

The World Heritage Committee, the decision-making body on matters connected with the World Heritage Convention, met in Brasilia, the capital city of Brazil, from 25 July to 3rd August 2010. A major item on its agenda was to decide on nominations that had been made by member states for inscription of properties in the World Heritage List. On 30th July, after deliberating on the matter, the Committee declared the Central Highlands of Sri Lanka as a World Heritage, and it will be so inscribed in the World Heritage List.

To qualify to be placed in the World Heritage List a property has to be a heritage of outstanding universal value. Such sites fall into three categories: Cultural Heritage, Natural Heritage and Mixed (i.e. both cultural and natural) Heritage. The Central Highlands of Sri Lanka has been declared for inscription on the World Heritage List on account of its outstanding universal value as a Natural Heritage.

What makes the Central Highlands special as a Natural Heritage of Outstanding Universal Value? The Central Highlands occupy but a small part of the country in the south-central region. Its natural ecosystem is the submontane and montane (or cloud) forest. Biogeographers who have studied the biodiversity of these forests in recent times have come to recognize these forests as an ecological region that is quite distinct from the the rainforests of the lowlands typified by Sinharaja and Kanneliya-Dediyagala-Nakiyadeniya.

In past geological ages, with the uplifting of land and the formation of the central highlands, the climatic conditions and the land forms and topography of this part of the country changed dramatically from the lowlands. Its cooler climate, led to the adaptation of the structural features of the rainforest. In contrast to the majestic tall trees of the lowland rainforest, the montane forest developed a vegetation comprising trees with gnarled branches and flat-topped crowns, and in some places stunted trees of just about a metre in height, the so called pygmy forest. But this structural difference by itself does not qualify the montane forest to be of outstanding universal value. What is more important is that the central highlands being isolated from the lowland rainforest of Sri Lanka, and from the rainforests of the Western Ghats of India for even a longer geological period, has led to biological evolution and the development of new species (speciation).

The rugged mountains, the many peaks and valleys, and the steep escarpments and dissected terrain have provided a multiplicity of habitats where plant and animal populations got isolated and, in the course of time, evolved into many new species distinct from each other and from the lowland species. This is most evident among the groups of smaller animals, the fishes, amphibians, lizards and invertebrate species. In the Knuckles Conservation Forest for example, because of its heavily dissected terrain and consequently high level of habitat partitioning, evolutionary changes have taken place to a amazing degree, exemplified in the prolific range of species in the amphibian genus *Philautus*.

It is also seen among the plant species. For example, in the endemic dipterocarp genus *Stemonoporus*, over six species are confined to the central highlands, mainly in the Peak Wilderness area, and it has been remarked that nowhere else in the world do dipterocarps appear at such high elevations. *Rhododendron*, isolated in the Horton Plains area, has

developed into a distinct subspecies *Rhodendron arboretum zeylanicum*. These are but a few examples of the spate of evolutionary changes that have occurred in the Central Highlands.

The montane forests also serve as an important habitat for some of the larger vertebrate species. For example, the populations of the leopard in the central highlands are isolated from the lowland populations paving the way for evolutionary changes to adapt to the conditions in the mountain habitats. This would also apply to the populations of the extremely rare and globally threatened Slender Loris. So, one of the criteria for being recognized as a heritage of universal value is fulfilled, namely, the Central Highlands of Sri Lanka being an outstanding example representing ongoing ecological and biological processes in the evolution and development of communities of plants and animals.

The forests of the Central Highlands are rich in biodiversity and a great many of these species, both plants and animals, are endemic. Of the 555 woody plant species recorded from Peak Wilderness alone, 50% are endemic. Moreover, the endemic species have very localized distribution so that if their particular habitats are destroyed they would be lost to the world. Of the 555 species, 147 are globally threatened. Among the plants, the central highlands are also a paradise for orchid species, with Peak Wilderness recording 121. Over half of them are epiphytic, which means that they depend on the presence of the trees on which they grow for their survival.

The Central Highlands is equally rich in faunal diversity. For example, the Knuckles Conservation Forest, which is the richest of Sri Lankan forests in terms of faunal diversity, records 338 vertebrate species, of which 99 are endemics and 28 globally threatened. These include birds and mammals.

Hence the Central Highlands also fulfils a second criterion for recognition as a heritage of outstanding universal value, namely: contains the most important and significant natural habitats for in situ conservation of biological diversity, including those containing threatened species of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation.

In considering the Central Highlands, the Man and Biosphere National Committee which initiated action on this nomination way back in 2004 had to decide on making a selection that would exemplify and embody the maximum degree of biodiversity and of habitat diversity. Also the forest should be near pristine, as far as possible, and should be large enough to ensure the conservation of the species within it. It was clear that more than one forest had to be selected. Eventually, a series comprising Peak Wilderness, Horton Plains and the Knuckles Conservation was selected for nomination. As the Peak Wilderness area and Horton Plains, as well as Knuckles though to a lesser extent, also had outstanding cultural features, it was decided to nominate the serial property as a Mixed Heritage.

The Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources at this stage spear-headed the preparation of the nomination document with the recruitment of a Lead Consultant and other subject area consultants where needed. The process took two more years to complete.

The nomination was evaluated by a mission representing the International Council on

Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The ICOMOS evaluator (Dr Jane Lennon) found that the cultural values of the three component parts do not qualify it to serve as a serial cultural property. However, her observations indicate that the Adam's Peak shrine, the pilgrim pathways and the Galpothawela temple could, collectively, by itself, be considered as a cultural heritage of outstanding universal value. Hence, at a meeting presided over by the Hon. Minister of Environment, it was decided, with the concurrence of the other stakeholders, including the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, to separate the Adam's Peak Shrine and the pathways from the rest of the Peak Wilderness and to treat the rest of the property, together with Horton Plains and Knuckles, as a Natural Heritage in the current serial nomination. The same meeting urged the Ministry of Cultural Affairs to avail of the observations of the ICOMOS representative and put forward a proposal for recognizing the Adam's Peak Shrine and the pilgrim pathways as well as the associated temple as a Cultural World Heritage.

What has now been declared as a World Heritage is the Peak Wilderness Forest (excluding the Peak itself and the pathways), the Horton Plains National Park and the Knuckles Conservation Forest.

(The writer was the lead consultant throughout the nomination process. He was earlier Chairman of the MAB National Committee, President of the National Academy of Sciences, President of the Institute of Biology and Country Representative of IUCN. The collaborating consultants included Dr Jini Dela and Prof Nimal Gunatilleke)

by L C A de S Wijesinghe