

The major western endemic plant species in the park are *phoenix* sp., unchi, thelkaduru, kolon, Wewarana, Halmilla, Satin, Lolu, Ebony, Daluk, Weera, Palu, Kon, Mahadan, Milla, Kirikon etc. Shrubs include Heerassa, Damaniya, Bu Kombe, Karapincha, Nelli, Ulkenda and Kukurumana. Grasses and herbs can be identified as thora, mayura grass, heen grass etc.

The Wilpattu National Park, which has such an aesthetic and historical value, has suffered some damage due to terrorist activities in the past but improved roads built for military purposes, illegal logging and poaching. Expansion of settlements also threatened the integrity of the park and the invasive vegetation in the rehabilitated Maha Andaragollewa and Mahawewa reservoirs was detrimental to wildlife.

Moreover, Wilpattu National Park is managed by the park headquarters at Hunuwila village while eco-tourism activities are also successfully implemented.