

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

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Sri Lanka is a low-middle income country that is currently undergoing a rapid epidemiological and nutritional transition. Nevertheless, as a whole, the country still remains very much an agricultural nation. The staple food of Sri Lankan is rice, and it is not an uncommon sight to see paddy plantations alongside roads and hillsides when driving through the country.

Sri Lanka's commercial agriculture is nevertheless dominated by its tea industry. This is especially true for the sloping hill-country and mid-country regions. Tea is one of the major sources of foreign exchange for the country, moreover, because Sri Lanka supplies about 18% of the tea traded in world markets.

The typical diet of Sri Lanka composes mainly of rice with some vegetables and a small portion of meat or fish, or a chicken egg. The bulk of the food consumed by the average Sri Lankan can be considered as composed of rice with a few vegetables. In particular, the diet of the rural populations in Sri Lanka is high in cereals with a low intake of foods of animal origin. Cereals are the main sources of protein in the Sri Lankan diet, and most of these are consumed for breakfast. On top of that, herbs and leafy greens incorporated into rice broth is becoming a popular food item in the country as well. Consuming herbal porridges or *kola kanda* for breakfast has become a trend in modern Sri Lanka to keep up good health as well as to obtain necessary phytonutrients. The younger generation finds the habit of consuming herbal porridge more palatable, as some of the herbs and leafy greens help to prevent the occurrence of diseases. When rice gruel is incorporated with minced leaves and consumed as a broth, the bitterness and grassy note present in many of the leaves is masked, and the resulting food product is more appetizing. Additionally, drinking one glass of herbal porridge is considered an all-in-one breakfast among Sri Lankans, and given the presence of fibers contributed by the broth, it offers a feeling of satiety. This is very important for the urban population of Sri Lanka who leads high-powered corporate-level careers but is nevertheless keen on incorporating a healthy diet and exercise as part of their lifestyle.

Sri Lanka offers a variety of traditional sweets that are especially prepared during festive occasions. These products are primarily made of rice flour, and traditional preparations of these food items do not use sugar. Instead, treacle obtained from the sap of the

tree *Caryota urens* or *kitul* as called in the Sinhala language is utilized. Kitul treacle offers body the food product as well as fiber and several other minerals and nutrients. Other than rice flour, the flour obtained from pulverizing the mung bean (*Vigna radiata*) is also used in the preparation of some of the traditional sweets, especially *Mung Kavum*.

Sri Lanka is part of the Western Ghats biodiversity hot spot that extends southward from Western India. This honor is bestowed upon the country due to the wide variety of flora and fauna. As a result of this diversity, the region as a whole has a high level of endemism in the animal species as well. It is important therefore for Sri Lanka to balance agricultural development and conservation efforts to meet sustainable development goals for biodiversity conservation while at the same time meeting demands to increase the national production of food. Several traditional Sri Lankan farming systems are based on diversified farms and landscapes that provide a series of benefits for both humans and wildlife. Traditional practices such as deep water and stepped rice production that adapt to natural water regimes and use minimal inputs are recognized as potentially sustainable food production systems. However, the environmental and socioeconomic sustainability of traditional agricultural systems has received relatively little research attention compared with intensified and commercialized production systems. Traditional agricultural systems are often the result of centuries of experience in farming under local environmental and climatic conditions. Efforts to modernize such systems can sometimes result in reduced environmental sustainability and degradation of land or water, with consequent abandonment of farming or a return to original, traditional methods. Thus all efforts to produce sustainable food production systems via agriculture should bear in mind that the flora, fauna, and wildlife of Sri Lanka does not get destroyed as a result.