

THE DRY ZONE FOREST OF SRI LANKA

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Physical perspective

The dry zone can be generally characterized as low-lands receiving upto 1780 mm of annual precipitation, mainly during October to February, and thus subject to a relatively long drought. It includes nearly two thirds of the island and is separated from the wet zone by a narrow belt of the intermediate zone.

Semi-evergreen Forests, Mixed Deciduous Forests (Monsoon Forests)

The larger part of the remaining natural vegetation in this zone is represented by the "Semi-evergreen Forest" (Tropical Dry Mixed Evergreen Forest). Its canopy reaches upto about 18 m, and includes several popular timber species such as "Buruta", "Palu" and "Kaluwara" etc. In the northern and south eastern parts of the island, where the climate is relatively arid, the above forest is replaced by a thornscrub in which low stature trees occur in isolation or in small patches. The dry zone species, excluding those of isolated hills, represent only about 17% of the island's flora, with low endemism of about 2%. Euphorbiaceae, Sapindaceae, Rubiaceae and Ebenaceae etc. dominate the woody flora.

Human interference and recovering ability

As a result of the activities of ancient civilization in the dry zone these forests are secondary and seral. It is further evident that, even when heavily disturbed, the dry zone forests have the ability to recover and more or less revert to the original stature and composition.

Isolated hills and rich flora

The isolated hills in the dry zone, e.g. Ritigala, Friars Hood, Kokagala, Gunners Quoin and Govinda-hela etc., support interesting and sometimes extremely heterogeneous flora and vegetation patterns. Recent investigations on the flora and ecology of the Ritigala Natural Reserve in the Anuradhapura District, the highest isolated hill range in the dry lowlands, indicated the presence of a steady-state vegetation, a rare phenomenon in the dry zone. Furthermore, the richness of the flora, dominated by Euphorbiaceae, and relatively high endemism of 16.4%, among a total of 337 flowering plant species recorded, were evident. It is therefore, clear that Ritigala has provided a variety of niches for numerous species which otherwise occur in diverse climatic and geographic zones of the island. Consequently it serves as a refugium for many rare species which are rapidly disappearing, if not already extinct, in their other natural habitats.