

by Cecil Dharmasena

A recent interesting article by G. Mahen P. Siriwardena on the ancient rice bowl of Mahiyangana (The Island - Leisureland, 02/04/2009) took my memory back over four decades, when as a new recruit in the Research Division of the Agriculture Department, I had to work on and off at the Alutharama Research Station (about 15 Km north of Mahiyangana), experimenting on the introduction of new vegetable varieties into the dry zone farming system. This was the era of those onethousand acre special leases farms started by the then UNP government and Mahen Sriwardena (If I am not wrong he was a student at Trinity College, Kandy, when I took on a short teaching stint there after my final exam at Peradeniya) was attached to the Tobacco Co. farm further up the Alutharama - Hembarawa road. My good friend, fellow Trinitian and classmate Felix Elikewela, was Manager of the Carson Co. farm adjoining our Research Station (it was later acquired by the Agriculture Department as a seed production farm) and he later shifted to Brown & Co. to open up their farm at Serapitiya, a "villu" area close to Hembarawa. All this was virgin Jungle and the haunt of Bear, Deer, Sambhur and large herds of Elephants.

My work at Alutharama brought me in contact with these old school friends as well as the villagers and settlers and the forest creatures abounding in the region. It was during these times that I met the intrepid hunter, born poacher and Jungle tracker par excellence Saamel whom Mahen mentions in his article. He was a half-Vedda and hunting was in his blood. As a lover of wildlife and the forests since my childhood, I too was in my element when traversing these virgin vistas where the jungle tide had for over two millenia, swallowed up this ancient rice-bowl. Eons ago, these vast rice fields spread northwards to Manampitiya and east to Digavapi the handiwork of King Saddhatissa, to feed the armies of his brother King Dutugemunu during the latter's long march to liberate the Anuradhapura kingdom from Elara the Indian invader who had ruled there for 44 years. Our ancient rulers, unlike some of those today, knew the importance of agriculture and self-sufficiency in our staple food especially during the conduct of a war.

The ancient road north to Kalinga nuwara along the right bank of the Mahaweli trod by Dutugemunu's armies, could yet be discerned in places when walking through these vast jungles and villu north from Hembarawa across the Ulhitiya oya. It was uncharted territory then until the Mahaweli scheme completely changed the landscape in the 1980's when this area was termed system-C.

Once Saamel suggested we collect "divul", (woodapple) fruit which was in season. Having crossed the Ulhitiya oya we walked a few miles through the thick jungle until we reached a large open glade full of divul trees. Hundreds of mature fallen fruit lay under the trees and the delicious smell of ripe divul pervaded the air. Saamel urged us to quickly collect as much of the ripe fallen fruit as possible into the gunnies we had brought, since at any moment, large herds of elephants that were in the area would converge onto this glade attracted by the smell.

It was around 8 P.M. when we finished our task under a half-moon and carrying the loaded, gunnies we headed back. While crossing a small villu, a herd of wild buffalo got excited and charged at us headlong. Dropping the heavy sacks we ran helter skelter into the trees. Fortunately no one was injured except for minor scrapes and stubbed toes but it took another hour or two of whistles and "hoos" to locate the whole party, collect the fallen gunnies and return to the tractor

# Jungle adventures North of Mahiyangana



There was Aandemonium as the beasts rushed into the forest....(Pix. Cecil Dharmasena)

parked by the Ulhitiya oya. We had a well earned bath in the oya in the moonlight watched by a small group of curious crocodiles while dinner was cooked over a campfire on a sand-spit in the middle of the stream. It was a long and eventful night under the stars.

"Villu" or "Wilas" are natural low-lying depressions on either Side of the Mahaweli which retain some water even in August/September when the dry zone is parched and the "kachan" winds blow incessantly. During the rains, the river rises and these depressions become shallow lakes with a lush growth of semi-aquatic "villu-grass" relished by elephants. During such times, one can distinctly hear from afar, the "swish... swish" and "slap..slap" of elephants pulling out the grass and slapping it on their legs to get rid of the mud before eating. Walking through the forest on a dark night, these sounds would alert us to the presence of elephants in a villu nearby. Most of these villus are found in the flood plains of the Mahaweli north of Manampitiya, Somawathiya wila (Meen villu) being the best known. Sometimes after dinner, we would pick up Saamel and go across to one of these villus, sit on a fallen kumbuk log by the edge and watch

the large herds of elephants feeding in the moonlight. While we enjoyed the elephants and hordes of mosquitoes enjoyed a good feed off us, Saamel would take off alone with his gun and torch looking for wildboar.

