



Indigenous Communities in Sri Lanka

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## An introduction

In the same way that the evolution of man since the stone age defines us in this 21st Century, understanding ancient tribes and their cultural, social, economic and scientific heritage has indisputable relevance in the present time. The symbiotic relationship that many of Sri Lanka's ancient tribes had with nature offers invaluable lessons for example, in sustainability. The architecture, medicine, nutrition, agriculture, irrigation systems and many other aspects of the traditional communities of Sri Lanka feature technologies that have been perfected over generations and which are important to science even today.

Dilmah Conservation began its investigation into the indigenous communities of Sri Lanka with two objectives. First to attempt to ease the dislocation that many of these communities suffer as a result of the irrelevance of their skills in the 21st Century. In seeking to do so, we have made every effort to understand and respect the cultural, social and historic context of each of the communities that Dilmah Conservation has engaged with, in order to nurture the identity of each as we assist them in redefining their role in society.

Secondly, we have sought to address the dearth of serious investigation and documentation of the remarkable heritage of the many indigenous communities in Sri Lanka. As the rapidly changing social context disrupts the tradition of orally passing historical tales from generation to generation, we have sought to document any that could be recorded for the benefit of future generations. The purpose here is not solely for historical record but equally that future generations of these communities might take pride in their heritage and also benefit from it.

The Culture and Indigenous Communities Programme of Dilmah Conservation has a socio-economic dimension which seeks to assist the communities in exploring opportunities in indigenous tourism, traditional art and craft as a means of empowering themselves with dignity. I invite you to join Dilmah Conservation in its endeavour. As you read this publication please remember that the traditions that are recorded here are in most cases deeply meaningful and form important elements in the complex social, cultural, environmental, historical, political and economic definition of a Sri Lankan in the 21st Century.



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*Uruvarige Vanniyalathibo, leader of the Veddah community*

dwellers', akin to the Vanniyalaththo. Many places situated in the environs of the District to this day bear names such as 'Vedhi Gala', 'Vedha Ala', and 'Vedi Kanda', bearing testimony to this school of academic opinion.

Dr. S.V. Deraniyagala, former Director General of Archaeology in Sri Lanka however goes a step further. He points out in his research work titled *The early man and the rise of civilization in Sri Lanka: Archaeological evidence* (1992) that the genetic continuum from at least 18,000 BC at Batadombalena to Belilena at 16,000 BC and to the Bellan Bandi Palassa at 6,500 BC connects to the modern Veddah population. He opines that in actual fact, the Veddahs could find a common ancestor in the form of the 'Balangoda man'. All these sites where human remains have been found were subject to detailed scientific study. They are considered to yield the earliest evidence of the anatomically modern man in South Asia. 'These anatomically modern prehistoric humans in Sri Lanka are referred to as Balangoda Man in popular parlance (derived from his being responsible for the Mesolithic 'Balangoda Culture' first defined in sites near Balangoda). He stood at an estimated height of 174 cm for males and 166 cm for females in certain samples, which is considerably higher when compared with the genetics of the present-day population in Sri Lanka. The bones are robust, with thick skull-bones, prominent brow-ridges, depressed wide noses, heavy jaws and short necks. The teeth are conspicuously large. These traits have survived in varying degrees among the Veddahs and certain Sinhalese groups, thus pointing to Balangoda Man as being the common ancestor.'

Within the course of their evolution, the original community spread across the country setting up home in rural parts of the Island. Dambana, is considered the capital of the Veddah community and some folk moved and integrated with society in areas in North Central and Uva Provinces.



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There is also a distinct line of these indigenous inhabitants found within the east coast of Sri Lanka. Though much of their original practices and grandeur have been compromised to this day, many find their distinct culture and practices fascinating.

The Veddah lifestyle is intertwined with forest ecology. The restrictions that have been put forth internally due to the scarcity of resources and their nomadic lifestyle have influenced the tribes being split into small groups. Each group comprises a nuclear family or a few extended families. These clans dwell within clearly demarcated boundaries and territories. This very fact has tacitly played a pivotal role in forming a unique but sustainable lifestyle for these 'forest dwellers'. The nature of hunting, gathering of rations, chena cultivation and the size of the individual group, have direct bearing to the division of labour among each individual group. The Veddahs seldom have individual belongings; this in turn facilitates their mobility and harnesses their freedom. Thus inevitably, some clans hold distinct advantage due to the fact that the clans that have settled down have access to more natural resources and good hunting grounds.

The ritual structure of the Veddah society, also finds its bearings from nature itself. The affiliations of clans, tribes and the Veddah community as a whole, have towards the transcendental, in which they believe they are being looked after by some spirit who is a relative, animal or plant, the worship of trees and rocks, which are located at some strategic location important to the clan, charms and songs that are meant to invoke blessings, and the ritualistic veneration of the supernatural at the beginning and end of cultivation, points towards the Veddah's distinct relationship with forest ecology itself.

