*For immediate release*

**Valuing forest ecosystems and the services they provide**

The ‘International Research Symposium on Valuation of Forest Ecosystems and their Services’ is a ground-breaking symposium organised and spearheaded by the Ministry of Mahaweli Development and Environment – with the support of the Sri Lanka UN-REDD Programme and the Forest Department. The event is slated to be held on October 18th, 2016 at the BMICH in Colombo and is a part of the Sri Lanka NEXT: ‘A Blue - Green Era’ Conference and Exhibition, which would be held from 17-19 October 2016 at the same venue.

“Many consider forests as a waste of land, where utilising that same terrain for other purposes can bring prosperity to society and contribute to the national economy. But forests provide other services such as being the source of fresh water and clean air. Losing these services will result in costly alternatives that can be valued economically,” claims Conservator General of Forests Mr Anura Sathurusinghe, who also serves as National Programme Director of the Sri Lanka UN-REDD Programme.

Since rapid economic development is one of the main priorities of the Government of Sri Lanka, it is inevitable that the demand for land is going to increase with time. Therefore, there is a need to understand the many services that forest ecosystems provide, both tangible (timber, wood fuel, food items) and intangible (fresh air and water, soil conservation etc.) while attempting to value these services. If such economic valuations are not done by researchers, and if scientific data are not considered when justifying the need for forest conservation, policy makers would by default make decisions that can be detrimental to society. Consequently, there is an urgent need to strengthen the science-policy interface on conservation of forest biodiversity and ecosystem services for their sustainable development leading to long-term human well-being.

Much progress is being made worldwide on valuing forest ecosystems and, in particular, the intangible services they offer which have so far been taken for granted at policy level in Sri Lanka.

“We know the ‘provisioning’ values of forests such as the value of timber and other forest products but forest services are often taken for granted” points out Prof. Nimal Gunatilleke – an expert on Sri Lankan forests. He explains that “this international research symposium aims to create greater awareness on the valuation of forest ecosystems and the services that forest ecosystems provide for better-informed decision making at policy level for long-term human well-being and sustainable development.” While also spawning a market and non-market-based mechanism, which promotes sustainable management and conservation of forests as well as biodiversity in Sri Lanka, this symposium would create a research forum to share existing national and international knowledge in this area.

Nine countries including Sri Lanka would be represented by the presenters. Apart from twelve oral presentations by selected researchers, three international experts would address the audience on the three main focus areas of the symposium and join a panel discussion at the end of the event. As an outcome of the event, a set of recommendations is expected to be presented to the Government of Sri Lanka with specific actions that can be taken in line with the findings of the research symposium.