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Flooding and Climate Change : Sri Lanka

This four lesson Topic explores the issue of Flooding and Climate Change, and how the phenomena are affecting the lives of children living in the South Asian country of **Sri Lanka**.

Lesson 1 : Tsunami

Lesson 2 : Effects of Climate Change on daily life

Lesson 3 : Effects of Climate Change on agriculture

Lesson 4 : Saving the Environment



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 - at least militarily - when government forces seized the last area controlled by Tamil Tiger rebels.

- Population: 20.2 million (UN, 2009)
- People: 73.94% Sinhalese, 12.7% Tamil, 7.1% Muslim, 5.5% Hill Tamil, and 1.5% other
- Languages: Sinhalese, Tamil, English
- Capital: Colombo (commercial), Sri Jayawardenepura (administrative)
- Area: 65,610 sq km (25,332 sq miles)
- Major languages: Sinhala, Tamil, English

- Major religions: Buddhism (70%), Hinduism (15%), Islam, Christianity
- Life expectancy: 70 years (men), 78 years (women) (UN)
- Monetary unit: Sri Lankan rupee
- Main exports: Clothing and textiles, tea, gems, rubber, coconuts
- GNI per capita: US \$1,780

Environmental Problems

In addition to suffering a lengthy civil war, 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 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 2 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 3 examines how climate change is affecting the country's agriculture. 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 know they 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 3, 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 2, 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*