



# Climate Change Impacts and Experiences: The Voices of Vedda Women

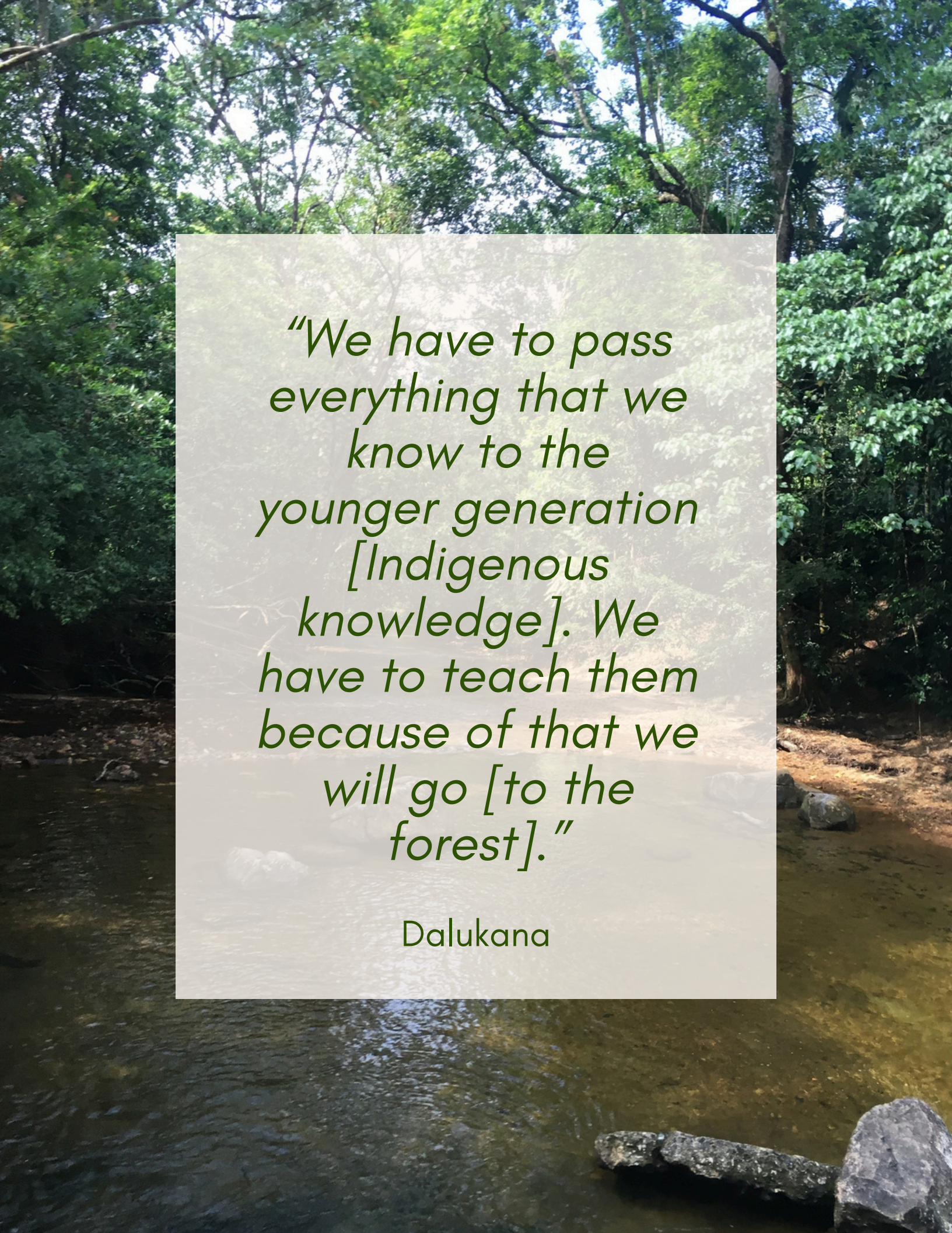
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Hannah E. Garbutt

# Dedication

*For the Vedda women who graciously shared their stories with us. We are forever grateful for your hospitality, openness, and trust.*



A lush green forest with a stream flowing through it, surrounded by large rocks. The text is overlaid on a semi-transparent white box in the center of the image.

*“We have to pass everything that we know to the younger generation [Indigenous knowledge]. We have to teach them because of that we will go [to the forest].”*

Dalukana

# Authors & Funding

## Author Contributions

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Vedda Women

Interviews & Quotes

Hannah E. Garbutt

Conceptualization, Writing Original Draft, Data Collection, Validation, Visualization

Eranga K. Galappaththi

Conceptualization, Data Collection, Resources, Reviewing & Editing, Validation, Funding

Sithuni M. Jayasekara

Data Collection, Resources, Validation, Reviewing & Editing

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# Introduction

This story booklet shares insight into the lives of four Vedda women in Sri Lanka, each from a different Vedda village. These stories offer a window into everyday experiences, shaped by changing environments, shifting livelihoods, and enduring connections to the land.

The following stories emerge from long-term relationships built between our research team and Vedda communities across Sri Lanka. Over the past decade, Eranga K. Galappaththi has worked alongside these communities through community-based participatory research. As part of his research mission, he approaches research with Indigenous communities based on mutual respect, trust, and friendship. Following this approach, Eranga has brought his students into the field with him. Sithuni M. Jayasekara and I have visited the Vedda communities in Sri Lanka and have been welcomed into the long-term partnership through field visits. Our team remains in regular contact with the communities outside of in-person fieldwork through monthly calls to each village.

This booklet is part of a broader body of work led by Dr. Galappaththi and his research lab, the Indigenous Resilience and Innovation (IRI) Lab at Virginia Tech. As a part of my master's thesis, I focused on uplifting Vedda women's voices, aiming to understand women's experiences, responses, and adaptation limits to climate change. During fieldwork in June 2025, I conducted semi-structured interviews with Sithuni as the translator. We were able to have deeply meaningful conversations with 32 Vedda women.

The stories shared with our team carry profound impacts on future climate change adaptation policy and planning. It is imperative that their stories remain protected and shared to facilitate positive change for Indigenous women's lives around the world.

In the face of climate change, Indigenous women often face the biggest burdens of environmental change due to heightened exposure to violence, embodied connections to the land, and colonial and discriminatory histories, while also holding deep knowledge about their environments and communities. Coincidentally, Indigenous women have been historically excluded from climate adaptation planning and policy, and decision-making processes. Within Sri Lanka, Vedda communities, especially women, have been excluded from climate adaptation policy and planning. These exclusions make centering Indigenous women's voices all the more important to listen to and learn from moving forward.



Eranga Galappaththi sharing photos from Indigenous peoples in Peruvian amazon with Vedda community members

