



ENVIRONMENTAL
FOUNDATION
(GUARANTEE) LIMITED

Report on Site Visit to Ehetuwewa

21.09.2016

Introduction

In June 2015, deforestation of forest land extending over 1,000 acres commenced in the Division of Ehetuwewa. The forest land supposedly belonging to the Lankawiriduwagama Nakolagama Purana Viharaya, under the Vihara and Dewalagama Act has been offered to two multinational corporations under a 30 year lease agreement by the Chief Monk. The Divisional Secretariat Division of Galgamuwa is 278.4 km² in extent and situated between Kala oya and Mee oya. Divisional secretarial divisions of Ambanpola, Nawagaththegama, Giribawa, Thambuththegama and Ehetuwewa create its border.

The Division consists of 62 Grama Niladari Divisions, home to 18,916 families with a population of 63,273. As per the project proposal, the said forest land was proposed to be completely cleared and developed into a cash crop plantation, including Mango and Cashew, it has also been learnt through the community that the land is actually to be allocated for the production of Sandalwood. The development had also proposed to erect a protective electric fence around the land and the catchment. This further included several water wells of depth up to 150 feet.

The initially proposed land to be leased also included private land owned by individuals in the community who have spent several generations cultivating in the land as a form of livelihood. In 2015, the Chief Monk has sought approval from the Ministry of Buddhist Affairs for the development of the land, and approval was provided for the demarcation and estimation of the exact extent of land to be developed. Although details of the proposal were submitted to the Department of Wildlife Conservation, Forest Department and the Central Environmental Authority, documentation proving the legal ownership of the land and an Environmental Impact Assessment was not produced. As per the National Environmental Regulation (Gazette No.772/22) an Environmental Impact Assessment has to be conducted for clearing the land in question as it extends over 01 hectare.

During the end of June 2015, media sources reported that the construction work commenced. Following these reports and a request made by concerned residents, environmentalists and farmers in the area, EFL conducted a site visit on 2nd July 2015. An extensive road network within the forest land had been established with preparation in place for the imminent clearing of the remaining land. After several communication events with relevant authorities this development was halted as it lacked the relevant approvals and authorizations. They were advised to follow the legal procedure in Sri Lanka regarding such a development.

As per the request made by the Ven. Walaththewe Rahula Thero, EFL gave its recommendations on the 8th December 2015 for the said development at the temple land. The recommendations were based on several site visits made to Ehetuwewa from July 2015 to November 2015. There, EFL recommended undertaking a comprehensive and independent EIA on both proposed sites for mango plantations, upon which EFL would study potential impacts as identified in the EIA and communicate further recommendations to the temple.

Following a complaint made to EFL by the community on an extensive clearance of land by the Lankawiriduwagama Nakolagama Purana Viharaya, EFL made a site visit on the 21st of

September 2016. During this site visit it was noted that the cleared area included land that was not proposed to be developed in the initial proposal for which EFL provided recommendations. It was also observed that the relevant cleared land extends 1 hectare and thus requires an Environmental Impact Assessment before clearing as mentioned above. Detailed observations of the latest site visit are given below.

