SRI LANKA NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY

E-Newsletter No.1 of 2025

Editorial

One of the recent successes of the SLNHS has been the recruitment of fresh young blood !

This newsletter was completed by one of them - Anishke Dissanayake, who will take over as the Editor very soon.

It has certainly been a while since our last newsletter.

We promise this one will be packed with information for your reading pleasure while we work on the next one.

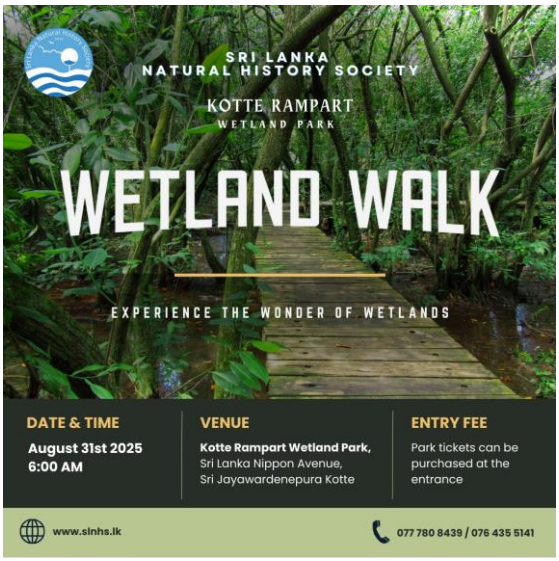
We have had many interesting lectures this year and have recorded them as well. Please check them out on the SLNHS YouTube channel.

Members are encouraged to send in their inputs by way of text and images pertaining to their own natural history related experiences (by email to anishked@icloud.com)

Chris Corea

Editor

RECENT EXCURSION



MORE PUBLIC LECTURES

We strive to provide more unique and interesting topics and speakers for the rest of the year! All our lectures can be attended remotely via zoom but also in-person whenever we organize hybrid sessions! Hope to see you there!

P.S. Yes, there will be tea and biscuits whenever we have physical venues!

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING – COUNCIL MEMBERS 2025

Patron	: Dr. Malik Fernando
President	: Prof. Enoka Corea
Vice President	: Prof. Devaka Weerakoon
Hon. Secretary	: Ms. Hirushi Siriwardena
Hon. Treasurer	: Mr. Peter Rezel
Council Member	: Mr. Chris Corea Ms. Hasula Wickremasinghe Mr. Prashantha Jayasekara Mr. Dharmin Samarjeewa Mr. Anishke Dissanayake

The newly elected Council takes this opportunity to thank the previous Council and the membership for their commitment and support throughout the year.

APPRECIATION – A Tribute to the Memory of Lal Motha, Past President, SLNHS *by Asoka Siriwardena*

It is with profound sadness that we pay tribute to the memory of our past President Lal Motha who passed away after a prolonged illness….

Lal, who was a keen naturalist, had a professional career as a Research Scientist at Sri Lanka's pioneering scientific research organization, Industrial Technology Institute (CISIR /ITI) as a senior scientist. His induction to the Sri Lanka Natural History Society was around the year 2015, first as a member and before long he was elected to serve in the Council. He exemplified himself by his dedication and devotion in the service of the natural environment and the ideals we hold dear.

He was elected as President of the Society in the year 2019 and was re-elected thereafter until 2023, when he stepped down due a debilitating illness. Under his leadership the Society achieved many milestones. He had the fine qualities of a gentleman, and his commitment and dedication guided the Society during a very turbulent time in our nation's history. It was the time of the COVID-19 pandemic which was followed by an even more devastating crisis, namely the economic meltdown which brought normal life in the country to a standstill. Lal's leadership enabled the Society to navigate successfully through this difficult period, by keeping the membership together and keeping the Society as a functioning entity without any interruption of its activities. This indeed was the hallmark of his achievements. As we mourn his loss, we pay tribute to his remarkable leadership, his qualities of wisdom and kindness and the passion he demonstrated throughout his service to our Society.

EXCURSIONS

SLNHS - Hambantota Field Visit Report (Oct. 4th - 6th, 2024)

Participants: Malik Fernando, Chris and Enoka Corea, Ninel Fernando, Damayanthi Attanayake, Bharatha Attanayake, Dilini Wickramasinghe, Padmini Seneviratne, Devi, Gamini

Introduction

This report details the activities and observations made during the Sri Lanka Natural History Society (SLNHS) tour of the Hambantota region from October 4th to 6th, 2023. The tour focused on exploring sites of historical and environmental significance of Hambantota District.