Despite colonisation and resettlements of Veddahs, the chieftains have remained strong in their resolve; Varige Wanniya, the chieftain of the Veddahs addressing the United Nations working group on Indigenous people in 1996 was very clear 'We want to survive not only as a people but also as a culture', he said. This was in the backdrop of the Maduru Oya reserve being taken out of the hands of the Veddahs and the criminality that was prescribed to the killing of beasts and the shredding of forests. 'Our relationship with our environment is changing. We were the custodians of the jungle throughout the generations. Now the jungle is no longer ours and we do not feel responsible for its maintenance. A 'grab and run' philosophy has developed. We sneak inside, kill what we can get and then run outside again. We would not do that before. We were taught not to kill an animal drinking water, because we all need to drink water. We would not kill a pregnant mother; a deer, a sambhur or any other pregnant animal. We would not kill a four-legged mother giving milk to her young ones. The very land we, the Vanniyalaththo, shared with other beings (aththo) is also shared by our ancestral forefathers, gods and goddesses and forest spirits. We are now alienated from them.'

This underscores the threat that modern civilisation presents to the indigenous community. They have been dwindling in numbers due to integration with the Sinhalese and Tamil community and to make matters worse, there is the issue of direct governmental intervention either by way of law or by way of resettlements.



## Veddah community in the east

The Veddah community in the east, often referred to as 'Muhudu Veddah' or 'Veddahs of the sea', reside mainly in the Districts of Trincomalee and Batticaloa. Despite being intrinsically connected to the 'original inhabitants of the land', this community bears very little resemblance to the original Veddahs. The word Veddah is often associated with a bare chested man, carrying a weapon on his shoulder with his hair tied behind his head. This generalised description does not fit the present day Veddahs of the east. They seldom bare resemblance to the prototype of the indigenous Lankan.

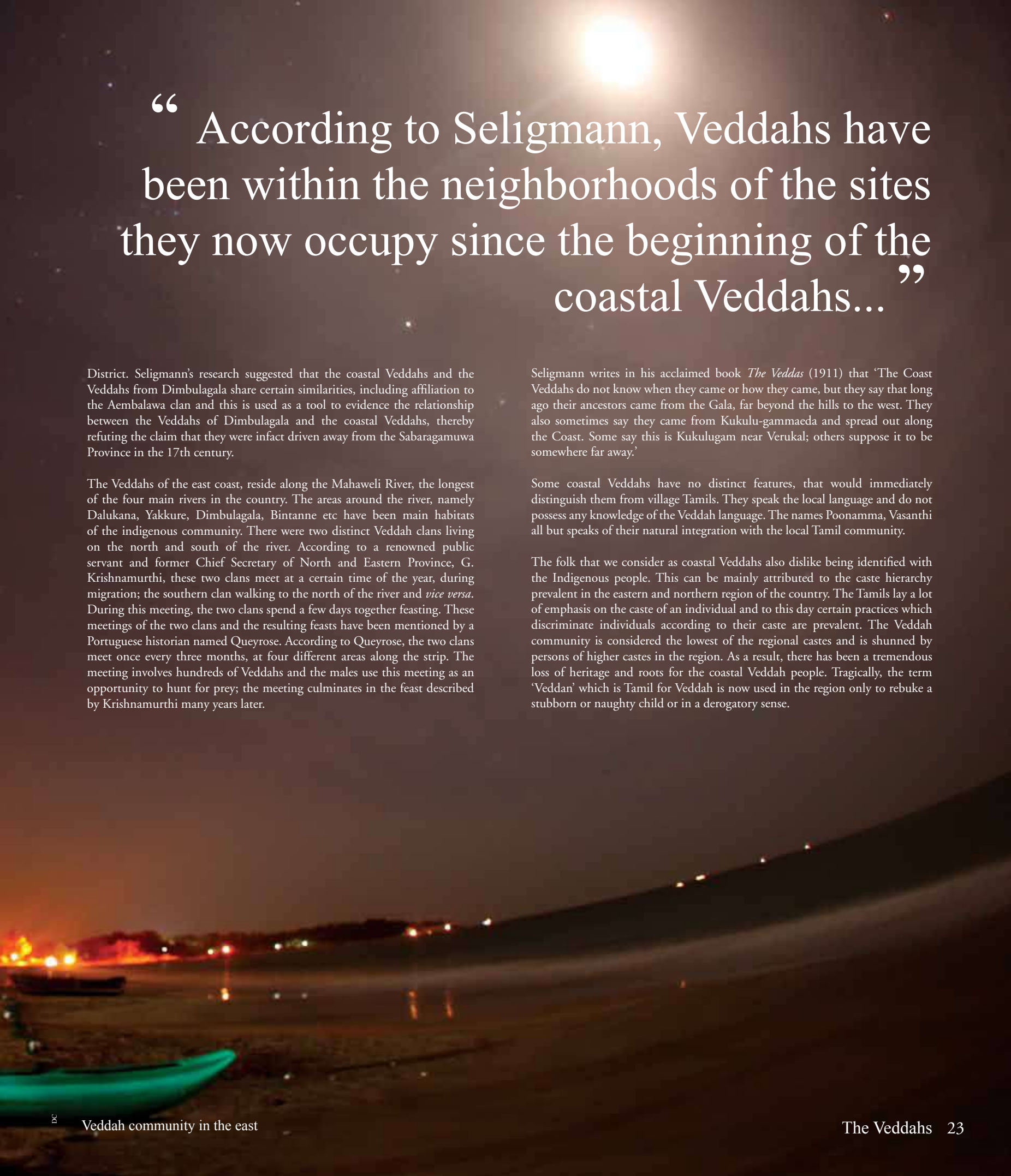
The remake of the Veddah in the eastern part of the island can be attributed to the socio-political reinvigoration that has swept across the country. Many of the Veddahs have married into native Tamil families and thereon have evolved into the normal way of life of the community.