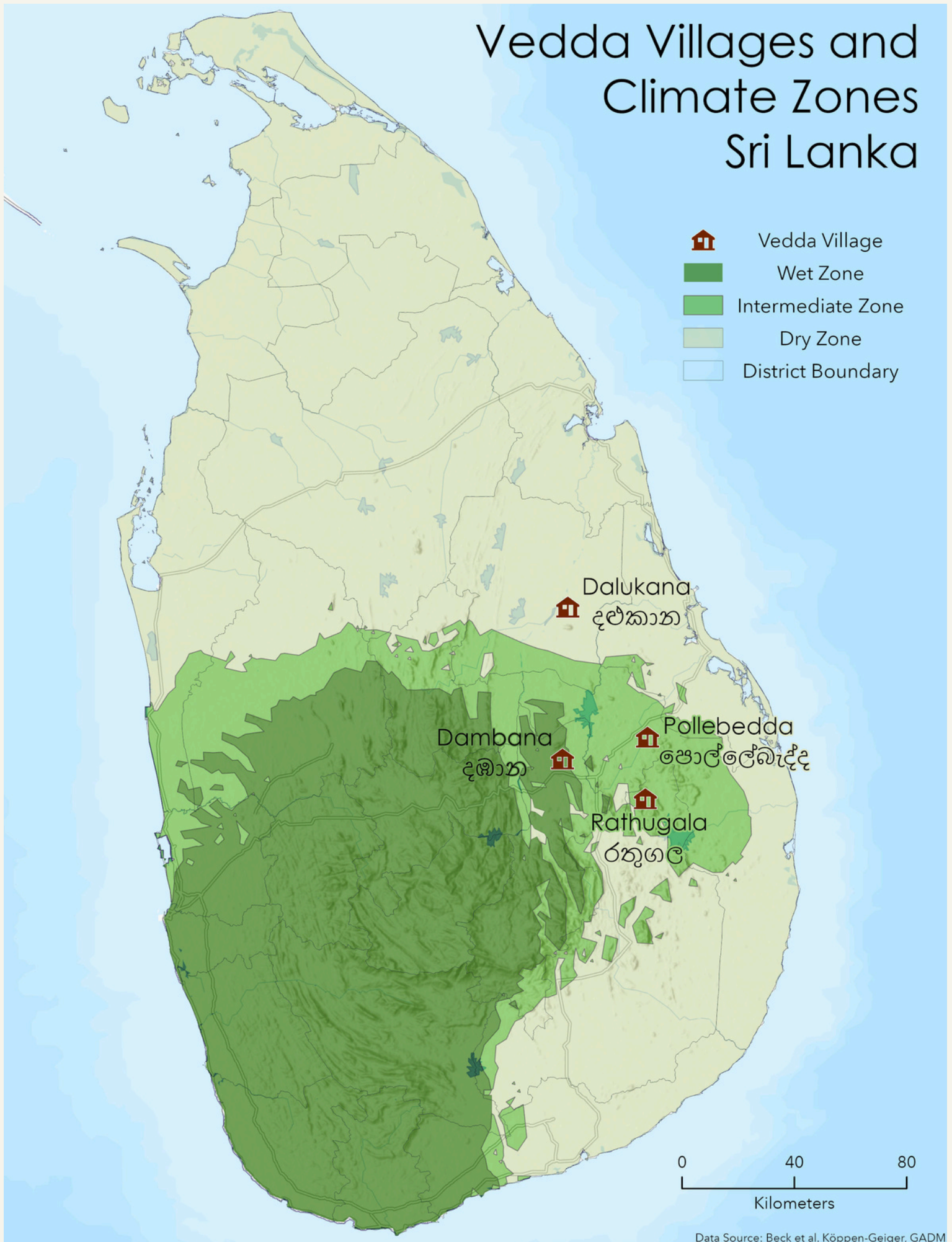
Each story in this booklet reflects broader themes, including climate impacts leading to changes in food systems, health, mobility, and Indigenous knowledge. While these are individual stories, they speak to shared challenges and strengths across the communities.

These stories are intended to inform and invite reflection. They highlight the importance of including Indigenous women's voices in climate adaptation planning and call for policy approaches grounded in equity, respect, and lived experience.



Obtaining consent from National Chief Vedda Leader, fieldwork June 2025  
From left, Sithuni M. Jayasekara, Hannah E. Garbutt, National Chief Vedda Leader, Eranga K. Galappaththi

# Vedda Villages and Climate Zones Sri Lanka



# Background

The Vedda are Indigenous people of Sri Lanka, whose presence on the island extends back thousands of years, traced back prior to colonization. Today, the Vedda possess a rich body of Indigenous knowledge which has been passed down over generations. This knowledge base holds extensive traditional forest-based livelihood activities that are deeply interconnected with the land. These practices include hunting, gathering medicinal herbal plants, collecting bee honey, and spiritual ceremonies.

Historically, through colonization the Vedda have been forcefully displaced several times. Once inhabiting the entire island of Sri Lanka, Vedda communities are now consolidated in the eastern region of the island. Additional factors have led to this displacement, such as the Sri Lankan ethnic war, government policies and regulations, and development programs. The Indigenous knowledge base has been threatened overtime by social modernization and out-migration to urban areas in search of employment.

The stories in this booklet are adapted from conversations with Vedda women and are shared with permission using pseudonyms for anonymity. Each woman had a different story to tell; however, common themes emerged. Each story begins with a snapshot of the village the story is from, told from my perspective, with observations from fieldwork. The stories then transition into a narrative about one woman's life experiences.

Each narrative is adapted from semi-structured interview transcripts. All stories include exact quotes, which have been italicized. Some quotes are long anecdotes, and others are short, mostly supported by my own writing to provide context and flow to the stories. All terms with an asterisk can be found in the glossary.

The following pages provide an overview of the main themes found in this booklet, and overarching information about each story.



Fisherman paddling in the early morning in Hennanigala Vedda community

# Common Themes



## Health

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Several health impacts were commonly discussed as a result of changes in climate, specifically, prolonged dry seasons and higher temperatures.

## Knowledge

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In some villages, access to Indigenous knowledge was restricted for women, limiting their ability to access the forest. Those with access to knowledge participated in forest-based livelihood activities.

## Food

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Food insecurity was prevalent in all villages as women faced reduced crop and home garden yields due to prolonged dry seasons and unstable income to purchase food from shops.

## Mobility

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Women's mobility inside and outside their communities was restricted for some women due to marriage and husband control. For others, marital status was not a barrier to mobility.



## 1. Dambana

### **Collective adaptation strategies through forest connection and Indigenous knowledge**

In Dambana, women's responses to climate change are rooted in relationships with community members and the forest. Women have strong connections to Indigenous knowledge and their community which enables adaptation through shared labor, mobility, and care. This story highlights how women's ability to adapt is enabled by their use of Indigenous knowledge to sustain livelihoods and well-being in the face of climate change.

## 3. Pollebedda

### **Navigating climate change impacts through partial connection to Indigenous knowledge**

For women in Pollebedda, adapting to climate change involves constantly balancing work and care. Partial connections to forest-based livelihood activities persist to support well-being, yet, some women have completely disconnected. Women play a central role within their households and community by acting as peacekeepers while they balance income generation, household labor, and social responsibilities. This story shows how women carry these burdens, finding ways to support their families in the face of adversity.

## 2. Dalukana

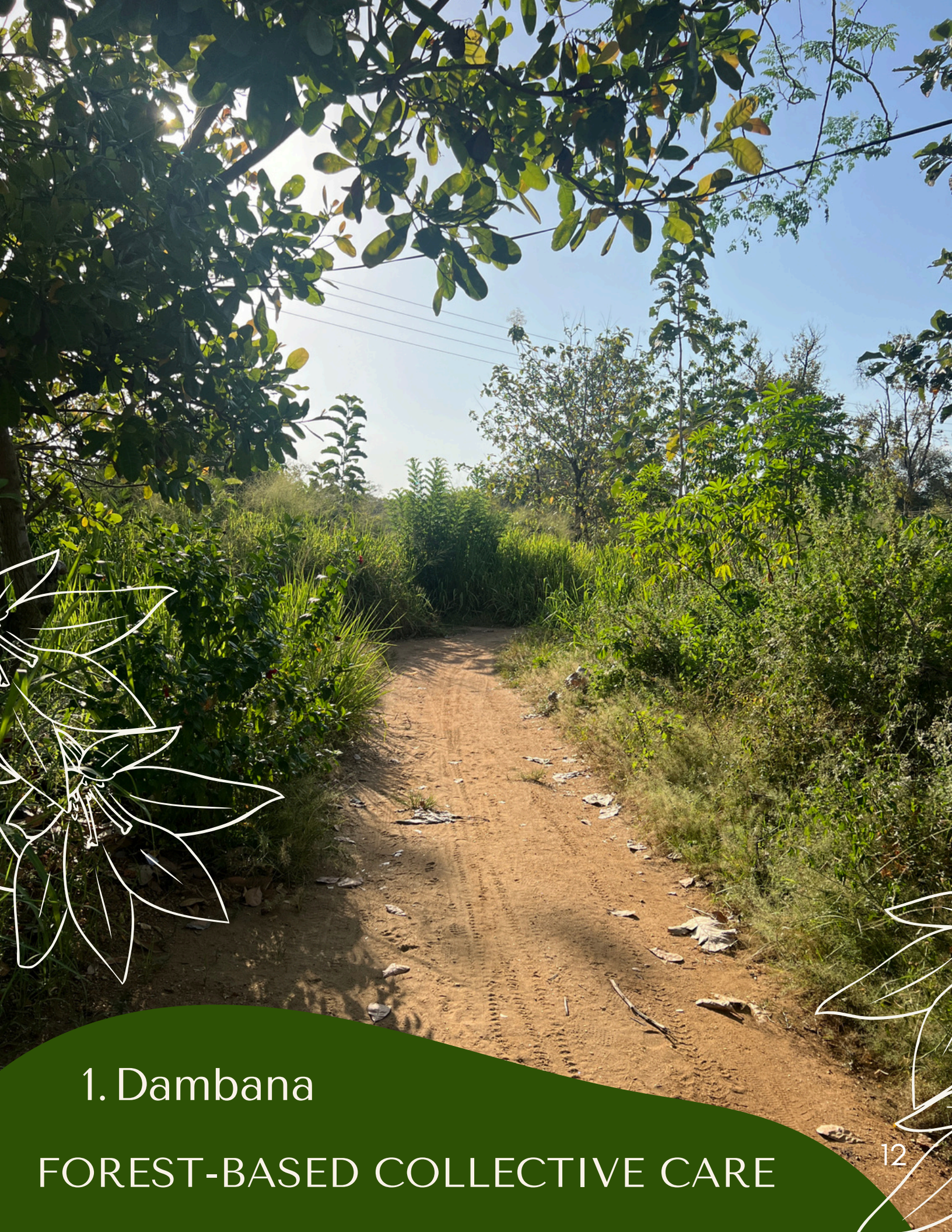
### **Gendered isolation and erosion of traditional lifeways under climate and social pressures**

