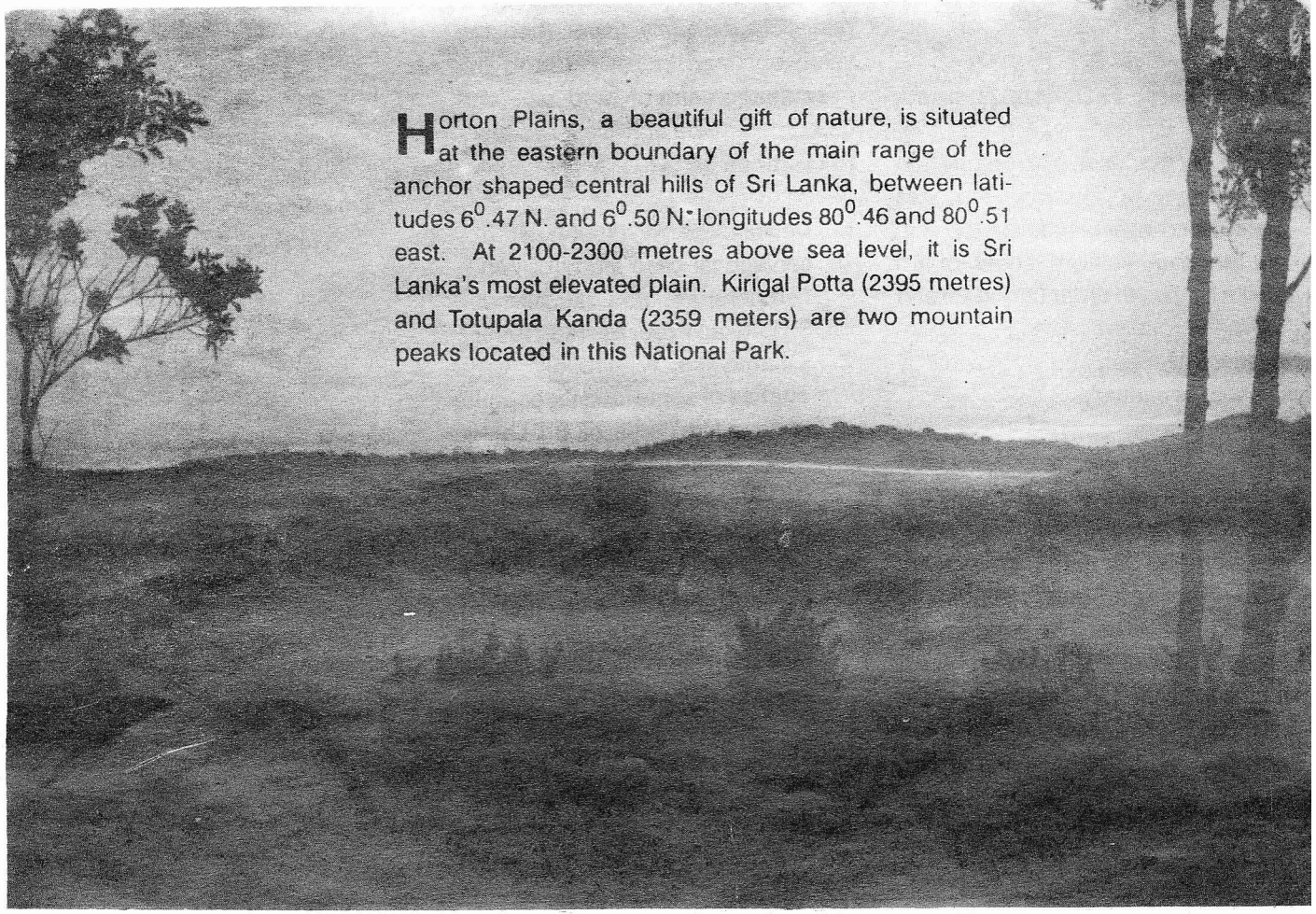


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HORTON PLAINS

**- A NATIONAL HERITAGE
AT A HIGH ALTITUDE**



Horton Plains, a beautiful gift of nature, is situated at the eastern boundary of the main range of the anchor shaped central hills of Sri Lanka, between latitudes $6^{\circ}.47$ N. and $6^{\circ}.50$ N. longitudes $80^{\circ}.46$ and $80^{\circ}.51$ east. At 2100-2300 metres above sea level, it is Sri Lanka's most elevated plain. Kirigal Potta (2395 metres) and Totupala Kanda (2359 meters) are two mountain peaks located in this National Park.

