

CONSERVATION

SRI LANKA PROTECTS MANGROVE FORESTS

Oliver Tickell reports on a plan to benefit plants and people

For decades coastal mangrove forests around the tropics have been sacrificed to development – to make way for shrimp farms, ports, urbanisation and luxury resorts – with little or no thought for the value of the mangroves, the wild-life they harbour, or the many essential services they perform.

These services include protecting vulnerable coastlines from storms and rising sea levels, acting as nurseries for marine fish, and storing more carbon in their biomass and soils than almost any other kind of tropical forest.

But now that's all changed, at least in Sri Lanka. On 26 July, World Mangrove Day, President Maithripala Sirisena announced that the south Asian island nation would become the first to grant legal protection to all its surviving mangrove forests, working with local communities and NGOs to deliver a range of local benefits – economic, environmental and educational.

The project began as the brainchild of Sudeesa, the Small Fishers Federation of Sri Lanka, set up in 1992 to “improve the social and economic living conditions of all the coastal, inland fisher communities and associated farming communities of Sri Lanka”. Sudeesa then teamed up with Seacology, a US-based group that protects island habitats around the world. In May 2015 Seacology launched its US\$3.4 million funding drive, and raised the entire sum in little over a year.

Working with the Sri Lankan government, the NGOs are now driving forward their plan to protect the island's surviving 21,000 acres of mangroves and replant a further 9,000 acres with half a million mangrove seedlings. This means reaching into 1,500 coastal communities, each of which will protect its own area of mangroves, and training 15,000 village women in mangrove conservation, propagation and planting.

“Much has been achieved since the project launched, particularly at a grass-roots level, transforming the lives of some of the poorest people in Sri Lanka,” Sudeesa reports. “Women and children are at the heart of this project and many have received microloans as part of the project's Livelihood Programme, which offers training and funding to develop alternatives to cutting mangroves.

“Women have set up small businesses such as ice-cream sellers, small shopkeepers, poultry farmers and mill grinders. Through generating sustainable income from sources other than cutting mangroves, they can now pay for food for their families and for their children to go to school.”

President Sirisena also opened the world's first mangrove museum to mark what he hopes will be a “new model for mangrove forest conservation around the world” – a topic now incorporated into the national curriculum.

tinyurl.com/sri-lanka-mangroves www.sudeesa.org

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Pictures, from top: Half a million mangrove seedlings are being grown, and then planted out around the coast. The new mangroves will provide work and inspire new business, especially for Sri Lankan women.



Photographs courtesy of Seacology www.seacology.org