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## Human- Elephant Conflict and Environmental Journalism in Sri Lanka

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## Abstract

*This study examines the human-elephant conflict in the context of environmental journalism in Sri Lanka. The paper is based on empirical study and reviews of the relevant literature in environmental sociology and political ecology. The changing political economic policies and development activities have affected the reciprocal interaction between society and nature resulting many socio-environmental crises such as the human-elephant conflict which has become a threat to the elephant population as well as to human beings.*

*The main objective of the paper is to assess the human-elephant conflict in the context of environmental journalism in Sri Lanka. The paper draws relevant literature from archives and print media. Content analysis of newspaper articles of Sunday Lankadeepa, Sunday Observer and Sunday Thinakaran published from 2009 to 2013 was carried out based on stratified sampling. The qualitative information with regard to environmental journalism on the human-elephant conflict was collected from 15 in-depth interviews based on purposive sampling.*

*The findings revealed the main cause for the human-elephant conflict is rapid increase in human population, deforestation in the name of development, conspicuous consumption and socio - economic agricultural policies. The increase of rural habitation has resulted in invading the*

*natural elephant territories by humans. This has become the underline cause for the human elephant conflict in many parts of Sri Lanka. Moreover, the government agricultural economic policies have a major impact on destroying the elephants' natural habitat. Due to the loss of their habitats and habitat fragmentation, elephants have begun to roam around rural habitation and migrate from place to place attacking and destroying cultivated land and people. On the other hand, media highlights the human-elephant conflict in comparison with other environmental issues sensationalizing the conflict by highlighting and creating a critical socio-environmental issue on the mass culture.*

Key words: human-elephant conflict, environmental journalism, natural habitat

## Introduction

Environmental journalism is a two-way communication process on environmental issues, factors and events associated with the natural world in which human beings interact. Environmental journalism promotes environmental sustainability by responding to environmental issues through an interactive process. Environmental sociologists typically place special emphasis on studying the social factors that cause environmental problems, the societal impacts of those problems, and efforts to solve such problems (Hannigan, 2006). On the other hand, political ecology attempts to analyze environmental issues in terms of power relation (Bryant & Bailey, 1997). Irrational human interaction and abuse on the natural world has caused severe damages to the environment. Manipulations and modifications done to the nature due to endless human activities in the name of development have made a lasting impact on eco-system. Human-elephant conflict is one such issue that has arisen based on this grounds which has become a threat to the elephant population and to humans. Foucault's discourse of power and the social construction theory (1980) by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1979) are used to study the human - elephant conflict in the context of environmental journalism in Sri Lanka.

## Objective

The main objective of this paper is to analyse the human-elephant conflict in the context of environmental journalism in Sri Lanka. This fundamentally critical issue that threatens the co-

existence of humans and elephants have been sensationalised and blown out of proportions in the last decade through the media for marketing purposes. Therefore, the media and the conflict are interrelated in terms of the prevailing socio-political and economic scenarios in Sri Lanka.

## Methodology

The study explored the hidden and subjective perspectives of environmental journalism and its links with socio-environmental issues such as the human-elephant conflict in Sri Lanka. It is mainly based on qualitative data. The information was collected through qualitative means of data collection, such as content analysis of newspaper articles, in-depth interviews and review of relevant literature.

All environmental news coverage published in three selected weekend newspapers of three languages, *Sunday Observer, Sunday Lankadeepa and Thinakaran Varamalar* were considered for the content analysis. The time period was 2009 to 2013. The stratified sampling technique was used to select a number of articles proportionately from each newspaper in order to have a wide representation. The total number of articles which were available and selected within the period of 2009 to 2013 were 294. While 162 were from *Sunday Lankadeepa*, 78 were from Sunday Observer and 54 were from *Thinakaran Varamalar* respectively.  In view of the constraints of time and manpower, 75%, which is 222 articles were selected from the total sample of 294. According to the random sampling method, 41 articles were selected from the Tamil newspaper, 122 from the Sinhala newspaper and 59 from the English.

Ten journalists who represented different newspapers in three languages were purposively selected for the in-depth interviews to gather qualitative information on the issue of the human-elephant conflict in the context of environmental journalism.  The qualitative data was analysed based on the theme and concepts related to environmental sociology and political ecology. The secondary information and data found in journals and books on human wildlife conflicts and other environmental issues were analysed along with data collected from the primary sources.

