

## **Birth and Death Anniversaries of Lyn de Alwis (27.10.1930 – 22.11.2006), Chairman Asian Elephant Specialist Group 1985 – 1997**

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This past 27<sup>th</sup> October and 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2020 marked respectively the 90<sup>th</sup> birth and 14<sup>th</sup> death anniversary of the eminent and world-renowned Sri Lankan wildlife and zoo expert, Lyn de Alwis.

How do you pay homage to an individual of the calibre of Lyn? Just narrating his accomplishments alone would not be a fitting eulogy for a person who was much more than the sum of his achievements. To portray Lyn not only as an internationally acclaimed wildlife and zoo expert but also to highlight the man behind his true persona – the man who drew the respect, love and loyalty of a vast number of people ranging from scientists to wildlife trackers and the general public.

Delving into publications, tracing old interviews, contacting former colleagues and getting firsthand accounts and by reading through reminiscences of friends, contemporaries and adherents, I have strived to provide a succinct profile of probably Sri Lanka's greatest wildlife expert and conservationist. With the passing away of Lyn de Alwis one of the most glorious eras of wildlife conservation in Sri Lanka came to an end.

During Lyn's tenure as the Director of the Department of Wildlife, the first intensive behavioural and ecological studies of the Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*) were conducted in Sri Lanka. In 1966, the Department of Wildlife and the Wildlife and Nature Protection Society made a request to the Smithsonian Institution in the USA to initiate a detailed study of the Sri Lankan elephant. The Smithsonian put together a team that included Drs. Fred Kurt, Melvyn C. Lockhart, George M. McKay, and Robert Olivier with Dr. John F. Eisenberg as the team leader. They conducted their studies from 1967–1978.

Following up on it several additional studies were carried out by graduate students at the University of Peradeniya until the 1980s. The Ceylon Project, as it was known by the Smithsonian Institution, included research on elephants (1967–1978) and primates (1968–1982).

How much the Department of Wildlife, its personnel and especially Lyn was valued for their cooperation can be assessed when reading the acknowledgements of the publications that were published as a result of the project. In *An Ecological Reconnaissance of the Wilpattu National Park, Ceylon* (1972), John Eisenberg and Melvyn Lockhart mention how “in 1966, The Wild Life Protection Society of Ceylon and the Ceylon Department of Wildlife sent a request to the Smithsonian Institution for advice and/or help in the organization of an elephant study program.” They also mention the support they received from Lyn: “Mr. Lyn de Alwis, Director of the Zoological Gardens at Dehiwala and Warden of the Wild Life Department of Ceylon – without the aid, assistance, and encouragement of Mr. de Alwis, the project could not have achieved success.” George McKay makes a similar statement in his article on the *Behavior and Ecology of the Asiatic Elephant in Southeastern Ceylon* (1973): “My thanks to the entire staff of the Department of Wild Life, under the direction of Mr. W. [Lyn] E. de Alwis, who provided the cheerful cooperation without which none of this work would have been possible.”

Another major achievement of Lyn was designing the award-winning Singapore Zoo and Night Safari. It was what Lyn had achieved at the Dehiwala Zoo that attracted the Singapore authorities to invite Lyn to set up their new zoo in 1970 in a 225-acre land. In a July 1996 interview

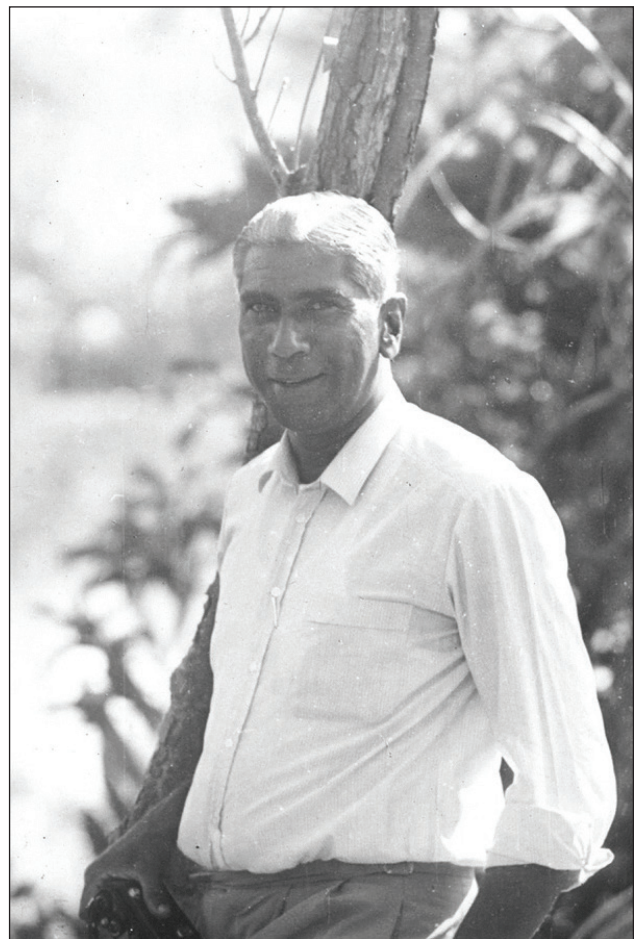
Lyn stated: “They [Singapore authorities] knew what they wanted, having toured many zoos, particularly in the US and Europe. They saw what we had at Dehiwela and decided to give us the job.”