Day 1: Friday, October 4th

Madunagala Hot Springs

The tour began at Madunagala Hot Springs, renowned for their therapeutic properties. These natural hot springs are set in a serene environment, making them a popular destination for both locals and tourists seeking relaxation and health benefits.

Tamarind Tree of Leonard Woolf

Next, the group visited the Tamarind Tree linked to Leonard Woolf, a key literary figure of the early 20th century. Woolf served as an Assistant Government Agent in Hambantota between 1908 and 1911. His most famous work*, Village in the Jungle*, vividly depicts the hardships of a poor family in a jungle village, offering a rare local perspective on colonial life. This tree stands as a historical landmark, bridging literature and nature, and reflecting Woolf's time in Sri Lanka and his contributions to its literary heritage.

Andare's Tomb and Statue

The team explored Andare's tomb and statue, dedicated to Andare, a beloved local jester known for his wit and humor. This site highlights the cultural narratives that shape Sri Lankan identity, celebrating folklore and traditional storytelling.

Dry Zone Botanical Gardens

The day concluded at the Mirijjawila Botanical Gardens, which span over 300 acres. These gardens feature a diverse collection of native and exotic plant species, emphasizing conservation efforts. Participants observed various ecosystems within the gardens, including tropical flora and medicinal plants. The gardens serve as an educational resource for visitors and play a crucial role in preserving Sri Lanka's botanical heritage.

Day 2: Saturday, October 5th

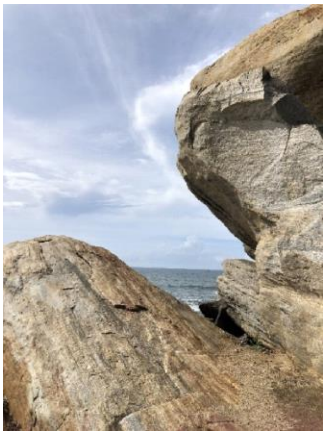
Birdwatching in Bundala Environs

The second day focused on birdwatching in the Bundala area, part of a designated Ramsar Wetland site. Participants identified numerous bird species, including migratory birds. The rich biodiversity of this area makes it an essential habitat for both resident and migratory avifauna.

Observing the biological control of invasive *Opuntia dillennii* using cochineal insects; formally used as crimson -edible food coloring.

Godawaya

The group visited Godawaya, a former river estuary of the Walawe River characterized by its unique ecological features. One of the oldest harbours in Asia and home of the oldest shipwreck in South Asia. The site provides insights into historical river dynamics and is notable for its Garnet-rich beach and rounded rocks shaped by exfoliation weathering.




Godawaya estuary

Ussangoda National Park

Participants explored Ussangoda National Park, known for its distinctive geological formations, Fe rich soils and rich biodiversity. The park features rare flora adapted to its unique soil conditions, including endemic species that thrive in this environment.


Long views of Ussangoda

Ruhuna Magama Heritage Museum

The tour included a visit to the Ruhuna Magama Heritage Museum, where participants learned about local history through artifacts that reflect the cultural richness of the Hambantota region. The museum showcases items from ancient civilizations, providing context to Sri Lanka's historical narrative.

Light-house and the Martello Tower

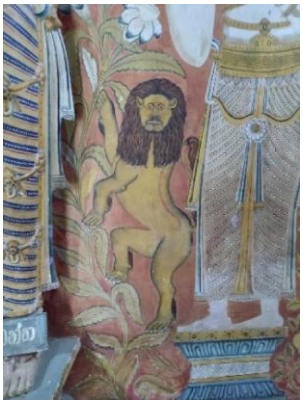
Participants examined the remains of a Martello tower, one of several coastal defense structures built during colonial times. This site offers insights into Sri Lanka's colonial history and military architecture.

Bata Atha Agro-Technology Park

The group visited Bata Atha Agro Technology Park, which showcases innovative agricultural practices aimed at sustainable development. Participants learned about modern farming techniques that integrate technology with traditional practices to enhance productivity while preserving environmental integrity.

Kasagala Temple

The final site visited was Kasagala Temple, an important religious site that reflects the spiritual heritage of the region. This temple is known for its intricate architecture and serene atmosphere, serving as a place of worship and reflection for both locals and visitors.



