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## Biodiversity for Ethnic Harmony

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By Malaka Rodrigo

[For the first time since the launch of the programme “Preserve Heritage for Tomorrow” in 2006, students from the north get a chance to learn about the amazing biodiversity of the Sinharaja rainforest](#)

In the silence after an unexpected downpour at Sinharaja Rainforest, the birds that had taken refuge in the thick foliage started coming out one by one. The Orange-billed Babbler was one of the first to be spotted. “Enna kuruvi (what’s that bird?)” queried a puzzled lad pointing at the reddish bird. “Rathu demalichcha” came the answer from one of the instructors, understanding the question only by her body language. Asokan, a coordinator of the programme translated the name to Tamil, so that the student could identify it. But no matter- despite the language hitches, this group of Jaffna students was fascinated by the amazing rainforest biodiversity unfolding before them.

The Sinharaja Tropical Rainforest is the most famous wilderness in the country. “I have long dreamt of a day I would get a chance to visit Sinharaja Rainforest,” said a thrilled S. Sriharshan – a Tamil student who together with 20 fellow students and six teachers from the Mahajana College, from Tellipalai – Jaffna made the trip south. These students were the first batch from the north to take part in a residential workshop “Preserve Heritage for Tomorrow” organized by the Field Ornithology Group of Sri Lanka (FOGSL) together with Sri Lanka Telecom (SLT).



Lessons in the wild: A complete rainforest experience.

Since 2006 ten schools have been selected for this programme each year. Extending it to Jaffna schools was a landmark, for the organisers.

“It is my first rainforest experience and I saw lots of rare plants and animals,” said N. Thuvaraga. This was in fact the first time these students from the north had visited a rainforest or spent a night in the south of Sri Lanka. The children in the war ravaged north indeed had very little opportunity to engage in such nature study activities. There are no rainforests in the North and East, and even the little patches of jungle were restricted due to security reasons during war time. Using binoculars would have definitely invited trouble. So the children’s fascination was understandable.



Pix by S. Sriharshan

“It was really an unforgettable experience for all of the students,” Vaani Muhunthan, a teacher from Jaffna’s Mahajana College said.

“Preserve Heritage for Tomorrow” is the brainchild of Prof. Sarath Kotagama who has been spearheading research in Sinharaja since the 1980s. “This programme is aimed at creating a generation of exemplary citizens to act as environmental ambassadors,” he said, looking back to its launch in 2006. Mahajana College Jaffna was the 35th batch to participate in the programme where the logistics are all taken care of.

A tour from Jaffna to Sinharaja involves lots of travel time, so the usual three-day programme was extended by another day. Prof. Kotagama who had conducted most of these workshops together with a FOGSL team recognized that the Jaffna students were hungrier for knowledge compared to the other students.



The “Preserve Heritage for Tomorrow” comprises mainly of field studies in Sinharaja Rainforest and classroom lectures in a wilderness setting. The field activities are lined up to let students recognize the value of a rainforest and emphasize the need to conserve this biodiversity hotspot.

The adaptations of Dip tip of leaves to rainforest conditions, study of the pitcher plants to understand the animal plant inter-relationship and food exploitation in a rainforest through the study of mixed-species bird flocks are some of the field studies done during the programme.

An activity to compare the different levels of biodiversity recorded from substituted Pinus forest, secondary forest grown in the logged area and pristine primary forest lets students understand the value of protecting the remaining primary rainforests of the country and why Sinharaja is listed as a World Heritage site.

They also get an opportunity to sharpen other soft skills – like report writing, aesthetic skills, techniques to face exams and team working abilities.

Lack of literature was however a problem, as most of the students from the north only read Tamil. This problem was also faced by Sinhala-speaking students decades ago; no proper field guides for birds were available in Sinhala until FOGSL published the first comprehensive Sinhala bird guide ‘Sirilaka Kurullo’ in 1989.

The students enjoyed most of the new experience except the leech bites. They had rice for all three meals instead of the chapattis or thosai their mothers would make back home. They’ve got a chance to learn from Martin Wijesinghe, the Sinharaja veteran who has spent his entire life in the rainforest and met other Sinhala speaking villagers, instructors, forest rangers.

“It was nice to meet and mix with Sinhala friends,” said V. BHagawathi, one of the Jaffna students reflecting that Natural Heritage too can be a tool to build links of peace in this country.