

Interview with Ekanayake Abeyrathne Director of EMACE Foundation of Sri Lanka

1. Question: What are the most severe problems and challenges for Lake Bolgoda?

Answer:

- Mangrove destruction due to lake encroachment for hotels and bungalows.
- Lake encroachment for various constructions.
- Destruction of habitats that support endangered species.
- Water pollution.
- Loss of livelihood within the Community due to ecosystem degradation

2. Question: What are the main sources of livelihood for the local population at Lake Bolgoda?

Answer: The livelihoods include cultivation of leafy vegetables in the wetlands, vegetable and fruit farming, mask making, fishing, sale of vegetable/fruit based food, eco-tourism, livelihoods based on religious centres and handicraft making.

3. Question: Does commercial fishing have any effects on the lake?

Answer: Yes. The construction of Crath (long fence with bamboo and cane) for prawn fisheries severely disturbs the free flow of water. This increases stagnation of the water in some areas while the increased nutrient content in stagnating waters leads to the growth of invasive species. The commercial fishery for fish and river oysters (known as 'bello') does not exclude fish in infant stages which leads to a lower breeding stock and ultimately a depleted total fish stock.

4. Question: Where is the fish caught in the Lake Bolgoda mainly marketed?

Answer: They are sold at local markets, oysters and prawns are mainly sold to hotel chains in Colombo as well as to the bungalow/tourism operators.

5. Question: Is Lake Bolgoda a drinking water resource?

Answer: It is evident by elders' accounts from the 1960's, that the South Lake community used lake water for all purposes in the past, including drinking water supply. Gradually pipe-borne water was provided to the villagers and the nutrient level had also gone up in the lake water. Due to the present level of pollution and nutrient levels in some areas, they currently don't use it for drinking but it is used for bathing or washing clothes by some communities and is vital for the fishing and farming industries.

6. Question: Is the local population aware of problems at Lake Bolgoda?

Answer: It is mainly the younger generation and school children that are aware of the situation. Some of the adults can see the difference between the old days and the present. In many areas, the lake is not used for any purposes, as they cannot use it due to the high nutrient levels. Even though they cannot explain it scientifically, they are aware of the lake situation.

7. Question: What are possible solutions for the challenges at Lake Bolgoda?

Answer: Possible solutions for the challenges at Lake Bolgoda are:

- Strictly enforce lake buffer zone regulations. Erect sign boards, and demarcation stones. Empower and capacity build the community and civil society stakeholders to take action to safeguard the wetland eco system.

- Provision of alternative livelihoods and alternative heating solutions instead of firewood (i.e. solar cookers) to prevent lake eco-system destruction.
- Changing the mind-set of policy makers and encourage practical sustainable actions towards conservation and environmental protection.
- Technical interventions, such as green filters, for every holiday bungalow with low cost waste treatment solutions for small hotels and industrial establishments.
- Innovative machinery and equipment to minimise wood waste of timber industries in the northern lake areas.
- Effective waste management and composting of biodegradable materials.
- Approaching adult community members through the younger members to influence mind-set changes and attitudinal changes.

8. Question: What is the role and what are main activities of EMACE Foundation of Sri Lanka? Who are other important actors concerning the protection of Lake Bolgoda?

Answer: The role of EMACE is to be the initiator and convener of community stakeholders, coordination of the Bolgoda Lake Conservation Committee (BLCC) and creation of holistic programmes to address the issues plaguing the lake ecosystem. EMACE has been conserving the mangrove habitats of the lake ecosystem, however there is a vast area that continues to be destroyed every single day due to property sales and land development. The other important actors include the Central Environmental Authority (CEA), local councils and the local municipalities.

9. Question: What do you expect from the proclamation of Lake Bolgoda as a Threatened Lake of the Year 2018?

Answer:

1. This will be an eye opener for all the interested parties, including policy-makers.
2. The lake will gain more attention including support from more pressure groups, social media, and social actors.
3. It may help the lake to be included in the Provincial Council agenda and ensure more support for positive actions.
4. Get attention from similar minded collaborators and supporters, both local, and overseas.

We hope to shine a spotlight on Lake Bolgoda which could at the current rate, cease to be a lake or worse, a polluted cesspool by 2030, which is ironically when the Sustainable Development Goals are to be met.