

**Displacement and Environmentalism:
A Resettlement and Conservation Controversy
from Wilpattu, Sri Lanka**

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Abstract

The issue of internal displacement is a complex and sensitive one, particularly in Sri Lanka where the twenty-six-year-old Civil War that ended in 2009 was still affecting around 11,000 people as of 2021. This study focuses on the resettlement of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Wilpattuva, a small region in northwest Sri Lanka. The post-war period saw an environmental controversy arise due to the resettlement of IDPs in the Jassim City area, which was funded by Qatar and initiated by a controversial Muslim politician. This resettlement caused deforestation in the Wilpattu National Park area and affected the ecological balance. The situation became even more complicated with the involvement of environmentalists, a military presence, and Muslim responses to the Wilpattu Controversy.

The IDP resettlement was carried out without proper planning or consideration of the ecological and spatial spheres, which resulted in environmental concerns and endangered the lives of animals in the elephant corridor in the buffer zone of Wilpattu National Park. It is crucial to acknowledge that the growing concerns about global warming, deforestation, and nature conservation have led to an increase in environmental activism. It is high time that we prioritize the preservation of the environment and prehistoric heritage over political and social interests. The resettlement of IDPs should be carried out with proper planning, taking into account environmental and security concerns. Solutions to internal displacement are heavily dependent on various factors that are difficult to control, and we must work towards finding sustainable solutions that benefit everyone involved. The Wilpattuva case demonstrates the complexity of the issue and highlights the need for a comprehensive approach that takes into account the island's political, social, environmental, and security concerns.

Keywords

Displacement, Conflict, Environmentalism, IDPs, Wilpattu, Sri Lanka

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1. Introduction: Internal Displacement in Contemporary Sri Lanka

Natural and human-made disasters such as war cause internal displacement, which is very much the case in contemporary Sri Lanka. From 1983 to 2009, the key factor that contributed to internal displacement in Sri Lanka was the Civil War. Other causes include primarily natural disasters such as floods, which are quite widespread. The two monsoons—the southwest monsoons (May/June) and the northeast monsoons (September/October)—create disastrous floods, displacing thousands. In 2021, while the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre recorded more than 121,000 internal displacements, the key factor for the displacement was two widespread floods.¹ By the end of 2001, there were 800,000 persons displaced. At the end of 2021, even 12 years after the end of the Civil War, the number of persons displaced by Civil War remained around 11,000.

This paper concerns the resettlement of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and a nature conservation controversy that erupted in the 2010s. The internal displacement in this case took place in Wilpattu National Park and its surroundings in northern Sri Lanka as a result of the Sri Lankan Civil War (1983–2009). This study examines that displacement event in relation to an environmental controversy that arose concerning post-war resettlement initiatives. Though the Civil War displaced other communities, too, the focus of the controversy was primarily on a displaced Muslim minority community, which was forcefully expelled by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) during the Civil War on 17 October 1990 (Hasbullah 2015: 99; Köpke 2021: 60). Their expulsion from their local habitat was an instance of ethnic cleansing, involving severe violations of the human rights of a minority community by a fierce terrorist organisation that ruled parts of the island over two decades. When members of this Muslim minority group eventually resettled in the northern area of the Wilpattu National Park under an overseas-funded programme, clearing the forest for housing and agriculture, an environmental controversy emerged in the electronic media and public platforms. The displaced minority claimed that their family members had previously lived in the northern area of the Wilpattu National Park Forest Reserve before their forced expulsion. Although this study focuses primarily on Muslim IDPs, it must be noted that other ethnic and religious minorities, such as Roman Catholics and Hindus, were also affected.

2. The Historicity, Conservation of the Wilpattu National Park and the Impact of Guerrilla Warfare

In the Wilpattu controversy concerning the resettlement of IDPs, there are several key players: (a) The Sri Lankan Government along with its military forces and administrators, (b) Colombo-based middle-class environmentalists, (c) vocal activists of various ethnic and religious persuasions, and (d) returning IDPs. The heightened environmental controversy raised issues concerning both the legality and morality of the deforestation that resulted from resettlement. Within the political discourse in the country, Wilpattu National Park and its surroundings became a hotbed of controversy over the resettling of IDPs.