Conclusion

The SLNHS tour of the Hambantota region provided participants with valuable insights into both historical and environmental aspects of Sri Lanka. Through visits to significant sites, members gained a deeper understanding of local biodiversity and cultural narratives that shape this unique area.

Appendix 1:

Birds observed at Dry Zone Botanic Garden

Little green bee-eater
Yellow-billed babbler
White-throated kingfisher
Red-vented bulbul
Asian Koel
Spotted dove
Common myna

Birds observed at Bundala National Park

Sunbird
Waterhen
Black robin
White-browed bulbul
Blue-tailed bee-eater
Painted stork
Pheasant-tailed jacana
Spot-billed pelican
Common redshank
Rose-ringed parakeet
Weaver Bird
Pacific golden plover
Lesser sand plover
Pelican
Purple Heron
Spoonbills
Black-headed ibis
Common sandpiper
Little stint
Great Thick-knee
Black-tailed godwit
Little ringed plover
Kentish plover
Black-winged stilt
Marsh sandpiper
Wood sandpiper
Barn swallow
Black-headed oriole
Little green bee-eater
Spoonbill grey heron
Curlew sandpiper
Ruddy turnstone
Western swamphen
White-bellied Sea eagle
Cormorants
Snipes
Grey-headed fish eagle
Osprey

Appendix 2:

Plant species observed at the Dry zone Botanic Gardens

Common name	**Scientific name**	**Family**	**Native/non-native**	**Conservation status**
Maliththan	*Salvadora persica*	Salvadoraceae	Native	LC-Least Concern
Kaha karanda	*Dendrolobium umbellatum*	Fabaceae	Non-native	
Gansuriya	*Thespesia populnea*	Malvaceae	Native	LC- Least Concern
Milla	*Vitex altissima*	Myrtaceae	Native	
Aralu	*Terminalia chebula*	Combretaceae	Native	LC- Least Concern
Bulu	*Terminalia bellirica*	Combretaceae	Native	
Nelli	*Phyllanthus emblica*	Phyllanthaceae	Native	VU - Vulnerable
Hik	*Lannea coromandelica*	Anacardiaceae	Native	LC- Least Concern
Neralu	*Elaeodendron glaucum*	Celastraceae	Endemic	LC- Least Concern
Baobab tree	*Adansonia digitata*	Malvaceae	Non-native	
Siyambala	*Tamarindus indica*	Fabaceae	Non-native	
Kohomba	*Azadirachta indica*	Meliaceae	Non-native	
Palu	*Manilkara hexandra*	Sapotaceae	Native	NT-Near Threatened
Mee	*Madhuca longifolia*	Sapotaceae	Native	LC- Least Concern
Pare mara	*Samanea saman*	Fabaceae	Exotic - Naturalized	

Plant species observed at the Bundala National Park

Common name	Scientific name	Family	Native/non-native	Conservation status
Kalapu andara - invasive	*Neltuma juliflora*	Fabaceae	Exotic - IAS - Invasive Alien Species	
Ranawara	*Senna auriculata*	Fabaceae	Native	LC- Least Concern
weera	*Drypetes sepiaria*	Putranjivaceae	Native	LC- Least Concern
palu	*Manilkara hexandra*	Sapotaceae	Native	NT-Near Threatened
daluk	*Euphorbia antiquorum*	Euphorbiaceae	Native	LC- Least Concern

SNIPPETS

Please check out the full writeups (with extensive pictures) for these Snippets and more on our website!

	#	Title	Author	Date
	M08	Greater Painted Snipe	Mr Sri Srikumar	11th March 2025
	18	Nudibranchs /Sea Slugs	Dr Malik Fernando	24th March 2025
	19	Sea Cucumbers in Sri Lanka	Dr Malik Fernando	22nd April 2025
	20	Snails & Slugs in my Garden	Dr Malik Fernando	18th August 2025
	21	Bundala National Park and its invasives	Dr Malik Fernando	10th October 2024

LECTURES

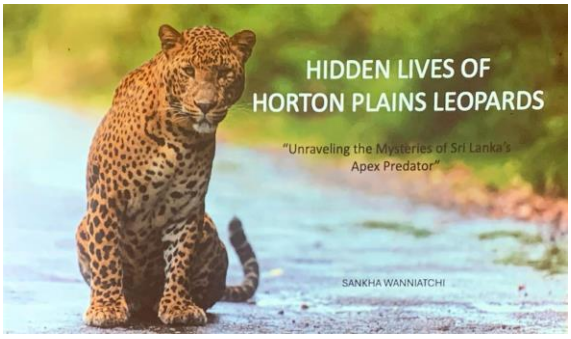
We have had four lectures of which three were hybrid with both in-person and zoom participation while one was strictly on zoom. The contents are synopsised below -

