

Summary of the Key Note Address

Forest Ecosystem Services and Human Well Being: A Sri Lankan Perspective

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Having reached a critical minimum cover, Sri Lanka's natural forests are presently under a moratorium, which has suspended any form of commercial timber extraction and management for timber. Since 1989, these forests have been assigned primarily for conservation of their rich biodiversity that provides multiple benefits. Forests being a key component of the island's natural capital, they make a vital contribution to ecological service infrastructure (conservation of biodiversity, water and soil, climate regulation through carbon sequestration and storage, provision of habitats for wildlife including wild germplasm, pollinators and predators of agricultural pests *etc.*) and in no small measure, to nature-based tourism, for which Sri Lanka has already gained global recognition. In addition, these forests harbour important non-wood forest products (NWFPs) that make a significant contribution to local economies and livelihoods, by provisioning traditional food, medicinal and/or health-care resources, which lately are emerging even as export commodities.

At a global scale, with the development of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, there is a significant paradigm shift to include these ecosystem goods and environmental services in to national accounting systems. The Rio+20 agreement and several international follow-up initiatives advocate measures to value the contribution of ecosystems to human well-being through economic-ecological and social (triple bottom line) accounting such as green GDP.

Sri Lanka faces a challenge at this crucial phase of rapid development, set out in the National Physical Plan 2011-2030, to engage in an emerging global initiative to drive towards a greener economy. Nonetheless, this seemingly portentous challenge opens up many opportunities, both for research and development, to be aligned and repositioned with the evolving global scenarios in the forestry as well as other sectors, so that visionary planning now would avoid costly remedial measures in the future. Sri Lanka is richly endowed with a religio-cultural heritage that is inextricably linked with its equally rich natural heritage. To move towards a greener economy, while learning from these past experiences and judiciously blending them with innovative thinking to suit modern situations, is indeed the task ahead of all of us. We still have time-tested models entwined with traditional wisdom for appropriately greening the forestry as well as other related sectors and meeting our own sustainable development goals. The challenge now is to re-define the vision for Sri Lanka's forests in the light of emerging sustainable development goals, and to build the necessary in-country capacity to demonstrate its benefits to policymakers in our move towards a greener economy.

Keywords: Ecosystem services, Human well-being, Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, Green economy, Green GDP, Traditional wisdom, Sustainable development.