The Wilpattu National Park is the oldest and largest national park in Sri Lanka. On 25 December 1938, it was established on the northwest coast along with Yāla (Ruhuna) National Park in the south of the island. In 1956, the land area of Wilpattu was 252 square miles

¹ <https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/sri-lanka/#:~:text=More%20than%20121%2C000%20internal%20displacements,the%20first%20week%20of%20June.>

(Rankine 1956: 10). Today the land area of the Wilpattu National Park covers 131,693 hectares (508 square miles) (Gunawardena 2003: 202; Köpke 2021: 59). The Wilpattu sanctuary lies on the northwest coast of the island within the two provinces of Northern and North-central, 19 miles west of Anurādhapura, the ancient capital of Sri Lanka. Its land area extends into the three districts of Anurādhapura, Puttalam and Mannar.

The formation of the Wilpattu National Park is a part of the British colonial legacy. Current Yāla (or Ruhuna) National Park was the first to be declared a Game Sanctuary in 1898. Wilpattu followed in 1902 also becoming a Game Sanctuary (Rankine 1956: 13). In 1909, the first legislative measure of protection appeared as the Game Protection Ordinance. On 1 March 1938, an amended Ordinance called “The Fauna and Flora Protection Ordinance” was promulgated (Rankine 1956: 12). On 2 February 2013, Wilpattu Ramsar Wetland Cluster (site no. 2095) became one of the six designated Ramsar wetlands in Sri Lanka under the Wetlands of International Importance Treaty.² The Department of Wildlife Conservation (Ref. No. 2095) manages the affairs at the park.

The present Sinhala toponym, with Anglicised spellings “Wilpattuva” (phonetically Vilpattuva), is formed by combining two Sinhala words—the singular noun “*vila*”, which means “lake”,³ with another singular noun “*pattuva*” (plural “*pattu*”), meaning an administrative division of a Kōraḷa within a province (Clough 1999[1892]: 317; Carter 2002[1924]: 352). Thus, “*pattuva*” had been used as a useful term in making boundaries in the ancient Sinhala administrative vocabulary to identify divisions within a given province. The key geographical feature in this northwest region in the province is the presence of lakes (pl. *vil*). In this coastal lowland dry zone national park, the lakes, which are natural and sand-rimmed water basins, remain the common feature. It is stated that nearly one hundred and six lakes are found spread throughout Wilpattu. They perform as depressions that fill with rainwater. The lakes, being essential features of the park, enable the survival of various species and support a suitable habitat for wildlife [fig. 1]. Monsoon scrub jungle forms its landscape.

The historicity of the Wilpattu National Park and its surroundings is becoming more and more important today from the perspectives of the archaeology and heritage of Sri Lanka. According to the nation’s second oldest Pāli chronicle, the *Mahāvamsa* (ch. 6: 47; Geiger 1950: 54), in 543 BCE, Prince Vijaya, the progenitor of the Sinhalese (the ethnic majority on the island), landed at Kudremalai (Horse) Point. On his arrival, Prince Vijaya identified the island as “the copper land” (Tambapaṇṇi) because of the sand’s red colour. The beach where Prince Vijaya allegedly first set foot on the island, and the ruins of the palace of Queen Kuvēṇi, the indigenous lady that Prince Vijaya married, are nearby. Kudremalai Point also contains some archaeological remains that indicate later Hindu and Muslim presence. Most importantly, inside the national park lies a prehistoric (bronze age) burial site, Pomparippu, which makes the park also archaeologically valuable (Rankine 1956: 15).