AGM Lecture - The Hidden Lives of Horton Plains Leopards:

Unravelling the Mysteries of Sri Lanka's Stealthy Apex Predator

By Sankha Wanniatchi, Author, consultant, conservation wildlife photographer and wildlife enthusiast

This presentation delves into the mysterious world of the Horton Plains leopards, one of Sri Lanka's most elusive and striking apex predators. Situated within the tranquil yet rugged terrain of Horton Plains National Park, these leopards have mastered the art of survival, seamlessly blending into their environment while remaining largely unseen by human observers. The park's cool, mist-enveloped grasslands and dense forested areas provide the ideal backdrop for a predator that thrives on solitude and discretion.



The first aspect we explore is the **behavioral patterns** of these leopards. We examine their hunting techniques, social interactions, and territorial behaviors. Despite their position at the top of the food chain, their ability to remain hidden from view is a testament to the sophisticated survival strategies they have developed over generations. This aspect of their behavior showcases their keen adaptation to a life of stealth and precision.

Following this, we turn our attention to the **adaptations** of the Horton Plains leopards to their unique habitat. The cold, often foggy climate of the Horton Plains plateau presents numerous challenges, yet these leopards have evolved a range of physical and behavioral traits that allow them to thrive in this high-altitude environment. Their ability to endure harsh weather conditions and navigate through the dense vegetation demonstrates their remarkable resilience and adaptability.

Another key focus of this presentation is the **role of light** in leopard sightings. The interaction of natural light, fog, and the transition from day to night plays a crucial role in shaping the visibility of these leopards. The constantly shifting light conditions, combined with the pervasive mist that envelops the plains, influence how frequently these animals are observed by researchers and visitors. We will analyze how varying levels of light at different times of day impact both predator and prey behavior in this unique ecosystem.

Ultimately, this presentation seeks to uncover the hidden lives of the Horton Plains leopards. By examining their behavior, adaptive traits, and the environmental factors such as light, we gain a deeper understanding of their role within the broader ecological balance of Horton Plains National Park. Their presence underscores the delicate relationship between predator and prey in one of Sri Lanka's most pristine natural environments.

Public Lecture #1

Wetlands in Crisis: Addressing Threats and Driving Transformative Change

By Chaturangi Wickramaratne, PhD
Researcher – Freshwater Ecology, International Water Management Institute (IWMI)

Wetlands have long been overlooked, yet they are among the most essential ecosystems for sustaining life on Earth. From purifying water to mitigating climate change, these ecosystems are vital for preserving biodiversity, ensuring water security, and addressing the global climate crisis.

As we face the polycrisis from growing anthropogenic pressures, leading to biodiversity loss and climate change, the state of our wetlands has never been more critical. We are seeing wetland ecosystems degrade and disappear at an alarming rate, with over 3 million square kilometers lost since 1700. This loss is not only devastating for the species that depend on wetlands, but also for the human communities whose livelihoods rely on them.

This talk will examine the critical state of wetlands, both globally and locally, highlighting the urgent threats they face and the invaluable services they provide. We'll explore the deep, multifaceted connections between wetlands and local communities, shedding light on how these ecosystems are both cherished and challenged by the people who depend on them. Through this discussion, it will emphasize the importance of community-led solutions in addressing local threats. At the heart of the talk is a call for transformative change, advocating for a shift away from traditional wetland management systems towards pathways that consider intrinsic value of nature. Join us as we confront these challenges, celebrate the vital role of wetlands, and explore a path toward sustainable solutions.

Public Lecture #2

Gecko Research in Sri Lanka: Past, Present & Future

By Nimal D. Rathnayake Ph.D.

Amphibia and Reptile Research Organization of Sri Lanka (ARROS)
Member of the IUCN Species Survival Commission (SSC)

Sri Lanka's reptile diversity is higher than many larger tropical islands. *Cnemaspis kandiana* and *Hemidactylus pieresii* are the first two geckos described in Sri Lanka by Edward Frederic Kelaart in 1852. With the promising commencement given by the late Paulus Edward Pieris Deraniyagala to the herpetological research in Sri Lanka, there has been a growing interest in all aspects of research on geckos. Of the 64 geckos in Sri Lanka, 43 have been identified during the past 24 years.