History does not record any information about the Horton Plains other than that it served as a hunting-ground. It is believed that Sir Robert Horton named the plains after him in 1836 during the British occupation. In January that year he had made arrangements to tour Nuwara-Eliya and meet his friend the Rate Mahattaya of Sabaragamuwa. They decided to meet each other in some place between Nuwara-Eliya and Ratnapura. This place was Mahaweli or Mahatenne (Great Plain). River Mahaweli originates in the Horton National Park. Therefore it is possible to presume that the river took its name from the place 'Mahaweli'.

In 1969 Horton Plains National Park was declared a natural reserve for the first time. This plain which is 31600 hectares in extent is bounded on the east by the Samanala Kanda Peak Wilderness Sanctuary. When the necessity to protect this area arose it was raised to the status of a National Park in 1988.

Records of weather or climatic conditions of the plains have not been kept for any considerable length of time. Although there is a regular incidence of rainfall throughout the year. During this season midday temperature is about 27°C, and the night temperature 5°C or less. In 1971 Muller Dombis and Perera have recorded an average February temperature of 12°C. Annual rainfall in the

region is about 2540 mm (Wijewansa, 1983) but for Horton Plains, may exceed 5000 mm (Ratnayake & Balasubramaniam, 1989). Rain occurs throughout most of the year but there is a dry season from January to March. In February and March dew forms on the grass in the early mornings. In the rainy season there is mist throughout the day. The strong winds and the ceaseless drizzle which fall during the South-West Monsoons is a climatic condition not experienced in most other parts of the country.

In 1961 seed potato was cultivated in parts of the Horton Plains. But due to the efforts of environmentalists it was possible to put a stop to this. However the environmental destruction caused during the 9 years have created many problems within the National Park.

A recent study reveals that 7 major habitat types can be observed within the National Park (Wijesundara, MFC, 1992), namely:



Flower of *Christisonia* Sp.

- Upper Montane Rain Forest (including the pigmy or cloud forest).
- Wet Patana Grasslands.
- Marshy and aquatic areas.
- Forest-grassland Ecotone.
- Open areas (gaps) in the forest.
- Disturbed areas in the grasslands.
- Roadsides and around buildings.

The upper Montane Rain Forest is the most dominant habitat type in Horton Plains National Park. Forests are present as continuous ranges as well as isolated patches in the grasslands. The dominant families of flora in the National Park are Lauraceae, Myrtaceae, Rubiaceae, Symplocaceae and Euphorbiaceae.

Among the large trees of the rain forests can be identified 101 different species of trees. Of these 49 are endemic to Sri Lanka. Hence in the Horton Plains National Park's Upper Mountain rain forests about 48.54% of these varieties can be seen. Only in Sri Lanka and nowhere else is this possible. The dominant plants in this forest are, Kurundu (*Cinnamomum ovalifolium*), Karandamba (*Syzygium revolutum*), Keena (*Calophyllum walkeri*), Maharatmal (*Rhododendron arboreum*) etc.

The beauty of this forest is enhanced by a kind of lichens (*Usnea barbara*) that hangs from their branches like beards of old men. Numerous varieties of orchids grow on these trees. A special feature of the environment here is the total absence of palms.

The lower parts of the grassland are marshy. Small streams and springs flow slowly over this portion. In the slow moving rivulets many kinds of *Kekatiyas* (*Aponogeton jacobseui*) *Diya Pasi*, *Beraliya Pasi* (*Nitricularia* sp.) grow.