Wilpattu National Park became a hotbed for guerrilla warfare during the Civil War (1983–2009) when Tamil separatist groups took shelter there. It remained on the frontline of the Civil War, resulting in the closing of the park to visitors until 16 March 2003 (Santiapillai and

² <https://www.ramsar.org/news/sri-lankas-wilpattu-ramsar-wetland-cluster>

³ Some written literature inaccurately states that this place name derives from “willus” or “villus”.



Figure 1: One of the four postal stamps issued by the Philatelic Bureau of the Department of Posts on 4th January 2006, which depicts the lake and a leopard at the Willpattu National Park after the park was reopened briefly in 2003. Photo by Mahinda Deegalle.

Wijeyamohan 2003: 1182). Earlier, the park was a hiding ground for one Tamil separatist insurgent group, the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE, f. 1980), a rival group of the main insurgent group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE, f. 1976). In 1989, as a consequence of their occupation of the park, the LTTE attacked the PLOTE in the park, killing more than a dozen guards and turning the park into a warzone. In 2006, when a Safari jeep hit a landmine, seven Sri Lankan tourists died, resulting in the park's closure again until 2010.

Research conducted during the Civil War observed the grave impact of war on wildlife in Wilpattu in the following terms:

[G]overnment troops and guerrillas have hunted wildlife for food. . . . In addition, landmines have also either killed or maimed an unknown number of large mammals including elephants. . . . Although the park still [in 2003] retains its charm as a beautiful and tranquil parcel of land, the ravages of the two-decade[-]long armed conflict can be seen from the destruction caused to its forest and wildlife. In general, habitat destruction and the accompanying loss of wildlife are among the most common and far-reaching legacies of any armed conflict. In Wilpattu, even the fear of landmines has not deterred unscrupulous people from extracting commercially valuable timber species. Poaching followed logging. The free availability of guns during the war and the use of wire snares appear to have had a serious impact on wildlife. . . . Other protected areas . . . are also in danger of becoming 'empty forests' if illegal timber extraction and poaching continue unabated (Santiapillai and Wijeyamohan 2003: 1182).

3. Internal Displacement, Elephant Corridors and the Politics of Resettlement

The wartime plight of the IDPs is closely related to the strategic location of the Wilpattu National Park on the northwest coastline. At the height of the Civil War, on 17 October 1990, the LTTE expelled the entire Muslim population from the Northern Province (Gunawardena 2003: 198). This included 60,000–70,000 Muslims displaced in the Northern Province and 20,000–38,000 in the Mannar District.

In the post-war period, the resettlement of the displaced persons became the responsibility of the Presidential Task Force for Resettlement, Development and Security. An initiative was taken to resettle some Muslim IDPs on the northern side of the Wilpattu National Park. The resettled community claimed that the area was their family's habitat. The resettlement programme of Muslim IDPs on the northern edges of Wilpattu National Park created a serious controversy of political and religious significance, drawing much attention from environmentalists and activists as well.

After the conclusion of the Civil War in May 2009, an initiative began to settle about 73 families. Each family was allocated half-an-acre of land in the northern area along B403 road [fig. 2]. Some of those land allocations were closer to the northern boundary of the Wilpattu National Park. With the consent of relevant government authorities, the forest area that had covered over the land during the Civil War was cleared. When the public noticed the excessive clearance of the forest, there came a wave of protests that were covered in electronic media and other public and social platforms, giving birth to an intensely political national debate on deforestation.

In 2014, deforestation in the area for construction purposes reached new heights. Trees were felled systematically for housing and agricultural fields and a new road was also built. A collection of one-storeyed brick houses bearing uniform features was erected on both sides of B403 road [fig. 3]. The new housing development was called the Jassim City. The new Arabic-sounding naming of the resettlement housing complex is derived from its sponsors, the Qatari al-Jassim Foundation, which financially supported the resettlement programme by building the houses. An influential Muslim politician, who had himself been an IDP in the ethnic cleansing orchestrated by the LTTE in 1990, had taken centre stage in the new IDP resettlement programme. Rishad Bathiudeen, a controversial Muslim Politician and the leader of the All Ceylon Makkal Congress (ACMC, f. 2005) political party, had initiated the resettlement project by raising funds.

