

**Empowering Citizens with Environmental Awareness  
Rajanganaya, Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka**

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**Section I.**

This project sought to address the gaps in knowledge concerning proper solid waste throughout the rural provinces of Sri Lanka through four community-based programs that focused on promoting environmental awareness and developing village-based recycling systems. We hope to improve the quality of life in rural Sri Lanka, empower these communities, increase environmental awareness, and obtain program sustainability.

Throughout the Spring and Summer of 2011 we collaborated with the Sewalanka Foundation – an indigenous Sri Lankan NGO - to develop our four-part solid waste management program. Sewalanka has proved to be an invaluable resource and partner throughout the development and implementation of our program. We have heavily drawn from their local knowledge and strong relationships with thousands of rural and urban Sri Lankan communities to develop programs that will cater to the unique conditions of not only Sri Lanka, but each individual community to ensure the program's success.

*Our Community-Based Programs*

Program 1: We developed a system for managing solid waste at the Islander Center - an institute run by the Sewalanka Foundation that brings youth, clergy, and community leaders from all over the country for leadership workshops and training sessions - to serve as our main model. The system included: A) A center-wide recycling & composting system consisting of sorting plastics, glass, paper, and food waste that would then be sold to the government recycling facility in the nearby city of Anuradhapura to help financially support the Islander Center. B) Educational workshop with the staff on methods to reduce waste, recycling, and create organic fertilizer. The workshops also included information on the negative impacts of improper waste management such as environmental pollution, negative health effects, and climate change. These workshops were meant to equip the staff with the necessary information to create a curriculum to educate all future workshop/training session participants.

Program 2: We conducted environmental education workshops similar to those given to the Islander Center staff (please see Program 1.B for the details) with 27 elected youth-community leaders, ages 18 to 25 from villages all over Sri Lanka. Program 2 culminated with each youth leader developing their own waste management plan for each of their villages with Sewalanka's/our supervision and support. These educational workshops and village waste management plans were meant to provide the youth leaders with the necessary information to educate their village about proper solid waste management techniques and the first steps to put their newfound knowledge into action. Sewalanka plans to follow up with each of these villages in the month of September.

Program 3: We worked closely with two public schools and two Dharma schools (Buddhist Temple 'Sunday Schools') in the small rural villages of Rajanganaya, Track 18, and Track 17 to develop school-based community recycling programs. Again we first held environmental educational workshops similar to those in programs 1 & 2. We then worked closely with the school principals and High Priests to organize a storage system, a method to monitor the amount of incoming waste, connect the villages with the government recycling facilities in Anuradhapura, and to develop plans to funnel the income generated to maintain the long-term sustainability of the recycling programs.

Program 4: In our last program we held workshops with the Islander Center staff on the basics of Geographic Information Systems (GIS). GIS is a program which allows the user to analyze data spatially. Gaining a better understanding of this program will provide the staff with the necessary foundation to help community leaders monitor environmental conditions in their organic farms and villages.

*Challenges and Successes*

Challenges are often encountered in every project, and ours was no exception. We faced a wide range of challenges from communication to cultural and all the way to financial difficulties. *Firstly* we had to adapt to the local circular concept of time (vs. linear), their hierarchical management style, and conducting all business face-to-face. Here in Sri Lanka the people rarely ever believe there are emergencies and due to their circular concept of time what is not done today can easily be done tomorrow. This manifests itself into a pleasant easy-going attitude but also a much slower pace of work. Additionally within Sri Lanka each and every decision must be approved by the high ranking officials

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within each institution/organization. the hundreds of decisions are thread through single eye of a needle, greatly contributing to the many delays we faced. Furthermore, while cell phones and e-mail are readily available, the local people highly prefer conducting every meeting (even if just a few simple questions) and every business transaction in person. In the states we exceedingly take for granted the time saved by internet business transactions and information hotlines. *Secondly* we were led to believe many Sewalanka staff possess a high fluency in English, but we soon found only a small handful could speak English with an intermediate to advanced level, resulting in some difficulties collaborating on the details of the project. Additionally while Sri Lanka is a small nation, it is largely divided between two populations the Tamil and Sinhalese who are largely unable to communicate with each other. Working with both populations proved difficult and often required two translators. In the end we were lucky to recruit the help of a Buddhist monk, his reverence Manjusri, who possesses impeccable English, Sinhala, and Tamil language skills. It was an added bonus that not only did his addition to the project tear down many language barriers; it also added an extra level of respect for our project because Sri Lanka is a highly devout Buddhist nation. Finally we were taken by surprise at how expensive materials were within Sri Lanka. In the end we had to decide on how to split our shrinking budget – devoting more resources to working with the youth leaders/neighboring villages or to building weather protection for the recycling system at Islander Center. In the end the Islander Center was able to come up with outside funds to build weather protection for the waste storage facility allowing us to allocate more of our budget to working directly with the communities.

Despite all the challenges we faced the initial excitement and support we have received from our programs indicates this project will be a success. We expect the 30 villages we worked with (27 community leaders and the 3 neighboring villages) will positively benefit from our community programs by establishing long-term community-recycling programs. Additionally we hope that all of the participants of the future workshops/training sessions that take place at the Islander Center will not only benefit but will pass on what they have learned to their friends, families, and communities. In the end if just one village were to reduce their waste by 50% the impact will have far-reaching long-term positive effects. We hope this project will continue and grow with the help of Sewalanka, who has pledged their full support to continue to monitor and help promote these programs into the future.

**Section II.**

We strongly believe as Martin Luther King said, “peace cannot be kept by force but only achieved through understanding.” While our project focused on environmental issues and waste-management, it was more broadly concerned with bringing together members from the Tamil and Sinhala communities to work together to solve problems in their local communities. In this sense, our project provided opportunities for members from ethnic groups (that were only recently fighting each other) to work together to implement solutions to environmental problems within their villages. Hopefully, by working together on issues that affect the entire island of Sri Lanka, both Tamil and Sinhala populations were able to experience first-hand the potential for collaboration to foster mutual understanding, and hopefully, long-lasting peace and sustainable development.

In the short-term, we brought youth-leaders and communities together to learn about the negative effects of waste and littering on the local environment and their lives. This involved workshops with local students and community leaders working together to develop plans for their own villages. To do this, they will have to work across the Sinhala-Tamil divide that still sharply divides the country. Hopefully, their collaborative work this past summer will be a powerful inspiration to them that will then radiate outward to the rest of their communities.

When we first began the project, we honestly had some doubts about what we would be able to effect in the long-term. We knew we were only in the country for a couple months. Although after actually interacting with the students and local communities, we felt that one of the most powerful effects we may have had was simply the result of listening to people and being present while they listen to each other. Watching the people interact convinced us that sometimes, simply bringing members from different backgrounds together to speak to each other as equals can have a lifelong impact on people’s perspectives.