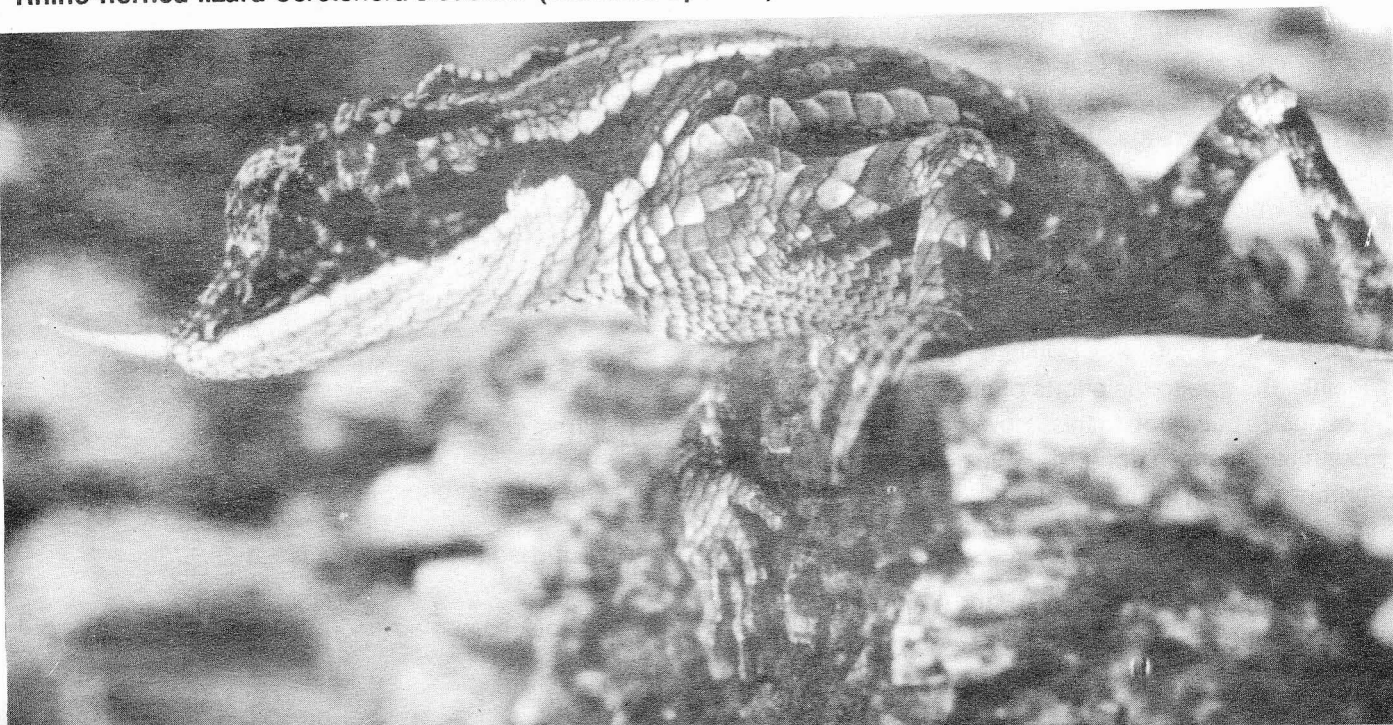
On the banks of the rivulets and brooks grow thick bushes of bamboo (*Chimnobambusa devisifolia*). Near the marshes grow different kinds of grass. The more prominent are *Gavnotia mutica*, *Denmistaedia seabva*, *Ericanlon* sp., *Exacume maeravithum* grasses.

The dominant species of grasses that grow in the main grasslands are *Arundinella villosa*, and *Chrysopogon zeylanicus*. Fire resistant Maha Ratmal trees (*Rhododendron arboreum*) grow interspersed on the grasslands. Hence these grasslands resemble the Savannas. Various kinds of shrubs grow on the road clearings. Among them are kinds of *Bovitiya* (*Osbeckia* sp.).

Large mammals except the elephant inhabit the Horton Plains. Nowhere in Sri Lanka could one see so many sambar (*Cervus unicolor*) roaming about as on the Horton Plains National Park. There are herds comprising more than 50 animals at times. The spotted deer is absent here, but the Barking deer (*Muntiacus muntjak*) and Mouse deer (*Tragulus meminna*) are a common sight.

A large number of endemic fauna of Sri Lanka could easily be seen here. Of the 23 endemic Sri Lankan birds 17 could be found on the Horton Plains.

Rhino-horned lizard *Ceratochama stoddartii* (Endemic Species)



The special identity of its environment is exhibited by the presence of Rhino-horned lizard (*Ceratophora stoddartii*), Purple-faced leaf monkey (*Presbytis senex*). Several species of insects and animals have been discovered in this National Park. Its zoological phenomena may be treated under a different heading.