Life in Dalukana reflects a different experience of change, marked by growing distance from the forest, shifting livelihoods, and increasing social constraints. Here, adapting to climate change is not only about responding to increased heat, drought, and food insecurity, but also about navigating the limits placed on women's mobility and autonomy. Even when knowledge and willingness to visit the forest exist, women's access is limited by patriarchal norms. This story reveals how women's ability to adapt is constrained by restrictions on movement and access to Indigenous knowledge.

## 4. Rathugala

### **Gendered knowledge division limits forest access**

In Rathugala, adapting to climate change is also shaped by social structures and access to knowledge. Outside organizations, such as an NGO, have helped facilitate adaptation responses in agriculture. Forest access is constrained by lack of access to Indigenous knowledge. This narrative shows how knowledge is divided by gender, limiting forest access for women, yet, women remain heavily involved in cultivations.



# 1. Dambana

## FOREST-BASED COLLECTIVE CARE

This story follows Kamala, a Vedda woman whose kindness and generosity I will never forget. During our visit to Dambana, we were fortunate enough to spend time with her on two separate occasions. From the moment we met, she welcomed us into her home, offering us tea and snacks throughout a long day of interviews in the Sri Lankan heat. Later that afternoon, she had prepared a meal of rice and coconut sambal for us to share.

Kamala lives in Dambana, the largest Vedda village in Sri Lanka, is located near the city of Mahiyangana in the Uva Province, about 300 kilometers from Colombo. The village is home to the National Chief Vedda Leader, who meets with visitors and community members in a traditional meeting hut in the village. Two museums, the Vedda history and culture museum, and the Mahiyangana Ayurveda museum attract both local and international tourists to the area year-round. While in the village, tourists can also visit a market where traditional handicrafts are sold by community members, such as baskets, jewelry, bee honey, and dried and packaged medicinal herbal plants. Alongside tourism, agriculture remains an important source of income for many residents.

Born and raised in Dambana, Kamala was 47 years old when we met her. She was open to speaking with us and passionately told us her stories. I felt cared for by her attentive nature as she paid extra attention to me as it was my first time doing fieldwork in Sri Lanka. On the second day, we were sitting under a Bo tree closer to the center of the Village, and she walked by with her lunch and gave all of us a bite of the already small portion of milk rice and chili paste. She held both my hands and patiently taught me the traditional Vedda greeting, "*Maama katchak hondamai*", encouraging me to repeat it until I said it confidently and with the correct pronunciation. Her passion for sharing her culture with us was inspiring. This research would not have been possible without her openness and acceptance of our presence in her community. Our team collected her phone number and have tried to remain in contact with her through phone calls and text messages until we can visit her in person again.



Inside the Mahiyangana Ayurveda museum

When we interviewed Kamala, she described her daily routine to us in great detail, involving several labor-intensive activities including preparing farmland, cooking, collecting water, and gathering bee honey. She lives in a modest home in the village with her 24-year-old son who regularly assists her with cultivations.



Outside Kamala's house

Over the course of her life in Dambana, she has noticed several changes occurring around her. Particularly, changes in climate have severely impacted her life through her ability to cultivate, the productivity of her crops, and her overall health. There were once full lakes and steady rainwater for her cultivations; however, now dry seasons are longer leaving the soil cracked and unsuitable for growth.

*"I have been experiencing climate change issues over the past 20 years. Back then, the lakes were not drying up, and we had enough water for our cultivations. But now, we are experiencing issues with the lack of water and water bodies drying up in the drying seasons. It is an issue for us."*

Prolonged and intensified heat exposure during the dry season has made her daily life increasingly difficult, exacerbating existing health conditions, such as gastritis, and introducing new problems due to dehydration and constant exposure to the hot sun.

*"I think because of the high heat problem, we are having more urinary problems. It's not only for women, both men and women are getting it. When we are busy with the cultivations in the dry seasons, without rain, we are getting more urinary problems."*

Finding places to cool down during the dry season has become imperative for her well-being and others. During the driest months, when the heat becomes unbearable, she works with men and women in Dambana to adapt to the warmer climate.

*"In the drying season we cannot do cultivations and it's very hot to live here. Because of that, a bunch of us are getting together, males and females, a group of eight people approximately. We are getting together and then we are going to the forest and we are living nearby the lakes and water bodies because it cools down our bodies. We bring food with us, like corn, and sometimes we are eating. We boil water with salt and rice and then we are drinking it. There are no preferences. There are not many choices. We are limiting the starvation by bringing food and some medicinal herbs."*

Going to the forest together is not only a strategy for surviving extreme heat and connecting with traditional livelihood activities, but also a form of collective care. For her and others, moving as a group offers safety, shared labor, and emotional relief during the most difficult months of the year as forests are integral to Vedda traditional lifeways. Vedda possess deep physical and spiritual connections to the land that have been established over thousands of years. A central part of the forest connection is extensive knowledge of medicinal herbal plants. Vedda use traditional herbal medicines to treat and heal ailments. For Kamala, she prefers to use traditional medicines over visiting hospitals.



Dried traditional medicinal plants, Dambana

However, over time, Vedda communities have been displaced and forcefully relocated from inhabiting the forests. This has disrupted their access to the forest, a place crucial for physical and spiritual well-being. Climate change has exacerbated this disruption by making accessing traditional medicinal plants increasingly difficult.

*"We are using Iramusu\*, Polpala\*, and Beli\* Indigenous herbal medicines. The herbal plants are dying because of the lack of water. The plants are planting well and growing well inside of the forest because the inside of the forest is cooler than the edges. So, we have to go in the middle of the forest to find those plants, and it has become harder for us in the drying seasons."*



Monarakudumbiya (*Cyanthillium cinereum*) picked from outside her home

From her home in Dambana, visiting the forest is not an easy, safe, or quick journey. Dambana Vedda must travel far distances to the forest to engage in bee honey collection, hunting, gathering medicinal plants, spiritual practices, and now to cool down during the dry season. Even elders in the community, as old as eighty, will make the trek.

*"There are two nearby forests. The first is Maduru Oya. It's a big national park. I don't know how far it is in kilometers or miles, but it will take one and a half days to get there by foot...the other one is Unikirigala, it's a mountainous area. If we leave the house now, at 10:35AM we will reach there by 1:30PM. About nine hours."*

Injury and danger from predators are common issues she and other Vedda have faced when making the trip to and inside the forest, *"We are facing troubles from elephants, leopards, and bears."* Snake bites are also common, and there are extensive traditional healing methods to treat bites.

*"We are only going to the hospital if we have broken legs or hands. Other than that, we don't use hospitals and we are always using traditional medicine. Especially when we are going to the forest, we get snake bites from venomous snakes like the cobra, the viper, and others, mapila, and telwissa. Four main kinds."*

The treatment process for bites can span over several days and requires several types of traditional medicinal plants, wood, and rocks.