## Results and Discussions

Human behaviour has become 'economically rational' as a result of conspicuous consumption patterns and the competition inherent in the capitalistic economic system. The main aim of

humankind is to maximize utility and enjoy life. As a result, human interests centralized on personal satisfaction. The media plays a role in making humans more selfish and immune to the consequences of their actions in the cause of destroying their environmental and social existence. The obsessions of modern science, industrialization, and technological growth have disrupted the harmony between man and nature. New aspirations and symbolic consumption created among the Sri Lankan middle class population in the recent past with regard to the standards of living compelled people to consume luxury artificial goods as symbols of life achievement (Mahees, 2010). These patterns have caused heavy damages to our ecological system, thus creating many new complex environmental issues.

One such issue is the human-elephant conflict which has become a common topic in the Sri Lankan media with many deaths of humans as well as elephants being reported with exaggeration including many incidents of crop and property damages. Elephants are considered an endangered species in the Asian region including in Sri Lanka. According to the statistics of the wild life conservation department, 200 deaths of elephants and 70 deaths of humans were reported in 2015. During the last decade, nearly 2000 elephants were killed by people and 1200 humans were killed by elephants. The human deaths and property destruction is a significant. At the same time, decreasing a mass amount of Asian elephants is a significant loss to the world. These incidents damage the symbiotic relationship between nature and human beings (Santiapillai et al., 2010).

Environmentalists are mainly sensitive towards the elephant population while rural population and their political representatives focus on rights of people. However, the issue should be identified on the basis of both social and environmental perspective. Elephant conservation is least concerned due to the ignorance of the environment in a context where scientific and technological advancement have prioritized economic development (Kadian & Kaushik, 2003). As a result of endless human activities done in the name of development, the earth has become severely ill and is gradually reaching its death (Mahees, 2010). The earth has become dangerously crowded and resources have started to run out (Wilson, 1971). When economic growth becomes the first priority of a nation, the consequences are the rising expectations of humankind. People are in competition for the sake of comparison, in order to accumulate utilities as a status symbol or a social prestige that is beyond the reach of others. As a

consequence, staple resources are modified and overexploited resulting in the exhaustion of natural resources (Carley & Christie, 2002).

It was identified that the main causes for the human-elephant conflict are the rise of the human population, deforestation in the name of development and conspicuous consumption. The population in Sri Lanka in 1871 was 2.4 million. It increased rapidly to 4.8 million in 1925 and in 1960 to 9.6 million.  At present, the population has increased to 20 million. On the other hand, the forest cover in Sri Lanka declined gradually parallel to rapid increase of population, Sri Lankan forest cover was 85% in 1881. It decreased to 70% in 1900 and further declined to 44% in 1956. In 1989, it was reported as 28% and at present, only 15% of the forest cover remains (Tilakaratne, 2000). At the beginning of the post-independence period, the population increased at a rapid scale and doubled within a short period of time. Therefore, the increase of population caused a gradual deforestation which negatively affected the elephant habitats.

Approximately hundred years ago, elephants were secure in the forests as their natural habitats were not threatened by human beings. However, population growth and large-scale economic developments have resulted in a decrease of the forest cover and in turn, has threatened the elephant population. Land fragmentation, deforestation, land degradation, land reclamation, loss of biodiversity, and fresh water problems have been identified as some of the crucial environmental issues prevailing in Sri Lanka at present (Santianpillai et al, 2010).

On the other hand, social, health, agricultural and welfare policies which governments implemented have contributed positively towards the increase of the human population. Mainly, the eradication of malaria resulted in an increase of the population at a rapid rate (Pieris, 1976). As a result of deforestation that took place to fulfil the needs of the rising population, elephants' habitats started to shrink. Elephants have become endangered due to a loss, degradation, and fragmentation of their habitats causing the elephants to counter attack humans by invading their territory.  The socio-economic and agricultural policies which governments have implemented also influenced deforestation, land degradation and land reclamation.  This has given rise to the human-elephant conflict (Karunaratne, 2011).