During the last two decades, Bathiudeen changed his political alliance when the conditions were advantageous, away from an early political alliance with President Mahinda Rajapaksa (2005–2015) to President Maithripala Sirisena in 2015. In the government, he held cabinet portfolios as Minister for Industry and Commerce and Minister for Resettlement and Disaster Relief Services. Though Bathiudeen is recognised as a strong advocate for Muslim IDPs, Bathiudeen's leadership in the IDP resettlement programme, along with accusations of severe damage to the forest, became the centre of the Wilpattu resettlement and environment controversy. Bathiudeen was seen widely as a political "opportunist" and deplorably corrupt, resulting in further vilification in the controversy.

For resettled IDPs, though houses had been built to a higher standard, the resettled people of Marichchikatti experienced the lack of certain essential facilities such as running water. The



Figure 2: An inscription bearing the name of the IDP resettlement sponsor, The Qatari al-Jassim Foundation, in front of a newly-built mosque along B403 Road. Photo by Mahinda Deegalle. 9 August 2016.

new settlement programme also appeared to have been implemented without feasibility studies in advance of its implementation, and the programme had been rushed unnecessarily perhaps due to the urgency of the issue of IDPs at hand. This quick decision-making and implementation underscored drawbacks and later generated a severe controversy, which led to serious confrontations and uncompromising arguments and debates among politicians, activists and environmentalists. From an ecological perspective, the site of the new resettlement in the north of the Wilpattu National Park might endanger wildlife in their surroundings. Alarming, the new IDP resettlement was located within an elephant corridor connected to the Wilpattu National Park.



Figure 3: A one-storey brick house built for IDPs in Jassim city along B403 Road. Photo by Mahinda Deegalle. 9 August 2016.

In terms of human and elephant conflict in Sri Lanka, it may be worth noting here a recent news report in the Sri Lankan Sinhala daily newspaper *Lankādīpa*. On 7 March 2024, the *Lankādīpa* reported a startling record number of human and elephant conflicts in contemporary Sri Lanka. According to the article, in 2023 alone, there were the deaths of 188 persons and 488 elephants in human and elephant clashes. The statistics for the period from 2011 to 2023 are rather daunting. The clashes resulted in the death of 4038 elephants and 1314 persons. It also recorded that in Sri Lanka, 70% of wild elephants live in areas where human activities take place. Highlighting the primary cause of this elephant-and-human catastrophe, the newspaper reported that humans were constructing villages and fields in elephant corridors.

It appears that the resettlement programme of the IDPs had been planned without any consideration of the ecological and spatial characteristics of the concerned area. The environmental issues in the geographical location of the new settlement raise some serious questions concerning the very idea of resettlement of IDPs in the buffer zone of the Wilpattu National Park. It appears the location is, for the most part, not a practical or healthy option for IDP resettlement. Thus, the lack of good planning and implementation has generated a serious environmental, national, ethnic and religious controversy in post-war Sri Lanka.

4. Triple Aspects of Wilpattu Resettlement and Environmental Controversy

There are three key aspects to the Wilpattu resettlement and environmental controversy: Environmentalists' efforts to "Save Wilpattu"; the Military presence in the surrounding area of Wilpattu; and Muslim responses to the Wilpattu controversy.

4.1 Environmentalists' efforts to "Save Wilpattu"

In early 2015, the Wilpattu controversy drew the attention of environmentalists. Colombo-based environmentalist groups formed a new platform to present their concerns. Their platform to conserve and preserve Wilpattu was called the "Save Wilpattu" campaign.⁴ They began to raise public awareness of protecting forests on a grand scale (Köpke 2021).⁵

The construction of new houses for IDP returnees in northern Wilpattu included extensive forest removal. The local media heightened the fears of deforestation and the potential encroachment on protected forests, leading to broad public debates.