The only recognition of the eastern Veddah, as being distinctly indigenous, is a purely theoretical one. The United Nations definition on what an indigenous population is, was first formulated in 1972 and was subject to amendments. The original definition reads 'Indigenous populations are composed of the existing descendants of the peoples who inhabited the present territory of a country wholly or partially at the time when persons of a different culture or ethnic origin arrived there from other parts of the world, overcame them, by conquest, settlement or other means, reduced them to

a non-dominant or colonial condition; who today live more in conformity with their particular social, economic and cultural customs and traditions than with the institutions of the country of which they now form part, under a state structure which incorporates mainly national, social and cultural characteristics of other segments of the population which are predominant.'

Thus the Veddahs of the east would find themselves within the parameters of the above definition. The date of their first arrival on the coast and of their subsequent inter-marriage with Tamils is uncertain. According to Seligmann, Veddahs have been within the neighborhoods of the sites they now occupy since the beginning of the coastal Veddahs, but the Veddahs themselves have a belief that they migrated from the inlands. Robert Knox does not mention them, but Hugh Neville considers that they came from Sabaragamuwa (Sufferagam), being driven from their native Sabaragamuwa during the 17th century.

There is strong academic opinion to refute Neville's claim. The older generation of Veddahs, despite not being able to give a clear date or place of their arrival in the coast, were of the opinion that their forefathers migrated to the east of the country from a place with the name of 'Gala' (stone). Taking the above into consideration, we can assume that these Veddahs migrated from either Dimbulagala or Nilgala, habitats situated close to the Batticaloa



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District. Seligmann's research suggested that the coastal Veddahs and the Veddahs from Dimbulagala share certain similarities, including affiliation to the Aemalawa clan and this is used as a tool to evidence the relationship between the Veddahs of Dimbulagala and the coastal Veddahs, thereby refuting the claim that they were in fact driven away from the Sabaragamuwa Province in the 17th century.

The Veddahs of the east coast, reside along the Mahaweli River, the longest of the four main rivers in the country. The areas around the river, namely Dalukana, Yakkure, Dimbulagala, Bintanne etc have been main habitats of the indigenous community. There were two distinct Veddah clans living on the north and south of the river. According to a renowned public servant and former Chief Secretary of North and Eastern Province, G. Krishnamurthi, these two clans meet at a certain time of the year, during migration; the southern clan walking to the north of the river and *vice versa*. During this meeting, the two clans spend a few days together feasting. These meetings of the two clans and the resulting feasts have been mentioned by a Portuguese historian named Queyrose. According to Queyrose, the two clans meet once every three months, at four different areas along the strip. The meeting involves hundreds of Veddahs and the males use this meeting as an opportunity to hunt for prey; the meeting culminates in the feast described by Krishnamurthi many years later.

Seligmann writes in his acclaimed book *The Veddahs* (1911) that 'The Coast Veddahs do not know when they came or how they came, but they say that long ago their ancestors came from the Gala, far beyond the hills to the west. They also sometimes say they came from Kukulugammaeda and spread out along the Coast. Some say this is Kukulugam near Verukal; others suppose it to be somewhere far away.'

Some coastal Veddahs have no distinct features, that would immediately distinguish them from village Tamils. They speak the local language and do not possess any knowledge of the Veddah language. The names Poonamma, Vasanthi all but speak of their natural integration with the local Tamil community.

