

Providence Journal-Bulletin

May 28, 1998

Here, as in Sri Lanka

Maintaining the coasts, worldwide

BY CHIP YOUNG

It was a typical coastal council meeting. Fishermen straight from their boats sat sullenly in the back of the room, arms crossed on their chests. Opposing factions perched on either side of the center aisle, pointing and gesturing at their adversaries when they stood to speak, and glaring across at them when they in turn rose to plead their case. In the front, facing the crowd, the council chair stoically prodded the meeting along. A council member to her left didn't bother to conceal a long yawn, while to her right, a well-dressed representative from the business community was absorbed in watching the tasseled loafer he was dangling from the end of his toe as people testified.

The setting could have been anywhere from Bristol to Charlestown. Instead, the meeting was taking place half a world away in Hikkaduwa, a southwest coastal town in Sri Lanka. The sound of the Indian Ocean waves crashing against the shore a few hundred yards away were carried through the open windows by humid May monsoon winds. The meeting was being conducted in Sinhalese, the national language of Sri Lanka, but the words didn't matter, you knew what was being said whether the names were Bob and Joe or Suma and Nissanka.

Sri Lanka is a long way from South Kingstown. Formerly Ceylon, it is a teardrop-shaped island, roughly the size of Ireland, situated 60 miles south of India. For the past 13 years, Sri Lanka has been putting to work some of the coastal management techniques developed in Rhode Island at the University of Rhode Island's Coastal Resources Center. The country's Coast Conservation Department (CCD) has created the first-ever coastal management program in a developing country, much in the way Rhode Island took the lead in being one of the first states in the nation to create a coastal resources management program back in the early 1970s.

One of the most successful techniques initiated in Rhode Island was the "special area management" (SAM) plan. The state's coastal program used this planning approach to deal with areas along the coast with resources which pre-

sented singular, and sometimes sensitive challenges, such as South County's salt ponds. By zooming in on these special management areas, planning can better deal with the intricacies needed to sustain the resources. Rhode Island has had great success in maintaining the salt ponds, while increasing their attractiveness to nearby residents and tourists alike—both of which have positive economic impacts—and this has provided valuable lessons for coastal managers worldwide who are attempting to balance development pressures with ecological well-being.

Hikkaduwa had all the makings of a SAM site in Sri Lanka, as did the community at Rekawa Lagoon, a remote village in the south of the country. These were the two sites chosen by the Sri Lanka CCD for tightly focused attention.

Off Hikkaduwa's white sandy beaches, a coral reef offers a rich variety of fish and plant life. Over a decade ago, hotels sprung up along the coastal road that runs down from the capital, Colombo, seventy miles to the north, and soon glass bottom boats were competing with the traditional fishermen for harbor space. However erosion problems and increased shorefront development, similar to current problems in South County, jeopardized Hikkaduwa's future prospects. The CCD's work in establishing building setbacks and dealing with conflicting uses, not unlike Rhode Island's approach to coastal management, has helped the local fishermen, hoteliers and tour guides thrash out a sensible approach to development along local coastal areas.

At Rekawa Lagoon, a different reflection of Rhode Island is seen, one of the local community taking ownership of its own resources, and coping with conflicting uses as *de facto* coastal managers. In Rekawa, the work of the CCD was literally door-to-door, with project staff encouraging people to attend public meetings to solve differences between local rice growers and artisanal fisherman. Helping to drive the effort were six young men and women from the community known as "catalysts," who aided in initiating

and continuing participation from the village residents. Attired in starched cotton shirts and dresses which constantly defied both the humidity and poverty, their face-to-face meetings with townspeople used an approach similar to that of Rhode Island's in proactively encouraging people to come together to maintain the values they cherished in their community's coastal resources. With the technical assistance of the CCD, they realized they could conquer many of the problems they had endured with no hope of success in the past.

This June, coastal experts from around the world, including Sri Lanka, Fiji, Sweden, Indonesia, Tanzania, Mexico and Jamaica, among others, will congregate for an intensive month-long training session at URI to share their experiences—both the successes and the failures—and attempt to learn from them. These are the professionals who will return home to lead their own countries' coastal management programs, having learned a great deal from Rhode Island's own struggles in this area. Do not be surprised to see this miniature United Nations delegation on the state's beaches and shorefronts in the next month.

And while not having to fight the poverty present in developing nations, or the civil unrest that continues to hinder progress in Sri Lanka and Indonesia, Rhode Island's coastal managers can and will learn as well, whether it is about aquaculture or coastal erosion, two concerns that still pose problems here at home. People are constantly going a long way to realize that so little changes when it comes to learning how people need only to work together to find ways to effectively utilize and maintain the coastal resources that make Rhode Island—or Sri Lanka or anywhere the water meets the land—very special places to live.

- *Chip Young is the communications liaison for the Coastal Resources Center at URI, and is editing a book on Sri Lanka's coastal management program. CRC's fifth Summer Institute in Coastal Management will run from June 1-26.*