As the 2<sup>nd</sup> Chairman (1985–1997) of the IUCN/SSC Asian Elephant Specialists Group (AsESG), Lyn reached out to Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar (Burma at the time) and China, which were all countries that were closed to foreigners. As Lyn observed at the time: “We must look at the whole of Asia and not just a few countries... where the Asian elephant survives...”

And apparently Lyn got results: “Burma’s Minister of Forestry has been most enthusiastic and he personally invited us to his country. He sent us under escort to elephant country in difficult areas and himself organized a workshop. We made a similar approach to Cambodia and they were very open and very keen. We have also sent a group to Vietnam and right now we are getting into Laos... all three countries are keen on protecting this heritage..., AsESG is also involved with elephant conservation in Szechuan in southern China, where there is likely to be an estimated population of 300 elephants.”

Another exemplary quality of Lyn’s was to give the people who worked for him the due recognition for their work. At the 2<sup>nd</sup> Meeting of the AsESG held at the Sri Lanka Foundation Institute in August 1980, in the meeting minutes it’s recorded Lyn stating: “He believed in the exchange of views not only of top-level administrators, but also those of field officers who actually carry out the practical tasks involved in effective conservation. That was why he had decided to let the meeting hear at first hand from those officers, rather than [Lyn] read a long and boring paper. Mr. de Alwis then introduced Messrs. C.V. Jayawardena, A.B. Fernando, M.M.D. Perera, and N. Ishwaran.”

Dr. Natarajan Ishwaran (2020) reminiscing about the time he worked on his elephant research work stated: “My best moments with Lyn were when I started on the WWF/IUCN Project 1783: *Conservation and Management of the*



*Wasgomuwa-Maduru Oya-Gal Oya Complex of Reserves*. The project was a joint effort between the Department of Wildlife Conservation (DWC) and the Zoology Department of the University of Peradeniya and Lyn was Sri Lanka’s head of the project. Between September 1980 and July 1982, I spent about 20–22 days/month in the field but came back to Colombo to meet Lyn. He always had time to talk to me and was open to discussing ideas very freely. Once he came to the field when I was in a little “Gam Udawa” house with others of the DWC staff who were responsible for the new Maduru Oya National Park. What was nice about Lyn was his calm confidence; he trusted his staff and was sure about the fact that his orders would be executed to the best of his personnel’s abilities. In my view the DWC had the best times when he was the Director. The same goes for the Dehiwela Zoo; it was best run when Lyn was heading it. I did some captive elephant feeding observations in the zoo to complement my fieldwork with the Smithsonian Elephant Ecology Project in Gal Oya during 1975–1977. He would come strolling around and talk to us and see if everything was going well. Sri Lankan

wildlife conservation owes a lot to Lyn whose leadership of the DWC could be linked to some of its best moments.”

Many knew Lyn as either the Director of Wildlife and/or the Dehiwala Zoo, since he was the only person in Sri Lanka who held both positions simultaneously. But for those who knew him personally, Lyn leaves behind a yearning nostalgia for an era that will never come back. For me it was an honour and privilege to have known one of Sri Lanka’s eminent wildlife personalities.

I first learned of Lyn from a book he had published in 1969 titled *National Parks of Ceylon, A Guide*, which 25 years later Lyn autographed when he visited my home in the US in August 1996. I came to know Lyn when I joined the Young Zoologist Association in 1974 and was later selected to be a Student Guide Lecturer in the Education Department of the Dehiwala Zoo in 1978. By then Lyn was renowned nationally and internationally for his work and achievements. When I became the General Secretary of the Ruk Rakaganno (Tree Society of Sri Lanka) in 1982, Lyn was one of the Executive Committee members, which was an incredible opportunity to talk, to listen and learn from Lyn’s knowledge and experiences.

In 1996, I experienced firsthand the incredible respect and regard the international community had for Lyn. After attending the 1996 International Zoo Directors Conference in San Francisco, Lyn was coming to New York. So, he asked me to arrange a meeting with the Director of the Bronx Zoo, Dr. William (Bill) Conway who was also the President of the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) that managed the Bronx Zoo and four other zoos in New York City and the Coney Island Aquarium in Brooklyn. Bill himself was regarded as a “God,” by the international zoo community. So, it was remarkable when I spoke to Bill over the phone and told him that Lyn wanted to visit the Zoo – he was thoroughly excited and said he was honoured. When we arrived at the zoo, I was so impressed by the extent of the hospitality Bill extended to Lyn to ensure he had a memorable visit.

