

Dear Wicks,

I wd be grateful if you could  
kindly follow up on this for  
me.

Yrs,  
Rohanp

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Secretary  
Ministry of Environment & Natural Resources  
'Sampathpaya'  
Rajamalwatta Road  
Battaramulla

Dear Sir,

### The 'WHT' Specimen Collection

Since 1991, the Wildlife Heritage Trust (WHT), a non-profit foundation established by me, carried out extensive biodiversity exploration and research in Sri Lanka. This mostly self-funded work involved surveys of the often neglected faunas of the island, including freshwater fishes, amphibians, lizards, snakes and small mammals (e.g., mice and shrews). It led to the discovery of large numbers of new species, resulting in dozens of pioneering scientific and popular publications (more than 30 books and some 100 research papers), of which I am sure you are aware. Since 1998, several of these surveys were also co-funded by the GEF window of the Department of Wildlife Conservation.

All the above work led to the accumulation of a large number of preserved scientific specimens which are stored in a collection building and laboratory specially constructed for this purpose at Agarapatana, adjoining a montane-forest restoration project I am implementing there. The reason for storage at Agarapatana is that the high elevation (1,650 metres) there results in low daytime temperatures of 18-24°C and lower nighttime temperatures of 12-18°C, which is ideal for the preservation of zoological specimens in ethanol. At the higher temperatures of Colombo, these specimens tend to decay quite rapidly.

These specimens represent a unique baseline for biodiversity of many groups of animals, and represent an important and unparalleled scientific effort that is unlikely to be repeated in the future. It is therefore of great importance that this collection be preserved in perpetuity. Indeed, the preservation methods we have used are such that with careful curation, these specimens should last for several centuries if they are well cared for.

In September 2005 I closed down WHT because of the great financial burden to me personally. While key members of the research team have been absorbed into universities overseas, the publications work (which is undertaken by an independent company, WHT Publications (Pvt) Ltd) will continue until end 2007 because of prior contractual commitments. In this background, it is necessary to develop a mechanism to secure the long-term security of this unique biodiversity collection.

While these specimens have been accumulated and cared for under my direct supervision, I regard them not as my private property but as the property of the State, only held in trust by me. They must eventually belong to and be cared for by a national institution. While I am willing to assure the curation of the collection for the remainder of my lifetime, clearly some official institutional arrangement will be necessary thereafter (and preferably as soon as possible). I have considered several options (there may be others), as follows:

1. ***Hand the collection over to the National Museum or the Department of Wildlife Conservation.***

While this is logical in terms of institutional responsibility, it involves storing these specimens in Colombo or Giritale, both of which are too warm to assure the continued preservation in good condition. This is evident in the existing collections of the national museum, which are in very poor condition largely because of the high ambient temperatures in Colombo, while historical neglect also may be partly responsible.

2. ***Hand the collection to an appropriate centre in the hill country***

Both DWC and FD have facilities in and around Nuwara Eliya, which could be developed to house such a collection, subject to long-term investment in curation. It may also be worth considering setting aside a building at the Tea Research Institute at Talawakelle for this purpose, especially given that there is much scientific capacity available there.

3. ***Hand over the collection, together with the present building and a suitable extent of land to a relevant government agency.***

I would be happy to gift the collection, building and the land on which the collection building stands to the State, so that it could be cared for *in situ*. The facility could then be managed, e.g., by the Biodiversity Secretariat, Department of Wildlife Conservation, Wildlife Trust, Forest Department (which would also provide the FD with access to the Agra-Bopath FR, which is adjacent to the land), Department of National Museums or any other government agency (or combination of agencies) nominated by you (perhaps even a university or the Institute of Fundamental Studies could be considered). In addition to the collection room and laboratory, the building is about 3,000 sq. ft. in extent and stands on about 1 acre of land; it includes 2 bedrooms, 2 kitchens and 2 bathrooms for use by resident scientists. Electricity and water connections have been provided.

This option would also allow the site to be developed further, perhaps as a centre for montane forest conservation and research, and perhaps also for *ex situ* conservation.

In addition to the above, there may be other options I have not thought of, that need to be considered.

What is most important are the following:

- a) The specimens need to be cared for *in perpetuity*, with preservatives being regularly checked and replenished (this is expensive and presently costs me about Rs 400,000 per annum).
- b) The specimens should be kept cool and in the dark, so as to avoid bleaching and decay.
- c) There should be free access to the scientific community to access the specimens and to conduct research on them.

In addition to the above, it is necessary to database the collection and digitally photograph all important specimens (this is now in progress under my supervision) so that all specimen information could be freely available for purposes of protected-area planning (e.g., DWC's gap analysis project used all our freshwater fish and amphibian data in their GIS), taxonomy, threatened-species listings, etc.

In the event of my gifting the building and land to the State, the only condition will be that residential access should be granted only for scientific purposes to *bona fide* scientists and research students, and that the facility should not be used as a tourist lodge or circuit bungalow. No activity harmful to the environment should be permitted at any time (e.g., vegetable cultivation).

I would be grateful if you could kindly advise me of what your preference is in regard to the above proposals, or of any other option, so that action could be taken accordingly. Please let me know at any time if I could assist in any way, e.g., by facilitating a site visit or by making a presentation to a committee appointed by you.

I would value it if you would kindly give this proposal your early and personal attention because this is an invaluable national resource that must be cared for *in the truly long term*.

Thanking you,

Yours faithfully,

Rohan Pethiyagoda.

cc. Mr. Gamini Gamage, Director, Biodiversity Secretariat