The folk that we consider as coastal Veddahs also dislike being identified with the Indigenous people. This can be mainly attributed to the caste hierarchy prevalent in the eastern and northern region of the country. The Tamils lay a lot of emphasis on the caste of an individual and to this day certain practices which discriminate individuals according to their caste are prevalent. The Veddah community is considered the lowest of the regional castes and is shunned by persons of higher castes in the region. As a result, there has been a tremendous loss of heritage and roots for the coastal Veddah people. Tragically, the term 'Veddan' which is Tamil for Veddah is now used in the region only to rebuke a stubborn or naughty child or in a derogatory sense.

When due recognition is given to empirical data it can be deduced that the origins of the coastal Veddahs can be traced back to the 13th and 14th centuries. During that period, ethnic Sinhalese dominated the dwellings of Batticaloa and Hugh Neville's research shows a presence of coastal Veddahs during that time. According to Neville, the coastal village of the modern day Akkaraipattu, had a Veddah chief by the name of Puliyan. He was hailed as the chief of seven Veddah villages and his village was named Puliyanthiwu. It is recorded that Batticaloa as a whole was named Puliyanthiwu bearing the name of the then Veddah chief.

Recorded history suggests that this Veddah chief was a man-servant, of a then powerful state official named Rajapakshe. He supplied him with constant offerings of traditional meat and honey and was considered to be loyal to the state official. Mudliyar Rajapakshe, as he was known was impressed with the benevolence with which he was regarded by the Veddah chief and ensured Puliyan's marriage to Kandi, a local Veddah girl. There is also mention of another Veddah chief by the name of Karadiyan. It is said that the duty of this chief and his clan was to help with the construction of buildings in the area. There is also evidence to suggest that the Veddahs in the area were involved with the growing of paddy and other agriculture related industries. Hugh Neville's discovery, the Nadukadu Record goes on to state that when Mudliyar Rajapakshe visits Batticaloa, he brings with him two Veddahs akin to modern day bodyguards. The reason was his fear of attack from another Veddah clan, which resided in an area then known as Palwekam. There is also a record of the visit of King Senarath to the eastern coast. During this visit it is said that the Vegoda Veddah clan played the role of 'obedient servant' to the king. There is good reason to believe that the Vegoda Veddah clan and the clan that resided in Palwekam, according to Hugh Neville, are one and the same.

During the Dutch rule of the Island (1658-1798), Francois Valentine prepared a map of Ceylon in the year 1726. The map titled 'New Katt Van Het Eyland Ceylan', consisted of an area in the east coast reaching up to modern day Mulaithivu, demarcated as coastal Veddah territory. It can be safely assumed that there must have been a considerable presence of coastal

Veddahs in the area, so much so, that the Dutch simply could not ignore their presence and were compelled to include it in their maps of the Island. But then, there arises the pertinent question as to what exactly happened to these indigenous clans? The only justifiable assumption is that these clans integrated into normal civilisation and evolved therein, leaving no trace of their ancestral roots except in the rarest of cases - the apparent similarity in their genes. There are certain records of the Dutch using these Veddahs as soldiers and slaves. Governor Ryckloff Van Goen's notes are instructive in this regard.

Seligmann's *-The Veddahs*, states that the coastal Veddah settlement was limited to the north of Batticaloa. However, he points out that there is reason to believe that prior to the dawn of the 20th century, the Veddah settlements in the east extended towards the south of Batticaloa. Seligmann goes on to describe 'The Coast Veddahs are expert fishermen and make use of various forms of nets including a cast net. They also spear and shoot fish, using a bifid iron spear-head, which they have adopted from the Tamils. For shooting fish, they use the usual Veddah bow, but the arrow has become a harpoon with a shaft as long as the bow into which the iron with its running line fits loosely'.

The census carried out by the Sri Lankan state can be used as a tool albeit its deficiencies in ascertaining the growth or decline of the coastal Veddahs. The census carried out in 1921 shows that the Veddah population in the Central Province at 458 and the total number of coastal Veddahs in and around the Batticaloa District at 2489, the coastal Veddahs from the Trincomalee District was recorded as 707 and Mullaitivu accounted for 43 individual members of the indigenous community. What is clear from this census is that, despite heavy attention laid on the Veddahs residing in the middle of the country, the population living on the border outnumbers them.

The census carried out in 1946, records a decline in the number of Veddahs who had made Badulla their habitat; the recorded figure being 351. This decline was common to the coastal Veddahs alike with 1866 Veddahs recorded from Batticaloa.

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Dilmah Conservation was initiated in 2007 by the Dilmah Group to incorporate environmental conservation efforts into the MJF Charitable Foundation, which focuses on social justice. Dilmah Conservation works towards the sustainable use of the environment in partnership with other organisations including the International Union for Conservation of Nature - IUCN. The pledge made by Dilmah founder Merrill J. Fernando to make business a matter of human service is deeply ingrained in the work carried out by Dilmah Conservation. For additional information visit our website at [www.dilmahconservation.org](http://www.dilmahconservation.org).



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