Name changes of *Calodactylodes illingworthorum*, increased numbers of species in the genus *Cnemaspis*, synonymizing *Cnemaspis clivicola*, rediscovering *Cnemaspis amith* and *Cnemaspis tropidogaster*, updates on the genus *Hemidactylus*, revision of the genus *Cyrtodactylus*, synonymizing *Cyrtodactylus ramboda* and *C. subsolanus*, and the removal of doubtful gecko species from the checklist are some important events in Sri Lankan gecko research during recent years.

There is little research on the history and archaeology associated with the gecko fauna in Sri Lanka. According to a study on the origin of the word 'gecko' by Anslem de Silva and Aaron Bauer in 2008, the Malay root of the word "gecko" remains unproven. Concurrently, two early lexicons, the *Piyummala*, believed to have been written between the 11th and 13th centuries ACE, and the *Ruwanmala*, attributed to King Parākramabāhu VI of Kotte (reigned 1412–1467 ACE), record *gēgo* (*gē* = house + go = *goya* = lizard = house lizard) as the Elu name for gecko. This may have originated from the earlier Sanskrit name *gruha goda* (*gruha* = *ge* = dwelling, *goda* = *go* = *goya* = lizard) and is apparently the oldest Elu or Sinhala name for geckos, dating back as much as 1000 years. If the term 'gecko' did not enter European languages from Malay or some other Austronesian language, it is possible that it may have originated from Sri Lanka. However, such findings demand further studies.

The history of the studies on rock art in Sri Lanka goes back to the last decades of the 19th century ACE. Rock art in the Tharulengala Monastery Complex at Hulanuge village in the Ampara District is considered one of the best herpetological ash paintings in the country. Some archaeologists argue that the large reptile, which measures 84 cm in total length, depicted in the Tharulengala cave is a crocodile that is residing in a water pool. In their view, the parallel dotted lines surrounding the depiction represent water. Simultaneously, many herpetologists consider this animal as the Sri Lankan golden rock gecko, *Calodactylodes illingworthorum*. The dots surrounding the gecko are very likely to be representations of the eggs of this gecko. This illustration is fairly accurate herpetologically, since several body features, including its curved tail tip, cannot be seen in other sympatric geckos or mugger crocodiles. Moreover, Tharulengala is a known habitat of Sri Lankan golden rock geckos.

Molecular identifications have been conducted for only about half of the gecko species identified in Sri Lanka. Therefore, it is essential to perform such identifications on the remaining species. Additionally, more new species are expected to be described as ongoing fieldwork continues and our understanding of the biogeography of *Cnemaspis* and *Cyrtodactylus* evolves.

Public Lecture #3

Sheltering Under the Leopard's Umbrella

Landscape-level biodiversity conservation in Sri Lanka

By Anjali Watson – Leopard Researcher

In this lecture, a big takeaway was the importance of wildlife or ecological corridors or buffers in maintaining leopard genetic diversity and reducing excess interspecific competition. The different leopard clusters in the island have adopted behaviours as a consequence of being restricted for so long. Yala leopards are increasingly changing their territories, with younger individuals traveling greater distances away from their natal home, crossing between the hotel/guest zones due to overcrowding within the protected areas. Some spend periods in and outside the borders of the Yala National Park proper. Meanwhile Wilpattu leopards, while more restricted, and several times more abundant, have been observed using the few corridors that have been studied by

Watson's team, and have also been seen using manmade paths and trails in plantations in order to move between forested areas. They avoid interfering with humans, so go largely unnoticed. This speaks to the inherent adaptability of leopards as a genus, however more work is needed to ensure safe travel for both their kind and ours, so that leopards can spread outside their natal regions and avoid inbreeding and more conflict due to insufficient territory space.

Public Lecture #4

Geotourism in Sri Lanka

By Prof. Pradeep Nalaka Ranasinghe

It was interesting to note the level of effort Prof. Ranasinghe had put into finding all the geological wonders found on our little island. Yet despite providing the educational and tourism merits of these locations to the government, most remain unutilized and unacknowledged by the wider public. Examples such as Pink quartzite ridges, as well as areas rich in prehistoric limestone deposits and fossil corals, some historically utilized in the construction of small to medium sized Buddhist stupas. That our ancestors saw these geological occurrences and saw fit to incorporate some into the ingenuity of their civilization is fascinating, yet we their descendents appear to be lacking in that regard. Prof. Ranasinghe's work encourages us to be conscientious citizens and honour the beauty of our island in all its forms, and to take advantage of the Geotourism trends worldwide to draw more awareness to these unique sights and develop Geoparks in key areas.

