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**DEFORESTATION AND DEGRADATION FORESTED LANDSCAPE :
A CASE OF MAHAWELI SYSTEM "C"**

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Deforestation and degradation of forest fragments and forest corridors in the planned agricultural landscape can be seen as an unsustainable way of maintaining agricultural resource base because this can lead to soil erosion thereby silting the regulatory reservoirs, canals and vast tracts of paddy fields in the region. The end result of this is declining productivity and sinking fortunes for the settlers in the new colonies. However, an alternative suggestion is that the deforestation for expanding cultivation creates new income earning opportunities and ameliorates the income of the economically marginal sections of the settlements. This is a critical landscape management issue confronting new and old planned agricultural settlements of Sri Lanka. To fill this gap, the present study focuses on what is happening to the forest fragments and corridors in the project area of system 'C' and what forces are responsible for this process.

The spatial scope of the study covers the project area of system "C" which is one of the fourteen settlement and irrigation systems of the Mahaweli development programme. Three study localities were selected to represent the system under study. The geographic origin and the method of settler selection provided the justification for the selection of units. The temporal scope covers a period of sixteen years from 1982 to 1998. The 1982 represents the initial year of settler colonization while 1998 constitutes the year in which fieldwork was conducted. The study is entirely based on the qualitative methodology as pragmatism informed the major theoretical assumption of the study. Accordingly, three methods were used to collect data. They included labour intensive narrative interviewing, participatory observation and the consultation of the published and unpublished sources.

The findings show that the majority of forest fragments and corridors, set aside as reservations, have now been converted to residential areas and chena cultivation. This has been made possible by encroachment and allocation to the member of second generation by the Mahaweli authority. It is also observed that the existing forest fragments have been subjected to logging for commercial and household purposes.

The analysis of data points to the inference that settlers struggle for survival in a resource poor environment has become the major cause for deforestation and degradation of forested landscape in the new Mahaweli settlers. The widespread poverty, manifested in different forms, provides the impetus for seeking survival strategies leading to the removal of very important landscape characteristics – forests.