

*GUEST EDITORIAL*

**AMPHIBIAN DIVERSITY AND THE STATUS OF  
RESEARCH IN SRI LANKA**

If any single work was instrumental in arousing my personal interest in amphibians, it was Parakrama Kirtisinghe's (1957) 'Amphibia of Ceylon'. Well written and illustrated for the time, it made me wonder why our much smaller neighbour (Sri Lanka) can have such a delightful guide, while we in India did not (well, we still don't!). In all, the work described 35 species, each illustrated with neat black-and-white sketches. Subsequently, two colleagues, Sushil Kumar Dutta and Kelum Nalinda Manamendra-Arachchi, went ahead and revised this fauna in a work primarily based on the first author's PhD. thesis, in 1996, increasing the fauna to 53 species. Work done subsequently on this fauna by Rohan Pethiyagoda and Manamendra-Arachchi (1999 and in progress) shows that this too was a gross under estimate, and the true figure may be several times higher, and possibly as high as ca. 250 species, making the island nation of Sri Lanka the richest in amphibian diversity per unit area of land in the world. These figures translated to 3.9 per 1,000 km<sup>2</sup> of land area, well ahead of the runner-up, Costa Rica with 2.75. What causes this diversity is also of great interest to biologists. Is it because more intensive sampling was carried out here? Or are there some unique ecological processes going on, that remains to be discovered? These and other questions will probably take many years to resolve, through not only intensive field and laboratory work in Sri Lanka, but also in adjacent India, where many of the vicars of the local species dwell.

Sri Lanka is blessed, not only with frogs, but also, equally important, men, who have the energy and industry to pursue them. Anslem de Silva is one such person. Operating from an estate situated in the heartland of Sri Lanka's biodiversity, he has, over the years, brought herpetology to the fore of nature conservation in the country, through talks, popular and technical, writings and edited volumes, and encouraging students to take up studies in herpetology, within the platform of his organisation, the Amphibia and Reptile Research Organisation of Sri Lanka (affectionately acronymed ARROS). A product of his industry is the present volume, which is based on the researches of Anslem and his band. These range from ethnobatrachology, to ecological and systematic studies. A variety of approaches have been taken, from methodical and obviously laborious field sampling to more anecdotal, but nonetheless useful, observation on natural history of individual species. Other workers have examined parasites and predators of these animals, as well as predator-avoidance mechanisms, these studies critical in resolving the problems of the world's declining amphibian populations.

Research on the country's amphibians is conducted by various local universities and NGOs, arguably the most famous among which is the Wildlife Heritage Trust of Sri Lanka (WHT). WHT's publications include the 1996 Sri Lankan frog book, and equally important, it supports the long-term sampling and documentation of the country's amphibian fauna. Along with ARROS, WHT have contributed significantly to our rapidly expanding knowledge of an interesting herpetofauna. These and other ongoing studies in Sri Lanka are important for developing a national database of biological diversity and conservation and management needs. They are also useful catalysts in reactivating research in adjacent countries, and go to show how a small band of committed people can make a difference. One hopes that the path shown by ARROS and WHT will be emulated regionally and internationally.

### **Literature Cited**

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