*"If we get a bite from a viper, there's a special stone we have. We take it when we go to the forest. We keep the stone on the bitten area, and we think the poisons will be absorbed into the stone. Then, we put the stone into a coconut milk dish and use demata\* leaves from the forest. We take the leaves and crush them and keep them on the wound. If the patient is requesting water because he or she feels thirsty from the snake bite, we do not give them water. We take the fruit from the demata tree and then we crush the fruit and pour it into their mouth. The forest area is so far so it takes a long time to take the patient back to the house. Even my husband got a snake bite, and it took one day to bring him back home. When we return home, we put a pot on the stove and add water and a lot of Indigenous medicinal plants for snake bites and create steam out of it. Then we cut the patient's scalp and put the pot on their head. Someone then blows the steam up the patients' nose to get rid of the snake poison. Until then, most of the time the patient is unconscious. The patient will be unconscious for around four days. If the patient is unconscious even after the fourth day, we make a herbal canoe, it's like a box. You can sit there and add lots of herbs and medicines. It's made of rukaththana\* wood. It has the ability to extract toxins from the snake."*

Even after this extensive process, she described how they never give up on a patient.

*"Even if the patient is unconscious, we are not allowing the patient to die. We will not have a funeral; we will make the herbal canoe. From a total of six days, the patient will be cured."*

Even though forest visits are an essential part of her life, she spends most of her time living in her house in the village. Within the village, she must work hard every day, walking far distances to acquire water for her family. She also has a chronic nerve condition in her face which she must manage daily.

*"We are facing issues with a lack of water for domestic purposes. We don't have tap water here. I have a nerve issue on one of my cheeks from an incident where I fell down. The doctors built the house for me, but I didn't get water. There is a water tank near the Vedda leader's place, which has been built by the government of Sri Lanka. Early in the morning, I take two pots of water from that tank for domestic purposes to drink and wash dishes. There is a tube well near a school, so I am collecting water from that tube well for washing dishes...There is a water issue here."*

In her home, it is just her and her son who manage the household. Her son helps the family by engaging in chena cultivations. Chena cultivation is an ancient cultivation method in Sri Lanka where farmers clear areas of the forest and burn the undergrowth. Farmers will rotate crops and share land between themselves, which allows the land to sustainably regenerate. To fight pests like flies from attacking long bean\* crops, she explained an Indigenous practice to mitigate fly attacks.



*"There are certain types of flies who are attacking long beans. What they do [the flies] is they take the sap out of the long bean. So, because of that we take ash from the stove and then before the dew point, we spray ash onto the field."*

The ash is applied early in the morning, so moisture from the dew helps the ash stick to the plants to provide a natural barrier to deter pests from reaching the crops. In addition to ash, farmers will not use coconut oil when cooking the harvested beans.

*"We are taking a small portion of the harvest from the field, and then we are not adding coconut oil. We believe if we add coconut oil and temper the long beans, the portion of the harvest that is left on the field will get attacked by flies. Then the yield will be reduced. We also add lime onto the first portion of the harvest, then we won't get the fly attacks."*

These traditional practices help safeguard crops to fight against climate and pests to preserve as much of the harvest as possible. Even with her careful stewardship, the returns from crop yields are rarely enough to ease the financial pressures she faces.

*"Sometimes we eat Katu Ala\* yams. If we are getting a surplus of Katu Ala yams, we are selling them to customers. One kilo could be sold for one hundred rupees. If we are making like 2,000 rupees per day, then we are spending that 2,000 to buy chili powder, curry powder, chilies, and rice. There's no point of earning 2,000 and spending 2,000, but that's the situation here."*

All her hard work and constant attention add to her already demanding routine, with no room for savings. To help low-income families such as she, the Sri Lankan government assistance program, Aswesuma, is intended to help families by providing a small monthly payment to help lessen financial burdens. Government officials visited households to survey assets and determine eligibility and payment amounts. Although she currently receives Aswesuma, she explained, *"I'm getting aswesuma, 8,500 rupees per month, but I think it will be cut off by next month. I don't know the reason."*

This uncertainty extends beyond daily expenses and into the safety of her living conditions. On top of a lack of government transparency with financial support, she experiences additional stress related to the physical condition of her home. Doctors helped construct a house for her due to her nerve condition to improve her quality of life, but it has deteriorated over time.

*"I need support to build the ceiling of my house. They [doctors] have built the ceiling before, but there are some issues. It has been broken over time. I am scared of sleeping and I think the ceiling will fall, so I need support for that."*

She needs a follow-up of support from them; that is the only help she requests from outsiders. A recent program by the National Chief Vedda leader has the intention of providing opportunities for women's self-employment training to increase entrepreneurship, but she doesn't see the benefit in joining.

*"I don't want to join that society at all. I think I'm afraid of taking loans. As a funding mechanism the society is giving loans to women to start up self-employment, but I don't like that system. If we are getting a loan, we will be trapped because we cannot find money to pay the loan because we are busy with farming and everything and I think I won't be able to pay it back. If I had more time, then I would like to join the society. I think...I don't want their money and it's a burden for me. I don't want to be a burden to others by taking the loan. I'm afraid if I couldn't pay the loan back, I'll get caught by the police. I don't want to do that."*

Interview outside Kamala's house in Dambana



Researchers have visited her in the past to inquire about her problems, but some have not followed through on their promises to her. Most promise to remain in contact and continue to visit. Recently, one group gave her a phone, but she is still waiting for them to call.

*"Some researchers have visited this house earlier, from Germany. She is similar to you. I'm upset because they have given me a phone and they said when they were leaving this place they promised they'll call back. That was two or three months ago. I have never got any response back from them. I'm disappointed."*

She prefers physical visits from researchers and expects them to return. Calling on the phone is also acceptable to her. She expressed a strong desire to remain in contact with researchers, *"I don't expect anything other than that."*



Meal of coconut sambal and rice outside her house



## 2. Dalukana

# GENDERED CONSTRAINTS ON CLIMATE ADAPTATION

Dalukana is a small Vedda village, located about a 30-minute drive from the famous ancient city of Polonnaruwa, a UNESCO World Heritage site in the North Central Province of Sri Lanka. Driving to the village, from the road, no traveler would recognize where the village was located. On our visit, we passed the entrance first and had to U-turn in the middle of the road to go back and look for it. Once we found it, we had to take a sharp turn off-road down a small steep dirt path between large bushes. From there, small green and blue concrete houses were scattered along the dirt path. The homes had corrugated metal roofs, and small corrugated metal square window covers, the bare bones of what is needed to protect a family from the elements. Doors and windows were kept open during the day for ventilation; some flew open by themselves due to the wind.

The wind came in strong gusts, blasting sand and dust through the village. Some residents had prominent coughs and visible rashes on their skin. A few goats and chickens roamed around in the bushes, with lots of children and toddlers playing and screaming around them. All residents welcomed our team into the village and ensured we had adequate shade and a chairs to sit in. A large tree outside of the village leader's house provided relief from the sun to conduct all our interviews. The leader is a young man in his early twenties, successor of his father. He lives near the entrance of the village with his wife and their one-year-old son. Despite having very little, they provided us with snacks and cold soda during our visit.

The following story showcases some of the phenomena occurring within the Dalukana Vedda community related to climate change impacts and the influence of gender norms on women's mobility. As is common among Indigenous communities around the world, community members in Dalukana have experienced changes in diet due to climatic factors which limit access to nutritional forest foods, leading to health impacts among men, women, and children. Further, with an increase in reliance on store-bought foods, due to inaccessibility to the forest and unproductive crops, men and women must seek out daily wage jobs to make enough money to afford food. Overtime, this process further disconnects Dalukana Vedda from traditional forest-based livelihood activities. Vedda in other communities have used forest visits to help adapt to the challenges they face in their daily lives, including the increasingly difficult pressures from climate impacts.

Manika, daughter of the previous Dalukana Vedda leader and sister of the current leader, lives with her sister's family and her two children. During the time she spent with us for the interview, she was patient and kind to us while her toddler pulled at her arms and legs, wanting her attention. Her other child has started attending a local school. She expressed that her life in the village changed the most after she got married and had children, *"After having children, it [life] has become more work. I am doing more household work because of the babies."*

To earn money, she works several daily wage jobs, particularly in the apparel industry making garments in the Polonnaruwa area, *"I started working once I got married to my husband and I was going to work until the third year of my marriage. Some women work jobs before marriage and some after marriage, so it depends."*

Like women in other villages, she has also noticed changes in climate throughout her life. *“There are three changes [in climate], there is less rain, more sunny days, and higher intensity of winds.”* These changes have impacted her own health and the health of her community.