Policies which have been introduced by governments are another reason for the conflict. In 1940 and 1935, two land development policies were introduced in order to strengthen the agronomic

of the country. Moreover, the Land Acquisition Act was introduced in 1940 targeting the agriculture based economy (Pieris, 1976). As a result, the government acquired 85% of private land and used those lands for the purpose of planting coffee, tea and other crops. Massive forest clearance took place resulting in many issues that arose due to people losing their lands and villages. For example, agricultural economic policies have had an impact on destroying the elephants' natural habitat. Due to the loss and fragmentation of their habitats, elephants have begun to roam around rural habitations and migrate from place to place attacking and destroying cultivated land and people (Naughton et al., 1999). Moreover, the Land Development Act caused changes in land use, the agriculture-based economy and in colonization schemes (Jayantha & Dunusinghe, 2014). Forest clearance took place on a massive scale destroying the natural habitats of the animals. This has led to elephants invading villages and attacking people in such areas in search of food freely available as crops.

The content of news paper articles reveals that animals' habitats have also been threatened as a result of using land for plantations. Many habitats were destroyed rapidly and animals like elephants began to migrate from place to place raiding villages. Though this situation was not critical in the period of early post-independence, the situation started to worsen at the beginning of the 1980s and 1990s.

Apart from that, the Land Development Act which was introduced in 1935 made changes in the usage of land, the agro-economy and colonization schemes. State's lands were distributed. Colonization schemes were established in Gal Oya, Mihintale, Giritale, Rajangane, Mahaillupallama, and Jayanthipura in order to uplift the agriculture-based economy and to reduce unemployment and poverty. To establish these colonization schemes, massive forest clearance and fragmentation efforts had to take place. As a result, animals' habitats were affected and threatened. In Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa districts where many such colonies were established, forest cover declined rapidly. Apparently this is the main area that human-elephant conflict is found to be at higher level.

In the 1970s, before the Mahaweli development plans were implemented, many areas of the North Central Province were covered in forest. New villages and small scale cities have been formed on the basis of new settlements. Also, new development programmes were implemented in the Mahaweli development plans. As a result, most of the forest areas were cleared; forest

cover was fragmented and shrunk (Ranasinghe, 1996). Since these settlements were established, they have extracted and invaded natural animal territories. Before the settlements, elephants lived within their boundaries of protected areas. However, people have come into conflict with elephants by invading elephant territories. Elephants enter villages and occupy these areas, resulting in villagers fleeing their lands in fear of elephants. Also elephants are threatened with traps and bullets by the humans. According to the qualitative data, both humans and elephants are in a constant battle for their existence.

According to the interviews with journalist, many developed countries use modern technologies in the agricultural economic (agronomics) industry. The number of labourers required for agricultural production decreases while the production per labourer increases. Therefore, the deliberate removal of forests and colonization projects in tropical forest areas are rarely experienced in countries like the United States. The farming population in the USA is only 3%. However, nearly 75% of Sri Lankan farmers are settled in rural areas where only 40% of population can be accommodated. Resulting in farming population to seek agricultural lands in natural forests. Sri Lanka boasts of natural forests being the natural habitat of Sri Lankan elephants. The contradiction of agricultural land and natural forests create the conflict between humans and elephants fighting for their livelihood.

Illegal land acquisitions and fallow land have also threatened the forest cover in Sri Lanka causing damages to natural habitats of wildlife. The political backing for chena farming in the dry zone and illegal land acquisitions have multiplied deforestation. Illegal settlers and distribution of forest lands in forest reserves by politicians among political henchmen and businessmen is an underlying reason for the continuous occurrence of the human-elephant conflict (Santiapillai et al., 2010). A rapid increase of the timber industry in the last few decades has also contributed to the decline of the forest cover in Sri Lanka.

Environmental protection is supposed to be an overall societal task. However, in-depth interviews reveal, the situation becomes worse when the ministries violating environmental laws by influencing the media to cover up higher authorities. Therefore, the interference of politicians has caused massive damages to the natural environment.

On the other hand, many environmental hazards have been caused due to the negligence of the Environmental Protection Authority. Environmental protection is a social responsibility. However, the insensitivity of human beings towards nature is an obvious reality. From higher administrative levels to the grassroots level, environmental protection laws are being violated due to the leniency of the laws and regulations. Laws are hardly followed and law enforcement is not rigorous. As a result, environmental regulations have become fragmented, weak and are not up to the task.

Moreover, the media institutions are bureaucratic organizations which are less likely to maintain a neutral stance in reporting the human-elephant conflict, due to their policies, propagandas and protocols in news coverage. State media, tend to elaborate and bring out stories which are favourable to their agenda. The control of media and abuse of power are normalized in the media culture due to the intimidation of party politics.

