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Environmental Sustainability : Sri Lanka and Kenya

This five lesson Topic explores how children's lives are affected by issues of flooding, climate change, and the need for improved environmental sustainability, in the South Asian country of **Sri Lanka**, and the east African country of **Kenya**.

Lesson 1 : Tsunami in Sri Lanka

Lesson 2 : Environmental problems in Kenya

Lesson 3 : Effects of climate change on daily life in Sri Lanka

Lesson 4 : Effects of climate change on agriculture in Sri Lanka and Kenya

Lesson 5 : Saving the Environment

Sri Lanka



Sri Lanka is an island located 31 km off the coast of India. The country's history has reflected its close links with the subcontinent, as well as with South East Asia. The colonial European powers arrived on the island 1505; the Portuguese, the Dutch, and finally the British, ruled the territory (which was then known as Ceylon) until the country gained independence in February 1948.

Since independence, Ceylon (which was renamed "Sri Lanka" in 1972) has faced a perennial problem of attempting to reconcile two contrasting peoples: the Buddhist Sinhalese majority, and the Hindu Tamil minority in the northeast of the country. Tamil separatism began in the 1950s. By a decade later the situation had escalated, with ethnic riots and the rise of the armed group the Tamil Tigers; this eventually led to 25 years of civil war.

The war lasted until May 2009, when the conflict finally appeared to be at an end when government forces seized the last area controlled by Tamil Tiger rebels.; however, significant ethnic tensions between the Tamil and Sinhala peoples persist.

Environmental Problems

As well as suffering military conflict, in recent years the people of Sri Lanka have had to grapple with serious environmental problems. This Topic begins with a lesson on effects of the *tsunami*, the massive underwater earthquake which caused a huge tidal wave to sweep countries around the Indian Ocean, on December 26th 2004, which is believed to have killed more than 150,000 people and made millions homeless. Five years on, both the physical and psychological legacy is impossible to ignore. In Lesson 1 Track 2, Chaya describes how her aunt, uncle and elder cousin were all killed in the disaster, leaving her younger cousin sick, and unable to speak for shock.

Sri Lanka is also suffering badly from the effects of climate change (and whilst climate change is not proven to be directly linked to the *tsunami*, certainly it contributed to making the country's delicate coastal eco-system even more vulnerable). The term "Climate Change" refers to changes in the earth's temperature over the last 100 years. Humans are changing the climate by their actions, especially through emissions of greenhouse gases, like carbon dioxide, which artificially warm the atmosphere of the earth. And global warming means more than just rising temperatures; it affects all aspects of the climate, making rainfall less predictable, changing the character of the seasons, and increasing the likelihood or severity of extreme events such as floods.

In Lessons 3 we hear how all this is affecting daily life for the people of Sri Lanka. In Track 1, teenagers discuss how both floods and drought are becoming serious problems, whilst in Tracks 2 and 3, Jithmi and Imasha describe the effects of the particularly heavy flooding in 2007, when many people had to leave their homes, to live with relatives, or to seek shelter in public spaces like temples.

Lesson 4 examines how climate change is affecting agriculture in both Sri Lanka and Kenya. Sri Lankan children describe how in their grandparents day, farmers could predict when the rainy season was going to arrive, so could buy seed and fertiliser and could safely prepare their paddy fields* for planting. Now, they can make no such predictions, and many crops are lost to drought or flooding. In Track 4, Piyumi introduces us to her farmer father, who describes just how hard it is to make a living these days, and how frightening it is to be so vulnerable.

The final lesson of the Topic examines how the people of Sri Lanka are working to counter climate change. Hiroshimi (Track 1) talks about her school's recycling policies, and shows us how they are growing special grasses designed to stop soil erosion. In Track 4, Prashani and Yasaswi deliver some hard-hitting lessons to people living in countries less immediately affected by these environmental problems. "You [in the North] have to be more careful about what you are doing. You have to be careful not to emit more carbon dioxide [into the atmosphere]. [That way], the whole world will be saved."

* *“Paddy fields” – fields for planting rice and other semi-aquatic crops*

Kenya

The east African country of Kenya is home to nearly 39 million people. The country's economy is the largest by GDP in East and Central Africa and Kenya's capital, Nairobi is a major commercial hub. The country produces world renowned tea and coffee, and is also a major exporter of fresh flowers to Europe. Kenya's telecommunications industry is considered one of the most successful and innovative in Africa.

However, in recent years this industrial growth has meant more heavy industry, more traffic on the roads, and more pollution – all this had led to considerable environmental problems. Water pollution from urban and industrial wastes is widespread; only about 42% of the residents in rural areas and 88% of city dwellers have access to pure drinking water. Additionally, as well as pollutants from industry, the nation's cities produce about over a million tons of solid wastes. Chunambwe (Lesson 2 Track 4) talks about the problem of disposing of plastic carrier bags, whilst George (Lesson 2 Track 2) and Simon (Lesson 2 Track 3) discuss the issue of air pollution resulting from industrial fumes, also from the increase in traffic.

The rural environment is also facing problems. Growing population pressure has created increased demands for construction, food production and firewood; the resulting felling of trees has caused soil erosion which has caused major environmental damage in many parts of the country. In Lesson 2 Track 1 Annabel describes how felling of trees has changed the landscape around her home in the coastal town of Mombasa, and together with Ruth (Lesson 4 Track 2), she describes how climate change is affecting the seasons. Here as in Sri Lanka, unpredictable rains are making it far harder for farmers to know when to plant their crops, and flooding has become a major problem.

Silas (Lesson 2 Track 5) talks about the impact of climate change on the pastoralist Masai people. Traditionally the Masai lived by their cattle alone, regularly moving their herds from one place to another, so that the grass has a chance to grow again. This was made possible by a communal land tenure system in which everyone in an area shared access to water and pasture. But nowadays demand for land means that Masai are increasingly being forced to settle, and many are abandoning their traditional lifestyle and taking jobs in towns. Much of what used to be Masai land has been taken over, for private farms and ranches, for use in government projects or as wildlife parks. Mostly the Masai retain only the driest and least fertile areas. As we hear from Silas, as it becomes increasingly difficult to survive through pastoralism, the people's whole

way of life has changed, they are forced to move into the cash economy, growing crops and bartering for new foods in the market.

Another pressing environmental issue in Kenya, the Mau Forest evictions, is highlighted by Elizabeth (Lesson 2 Track 6). The Mau Forest, in the Rift Valley, is the largest forest in Kenya. In the past the area provided the bulk of the country's water supply, storing rain in the wet season and pumping it out during drier months. However, deforestation and demand for land has spoiled this delicate balance. During the past 15 years, an area of more than 100,000 hectares - one quarter of the protected forest reserve - has been settled and cleared. In 2009 this led to serious drought, which affected Kenya's harvests, cattle farms, hydro-electricity, the tea industry, lakes and even the famous wildlife parks. With farmers in the valleys downstream of the forest running short of water and cattle, the government worried that a struggle for water and land could escalate into civil conflict. Prime Minister Raila Odinga decided to act, and begun to evict some 20,000 families who have settled in the forest, and who he accused of contributing to an ecological disaster which has crippled the country.