Among various groups that expressed their views, the environmentalists gathered under the umbrella of "Save Wilpattu".⁶ They campaigned vigorously for the protection of forests by adopting a very successful and powerful social media campaign. While they also used traditional media, their use of drone photography imaging technology captivated their audience. Using this new technology for the first time, the environmentalists were able to display in graphic terms the destruction of the forest in Wilpattu. They produced drone footage of the Jassim City housing development for resettling IDPs, drawing much attention to the issue of ecological conservation. Using irrefutable scientific data, the environmentalists put forth a highly convincing case for the protection and conservation of Wilpattu, reaching the higher powers of the government.

In December 2015, environmentalists, under the banner "Save Wilpattu", organised a demonstration in Colombo which attracted 3,000 people. Two days later, surprisingly, they managed to secure an audience with President Maithripala Sirisena to seek government support for their environmental campaign. As a result of their campaign and demonstrations, they were able to convince President Sirisena to declare most of the forest a forest preserve. The relevant declaration appeared in March 2017 in the form of a Gazette notification (2011/34 2017).

4.2 Military Presence in the Surrounding Area of Wilpattu

In 2007, during the last phase of the Civil War when the Sri Lankan forces were advancing against the LTTE, a new Navy camp was established at Mullikulam, north of Wilpattu National Park. The establishment of the Navy camp and the lands that it occupies have become a contentious issue in the resettlement of IDPs. Wilpattu's proximity to the southeastern part of

⁴ A poster issued under the banner "Save Wilpattu" on 12 March 2016 can be seen at the link of <https://www.cleannation.lk/savewilpattu/>

⁵ Köpke's study (2021) is a thorough investigation of "Save Wilpattu" campaign. In particular, see pp. 62–64.

⁶ An online petition than began on 20 March 2019 under the banner "Save Wilpattu" can be accessed at https://www.change.org/p/facebook-save-wilpattu-one-of-srilanka-s-most-loved-n-beautiful-lace?recruiter=936610411&utm_source=share_petition&utm_medium=twitter&utm_campaign=psf_combo_share_abi.pacific_post_sap_share_gmail_abi.gmail_abi&utm_term=psf_combo_share_abi.pacific_post_sap_share_gmail_abi.gmail_abi&recruited_by_id=e14c8df0-31f5-11e9-a56d-47f33f0e541c.

India via the historic Adam's Bridge (Rama Setu) makes the coastal area strategically important to the Sri Lankan military. The purpose of establishing the Navy camp was to protect the coastline against potential terrorist attacks. The site of the Navy camp occupied the land of the displaced Tamils (of both Roman Catholic and Hindu communities) (Hasbullah 2015: 100, 105).

During the Civil War years, the Sri Lankan military confiscated some land in the Northwest coastal area for their military deployment. The Sri Lanka Navy, for example, was not able to vacate its premises after the war in 2009 since there were still security issues and an unfinished mission of strategic planning in the area. In the interviews gathered by Hasbullah, there was a considerable critique of the Sri Lankan government's actions (ibid., 97).

In December 2011, the report of the *Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission* (LLRC, pp. 213–214) was published. It noted 141 displaced families from Mullikulam. That particular displacement was a result of the military occupation, in which the installation of the navy base required new land allocations to the IDPs. It is also noteworthy that for some IDPs, the government had provided half-acre land permits (Hasbullah 2015: 105). Interviews 20 and 21 in Hasbullah's study (ibid., 106–107) state that one IDP lives with her daughter in a house constructed by the Sri Lankan Navy and another IDP family lives in a Navy-constructed house.

