

URGENT

Ms. Audrey Azoulay
Director General
United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
(UNESCO)
Paris

Dear Director General Azoulay,

Danger faced by UNESCO World Heritage Property - Sinharaja Forest Reserve in Sri Lanka

I write to draw your urgent attention to the danger faced by the Sinharaja Forest Reserve in Sri Lanka which was recognised as a World Heritage Property by UNESCO, in 1988.

The site description in the World Heritage listing reads:

“Located in south-west Sri Lanka, Sinharaja is the country’s last viable area of primary tropical rainforest. More than 60% of the trees are endemic and many of them are considered rare. There is much endemic wildlife, especially birds, but the reserve is also home to over 50% of Sri Lanka’s endemic species of mammals and butterflies, as well as insects, reptiles, and amphibians.”

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the global authority on the status of the natural world and the measures needed to safeguard it, in its 2017 Conservation Outlook, listed Sinharaja’s status as being of **“significant concern”**. The Report stated that the value of Sinharaja as a natural World Heritage continues to be recognised by the

discovery of several endemic species of plants and animals since the declaration of the forest as a world heritage in 1988. While pointing out some of the recent discoveries including several species of herpetofauna that are restricted to the eastern region of Sinharaja, as a result of well-planned systematic research work carried out over the past three decades, the Report states that the site is an icon of biodiversity conservation in Sri Lanka, which has led to a considerable increase in conservation awareness among the general public. The Report nevertheless, warned that existing conservation issues such as encroachment of forest due to agricultural expansion (e.g. tea plantations), human dwellings and fragmentation due to road construction could seriously compromise the conservation of the World Heritage site in the future. Identifying several threats to Sinharaja, the Report stressed that the management authority needs to take immediate steps, including preparation of an updated management plan in consultation with pertinent stakeholders, and implementation of a plan of action to address threats and fill management gaps. Summarising benefits, the Report states “*Sinharaja has immense global value in relation to biodiversity conservation, as it harbours many species of animals and plants that are restricted to this forest. The villages surrounding Sinharaja benefit from an array of environmental services from Sinharaja.*”

There had been several attempts to construct roads bordering the Forest Reserve on previous occasions which were stopped, and by Gazette Extraordinary 2150/31 dated 20 November 2019, the former President authorised the expansion of the Forest Reserve to quadruple the protected area to counter the fragmentation of the forest. This measure of demarcating new boundaries commenced as far back as the year 2000, and it was meant to increase the size of the protected area to 36,000 hectares.

However, while the expansion of the Forest Reserve remains pending despite its authorization in November 2019 by Extraordinary Gazette 2150/31 of 20 November 2019, it was revealed on 10 August 2020, that the Sri Lanka Army had been entrusted with, and had commenced constructing a road from Lankagama to Deniyaya located on the border of Sinharaja. The construction involves heavy machinery and cutting down large trees causing immense short and long-term damage to the Sinharaja Forest Reserve. While construction was temporarily halted on 19 August 2020 in the face of protests, on 29 August 2020, it was reported that the President, having visited the area, had ordered the road from Lankagama to Neluwa, through the Sinharaja Forest Reserve to be built within 90 days “without harming the environment”.

The specific issue of constructive this road is said to involve an isolated village known as Lankagama, bordering the Sinharaja Forest Reserve and the Ginganga (river) and the 1.3 km of road that runs through the Reserve. The 8 foot wide 1.3 km stretch of road within the Reserve is to be expanded by the Army, and this would involve encroachment of the Forest Reserve. It is said that in some areas, the road is to be widened to between 12 to 20 feet. Environmentalists who visited the area had discovered that the Army has been entrusted with the widening of the road, while the Road Development Authority has been placed in-charge of concreting the road. Moreover it had been discovered that the usual guidelines and reports that are necessary to be obtained from the Central Environment Authority, the Forest Department and the Irrigation Department when undertaking projects of this nature, had not been obtained in this instance; and that the Army had not been in possession of essential information and guidelines regarding retaining walls to maintain drainage, culverts, soil conversation methods, and managing landslide-prone areas in respect of the road that they have been tasked with expanding and

developing. Another matter of serious concern is that although the impression given is that the road is being developed at the request of villagers, some allege that the actual parties calling for the building and enhancing of the road are not the villagers but parties with certain vested interests such as tourist hotels, and cultivation of tea and cinnamon, that would lead to even further encroachment in the future.

Environmentalists in Sri Lanka including the Centre for Environment and Nature Studies (CENS) have complained about this development to UNESCO. They have also launched an online petition to get public support to halt the work on the construction of the road.

Environmentalists point out that building the road would lead to hotels and shops being constructed along the way, and the Forest Reserve being encroached upon further including for cultivation purposes, and result in increase of vehicular traffic including at night time, increase in illegal activities including bio-piracy, and pollution of the river (Ginganga).

Possible options for consideration that the Environmentalists suggest are the following:

Have discussions with the approximately 300 families and -

(a) allow the villagers to continue living in Lankagama and leave the road as it is, *or*

(b) accept that the villagers and their children have a right to development and a knowledge-based education and provide them land and necessary facilities elsewhere (*there are many examples in Sri Lanka, of people being relocated and entire cities being moved to make way for development projects – e.g. when the Moragahakanda reservoir was built; when the Kotmale dam was built – this involved resettlement of close to 500 families; in the Knuckles Conservation Forest, 1200 acres were released and the*

people were given alternate land to build homes and for cultivation; Rambukolowa was re-forested to serve as a catchment area for the Moragahakanda project)

-If any of the villagers choose to remain in Lankagama as opposed to accepting land elsewhere, then that should be allowed only on the understanding that they should not expect any development within the village.

Sri Lanka's forest cover is just under 30% and that too is rapidly shrinking. While it is a fact that all Sri Lankans have a right to equal access to all facilities, it is also equally important for their survival that development is sustainable in keeping with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The interconnected nature of life, the absolute necessity of maintaining and preserving bio-diversity and forest cover for sustainable development and for dealing with climate change have now been scientifically proven. It is recognized that protection of natural resources and forest cover are essential to life and for maintaining a higher standard of life for all, not only in Sri Lanka but the Planet as a whole. The value of Sinharaja which is a World Heritage property, in this context, is not only for Sri Lanka but for the entire world at large. It is one of the region's last remaining bastions of ecological importance.

Considering these reasons, I urge that UNESCO calls upon the Government of Sri Lanka to halt construction of this road with immediate effect and provide to the Government of Sri Lanka, expertise to study the current status of Sinharaja and the possible short and long-term impacts of the current road construction project. It would be helpful if such expertise includes knowledge of examples from other countries as well as expertise on holding consultations with the affected populations and providing alternatives that would help Sri Lanka and the world conserve the

Sinharaja Forest Reserve for the benefit not just of Sri Lanka but the region as well as our Planet.

Sri Lanka has been a close partner of UNESCO for over seven decades, and has served on the Executive Board on several occasions, most recently from 2015-2019. I have had the honour of representing Sri Lanka on the executive board in 2004 and at some of the UNESCO meetings and hosting your predecessor's visit to Sri Lanka in 2016 during the time I held the portfolio of foreign affairs.

In the same spirit of cooperation that Sri Lanka and UNESCO have been bound by for decades, I hope that UNESCO and Sri Lanka would work together to chart a path for conservation of Sinharaja for the benefit of all.

Yours sincerely,

Mangala Samaraweera

cc.

Ms. Hanaa Singer, UN Resident Coordinator in Sri Lanka

Mr. Mechtild Rossler, Director, UNESCO World Heritage Center.

Mr. Eric Falt, Regional Director. UNESCO