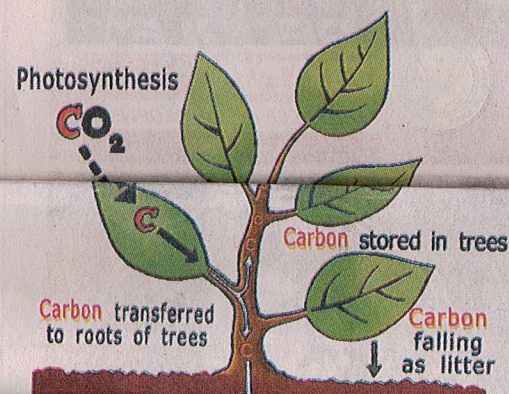


By Mihira Fernando

President Maithripala Sirisena, while launching the National Tree Planting Month programme in October, pledged to protect Sri Lanka's remaining forests and plant more trees with the aim of increasing the nation's forest cover up to 32%. The Government of Sri Lanka initiated this campaign as forests provide many benefits such as: protecting catchment areas of rivers; enriching soil quality; providing forest-based income opportunities; and providing a platform for eco-tourism, and so on. However, there is vital role of forests that is often overlooked; forests also play the leading role in the fight against global warming, which is triggering rapid changes in climatic conditions across the globe.

**Global warming**

Global warming occurs due to an excessive build-up of Greenhouse Gases (GHGs), such as carbon dioxide, which traps the earth's heat and creates a thick yet invisible blanket in the upper atmosphere. This invisible blanket traps the sun's heat and increases our planet's average surface temperature. If these gases continue to accumulate, the increase of global temperature can go beyond the 2° Celsius tipping point. Beyond this point, some scientists outline dramatic evidence that global warming threatens the planet in a new and unexpected way - by triggering earthquakes, tsunamis, avalanches and volcanic eruptions. Increasing temperatures can also cause natural disasters such as severe droughts and storms, as well as shortages in the availability of drinking water and food. The habitats of animals and their means for survival are already being affected in this country. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) says that technologies to remove carbon from the atmosphere will be needed to stay within the 2° Celsius tipping point.



# Let's unite to safeguard our forest resources

*A global opportunity for Sri Lanka to gain through the effort to increase forest cover*



Conservator General of Forests Anura Sathurusinghe informs the new Secretary of the Ministry of Mahaweli Development and Environment Mr. Udaya Seneviratne with the support of National Programme Manager Nalin Munasinghe.



The National REDD+ programme in Sri Lanka is governed by the Programme Executive Board.

referred to as carbon sequestration - has been identified globally as the most potent way presently to remove rapidly increasing atmospheric carbon.

Forests in particular help remove large amounts of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere by acting as 'carbon sinks.' Trees have the distinction of being the only source of oxygen in the planet, while also absorbing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and channelling carbon - which is accelerating global warming - into the ground through the biosphere.

This happens when plants store, or isolate carbon through photosynthesis, where green plants take in atmospheric carbon dioxide and convert this into sugar-trapping carbon components. The sugar feeds the plant and helps it create new branches, as well as leaves and roots during its growth stage. This process 'locks' the carbon that was previously present in the atmosphere in the biosphere. This process is crucial as it deactivates the carbon from aggravating global warming.

