

# REVISITED

## The Human Ecology Essay

### An Encounter with the First People of Sri Lanka

By Nishanta Rajakaruna '94, faculty member in biology

It took me forty years to come face to face with the Veddas, the original inhabitants of Sri Lanka. They were a thriving people when my ancestors, the Sinhalese, arrived in Sri Lanka some six thousand years ago. As elsewhere, the rest has become a history we have conveniently tried to forget. I am not sure how I should feel about waiting this long to make the visit but this meeting with the “first people” of my land has humbled and haunted me in more ways than I can describe.

While the two recent colonizers of Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese and Tamils, were fighting for their right to land and practices, drawing worldwide attention, the Veddas were silently struggling, their land engulfed by development and encroachment, and their traditional ways cast aside by us as primitive. Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam were the religions I grew up with, not the deep philosophies of the Veddas.

Sadly, the plight of the Veddas is just one element of a global phenomenon. Cultures and languages are disappearing at an alarming rate. Just as many of us don't want the landscape to be all corn fields or the skies filled only with crows, do we really want a world where we speak just one language and follow a single way of life?

When walking the streets of Sri Lanka I try to look away when I see parents taking their kids to McDonald's and young couples having their first dates at Pizza Hut, but I can't escape the fact that kids in the cities speak in English more than in their native tongue and parents are preparing their children to be leaders in a world dominated by dollar signs. In Sri Lankan villages, as in other remote places, kids strive to leave for a “better” life in the city.

What are we trying to become? The average American spends less than twenty minutes a day outside while the average American father spends less than eighteen minutes a day with his child. The !Kung, a hunter-gatherer people of Africa, only spend two to three days per week working; the rest of their time is spent with family and friends. Children grow up knowing their parents, families, and surroundings.

While my professional life is driven by my passion to study plant evolution, through teaching I have developed a strong interest in ethnobotany, human

ecology in practice, allowing me to explore vanishing cultures and glimpse the role of plants in their complex societies. When I teach ethnobotany I am not the teacher but a keen learner appreciating human diversity alongside my students.

As an ethnobotanist I see the world through many windows—biologist, anthropologist, sociologist, humanitarian—someone willing to appreciate the unknown and believe in the many ways of being. Through ethnobotany I take a step back from thinking that science is the one way of knowing. The age-old secrets of native peoples are those that we should cherish and preserve even though we don't have the tools to understand them.

This brief encounter with a proud culture at the brink of extinction echoes my first visit to Sinharaja—Sri Lanka's only remaining tropical, lowland rainforest—almost twenty-seven years ago. My week-long visit as a thirteen-year-old focused my life toward a passionate exploration of how plant diversity is generated and maintained. I still remember staring in awe at all the shapes and forms of plant life that filled the rainforest and asking myself how they came about and how they can all co-exist? I have spent much of my professional life trying to answer this question. This recent visit with the Veddas, I hope, will be the beginning of my life's next calling.



Nishanta Rajakaruna '94, faculty member in biology, visiting with the Veddas of Sri Lanka.

Born in Sri Lanka, Nishi came to COA as an undergraduate, then headed to the University of British Columbia, receiving an MSc in botany and plant ecology in 1998 and a PhD in botany and evolutionary ecology in 2002. For more on the Veddas, visit [www.vedda.org](http://www.vedda.org).