

Rush and Reed Conservation on the Decline

The ill-fated COVID–19 pandemic didn't just take the lives of only people, but it did stalemated some rampant projects as well. The rush and reed conservation and diversification project in Horana of the Kalutara district was one such victim.

The Podujana Himikam Kamituwa (Committee for People's Rights) is a community-based organization (CBO) involved in rush and reed conservation and promotion of traditional agricultural practices in rural areas of the low country wet zone of Sri Lanka, since 1999. In these areas, farmers traditionally grew paddy. Along with it, reed used to grow on its own under natural conditions. It provided farmers with the material for weaving traditional mats, baskets and other domestic vessels and containers. These paddy fields and reed beds were essentially wetlands and were home to a wide range of species, including birds, fish, and numerous insects. However, with the introduction of chemical fertilizers and herbicides, rush and reed varieties faced dire consequences. The popularity of synthetic materials such as polythene further exacerbated the problem, by sanctioning a drastic decline in the rush and reed industry. In this context, the organization started a programme to promote traditional agricultural practices and chemical-free agriculture along with the conservation and diversification of reed beds. The CBO trained small groups in appropriate agricultural technologies, focusing on developing micro land units as a viable and sustainable economic entity, consisting of the paddy field, the reed bed, and home gardens. Another group, predominantly women, was trained in traditional crafts. To sell these crafts, a building complex was constructed with a sales outlet, a training centre, and a showroom. Leadership roles in the agricultural aspect were taken by the older generation of farmers who contributed immensely to traditional practices. The craft training programme was initiated by the elderly women in the village, who were master weavers. These efforts led to the conservation of twelve rush and reed varieties which were threatened.

Attributed to the additional means of income generation and improvement in the local environment, the programme was well embraced by the community, and it soon became self-sustaining. Their authentic products were sought-after and sold across the country. The project identified that certain crafts were unique to certain districts, therefore the Centre expanded its services by initiating a district knowledge exchange programme. The Centre also has a valuable collection of district-specific rush and reed products, which are valued at over LKR 5 million, and was envisaging the construction of a small museum to showcase these products and unique technologies.

The programme was thriving until the ill-fated COVID–19 pandemic engulfed the country, after which the products lost the market steadily and is now surviving with a bare minimum. Their hopes, however, are very much alive. They hope for the best and they hope that funds will come their way to help them revive the project to its former glory and restore the once-rampant market. They look forward to building an online marketing portfolio in addition to reviving the local market demand. This will also provide them space to cater to the international markets *via* online marketing avenues. The CBO further plans to expand the cultivation of rush and reed varieties and establish nurseries in land plots deemed suitable for cultivation. The district knowledge exchange

programme can be revitalized to train many more women students in weaving crafts and handling weaving machinery. The CBO also understands that a museum and an expanded showroom are very pertinent to showcasing the collection of unique handicrafts from other districts while facilitating the sales of the existing products.

Right now, hope is all they have.

Nimashi Fernando - Western Province

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