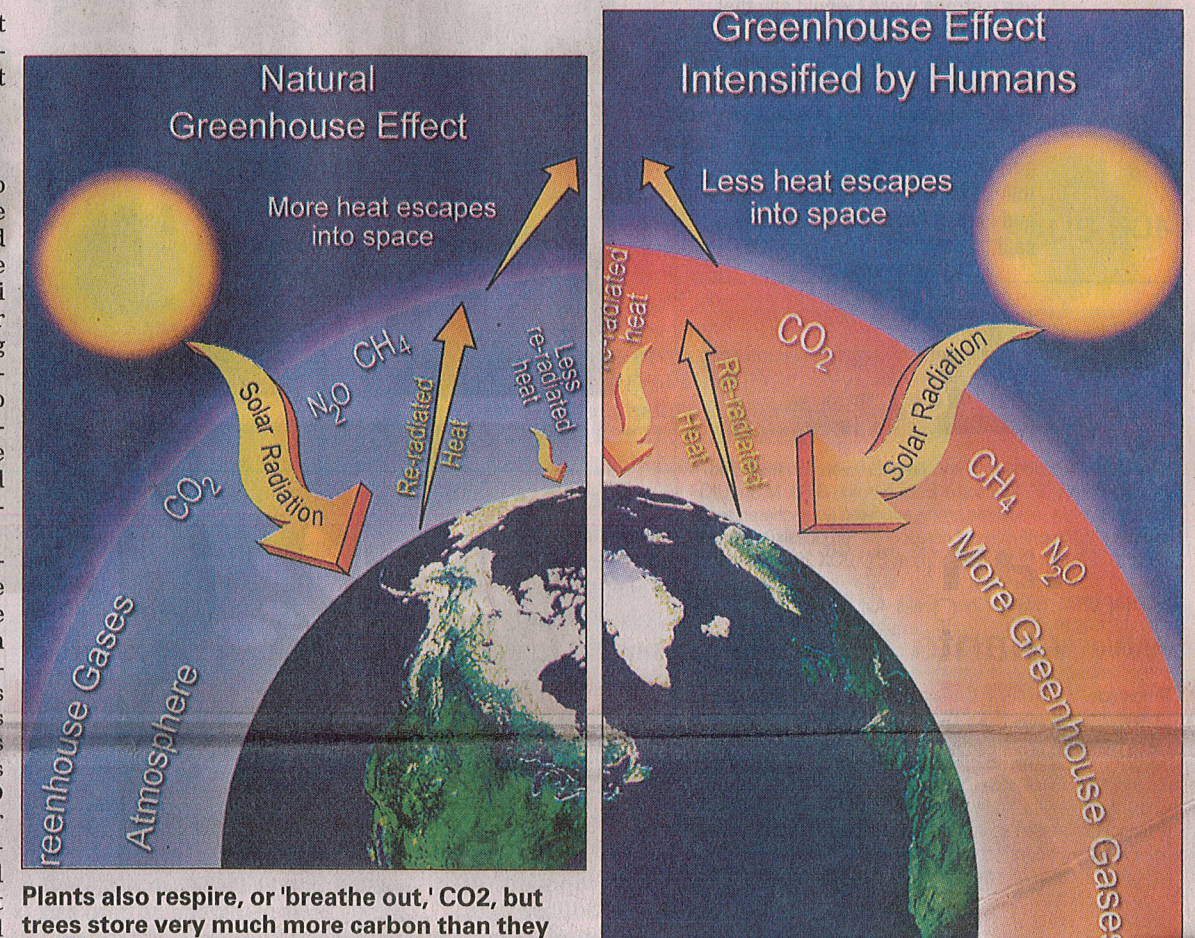
Plants also respire, or 'breathe out,' CO<sub>2</sub>, but trees store very much more carbon than they breathe out - particularly during the growth stage. Therefore, the crucial

tion, and now includes the forest conservation, sustainable management of forests and enhancement of forest carbon stocks.

**The UN-REDD Programme**

As a part of its global effort to address the issue of climate change, the UN formed the United Nations Climate Change Convention (UNFCCC) in 1992. Sri Lanka indicated its support for such a global initiative by signing the convention as a founding member. The mandate of UNFCCC is to achieve "... stabilisation of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous human interference with the climate system."

While a number of REDD+ activities have now emerged globally, the United Nations too has taken the initiative to reduce emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries through its UNFCCC mandate. This initiative - which is referred to as UN-REDD programme - was launched in 2008. The UN-REDD Programme supports 64 partner countries across Africa, Asia-Pacific and Latin America, as well as the Caribbean that are now at various stages of developing and



Plants also respire, or 'breathe out,' CO<sub>2</sub>, but trees store very much more carbon than they

Carbon stored below ground

Only trees convert harmful atmospheric carbon into harmless solid-form carbon and store it below ground.

With the start of industry in the 1700's, people began using more fossil fuels from coal, oil, and gas to run cars, trucks, and factories, while also destroying forests at a large scale in order to use land. There is more carbon dioxide in the atmosphere today than at any point in the last eight hundred thousand years. Global climate change has already had observable effects on the environment: glaciers have shrunk, ice on rivers and lakes is breaking up earlier, plant and animal habitats have shifted, and trees are flowering sooner. Heat waves caused by global warming present greater risk of heat-related illness and death, most frequently among people who have diabetes, who are elderly or are very young.

### The role of trees

Forests are now overwhelmingly acknowledged as fundamentally important for efforts to combat the climate change threat by curbing the increasing trend of average surface temperature. The vital role that trees play in removing carbon from the air - through a process

that forests perform in removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere is invaluable for sustaining life on earth.