All of the senior vice presidents, including Dr. John Robinson who headed the international wildlife conservation division of the WCS, were there to meet Lyn. Bill himself personally took us around the zoo in a golf-car and made sure the chief curator, Jim Doherty and all the animal keeping staff were there to provide Lyn with any information he needed. Prior to hosting us for lunch at the VIP lounge in the Zoo Restaurant, when we were in Bill’s office, I saw with what deference Bill and the other vice presidents spoke to Lyn and the high regard they had for what Lyn had accomplished such as designing the Singapore Zoo and Night Safari, as the Director of the Department of Wildlife Conservation and the Dehiwala Zoo, and as the Chairman of the IUCN/SSC AsESG. Personally, I felt fortunate to be there that day and be able to bask a tiny bit on the esteem Lyn was getting.

Lyn’s dedication, perseverance, fortitude, vision and leadership—is opulently encapsulated in this statement he made in a 1996 interview: “...we all talk glibly about the need for political will. But it is we who must be the instrument of securing that will.”

And there is no better way to end this eulogy other than with a message Lyn wrote in February 2005, which vividly captures the essence of the person he was:

### **How conservation goals were achieved in the past**

That the leopard became the symbol of the Wilpattu National Park by the nineteen sixties and seventies was no accident. Even as late as 1950, to sight a leopard in the park, there had to be a combination of dry weather, a good selection of deer, sambur, pig and buffalo with young calves to bring a leopard out into the open even in the fast-falling darkness. Such was the fear and uncertainty in the mind of a leopard living in the so-called security of the park.

When I became Director in 1965, I headed early for Wilpattu which to me was the most beautiful haven for animals anywhere in the world – its rolling sand-dunes, towering rockscapes, a

miniature lake every 1 km, fringed with almost manicured green plains and finally breathtaking coastline. Bird life was plentiful and visitors were assured of beauty, excitement and jungle sounds well into the night.

Yet, there were less than 2000 visitors a year. Why? There were few roads that took visitors around, no lodges to encourage them to stay and poachers who moved around fearlessly on foot, bringing down spotted deer, wild boar, bear and the occasional leopard that ventured out into the open.

But I held the trumps – dedicated fearless rangers and guards, who were always ready to do battle in order to save the lives of the animals in their charge. They would track armed gangs on foot, often lying-in ambush to apprehend the intruder and bring them to book. There were no monetary rewards because the total annual allocation for the Department was just over Rs. 600,000 (~US\$ 126,315). A ranger survived on a salary of Rs. 200 (~\$ 42) a month, of which Rs. 150 (\$ 32) had to be sent to their homes.

We tried our best to get something more, uniforms, a hat, a raincoat, a bicycle but no sob story would persuade even the extra Rs. 50 to make the staff feel they were doing a kind of national service. So, we put our heads together and invented new sources of income. Senior staff supported me in collecting money in what came to be known as a Wildlife Preservation Fund – we appealed to magistrates to give 50% of fines back to the Department. We organized “Festivals of Wildlife Photography,” we had film shows, courtesy of generous visitors, all of which helped swell the fund.

There was no jeep, so appeals went out to mercantile firms to make possible some easy payment schemes. The only foreign components came from the World Wildlife Fund, IUCN and the Fauna Preservation Society, who gave generously.

And so, we built up our little kingdoms in Yala, Wilpattu, Kumana and Gal Oya. Those were our

small beginnings and by 1968–1969, Wilpattu was showing off its magnificent leopards and the battle was temporary won.

Unfortunately, the 1970s saw some reversals when I had to go to Singapore for a couple of years and the Department came to be run by bureaucrats. They were followed by foreign NGOs who introduced textbook conservation, which to the average wildlife official was incomprehensible. So, the millions of dollars from GEF, from the ADB and World Bank seem to be spent in vain. The field staff remain in the same straits as 25 years ago with very little coming their way to help in their work, improvement of social status or housing, education etc., which will raise the standards of the Department. They get very little to challenge the human-elephant conflict, the rehab of other threatened wildlife etc.

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Sri Lanka lost a truly great and wonderful person the day Lyn passed away. I lost a mentor, advisor and a friend who encouraged me to venture forth, seek my dreams, passions and adventures. Lyn was a monument, a keystone, a pillar and a founding father of Sri Lanka’s wildlife conservation forum. The very essence of Lyn will live on and resonate through the many people whose lives he enriched and enlightened. We are fortunate to have as founding pillars of the conservation forum in Sri Lanka, people of the calibre of Lyn. The greatest honour we can do them is to keep building on the foundations they have left for us. Lyn’s outlook in life, his dedication and achievements should be an example to us all who are committed to saving species and their habitats all over the world.

*Footfalls in the Wild: Reflections & Writing of the Late Deshabandu Lyn De Alwis* is a posthumous compilation of Lyn’s articles, speeches and presentations. For those who would like to acquire a copy please contact the Lyn de Alwis Memorial Wildlife Trust. The book can also be purchased from Amazon and Ebay.