*“When we get less rain, there are less plants, and because of that the animals don’t have food too. In terms of kids, the kids are getting skin rashes with the high heat when there is more intense sunlight. Even my kids have got skin rashes.”*

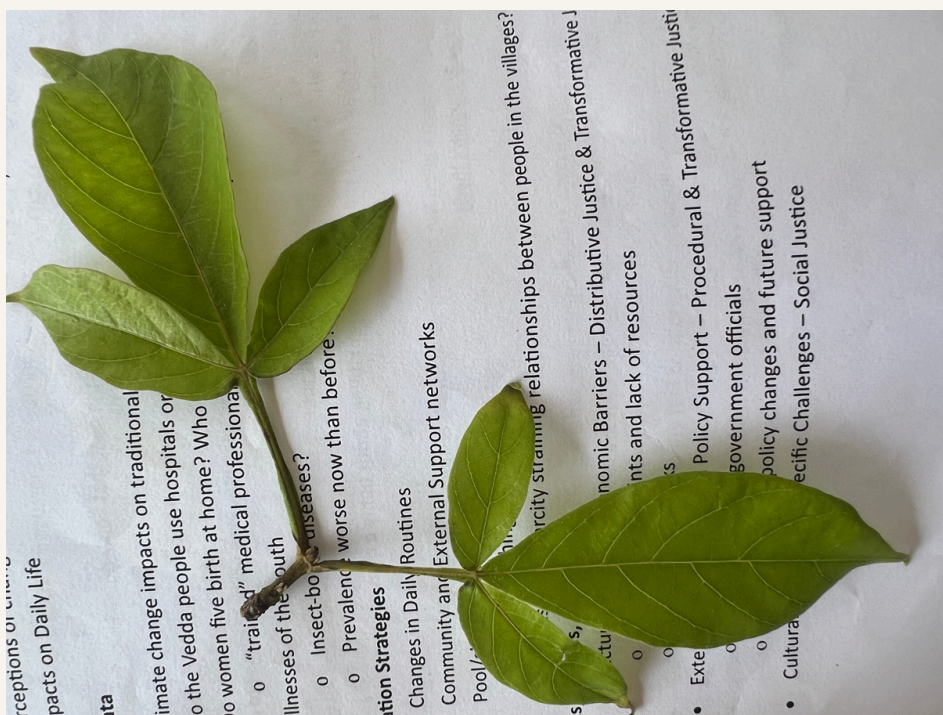
To treat the skin rashes, they rely on traditional medicinal treatments before resorting to the local hospitals and clinics.

*“There’s a tree called marathondia\* We use the tree, tea powder, and some sugar. Then we crush them all together and apply the mixture to the rashes. If we can’t cure the rashes, then we will go to the hospitals... it’s not only happening to the kids, everyone gets it [the rash].”*

She has seen people with the rashes since her childhood, but with the increase in heat she expressed how, *“When we are sweating more, we are itchy and it is difficult.”*

Besides using marathondia for treating rashes, she explained how she didn’t have much experience with traditional medicines, unlike what we heard in Dambana where women expressed using several types of medicinal plants to treat various ailments.

*“We are using marathondia, but other than that, we are not using traditional medicines most of the time. When there are dry seasons, the plants are dying. In the forest, there are plants, one called kothala himbutu\*, which is good for blood-sugar for diabetics. It’s a vine we can find anywhere, no matter the season. It’s a common one.”*



Leaves of Beli (*Aegle marmelos*) Traditional medicinal plant leaves given by Dalukana leader

With an increase in heat and dryness, they are having an increasingly difficult time finding marathondia to treat the rashes, *"When we cannot find the plant, we go to the hospitals."* To search for marathondia, *"Both men and women go to look for the plant [marathondia]. It's not typically found in our home gardens."*

Residents of Dalukana have a priority to use traditional medicinal herbal plants to treat illnesses and ailments. However, the climate is making medicinal plants less accessible.

*"Our priority is Indigenous medicine. We like to use Indigenous medicines, but the reason behind why we are not using them is that most of the medicinal plants cannot be found in the forest because of the lesser rains. Most of them have dried up. Because of that we cannot find the plants. That's why we are going to the hospital."*



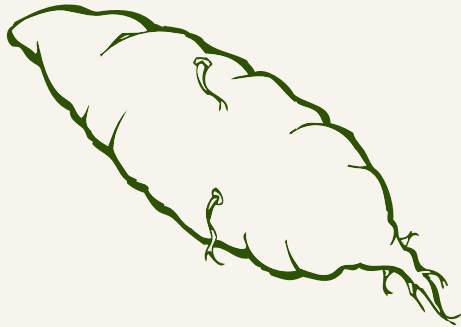
Another way women in Dalukana are increasingly using hospitals is for childbirth. Historically, a traditional midwife called the Winnabu-amma supported women throughout their pregnancies and childbirth at the village level. There was one midwife within each village, but as they have passed away and culture and policy have shifted, almost all women give birth in hospitals.

*"Now, we are not giving birth at home. We are always going to the hospital. The reason behind that is because we don't have professional healthcare at home. Earlier we had the Winnabu-amma, but now we don't. Because of that, we are going to the hospitals."*



She also noticed changes in the types of health conditions people in Dalukana are experiencing. She attributed these newly prevalent conditions to changes in diet.

*“The youths have seizures, high blood pressure, diabetes, and gastritis. Even I have gastritis, it doesn’t matter if you are male or female, both of us are getting gastritis...As far as I know, we didn’t have gastritis back then, but now we do. The food patterns and diets are different from the past. Because of that, we are getting gastritis. Most of the time, we are forest-based [diet], like yams and everything, but now we are eating mostly flour-based products.”*



A shift to flour-based products can be attributed to a decrease in crop yields, and a decrease in engagement with forest-based livelihood activities. To help manage these everyday hardships, some women in Dalukana participate in an informal money sharing network called Seettu.

*“There are some informal community organizations, called Seettu. A bunch of people are getting together and one person is giving a designated amount of money, let’s say one hundred rupees per month. Then all twelve people are pooling their one hundred rupees and then together someone gets 1,200 rupees. That goes to one person from the group of twelve. The next month, someone else will get it and likewise.”*

She has been a member for the past three years. Her aunt started the organization among women in the village.

*“It’s all about women. The organization only has women. Men are the ones who normally are earning money. So men earn money and then they’ll give the money to the woman of the household for the Seettu.”*

Besides pooling money for the Seettu, she explained that other resources are rarely pooled between community members.

*“Most of the time we are not sharing resources, but when my brother’s house has extra food when they are cooking a lot of curries, they’ll give some food to us, other than that, we are not sharing stuff.”*

Contrasting with Dambana, she went on to describe a generational shift in lifestyle between herself and her mother, attributing a shift from forest-based livelihood activities to daily wage work to make ends meet.

*"Normally, my mother was not engaged in daily wage jobs. But the difference is we are doing jobs. The mothers and fathers went to the forests and collected wood and stuff and then sold things and earned money. Those kinds of things our mothers have done. But now that has changed, we work and earn daily wages... earlier the prices of goods are very cheap, but now it's very expensive, because of that, it's not enough to earn money by one person from the household, so both of us [husband and wife] have to do a job."*

Despite a shift away from forest-based livelihoods, she is determined to maintain their Indigenous knowledge base by passing down knowledge to the younger generations of Vedda in Dalukana.

*"My kids and I will go to the forest for sure because we must pass everything we know to the younger generation. We have to teach them, because of that, we will go."*

Currently, she does not visit the forest as much as she used to due to fear, however, she still feels empowered and open to going back.

*"I'm scared, I don't know...I cannot remember the paths and how to walk in the middle of the forest. Because of that, I'm scared I'll get lost...We need someone who knows the forest well to go, an Indigenous person from our community."*



Vegetation within Vedda village

Being a woman in Dalukana brings additional challenges for her and others, preventing mobility within and outside of the community. She described multiple stories of how some women's challenges in Dalukana are related to their husbands.

*"Being a woman is sometimes difficult because some men don't like when women are living nicely. When the women are beautiful, the men don't like to see that...I like to go outside of the house but most of the time, my husband doesn't allow me to leave my house...Sometimes they [men] think we'll [wives] will go with another man. We might attract a guy."*

She described how this is common among other villagers and how some men will tell their wives not to go work daily wage jobs and stay inside. The impact from male control is profound, leading to feelings of loneliness and isolation for her and women in the community.

