Mangroves mangled in the name of Eco-Tourism

Conservators claim impotence...

The legal jurisdiction of the mangrove ecosystem falls under the Forest Department, Department of Wildlife Conservation and the Coastal Conservation Department. Although the area has been declared a conservation forest and none of the developers have obtained the mandatory Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) from the General Environmental Authority (GEA) to carry out any development work within 100 metres from the foreshore, no action has been taken by the relevant authorities.

Aali Press Release, Additional Director Coastal Conservation Department:
Some entrepreneurs have been given the licence to construct eco-tourism hotels, but no one has been given authority to clear mangroves. We have also received reports that some mangroves have been cut down when the tourists board a barge in the area. Also, officers in that area have sent us pictures of burnt vegetation and maybe some mangroves were among them. They have not received information about large-scale clearing of mangroves through.

The issue is that, we have no jurisdiction to interfere. According to the act, we can take action against activities like excavation and constructing buildings, planting and felling trees. Fishing is not considered a development project. And also the Department of Wildlife cannot act if the area is not declared a conservation forest. But if you say there is some destruction of mangroves it is alarming, I will instruct our officers to look into the matter.

Rs. 100 million per year from fish production.

In the name of eco-tourism

But without considering the long term damage to the eco-system and immediate impact on the fishermen, many areas of mangroves have been cleared. According to the Developers, they have been cleared.

"Already mangroves and scrub forests are being cleared. Sand dunes and sand islets off the coast have been removed. The authorities have also built a road through the mangroves and the soil has been washed away by fresh water and coastal erosion. When mangroves are removed there will be a great ecological disaster in the Kalpitiya peninsula. This is not eco-tourism as we know it, unlike this is the Sri Lanka version of it, he said."

In addition to the ecosystem functions, the mangroves are vital in supporting the local coastal communities where they serve as fishing and marine species. Removal of the mangrove automatically destroys the livelihood of fishermen.

The sea close to Kalpitiya lagoon is unclean, according to some residents, it contains a layer of silt and mud, especially in areas that have mangrove lands. Fishermen have seen the layer of silt and mud in the lagoon and there will be a massive decrease in fish population," said Krishnendu, a local fisherman.

He added that already many developers are removing the sediment since they feel that existence of the sediment prevents them from marketing the area as an eco-tourism.

"The shallow sea bed is deepened by removing the sandy shore so that people can go on boats and engage in water sports. Both those actions will reduce the number of fish in the lagoon and will endanger the livelihoods of thousands of fishermen.

"The government talks so we will not be affected in anyway. But what are they doing? They are removing the mangroves."

The Sri Lanka Tourism Development Act, No 56 of 2012 has highlighted that sea front developments and tourism have a major source of income for the residents. Studies carried out by the University of Agriculture Science for Conservation of Nature (USCOS) show 48% of the mangroves were lost due to the tourism development generate $4 million per year from mangrove services, Rs. 65 million per year from mangrove timber products. Rs. 375 million per year from hunting in mangrove eco-systems and..."