

Empowering Citizens with Environmental Awareness in Sri Lanka

Goal *Help spread awareness of proper recycling techniques to villages and community leaders and develop community planning workshops to address long term sustainability goals.*

Background

Sri Lanka has seen rapid economic development over the past 20 years. While this has brought many benefits, it has also led to a dramatic increase in the amount of non-biodegradable waste that is discarded by citizens on this island nation. Up until several decades ago, most waste was biodegradable and didn't harm the environment if left to decompose. But today, a lack of proper waste treatment facilities and public knowledge of sanitation guidelines has led to a growing environmental problem. Plastic waste from imported and processed products is often left to pollute local streams, rivers, and other public areas.

The Sewalanka Foundation runs a number of non-profit programs including the Islander Center, which serves as a headquarters for its community-leadership workshops and other activities aimed at educating and empowering local citizens to be more sustainable, among other goals. We will chiefly be assisting ongoing education programs aimed at increasing awareness of proper recycling techniques. We will also be helping the center develop a GIS database to monitor environmental pollutants, runoff, and other conditions.

We became interested in this project because of our backgrounds in environmental science, urban planning, and economic development. It is a unique opportunity to contribute knowledge we have learned in our studies in the real world (for example, our experience with GIS work). We also are excited that the initiatives we are contributing to will not cease upon our departure, and the programs we are contributing to will continue after we leave.

Objectives:

1. *Organize the current waste management systems* in place at Sewalanka's main educational headquarters, the Islander Center. We will focus on proper disposal of the following most prominent categories of waste in Sri Lanka:
 - a. Compost
 - b. Plastics Recycling
 - c. Non-biodegradable waste (trash)
 - d. Re-useable materials
2. *Educate the Islander Center Staff* on proper waste management techniques.
3. *Conduct educational workshops* on the following topics for the community leaders, youth leaders, religious leaders, and students who *attend*** Sewalanka's Islander Center. Workshop topics include:
 - a. Different types of waste and how to properly dispose of each type (listed above under objective #1).
 - b. Strategies to reduce waste
 - c. Health and environmental dangers due to poor waste management
 - d. Community recycling programs
 - e. Generating income from plastic waste

- f. How to use design/community planning to effectively deal with waste management issues.
4. *Increased community awareness and outreach* for those villages that are unable to send elected leaders or representatives to the Islander Center. We will travel to and conduct education workshops in several of these communities (listed in objective #3).

Methods

The Islander Center will serve as a model for the surrounding villages and for participants in the educational workshops. Currently all waste is collected in a single bin at the Islander Center. We will thus begin by sorting and organizing the waste systems throughout the center. At the same time we will be teaching the center's staff about the different types of waste and their proper disposal, using a hands-on practical approach. Once the staff are comfortable with the new system, they will become our assistants and we will begin conducting the workshops listed in objective 3 for the different incoming groups. We will utilize a wide variety of pedagogical techniques, from hands-on to intensive group discussions with the local community to get their input concerning the workshop topics. The participants in these workshops will then be provided with packets and other materials to bring back with them so they may then implement proper waste management planning techniques in their own villages. Finally we hope to travel and conduct educational workshops in the villages, that were previously assessed to have a great need for waste management education, but were unable to send elected community leaders or representatives. Also, we will help the center develop a GIS database of environmental pollutants that can be utilized by communities in monitoring their progress towards more sustainable waste management practices.

Expected Outcomes/Evaluation:

It is expected that this project will significantly impact the health of the people and environment of over 40 villages in Sri Lanka. We plan to conduct an initial waste audit of the Islander Center and a final one at the end of our project in order to measure the decrease in non-degradeable waste and the increase in compost, plastics recycling, and re-useable materials. Additionally we plan to conduct a survey of the participants at the beginning and 2 weeks after the conclusion of each of our workshops. Finally Sewalanka has agreed to continue conducting additional surveys 2 months after we leave with the villages we worked with in order to assess the sustainability of their waste management systems.

Sustainability: The people's desire to learn is a critical component to sustainability that is nearly impossible to teach. We were fortunate that the initial premise of this project was not presented by us; instead it was the local villages that expressed interest and a desire to learn about the topic of waste management. This desire coupled with our partnership with the Sewalanka Foundation, which has been committed to promoting peace and helping the people of Sri Lanka for nearly 20 years now will create the momentum and drive necessary for our work to continue well beyond our departure from this beautiful island.