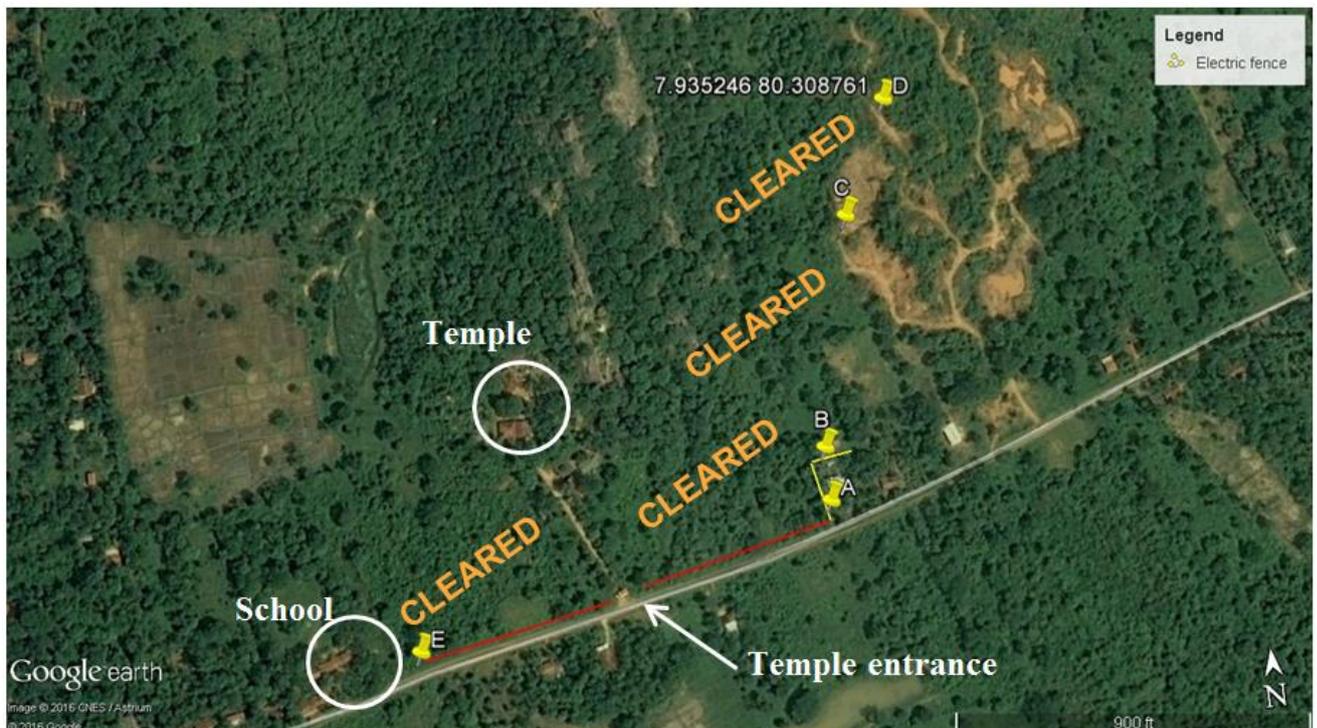
Site Visit Findings

Three major issues were identified with regard to the proposed project and current clearing of land; the unavailability of an EIA for the large extent of clearing, use of the cleared land by elephants and impacts of the plant to be cultivated in the project site.

1. Clearing of land

According to the villagers the land clearing was ongoing for the past month. During the site visit, it was observed that over a hectare of land was being cleared in close proximity to the temple. The area of clearing is evident to be greater than 1 hectare which would require an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) to be conducted for clearing of the land as per the National Environmental Regulation (Gazette No.772/22).

Map1 below depicts the area of clearing, as observed from outside, during the present field visit. Plates 1-7 show the cleared land as seen from different standpoints. Plates 5 and 6 also include images of the area before the present clearing (images obtained from Google street viewer).



Map 1: Observations on the extent of the cleared area (21st September 2016)



Plate 1: View of the cleared area as seen from B of the map in Figure 1 – to the left side from point B (this part of the electric fence separates private land and temple land as per villagers)



Plate 2: View of the cleared area as seen from B of the map in Figure 1 – to the front side from point B (this part of the electric fence separates private land and temple land as per villagers)



Plate 3- View of the cleared area as seen from B –to the left side from point B of the map in Figure 1



Plate 4- View of the cleared area as seen from the point C of the map in Figure 1



(a)



(b)

Plate 5- View from the main road side (a) before the clearing; (b) after the clearing



(a)



(b)

Plate 6- View of the cleared area as seen from the point E of the map in Figure 1 (a) before the clearing; (b) after clearing

2. *Elephant habitat*

Habitat loss could lead to elephants coming into increasing contact with human settlements. Furthermore, the Plate 7 provides evidence to the use of the cleared area by elephants (elephant dung on the ground next to the heavy vehicle track). Since it was said to have

started this clearing about a month from now it is understood that elephant dung observed in the site are quite old. However, this does not dilute the importance of the present observation of the previous use of the cleared habitat by elephants and the clue it gives on the potential threats to human settlements which is mentioned above.



Plate 7- Elephant dung found in an area cleared by heavy machinery

3. Plant species proposed for planting

It was also learnt from the concerned villagers that the proposed plantation is going to be a substitute for the well-known ‘Walla Patta’ plant. Suppliers are said to be from the same area and it was mentioned that purchasing of samples was carried out by the temple. When observing a specimen, provided by a villager (Plate 8), EFL confirmed that this is a specimen of *Aquilaria sp.* This is a commonly used commercial plant that is used to extract ‘Agarwood’ (can be considered as a substitute for ‘Walla Patta’). This plant is known to require considerably high water levels for its growth and it is questionable how the project implementers would obtain water for planting. Therefore, EFL would emphasize the need for an appropriate Environmental Impact Assessment to survey and assess all possible impacts of the project.