NATURE WALKS

WELLAWATTE TURTLE-WATCHING

Members were invited to join us on walks along Wellawatte beach, where unbeknownst to many, there are indeed pregnant Turtles arriving every night during the nesting seasons. A dedicated group of volunteers patrol the beach every night to keep the eggs and hatchlings safe from poachers. Eggs are collected and incubated in the sand at key guard posts. Members watched as hatchlings emerged, and then at opportune moments taken to the shoreline and set free into the ocean where some females will hopefully one day return to begin the cycle anew. Their fight for survival is constant though, and there is no guarantee that our beaches will remain in these conditions conducive to their nesting. The conflict with poachers is also neverending, so more volunteers towards the initiative are vital for the increased presence of these species on our island and beyond. If interested, please reach out to us and we can put you in contact.

RUK RAKAGANNO / SLNHS TREE WALK

The Ruk Rakaganno and SLNHS Joint Tree Walk at the Cathedral grounds Baudhaloka Mawatha on]26th April 2025

By Achini Caldera, Ruk Rakaganno

On April 26, 2025, a joint Tree walk was held at the Cathedral grounds, Baudhaloka Mawatha, organized by Ruk Rakaganno and the Sri Lanka Natural History Society (SLNHS). The event drew a large number of members and tree enthusiasts.

The tree walk began with the planting of a Jacaranda mimosifolia sapling by Mr. Dushy Perera, President of Ruk Rakaganno, and Professor Enoka Corea, President of the Sri Lanka Natural History Society.

Renowned Naturalist Mr. Channa Ekanayake and his team led the walk, sharing scientific and engaging facts that prompted discussions with the participants. Following an enriching morning, SLNHS hosted the participants for snacks and ice coffee.

This event marked the first collaboration between the two societies, and participants have expressed interest in another tree walk. The next tree walk is anticipated to be a "Biodiversity walk" at the Urban Wetland Park, Nugegoda. The date and time for this event will be announced later.

A Day with Nature:

Guided Nature Trail & Home Gardening Workshop at Aloka Academy

17th May 2025 | Sarvodaya Institute of Higher Learning, Bandaragama

On Saturday, 17th May, Aloka Academy proudly hosted a truly enriching day dedicated to reconnecting with nature and embracing sustainable living. Held at the picturesque Sarvodaya Institute of Higher Learning (SIHL), Bandaragama Main Campus, the event brought together enthusiastic participants for a Guided Nature Trail followed by a Home Gardening Workshop.

Adding to the value of the event was the presence of members from the Sri Lanka Natural History Society (SLNHS), whose participation and shared insights made the day even more special.

The day commenced with Aloka Academy's very first Guided Nature Trail, thoughtfully led by the passionate and knowledgeable Ms. Dilini Wickremasinghe. As participants explored the serene, green trails of SIHL, they uncovered the hidden wonders of the local ecosystem—learning about native flora and fauna in their natural habitat. Butterfly Garden, Miyawaki Forest garden and mix crop areas were some of the main attractions. The experience was both educational and deeply reflective, offering a fresh perspective on the interconnectedness of all living things.

Special appreciation goes to Prof. Enoka Corea and other members from SLNHS, whose presence greatly enriched the session. Their expertise and experience in natural history added depth to the dialogue, making it a truly remarkable segment of the day.

Home Gardening Workshop

The second half of the event shifted focus to practical sustainability through a Home Gardening Workshop facilitated by Mr. Anuradha Ranasinghe. With hands-on demonstrations and insightful tips, participants were guided on how to start and maintain home gardens—an empowering step towards eco-conscious, self-sufficient living. From composting to container gardening, the workshop offered something valuable for everyone, regardless of gardening experience.

A Day to Remember

The harmony of a tranquil setting, vibrant nature, and the shared enthusiasm of nature lovers created a magical atmosphere throughout the day. This was more than just a workshop—it was a celebration of life, learning, and our deep connection with the natural world.

Aloka Academy extends heartfelt thanks to all participants, facilitators, and the SLNHS team for making this event a success. We are confident that the memories, connections, and knowledge gained will stay with everyone for a long time.

Stay Connected

We remain committed to creating opportunities that nurture our bond with nature and encourage sustainable, mindful living.

Stay tuned for more events and workshops that inspire and empower!

Follow us on social media!