*"It has been isolating because we are not getting the chance to talk with others because we are always within the house. Because of the restrictions, we cannot even talk with anyone outside of the house. We are stuck indoors. It restricts us from talking with people outside. We are sad."*



She went on to tell a story of her friend who was regretful about getting married because she knew how her husband would control her freedom.

*"She [her friend] was super sad about getting married because her husband doesn't allow her to talk to others and he doesn't give her a phone to talk to others. It's frustrating for her...Even when she goes outside for a few seconds, then it will be a problem. Even now, if she's late returning to the house, then her husband will blame her. It's so frustrating."*

Male control was described by other women in Dalukana as well. Social stigmas within the village severely limited women's opportunities to learn new skills, pursue livelihoods, and participate in decision-making, leaving many feeling constrained in their ability to shape their futures. While the specific circumstances of Vedda women are unique, similar gendered barriers persist impacting women around the world.

Looking ahead, she expressed openness to continuing conversations with us, and prefers physical visits to stay in touch rather than phone calls. She doesn't have much experience with researchers, besides working with our team.

These experiences shared by women in Dalukana highlight how social isolation and unequal power relations can restrict opportunities to be seen and heard. Through this project, we aimed to create space for Vedda women to share their stories, perspectives, and knowledge in their own words. By documenting and sharing these experiences, we hope to draw attention to realities that are often unseen and overlooked to contribute to broader efforts that support gender equity, cultural recognition, and climate justice for Vedda women.





View of Rambakan Oya Reservoir near Pollebedda Village

The Vedda village of Pollebedda is located near the Rambakan Oya Reservoir. After we completed interviews for the day, our team's local friend, Ajith, took us to view the reservoir. The reservoir was extremely large with a dam over 1,000 meters in length. Construction for the reservoir was announced in 2007 and completed in 2013. After we briefly stood next to the dam and looked out across the water, he guided us across the dam's wall towards the edge of the forest. A few short steps past the forest edge, a building appeared, a future Vedda culture heritage museum in the making. He explained to us the village's plans to make the museum a place where tourists can visit and learn about Vedda culture and knowledge.



Outside of future Vedda culture heritage museum

Just past the museum, he took us down a narrow path through the forest between large boulders and below low hanging tree branches and vines. After a few minutes, we reached the entrance of a shallow cave. He explained to us that Vedda used to inhabit this cave before village life. Looking closer at the cave, a line carved along the edge of the entrance of the cave was clearly visible. Ajith explained how Vedda carved this line into cave entrances to keep the inside dry during rainfall as dripping water would be re-directed through the shallow curve down the sides of the cave. Their old way of life was preserved in the rock face.



Pathway through forest to cave entrance



Close up view of carved line into rock above cave entrance



View from cave opening  
From left, Hannah E. Garbutt, Sithuni M. Jayasekara

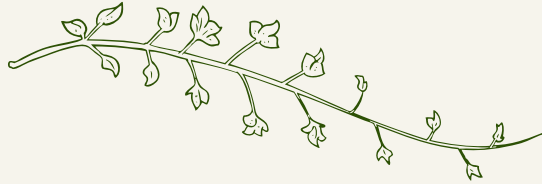
Like in the other villages, Vedda in Pollebedda were forced to move into the village and out of their traditional cave homes in the forest. The drastic change in lifestyle this forced displacement introduced was abundantly clear. As we ventured out of the forest back to the dam, Ajith pointed into the water at an area that used to be inhabited by Vedda, now completely submerged. The construction of the Rambakan Oya reservoir had further displaced the Pollebedda Vedda community.



View of Rambakan Oya reservoir with pin depicting where Vedda inhabited before reservoir construction

Since being forcefully relocated, residents must primarily rely on agriculture for income. However, with the changing climate, wet and dry seasons have become unpredictable, leaving farmers unsure of when to plant their crops for the season. Residents of Pollebedda have expressed experiencing longer dry seasons with more intense heat. When the rains eventually come, they are more intense, causing extreme flood events within the village. Some residents maintain home gardens to grow food and traditional medicinal plants. However, the lack of rain has given people no option but to irrigate with tap water, increasing financial strain. With an increase in financial insecurity, none of the residents we interviewed were receiving the government financial aid program, Aswesuma.

Despite their forced removal from their ancestral land, some residents of Pollebedda, men and women, visit the forest for hunting, collecting bee honey, and picking tamarind fruit. Among the women we interviewed in Pollebedda, we found an even mix of women with a desire to go to the forest and women who had never visited the forest. The following story follows one resident, Leela, who enjoys visiting the forest with a group of men and women from her community. Her forest visits help with isolation and provide income for her during the tamarind\* season. Her story illustrates how climate change has impacted her life, and the lives of others in Pollebedda, and provides insight into how gender dynamics shape women's daily lives in the village.



Leela begins her days by waking up and taking care of her twelve-year-old daughter, cooking, and completing other household tasks. Her two elder children are married and living with their spouses. Her husband passed away from a heart attack and since then she's become busier as the sole caretaker and breadwinner to provide for herself and her daughter. She works daily wage jobs nearby the village, typically by weeding the paddy fields of other farmers, and she finishes remaining household tasks in the evening. In August, she and other Vedda women go to the forest to partake in tamarind fruit harvesting,

*"I go to the forest too, when it's tamarind fruit season, in the month of August, I'm going to the forest to pick those small fruits."*

She explained how her life changed after having kids, with more work to take care of the child's needs and complete household chores. For income, she must rely on the opportunity for daily wage work to arise, but it is not reliable year-round.

*"I'm who is responsible for the household tasks because it's only me and my child. I don't have any opportunities to engage in daily income generation activities because we don't have work these days so I'm just staying inside the house without going to work for this time period."*

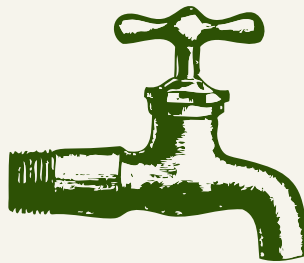
When she gets the opportunity to work, she always takes it. Her older daughters who are married give her money from time to time, but besides them, she doesn't receive any assistance. Though she receives little financial support beyond her daughters, she is not alone, finding support in working collectively with other women in Pollebedda when daily wage work is available.

*"I'm going for daily wage jobs with a bunch of women, about twenty. We are weeding together when we have the opportunity. When we don't have the opportunity to work, we stay in our homes and it's very difficult to eat and even find food."*

Her struggle to find food reflects broader challenges women in Pollebedda face with changes in crop cultivations, as changing climatic conditions have made farming increasingly difficult. She described to us how she is also involved in cultivating a variety of crops; however, like women from other villages, she has experienced higher heat than ever before and longer dry seasons which have made cultivating unpredictable.

*"Crop cultivation is difficult. Sometimes I grow maize\*, cowpea\*, and mung beans\*, but with the dry seasons, it's becoming harder to plant them and keep them alive. The crops grow well in the rainy season, so, if it's becoming dryer, we must water the plants to keep them alive. After the rainy season, I start planting maize and cowpea in my home garden."*

In her home garden, she must use tap water to keep her plants alive to cope with the dryness. Using tap water has increased financial strain for her family by adding to her list of expenses, including school fees for her daughter, but she has no other option.



*"It's like 2,000 rupees per month. It's expensive, but what to do. We have to do it. When I earn money from daily wages, I'll pay the bill, but I also must spend money on my child's school too."*

She was one of the few women in Pollebedda who still visits the forest. Tamarind season is the main time she and other women go to the forest during the year. She expressed how men should travel with women in case of animal attacks during the long journey. She even invited our research team to go with her next season to pick them.



Forest and mountainous area near Pollebedda Village

*"There are a bunch of people going to the forest. It is a mix of men and women. There are around 20 women in the bunch and most of the women are going in the tamarind season. We are not engaged in bee honey collecting, not the women, but we are collecting the tamarind. Most of the time, there should be men because there are elephants and it's about 8 miles to go to the forest and again to come back to the forest we must spend again six miles for the return trip with the tamarind on our heads and walk."*

Women traveling in groups to the forest with men is common in the other villages due to fear of dangerous animal encounters such as elephants\*, and bears\*. Limited forest visits and village life have exposed Pollebedda residents to high heat, leading to health impacts. Like other villages, she has witnessed an increase in health conditions that were not prevalent before, which she attributed to changes in a longer and more intense dry season.

