

## Rush and Reed Conservation and Diversification: Integrating Biodiversity Protection and Cultural Heritage into Rice Production

**SGP Grantee:** Podujana Himikam Kamituwa (Committee for People's Rights)

**Location:** Ingiriya, Kalutara District, southwestern Sri Lanka

**Ecosystem Type:** Freshwater wetlands

**Biodiversity Significance:** Global 200 EcoRegion 172 (Southwestern Sri Lanka Rivers and Streams)

**Key Themes:** Sustainable agriculture, indigenous knowledge and crafts

**SGP Contribution:** \$10,412 (December 2000), and \$30,487 (December 2002)

### Background

The wet zone in southwestern Sri Lanka has long been a rice-growing region, a type of agriculture that integrated well with the area's wetland ecosystem. Traditional rice cultivations always contained a reed bed and a home garden, which not only supplied households with material to weave baskets and vessels for domestic use, but also provided a habitat for a diverse set of freshwater fish, frog, plant, and insect species. However, since the Green Revolution, these farming patterns, and the traditional weaving techniques, have been dying out. Chemical fertilizers and intensified planting have eliminated the reed beds, which had been natural features of the ecosystem, and as a result many fish and plant species have all but disappeared from the region. At the same time, the craft of weaving rugs, baskets, mats and other items has been slowly disappearing; only a small number of women retained the skill but has almost given up the craft due to the lack of reeds, proper markets and payment for their efforts. The Committee for People's Rights was established in 1991 to educate people about their rights. The Committee became aware of the decline in the traditions of this agriculturally-based society, which was creating youth unrest, poverty, and a loss of moral and social values. The committee therefore sought to restore sustainable agriculture practices to help solve these problems.

### Project Implementation

In 1999, the Committee for People's Rights initiated the Rush and Reed Conservation and Diversification Programme to re-introduce the reeds and weaving practices in the region. The effort began with the formation of 18 groups of 5 people each who agreed to plant threatened rush and reed varieties in their rice paddy fields. At the same time, young people, mostly women, were trained in weaving, particularly using fast-disappearing traditional motifs. To promote the sale of these products, the project built a crafts center and show room. More and more farmers began to plant reed beds, and close to 150 people have been trained in craft production. In 2003, the project began to work closely with 20 farmers to re-introduce the self-sustaining "micro-land unit," which consists of less than 1 acre composed of a paddy field, a reed bed, and a home garden. The farmers have received training in organic farming techniques, including wormiculture, liquid fertilizer, and compost. The farmers were also encouraged to plant traditional but now nearly extinct rice varieties. The hope is that these farmers, selected for their leadership qualities, will encourage others to undertake similar efforts.

### Results

There are good signs that the wetland ecosystems are starting to recover since this project began. Approximately 12 rush and reed varieties have been successfully re-introduced, as have been several plants that weavers had traditionally used to make natural dyes. In all, over 750 plants have been reintroduced. Natural fertilizer and traditional pest control methods are replacing chemical fertilizers, which had been a major cause of reed depletion. Frogs, spiders and insect populations have been noted to increase, contributing to overall ecosystem restoration. Several fish species have also returned to the area. The project's livelihood benefits are also impressive. Farmers who began growing reeds have increased their incomes by \$50-\$70 annually, with \$10 to \$60 more when households are also engaged in craft production, which is a significant increase by Sri Lankan standards. The farmers using the "micro-land unit" approach have also saved between \$30-\$40 annually by growing more of their own food. Craft production has now become an important source of income for the women, enhancing their independence and participation in decision-making

processes. Currently, they produce approximately 1,000 craft pieces per month. In August 2003, a group member won an award at the Designer Fair 2003. Thanks to the support of the Export Development Board of Sri Lanka, the project was able to receive market exposure at Tendance Fair in Frankfurt, Germany and to attend a workshop in the Netherlands through the Fair Trade Assistance Programme.

### **Partnerships**

The successes of the Rush and Reed program are the product of a wide range of partnerships and networks. Sri Lanka's Environment Ministry and the GEF Small Grants Programme have provided funding. The Department of Agrarian Services enabled farmers to begin to cultivate fields that had been unused for many years. The National Handicrafts Board and the National Design Center have provided critical training and assistance in the development of the craft center and in market promotion. NGO networks, including the Green Movement of Sri Lanka and the Movement for National Land and Agriculture Reform, have helped spread awareness about the project's efforts. In 2004, the Committee for People's Rights was named as a finalist for the United Nations Development Programme's Equator Prize.