### Deforestation and forest degradation

However, if trees are cut down, this process reverses; most of the locked carbon is again emitted to the atmosphere. Therefore, deforestation and forest degradation has been identified as a main cause of global warming. The Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) estimated that deforestation and forest degradation account for around 12% of the Earth's human-induced carbon emissions, which is more emissions than the entire global transportation sector put together, and second only to the energy sector. Therefore, it is now clear that the battle against global warming would not be effective without reducing emissions from the forest sector.

With this understanding of the need to keep Earth's stocked carbon intact, a new initiative called Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation (REDD) has been launched globally. This is an effort to create financial value for the carbon stored in forests by offering incentives for developing countries to reduce emissions from forested lands and invest in low-carbon paths to sustainable development.

Globally, this concept has evolved to 'REDD+' which goes beyond deforestation and forest degrada-

tion. Around 60 percent of the world's tropical forests are located in UN-REDD Programme partner countries.

### Demonstrated commitment to fight climate change

The Government of Sri Lanka applied in 2009 to be a part of this global UN programme, and was selected as a UN-REDD Partner Country. Thereafter in 2012, Sri Lanka requested technical support to develop a national REDD+ mechanism. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), supports the UN-REDD Programme globally. In Sri Lanka too, these UN agencies are supporting the Government to develop a national REDD+ strategy.

With the active participation of the Forest Department, Department of Wildlife Conservation and the Climate Change Secretariat, the Government of Sri Lanka sent in an application to receive crucial technical support from the UN-backed global REDD+ programme. As a result of this, the Sri Lanka UN-REDD Programme Management Unit (PMU) office was setup within the purview of the Forest Department in 2013. The programme's National Programme Director is none other than the Conservator General of Forests Anura Sathurusinghe. The PMU is headed by National Programme Manager Nalin Munasinghe.

"Sri Lanka's forest cover is about 1.8 million ha and it is reported that there is a deforestation rate of about 7,000 ha/year. In global terms however, Sri Lanka is an insignificant carbon sink, while also being a low emitter of greenhouse gases from deforestation and forest degradation. Hence we have greater prospects for the three '+' activities under REDD+ which are: conservation of forest carbon stocks; sustainable management of forests; and enhancement of forest carbon stocks," explains Mr Munasinghe, referring to this global opportunity.

### The REDD+ Vision for Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's REDD+ programme adopted its vision as: 'Forests and

breathes out - particularly during the growth stage. Source: REDD+ Sri Lanka Facebook page

beyond; sustaining lives and livelihoods in a greener Sri Lanka.' This vision was arrived at through a broad stakeholder consultative process, and helps focus efforts when developing the national REDD+ strategy. Apart from government counterparts, the REDD+ stakeholders in Sri Lanka include indigenous people, forest-dependent communities, academics, concerned citizens of this country - who are represented by civil society organisations - as well as relevant government ministries, departments, and secretariats. The private sector can also play a crucial role in ensuring the sustainable implementation of the REDD+ Strategy in Sri Lanka by providing management know-how and financial resources to boost this national programme.

### Benefits of REDD+

For Sri Lanka, the obvious advantages of implementing REDD+ include many environmental gains due to forest conservation and the sustainable management of forests, as well as the consequent socio-economic benefits that these efforts have the potential to bring in to our island nation. REDD+ activities and efforts can also be considered the forest sector's contribution to a future national low-emission development strategy, since trees absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and lowers national emissions thereby, as explained earlier.

Conversely, continued deforestation and forest degradation is hampering our island nation's rich and unique biodiversity, soil quality and fertility, water purity and availability, while also triggering the occurrence of natural disasters such as landslides, floods and droughts.

Further benefits will be added when the Government of Sri Lanka supports the development and implementation of the National REDD+ Strategy. The results-based framework of emissions reduction include: setting up of a monitoring system for GHG emissions; forest-related information; safeguards information; the management and disclosure of

gathered data; financial transparency; sharing of benefits equitably; and stakeholder engagement. All of these activities would contribute to a sustainable path to national development.

