

Appreciation

Lyn de Alwis (1930 – 2006)

By Ravi Corea

On November 22nd 2006 one of Asia's leading wildlife conservationists, Lyn de Alwis, passed away. For many people who knew him professionally Lyn de Alwis symbolized the various achievements and benchmarks he set in the national and international zoo and wildlife conservation forum. For those who knew him personally Lyn leaves behind a void that will never be filled and a yearning nostalgia for an era that will never come back.

Most people, not surprisingly, knew Lyn de Alwis as either the Director of the National Zoo at Dehiwela or the Director of Wildlife or Director both. However Lyn was much more than this. Whilst he achieved much in the cause of wildlife conservation in Sri Lanka as well as Asia, it would not come as a surprise to know that he was also a good friend, colleague, father, husband, advisor and mentor.

Among his professional achievements Lyn provided the leadership for the Department of Wildlife Conservation as well as the Dehiwala Zoo to boldly step into areas where they had never ventured before. Lyn, with the help of the World Wildlife Fund and the Smithsonian Institution, led the Wildlife Department to conduct scientific research which brought Sri Lanka right into the forefront of the international conservation forum.

Lyn was the Director of the Department of Wildlife Conservation from 1965 to 1969 and again from 1978 to 1983. During his Directorship in the 1960s Lyn managed to convert almost all the intermediate zones into national parks, i.e. in 1967 and 1969 the Wilpattu West Intermediate Zones into the Wilpattu National Park and in 1969 the Yala Intermediate Zone into the Yala National Park. At the same time he also established special Elephant Control Units to attend to the increasing human-elephant conflicts in the

Hambantota and Anuradhapura regions. In 1970 he had an amendment made to the Fauna & Flora Protection Ordinance to include jungle corridors for the free movement of elephants between wildlife reserves. In 1978 he got a Cabinet Paper passed to establish one-mile wide buffer zones to the protected areas.

During his tenure the Department of Wildlife conducted the first capture and translocation of elephants. A pocketed herd of elephants was captured using traditional noosing methods in the forests of Bata ata and Hungama and again in 1979 a herd of eighteen elephants, pocketed in the Deduru Oya region, was relocated to the Wilpattu National Park. During his second tenure in the 1980s he designed a network of protected areas for the Mahaweli Development Project.

He established the now famous Pinnawala Elephant Orphanage. Additionally Lyn established the Zoo Development Fund and the Zoo Welfare Society for the zoo staff.

Lyn also designed the Night Safari at the Singapore Zoo establishing benchmarks in modern zoo development.

Lyn was a founding member of the IUCN/SSS Asian Elephant Specialist Group and a long standing member. Later he was the Chairman of the AsESG. As Chairman he paved the way for this international conservation forum to gain access to countries such as Burma, Cambodia and Vietnam that were closed to the outside world. He initiated many elephant conservation activities in these countries as well as in the other range states. Initially he himself penned and edited the newsletter of the AsESG, which later became the journal *Gajah*.

He along with several of his contemporaries was instrumental in getting the group functioning successfully and his contribution to elephant conservation through the AsESG and independently was great and it will always be remembered. He believed that we all work and contribute as individuals but we needed to make efforts to think of all our efforts as being those of the group - a selfless way of thinking in a world of ' I ' or 'my organisation'. We need to live up to his expectations.

It was a great loss for Sri Lanka the day Lyn passed away. His immediate family lost their patriarch. I personally lost a mentor, advisor and a friend. Lyn was a monument as well as a foundation stone of Sri Lanka's conservation forum and he will continue to be so through the people whose lives he has touched.



Elephants at the Pinnawala Elephant Orphanage, Sri Lanka, bathing in the river
Photo by Prithiviraj Fernando