



FORESTS:

Sri Lanka becomes first nation to place all mangroves under protection

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In a deal with two nongovernmental organizations, the island nation Sri Lanka has announced it will place all of its carbon-rich mangrove forests under protection.

It will be the first nation to do so, according to the United States-based environmental group Seacology, which spent over two years brokering the deal along with the Sri Lanka-based nonprofit Sudeesa.

Over the course of five years, all 21,782 acres of Sri Lanka's mangrove forests will be mapped and protected. Additionally, about 9,600 acres of forest that had previously been cut down will be replanted.

Mangroves are forest ecosystems that grow along tropical coastlines, known for their extensive underwater root systems that provide havens for a number of animal species. They also serve to protect nearby communities from tropical storm surges, and, according to a 2010 [study](#) in the journal *Nature*, they are among the most powerful carbon-sequestering forest ecosystems in the tropics.

But a recent report by the U.N. Environment Programme found that the world's mangroves are disappearing three to five times faster than the average rate of forest loss globally, and over 25 percent has already been destroyed ([ClimateWire](#), Oct. 1, 2014).

This is due to multiple factors, including development of fish or shrimp farms, pollution, harvesting for timber, and climate change-related stressors like sea-level rise and more frequent tropical storms.

According to Duane Silverstein, Seacology's executive director, mangrove losses in Sri Lanka are primarily driven by aquaculture development and harvesting for charcoal.

Microloans aimed at gaining local 'eyes and ears' on the forest

Silverstein said that preserving Sri Lanka's mangroves is important because they are home to a great diversity of species. "One of the many reasons we chose Sri Lanka is it has 21 different species of mangrove," Silverstein said.

The total cost to protect all of Sri Lanka's mangroves is estimated at \$3.4 million. Seacology has already raised approximately half this amount, according to Silverstein, largely from the organization's board members.

Much of the funding will go toward providing microloans and job training to 15,000 women in approximately 1,500 communities near the mangrove forests. This will be "in exchange for them not only cutting down mangroves, but also protecting mangroves -- becoming the eyes and ears of mangrove protection," Silverstein said.

Each community will be placed in charge of an average of 21 acres.

The government of Sri Lanka will not receive funding as part of the agreement, but it will play a role by establishing official boundaries for mangrove forests and providing rangers to monitor those boundaries.

The effort was announced by Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena at a May 12 press conference held in Colombo.

"It is the responsibility and the necessity of all government institutions, private institutions, non government organizations, researchers, intelligentsia, and civil community to be united to protect the mangrove ecosystem," Sirisena said in a statement.

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