"At present we are at the 'Readiness Phase' where we set the ground work for the REDD+ programme by developing the National REDD+ Strategy with the participation of all stakeholders. Sri Lanka's forests are under threat because of many factors, so the National REDD+ Strategy that is being developed with the involvement all stakeholders will facilitate the creation of direct and indirect mechanisms to protect our forests. Many of Sri Lanka's forests are degraded and soil enrichment is required in many areas, while reforestation needs to surpass the level of deforestation. So there is also potential through REDD+ for the systematic restoration of degraded forests and reforestation of new areas, which will ultimately contribute towards the national drive to increase Sri Lanka's forest cover," informs National Programme Director of the UN-REDD Programme and Conservator General of Forests Mr Anura Sathurusinghe.

### A common platform

The international community assembling in Paris in December cannot keep global warming below the 2° Celsius tipping point without both protecting the world's remaining tropical forests and restoring vast areas of tropical forest that have already been lost.

REDD+ provides an internationally recognised credible platform for Sri Lanka to focus its efforts to conserve its forestry and gradually reverse the negative trend of deforestation that has been seen in the past. The National REDD+ Strategy development process is currently giving a platform for the Government to work with the private sector, educational institutions, civil society, the Veddah community and forest dependent people, as well as the UN and other agencies to achieve a common vision. With the active participation of the private sector, such a

Deforestation and forest degradation has been identified as a main cause of global warming.

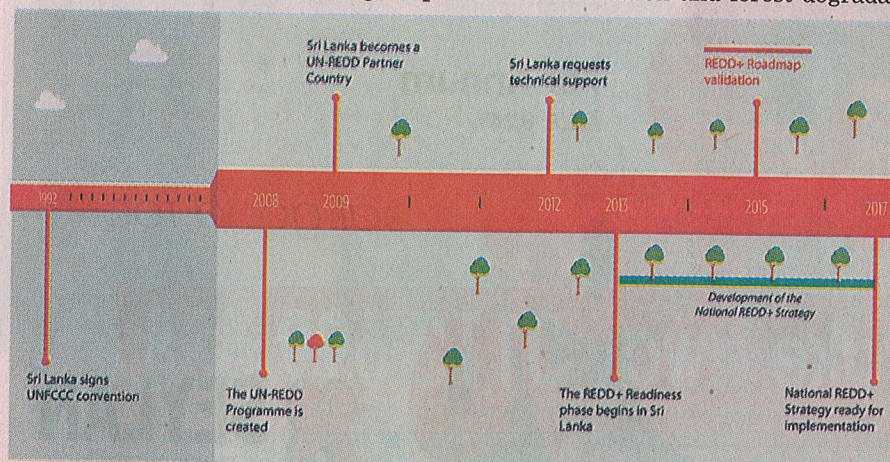
concerted and unified effort will no doubt increase the nation's forest cover up to 32% as envisioned by the minister in charge of environment in Sri Lanka who is none other than the President of this country.

Implementing a national REDD+ strategy also has the potential to bring in much-needed foreign exchange to our island nation - in the form of carbon funding - as a bonus for its contribution to the fight against global warming and thereby the climate change crisis. However, the outcome of many studies of the UN-REDD Programme is indicating a unique approach to REDD+ in Sri Lanka: Seeking funds is not the primary focus; contributing to the local agenda of sustaining the environment, safeguarding natural resources, conserving forestry and maintaining the island's rich biodiversity is the primary focus.

### Moving forward

A vibrant national REDD+ strategy requires the engagement of all stakeholders. This is not an easy task, especially in Sri Lanka, where many divides often stall unified progress in one direction. However, it is time for Sri Lanka to make a stand and project its commitment to sustain the environment as its response to fighting the threat of global warming and climate change. After all, the world knows that we are a resilient nation that is rising like a phoenix from the ashes of conflict with the grit to overcome any threat that we would have to face. Caring for the environment is an important focus for Sri Lanka as it pursues the rapid path of development. A national REDD+ strategy provides the platform for the country to move forward in a sustainable manner.

Are we smart enough as a nation to take advantage of this global opportunity? Or will we let this ship, which is now anchored in our harbour, sail by? You too can show your support for the Sri Lanka REDD+ programme by 'liking' them on their Facebook page. Further information about REDD+ in Sri Lanka can also be found in their website.



The Government of Sri Lanka applied in 2009 to be a part of this global UN programme, and was selected as a UN-REDD Partner Country. Visit Sri Lanka's REDD+ website for more details on [www.redd.lk](http://www.redd.lk) or like the Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/SriLankaREDDplus> to stay updated on the progress of REDD+ in Sri Lanka.