

MANGROVE VEGETATION : CASE STUDY OF PANAMA LAGOON IN EASTERN SRI LANKA

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Although most of mangroves of the western and southwestern coast of Sri Lanka have been destroyed or degraded, those in *Panama* have not been noticeably affected by human activities. Mangroves of *Panama* occur in scattered patches in estuaries and lagoons between *Wila Oya* estuary and *Okanda*.

However, those in the *Panama* Lagoon of *Wila Oya* estuary are more prominent. The present study was carried out to examine the distribution and composition of the Mangroves in the *Wila Oya* estuary. It was based on a random rapid field survey. This shallow lagoon is characterized with two islets (areas: 10 and 1 ha. approx.) and the margins of the lagoon as well as the islets have fringing mangroves that extend into the estuary.

There are six dominant woody obligate mangrove species in the area; *Aegiceras corniculatum*, *Bruguiera gymnorrhiza*, *Cericeps tagal*, *Excoecaria agallocha*, *Lumnitzera racemosa* and *Rhizophora mucronata* along with three mangrove associates; *Calophyllum inophyllum*, *Garcinia spicata* and *Thespesia populnea*. Absence of the mangrove fern *Acrostichum aureum* and the palm *Nipa fruticans* is a striking feature.

Human activities in the *Panama* Lagoon and *Wila Oya* estuary are confined to fishing. Also occasional anchoring of small sea-going vessels is seen. At present the mangroves of *Panama* are unique as an undisturbed coastal wetland system near a populated area. Nevertheless, a recent proposal to exploit these fragile mangroves for 'prawn culture' indicate the possibility of their future disruption.

Therefore, development of non-extractive ways such as water-based Eco-tourism in *Panama* Lagoon can be a better alternative. Location of *Panama* relative to *Arugam Bay*, *Kumana*, *Lahugala* and *Ruhuna* national parks and *Okanda* gives this potential to this area.