The opinion of the conservation groups on the media is that media interest on environmental issues is a passing fad. There has been no systematic documentation of the nature or the extent of environmental coverage over time. Environmental issues are least considered as newsworthy events. The environmental coverage has not gained a permanent place in media or as a central issue in current affairs. There is only a short term concern on environment. That is because of the lack of attention in decision making on environmental issues. When the situation is such, media consider environment issues are unworthy.

Furthermore, in-depth interviews reveal that the media can construct any issue and cultivate images in society. These images sometimes are unrealistic but due to the indirect influence on the general public can make anything realistic in the eye of the reader. In the news room, there is an increasing tendency to create a version of reality of the environmental crisis shaping up by social, economic, political and cultural factors. The adaptation of reality in to constructed reality of an environmental issue become an instrument of social power which influenced by the elite way of reporting style (great tradition). Power of the media is organized around the great tradition, marginalizing the little tradition (powerless group) in the news room itself. When the media construct the reality by constantly presetting distorted facts, the audience adopts this version of reality by structuring their views. The media can either present or hide the reality of

the environmental crisis manipulating the audience by constructing, reorganizing and redefining an issue as the media is an instrument of social power.

However, primary data reveal, even though the environmental pressure groups attempt to create public awareness of human elephant conflict by changing opinions and behaviour of people , they experience various issues as a result. Therefore pressure groups are less likely to pressurize the government or policy makers into more environmentally-sensitive policies.  Also, they are reluctant to mobilize the public opinion via media-based campaigns and hardly engage in sound environmental actions.

Moreover, in-depth interviews point out that editorial censorship makes a boundary for Journalists in reporting environmental issues. As the situation is such, sources—environmental pressure groups are reluctant to pass information on environmental issues because of the dilemma of the environmental democracy in constructing news.

The content analysis and in-depth interviews reveal that the human-elephant conflict has become the most highlighted issue in media institutions in Sri Lanka. The issue is elaborated, constructed and reported in a way to create a public discourse within the context of power. Since there are many deaths caused to both humans and elephants, the stories are reported frequently.  Reporters tend to write the facts which are easily available to them rather than developing an ecological consciousness of what they are writing about. Many reports highlight threats than the probability of occurrence. One such example is killing of tusker elephant " *Dala putuwa*". The general public became aware of the issue as the incident hits the headlines.  However, the issue was buried with no further solutions to the issue.

However, content analysis indentify that many environmental articles do not contain a concrete explanation about the issue. It's just a chunk of words with a few exaggerated accounts. Instead of providing solid information in order to judge the issue for the reader, journalists portray his/ her opinion on the issue they are reporting. Facts are misleading so as some headlines. Headlines are hardly connected with the story

# Conclusion

Environmental journalism tends to promote environmental sustainability by responding to environmental issues through interactive processes based on popular situations. However, political, cultural, and social practices threaten the environment as many believe in 'pollute first and control later' ideology. As a result, a decline of animal habitats causing conflicts between elephants and humans have become common occurrence in rural areas. Comparatively a few studies from socio-economic and political perspectives have been conducted to assess the human-elephant conflict and its connection to environmental journalism in Sri Lanka. There are other forms of conflicts between humans and animals – such as leopards, crocodiles, monkeys and peacocks which are not highlighted in the media. It is believed that they cause less damage to human lives compared to the human-elephant conflict and agricultural farming.

Furthermore, it is obvious that environmental issues gain unfavorable attention due to the fact that environmental protection and the concern of ecological way of life is least considered. Some are consciously prevent environmental protection by avoiding mechanisms of nation control. The people are constantly the influence of economic developments and they are not in to ecological way of life. The conscious of the people is created by the media and powerful sources for the survival of elites and therefore, the general public do not respect nature as the values for nature is not inspired either by powerful sources or by the culture. Current environmental policies distance the human environmental effectiveness as those policies are unfavorable to the environment as well as political ideologies which propagate by the media.

On the other hand, political and economic aspects, and power relationships with regard to land reforms and agricultural development schemes and some forms of patron-client democratic system at local context are also responsible for the long term human-elephant conflict in Sri Lanka. Reporting this conflict in the media is influenced by the power relationship negotiated by media institutions who construct social awareness based on popular discourses. The conceptual and methodological lessons learned from the study will support more detailed studies in the future to improve our understanding of the human-elephant conflict and environmental journalism in Sri Lanka.

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