The large special leases farms stretching north of Alutharama along the right bank of the river, were originally thick jungle and the numerous elephant trails indicated the old routes taken by herds coming to water in the Mahaweli. In the early days -these elephants came regularly in large herds, across the road and through the farms into the river. Before dawn., they would file back silently through the maize and highland rice crops, faithfully following their old trails. As time went by., this grand migration gradually petered out except for the occasional lone bull that would quietly but defiantly wander through the farms. We missed these lumbering giants over the years when their appearance became less and less frequent.

The Mahaweli around Hembarawa vilage was frequented by huge man-eating riverine crocodiles. Some of these giant saurians reached twenty feet in length unlike their much smaller marsh (or tank) cousins found in the dry-zone

the creature's mouth, he had frantically kicked the soft underbelly and scratched the croc's eyes until his toe and finger nails came off. In fact he showed me the new nails that had grown on his fingers and toes. Finally he was released for a moment and he managed to scramble ashore while the villagers who had assembled along the river bank had kept the croc at bay by shouting and throwing sticks and stones into the water. The bleeding and half dead man dropped unconscious and was rushed to the Mahiyangana hospital. This saurian which was a confirmed man-eater, Was shot dead some months later.

One moonlight night a few ears later when some of these lands were allocated to settlers under the Mahaweli project (system-C), we drove through the newly cleared areas. At the far end of the settlement adjoining the forest, we espied a man frantically screaming and gesticulating at an elephant standing on the newly bul dozed track in front of his hut. As the elephant charged, the man threw lighted bundles of straw, turning the huge creature away at the last moment. This grim performance was enacted several times as we watched spellbound.

"With gun shouldered, Saamel Approaches the herd"

tanks. We knew their haunts, the deep, dark pools of water lined by massive kumbuk trees with underwater tunnels in the depths of the extensive network of roots in which they would lie. During mating., these giants would make quite a racket, bel- lowing and splashing about, a most frightening performance which could be heard frequently at night.

I met a villager of the area once, just returning from hospital where he had spent several miserable months. He showed me the newly healed scars on his head and neck, a close and almost fatal encounter with a giant sixteen foot croc. After a bath in the river along with his child, he had bent over by the edge to wash some clothes when the croc grabbed him by his head and took him in while the frightened child and several other villagers looked on helplessly. Fortunately for him, several teeth on one side of the croc's jaws were missing which prevented his head and neck from being bitten through. While breathing in the foul air inside

Unable to passively watch any longer, we too joined in the fray, driving upto the elephant while shouting as loud as possible. At long last, having had enough, the beast retreated into the forest. It was almost midnight and we bade goodnight to the poor man whose newborn child could be heard crying inside the hut. Early next morning, we visited the place to see the devastation in his land. All his banana and manioc had been smashed up while the elephant's huge footprints could be seen right up near his door. We advised him to send his family away to relatives and get the neighbouring settlers organised to keep the elephants away until the authorities could take some action. According to the Hembarawa village school principal, an old resident of the area, this animal had killed thirteen people. That poor colonist was lucky that we stumbled on the scene at that crucial time.

When taking the tractor-trailer towards the Ulhitiya oya one afternoon, we were passing an abandoned special leases farm. Saamel who was our guide as usual wanted to pick some guavas from the few remaining guava trees in the farm and while leading us there, he suddenly stopped and said he could hear elephants over the small hillock ahead. His sense of hearing and smell and the keenness of his sight were unbelievable. He could smell elephants a hundred yards away and spot a leopard in a tree a half-mile in the distance. Maybe it was his wild Vedda blood that genetically enhanced his physical traits. We silently walked over the hillock and there, just as he said, spread out below us in the wide expanse of grass, was a herd of almost 50 elephants. It was a wonderful sight and we stood there spellbound. I had my camera with me and asking the others to stay put, Saamel and I crept down to get up close for a few good photos. When I hesitantly paused, a little apprehensive at getting any closer, Saamel crouched next to me in the tall grass and whispered some words of advice. I was to do exactly as he said and he would take care of the rest. Bending low in the fresh guinea-grass we crept yet closer, with Saamel, gun shouldered, constantly testing the wind. After zigzagging awhile to keep upwind of the herd, we were right in the middle of the feeding animals. Settling behind an anthill, Saamel asked me to take as many pictures as I needed (two are reproduced here).

Miraculously, even a half hour later we had not been discovered although one young female seemed a little uneasy and kept turning her head with ears outspread. Finally Saamel whispered to me not to get scared whatever happens, He stood up and clearing his throat softly, coughed and lightly clapped his hands. For a moment, the silence was electric with the whole herd standing absolutely still with ears spread out and trunks raised.

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