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Leanne Mitchell: Sri Lanka, After the Deluge

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The road from Colombo to Galle has always been treacherous. Two narrow lanes most of the way, it snakes along the southwest coast of Sri Lanka, transporting a river of buses, trucks, cars, three-wheeled tuk-tuks, motorbikes, and bicycles, all of them weaving hair-raisingly among the livestock, dogs, humans, and other forms of life. People live along it cheek by jowl in structures ranging from five-star hotels to wooden hovels. Despite its hazards, the road has long been the gateway to the spectacular coastline that peeks out intermittently as you speed along—the lifeblood of this area of fishermen, merchants, and tourism operators.

The scene was familiar to me from previous travels; my parents emigrated from Sri Lanka to Australia 37 years ago and the country's south coast beaches were always a stop during trips back. In March I returned to research the social and environmental impacts of a new highway that will replace the Galle Road as the country's major thoroughfare into the South. As I drove down the road on a sunny morning, the sea behind the bustling market towns was calm and a perfect aquamarine. Lines of coconut trees adorned brilliant white sands; every view was a postcard. Then it hit me.

Many of the spectacular views weren't even there three months before. The December 26 tsunami, which indifferently ripped up shantytowns and solid, 300-year-old Dutch- and Portuguese-built houses alike, ironically opened to view more of the once built-up coastline, revealing many more picture postcards—if you could ignore the carnage.

It started not far outside of Colombo, the capital. The town of Moratuwa, about 30 kilometers south, offered the first scene of devastation. Makeshift wooden housing, built along the train tracks and looking over the sea, didn't stand a chance. Some parts were nothing but rubble.

Farther south, the road wove through pockets of devastation. Most striking, once I got past the shock of the terrifying force the waves must have carried, was that the damage was not uniform. Some coastal towns stood virtually unharmed. Others, like Telwatta, about three hours south of Colombo, looked like bombed zones. Telwatta was also the scene of the world's worst train disaster, in which more than 2,000 people died trapped in carriages derailed by the surging waters.

The tsunami claimed more than 30,000 lives here. Environmental organizations, including Worldwatch, were quick to note

that certain unnatural factors contributed to this natural disaster. The destruction of mangroves, coral reefs, and other natural barriers left areas of the coastline a lot more vulnerable. Driving down the coast road made it blatantly obvious where this had happened.

But whether the government of Sri Lanka or the people rebuilding along the coast will heed this environmental message is still unclear. The two groups are deadlocked. To protect against any similar disasters, the government implemented clear zones of 100 to 200 meters between beaches and dwellings along the southern and eastern coasts. But the fishing industry is up in arms; most fisher folk are the poorest of the poor in these areas and their lives depend on living as close as possible to their catch. They are joined in their opposition by tourism operators, big and small, who are fighting to keep their prime coastal locations.

In fact, almost three months after the disaster, not much seems to be happening along the coast. Thousands of people continue to live in atrocious conditions in tent-city refugee camps and other temporary accommodation. Others choose to ignore government threats and rebuild on their previous lots, risking the chance that they may lose their houses again at any time.

I left Sri Lanka feeling that some middle ground between government safety concerns and the maintenance of people's livelihoods needed to be found. Early warning systems and forced relocations aside, there is precious little talk in policy and planning circles about other means available for protecting coastal populations against future disaster. One local group, the Centre for Environmental Justice, is leading a campaign to rejuvenate mangrove areas and stop coral mining, but movements like this are struggling to make their voices heard in this political and social screaming match.

Leanne Mitchell is Worldwatch's Director of Communications. She is currently on sabbatical leave.