Today the Horton Plains National Park is a reserve which protects our wildlife and plants. Large water resources like the Mahaweli and the fate of our hydro electric power plants depend on the catchment area of the Park.

The catchment of rivers Mahaweli, Walawe, Kelani, Belihul Oya, Uma Oya and Bagawantalawa Oya which joins the Castlereigh reservoir is based in this National Park. Hence it should be protected not only for wildlife but also as a catchment.

At present there are environmental problems in the National Park. On some parts there is a forest die back. This phenomenon was first observed in 1978 (Perera), is the dying of the cloud forest on all peripheral aspects of the plateau (Ratnayake and Balasubramaniam, 1989). This has reached serious proportions, with a 50% reduction of forest cover in some places. Water deficit is believed to be the main cause of the die-back, droughts having become noticeably more frequent during the last few decades. Regeneration of cloud forest is impeded by forest, which may be becoming increasingly more severe (Werner, 1988; Ratnayake and Balasubramaniam, 1989).

Other problems include increasing disturbance from visitors, poaching for meat, gemming around the park, annual fires caused by miscreants, localised spread of introduced exotics and the great increase of the number of sambur.

The scarcity of pure drinking water is a major worldwide environmental problem now and is one of Sri Lanka's foremost problems in the protection of this National Park.

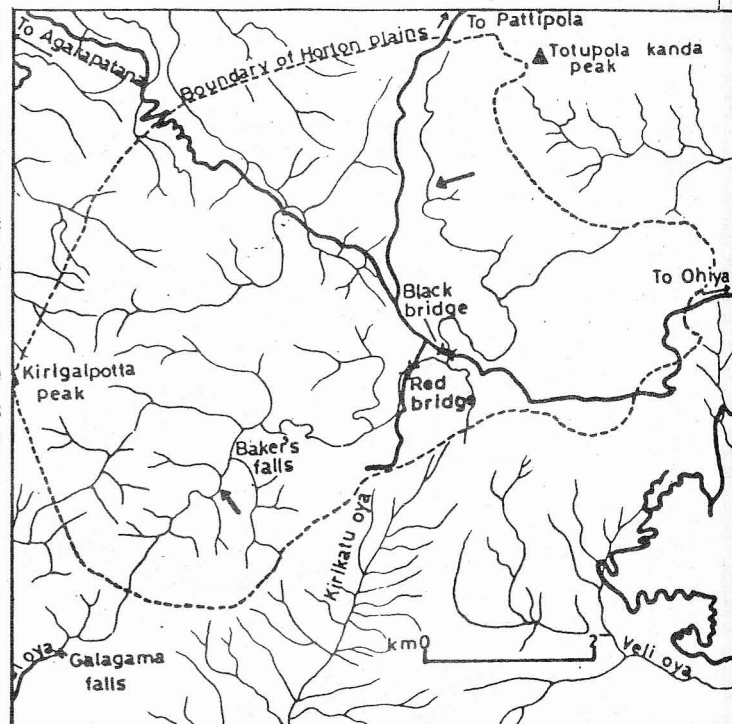
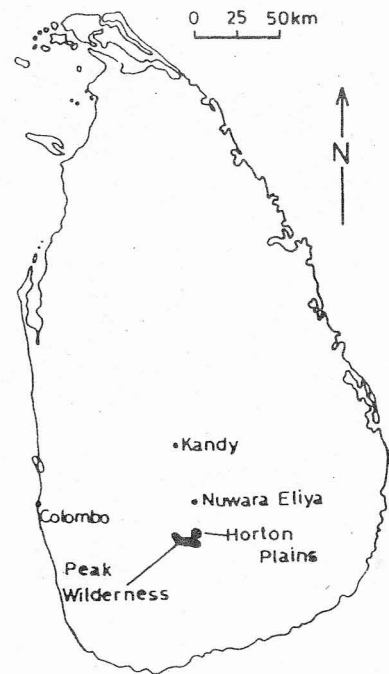


Plate 2: Debris and rock slides during excessive rains in 1989 damage to the Kandy - Mahiyangana road at Hunnasgiriya. (B) Landslide in a rubber estate at Pantiya (Matugama) in the Kalutara district.