*"In the dry season, we get fever, colds, stomach pains, and heart attacks...I didn't see these conditions before, but now they are prevalent. The reason behind them is the dryness."*

Prolonged exposure to extreme heat can strain the cardiovascular system. To treat these health impacts, she prefers to use traditional medicinal plants. However, with the intensity of the dry season, plants struggle to survive, compounded with an increase in pest attacks.

Pest attacks have been known to increase in warmer temperatures, as heat accelerates insect metabolism and larval growth. During dry conditions, plants become easy targets for pests as they are already weakened by environmental stress. The use of pesticides to fend off pests and irrigation with tap water has cost her several additional thousands that could instead go towards food or other expenses. Despite these mounting financial pressures, she receives no external support, including from Aswesuma.



Traditional medicinal plants given by Pollebedda Village Leader Nelli(Top), Pawatta(far right), Nika(far left)

*"I don't know the reason why I'm not getting it [Aswesuma]. I have filled out forms and documents, but I'm not getting the money."*

Like her, none of the other interviewees in Pollebedda are receiving Aswesuma. These financial burdens extend to social and emotional stressors that she and other women in the village experience. She believes visiting the forest with other women has helped her feel less isolated with these struggles.

*"I think it would be good to have women visit to the forest because it's good for the loneliness...yes, this [loneliness] is common among women in the community."*

She explained that women are often responsible for both income generation work and household labor, while men's contributions remain more limited in the domestic sphere.

*"Men are doing income generation activities like daily wages. Weeding and applying soil to the crops like mung beans. Women are also engaged in daily jobs, but sweeping, cooking, and other household tasks are done by women, not men."*

In addition to having several responsibilities inside and outside of the household, she detailed how women in the community often bear the brunt of emotional labor by mediating conflicts.

*"I think women are peacekeepers...I go to solve issues when there are issues occurring between community members. I try to solve them."*

While Leela described these overlapping responsibilities can be burdensome, she also expressed a sense of independence, emphasizing her ability to manage without male support. In Pollebedda, it has become normalized for women to stretch their labor across several spheres, economic, domestic, and emotional. For her, forest visits have emerged as a vital space for connection and resilience. Sharing these practices with women in other villages may help reduce isolation and support engagement in forest-based livelihoods, which have been crucial for women in Dambana to adapt to climate related induced challenges to their health and well-being.

# 4. Rathugala

## DIVIDED KNOWLEDGE





Sign located at the front of the Vadda's Heritage Center

Rathugala was the last Vedda village we visited during our fieldwork. The village is located near Gal Oya Valley National Park, a popular tourist area for wildlife safaris. Within the village, on the side of the main road, there is a Vedda cultural heritage museum. Tourists, both local and international, visit the site regularly. There was a small selection of handmade crafts for purchase along with a small library. During our field visit, within the museum, there was a meeting with local farmers being held by an agriculture-focused NGO.



Multiple languages present on sign within the heritage center

Before leaving the village, we had the opportunity to meet with two youth leaders who have taken the initiative to start an organization within their community. The organization is called the Rathugala Adivasi Sanwardhana Samitiya, and their purpose is to advocate for Indigenous rights and sovereignty. They detailed several goals moving forward that they would like to accomplish by 2027 including: building a cultural house for the village leader to use as a multi-purpose community space, create a museum to serve as a cultural heritage center (similar to the scale of the one in Dambana), and third, uplift livestock production, particularly with poultry.

The Adivasi organization has been working together with the NGO for the past year. According to the youth leaders of the organization, the goal of this partnership is to advocate for Indigenous rights, with farming being only one division of their partnership. Besides farming, the two partners are working towards ensuring education of the youth within the village, and aiming to improve and safeguard Indigenous health and livelihoods.



Group photo after meeting with Village Leader and youth organization leaders  
From left: Sithuni M. Jayasekara, Hannah E. Garbutt, Damith Disanayaka,  
Rathugala Leader Suda Vannila Aththo, Nipuna Herath, Eranga K. Galappaththi

The following story follows Nayana. Her recent experiences with farming bring insight to how climate is impacting livelihoods in Rathugala and how residents are adapting. A typical day for her involves household tasks like cleaning, cooking, and maintaining the home garden. She explained how her daily routine hasn't changed much as she has been cooking since she was around twelve years old. The biggest change in her life came after having her four children as she had to take responsibility for them.

She diligently maintains her home garden, despite warming temperatures, and grows mung beans, cowpea, maize, and finger millet\*. She travels to the forest during the tamarind season to pick the fruit, but she is now experiencing pain in her right knee which has prevented her from visiting the forest for the last four to five years. Despite not being able to visit the forest, she still prefers to use traditional medicinal plants to treat illnesses, but recently has had to rely on hospitals.

*"I like to use traditional medicines but the plants are difficult to find. Because of that if we get a cold or a fever we are going to the hospital."*

She said its more common throughout the village now for people to visit the hospitals when they're sick. Most of the time, she has seen success in hospital treatment. Visiting the hospitals has become necessary as she expressed how certain illnesses have become more common among Vedda in Rathugala.

*"As Indigenous peoples, now, there are more conditions and illnesses that are happening to us...cholesterol, high blood pressure, and kidney diseases."*

Chronic Kidney disease of unknown etiology (CKDu) is prevalent in Rathugala. She attributes the CKDu cases to drinking dirty water from lakes when she was younger, but now she thinks the water is *"coming from a cave in a mountainous area so the water is cleaner."* Back then, the high consumption of dirty water has led to CKDu in some villagers.

Like in Dalukana, she stated they also get rashes from the incidence of high heat. She described how, *"Earlier the forest was cooler, there were a lot of trees, but now with deforestation, there are less trees. Because of that, we are experiencing high heat leading to skin rash problems and others [illnesses]."* To treat the rashes, they use neem\* leaves, *"We boil the neem leaves with water and take a shower with the water and we will be cured."*



In addition to household tasks, she is engaged with chena cultivations by growing mung beans and maize. Labor is shared between farmers using a system called *attham kramaya*, “A bunch of people get together and help at one person's cultivation and then the next day we move to the next person's cultivations and so on. We share the labor.” Although, like the other villages, she described how recently they have been struggling with decreasing yields.

*“In the past, the yield was okay. Last year, the mung beans were good, I got one thousand rupees per kilogram from my harvest. But now, because of the dryness this year, we got a very little amount from our harvest. We couldn't even sell the surplus harvest of mung beans. For one kilogram versus the price of one kilogram was around four thousand five hundred rupees.”*

Similarly to other interviewees from Rathugala, she expressed the dryness was something they hadn't faced before, “We have never experienced such kind of stuff, but this year, yes, it began this year.” To prepare for the upcoming year's cultivations, she has decided to change her focus away from growing mung beans to growing maize.

*“There's no point of cultivating mung beans again, because of that we are trying to shift to maize instead of planting mung beans again...This year we have received support from the NGO for mung beans.”*

The NGO works with farmers in Rathugala by helping provide seeds for their crops. She told us they will give out mung bean seeds again next year, but she's going to focus on maize instead. The reason she is shifting from mung beans to maize is not because of the lack of rainfall.



NGO meeting with local farmers at Vadda's Heritage Center  
Rathugala

*"For mung beans, it's not about less water, they also need water and maize also needs water. But for mung beans, the price for mung beans is becoming reduced from the harvest so we get a lower amount of money...the price of one kilo of maize is about 100 rupees, but from two acres of land, we can grow more maize seeds than mung bean seeds."*

Although she described unprecedented dryness in Rathugala, she has decided to shift to maize primarily due to economic factors. She explained how mung beans have lower market prices, whereas maize sells around one hundred rupees per kilo and produces higher yields per acre. For these reasons, she thinks maize is a more financially viable crop despite the past year's drought conditions.

To support her family, she expressed how they do not receive any financial aid from the government. Like many others, she was not sure why she doesn't receive payments from the government financial aid program, Aswesuma, even after visiting her local government office, the Divisional Secretariat, in person.

*"I have physically visited the Divisional Secretariat and handed over the forms, but they have never responded. It's been over a year since... I have lost hope."*

In the absence of reliable institutional support, the burden of sustaining the household falls on her and her husband. She described how roles and responsibilities in her family and for other families in Rathugala are divided between men and women. Like women in Pollebedda and Dalukana, she expressed that women are primarily responsible for domestic labor.