From July to August 2015, Hasbullah conducted 47 interviews and published them in 2015 with scripts of 23 IDP testimonies concerning the Muslim IDPs in the Musali area of Wilpattu. Some of the IDP testimonies in Hasbullah's study show that the IDPs view the issue of the environment concerning Wilpattu differently. Some expressed their opinions regarding the 2012 Gazette forest reserve declaration in the following words: "I feel distressed when the places I lived in . . . are declared as forest reserve" (ibid., 95); "I am deprived of my right to live in my place of origin . . . since the government declared the places where I was living . . . as forest reserve" (ibid., 96); "It is frustrating to see the lands that belonged to me from my birth up to now being impounded and given to wild animals" (ibid., 97); and "The 2012 gazette notification declaring our lands as forest reserve is outrageous" (ibid., 102). Their claims and views express the sentiment that their land, in the post-war period, has been given to wild animals rather than respecting their right of return as IDPs, as international humanitarian law stipulates.

4.3 Muslim Responses to Wilpattu Controversy

The Muslim community on the island began to grasp the symbolic meaning and impact of the Wilpattu resettlement controversy. They framed their narrative in terms of "injustice" towards the once-persecuted IDPs and a denial of their "right to return". How this form of argument developed can be seen from field research in Shahul H. Hasbullah's (1950–2018) *Denying the Right to Return: Resettlement in Musali South and the Wilpattu Controversy* (2015). The publication included scripts of 23 IDP testimonies out of 47 interviews with Muslim and Roman Catholic informants, who sought compensation for their losses and vigorously voiced their right of return (Hasbullah 2015: 100–101).

Hasbullah identified many difficulties that IDPs faced when they returned to their old habitat. In their absence of over two decades, a thick layer of the forest had overgrown former paddy and Chena lands. Surrounding lands which farmers used for free roaming of cattle farming were also under thick forest. When the government expanded the forest boundary through the

forest reserve declaration (ibid., 95), some people who possessed deeds and permits earlier for land use found their land now within the declared forest reserves (ibid., 100, 106).

Though Hasbullah's study is extremely useful in understanding the resettlement issue from the perspective of IDPs, it does not explain why some houses built for the resettlement of IDPs remained vacant in 2016 when I visited the area. In some areas in Silvaturai, leading to the forest, some well-built new houses had been abandoned. Perhaps these newly-built yet abandoned houses may indicate the housing projects implemented in the area for the IDPs were not well-managed and coordinated properly for efficiency and value for money.

Furthermore, Hasbullah's study does not tackle the controversy from an environmental perspective. Moreover, Hasbullah's study is primarily driven from the perspective of the rights of the displaced. Its usefulness lies today in its data and analysis to understand the perspectives and victimhood that war-affected IDPs attempted to communicate.

5. Conclusion: Solutions for IDPs from the Sri Lankan Civil War

As a focus of examination, this study has considered only a very tiny geographical area of war-affected Sri Lanka. That area is also a religiously and ethnically differentiated agricultural and fishery-centred rural area. As examined here, solutions to internal displacement in Sri Lanka are heavily dependent on many factors that are difficult to control: they are varied in terms of the island's political, social, environmental and security concerns. When analysed in the context of the Musali area of Wilpattu, in particular, security and the environment are the two key factors that may hinder the proper resettlement of all persons displaced from the area during the long Civil War.

Given the concerns of climate warming and more awareness of the importance of nature, environmentalism appears to be a key factor that might prevent today the complete resettlement of the IDPs in the Wilpattu area. Let us also note here the significance of the Wilpattu area as an important site for prehistoric burial, thus, highlighting the need to preserve the archaeological significance of the area. Given the long history of conflict and war, security issues in the coastal areas – in particular, in the west of Wilpattu National Park – remain critical to finding a viable and sustainable solution to the displacement.

Environmental issues that emerge and delay resettlement programmes are not easy to deal with in the current climate of global warming and its impact on societies around the world. When an ethnic and religious minority is the focus of attention in the resettlement, issues that arise can become grave both locally and internationally in a troubled pluralist society with ethnic prejudices and religious tensions related to ethnic differences. Nevertheless, overall in Sri Lanka, attitudes towards protecting nature after the Civil War have improved. Accommodation of environmental concerns in allocating lands to IDPs has become more important today than ever before.

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