Fire demonstration by Rathugala Veda elder

"Most of the time household work is done by women, like cooking and looking after children. In terms of chena cultivation, both men and women are engaged. Also, picking nelli, a fruit we have here in Sri Lanka, that's also done by men and women."

She went on to discuss how Indigenous knowledge is passed down between men in the village. Women are not involved in the passing down of Indigenous knowledge or the Vedda language.

*"I don't know [Indigenous knowledge], but men know most of the time, the Vedda language and everything, but as women, we don't know...sometimes, there are women [who know Indigenous knowledge], but most of the time the Indigenous things are done by men. For example, the spiritual activity, the dance, that's also done by men. Most of the time it's men."*

According to her, women don't hold Indigenous knowledge because *"There is nobody to teach since childhood."* Fathers teach their sons from their childhood. Within the community, men are the ones who go to the forest by themselves because they know how to handle animal encounters, such as elephants, which can be incredibly dangerous. She explained how women never go to the forest by themselves because of the risk of animal encounters, *"No women never go alone, there are animals like elephants and bears. Because of that, it's so difficult to go [to the forest] alone."*

Compared to Dambana, women in Rathugala do not travel to the forest alone or outside of tamarind season, according to her. This limits women's engagement in traditional forest-based livelihood activities that have been important sources of adaptation for women in Dambana. Nayana's story illustrates how everyday customs and gender relations differ between Vedda communities, shaping the ways women are able to maintain connections with the forest and navigate environmental change.

# Conclusion

This storybook shares the lived experiences of Vedda women navigating the challenges of climate change across Dambana, Dalukana, Pollebedda, and Rathugala. These brief snapshots of their lives reveal how environmental change is intertwined with shifting livelihoods, access to Indigenous knowledge, gendered responsibilities, and broader social and institutional systems.

From forest-based collective care, to constrained mobility, these accounts highlight instances of vulnerability and resilience to climate impacts. Despite instances of resilience, women continue to carry unseen burdens balancing care, labor, and uncertainty. Moving forward, Vedda women must be involved in climate adaptation research, policy, and planning. Adaptation policy must be grounded in lived-experience, center Indigenous knowledge, and meaningfully include Indigenous women's voices to support more just and equitable adaptation strategies.

As researchers, we must continue to advocate for community-based participatory research approaches that promote justice and autonomy of Indigenous peoples. Lessons from this project may reflect phenomena occurring within other Indigenous communities around the world.

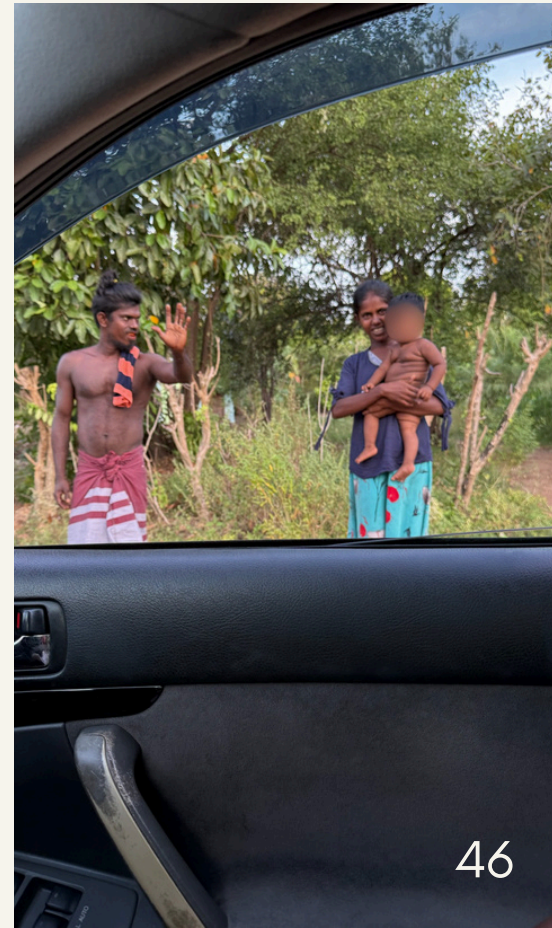
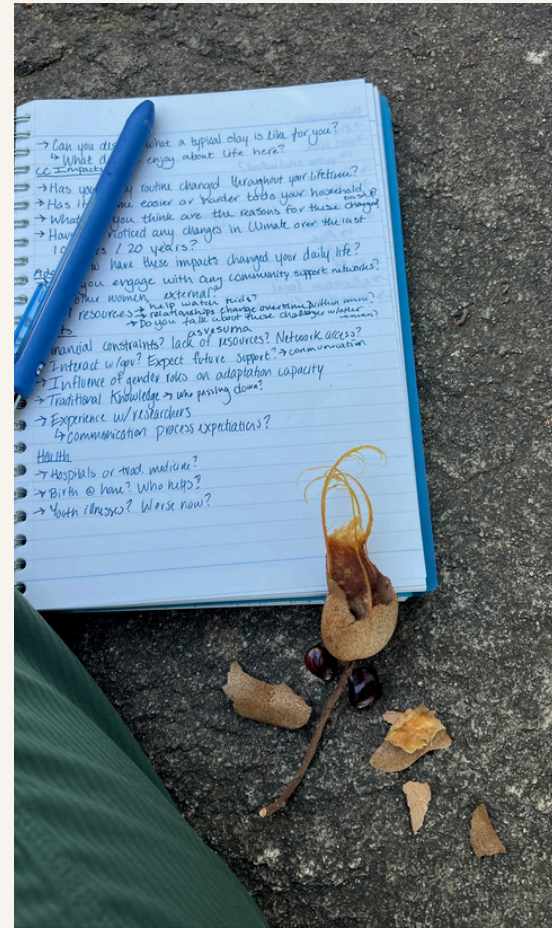


As an author, I carry deep gratitude for the women who welcomed us into their homes, shared their time, and entrusted us with their stories. It was an honor and a privilege to spend time in the Vedda communities and to create this storybook. This project was only possible because of the communities', openness and generosity towards us. I am equally thankful for the friendships that have been built and continue to grow through this work. It is my hope that this storybook honors women's experiences with care and integrity, and that it serves as a platform to amplify their voices beyond their communities.

This work does not end here. Rather, it is part of an ongoing commitment to listen, learn, and advocate alongside Vedda communities. May these stories stay with you, challenge you, and inspire reflection on the many voices that shape conversations about climate change, and the importance of listening with care.



# Photography & Art

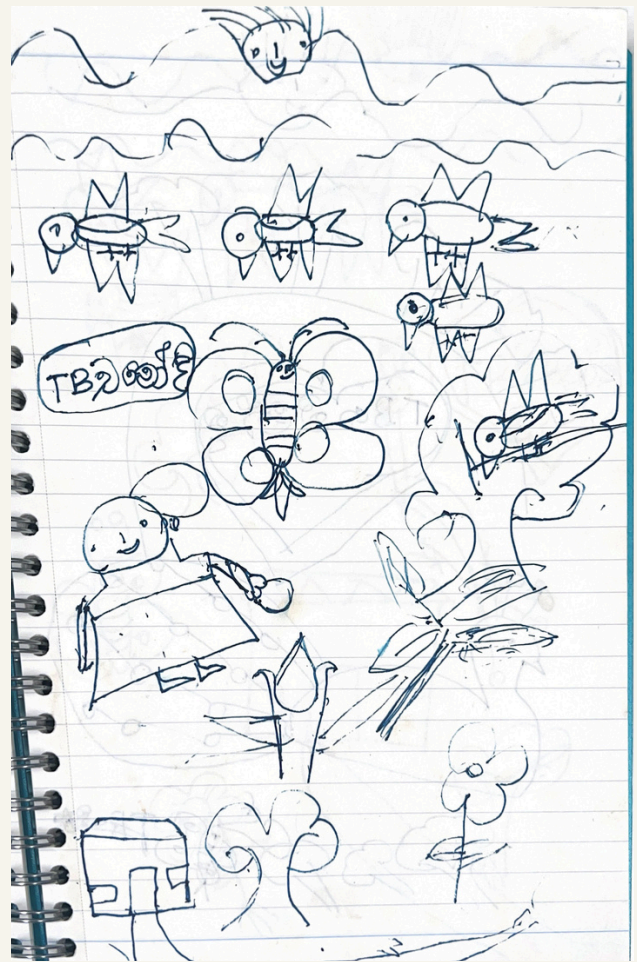






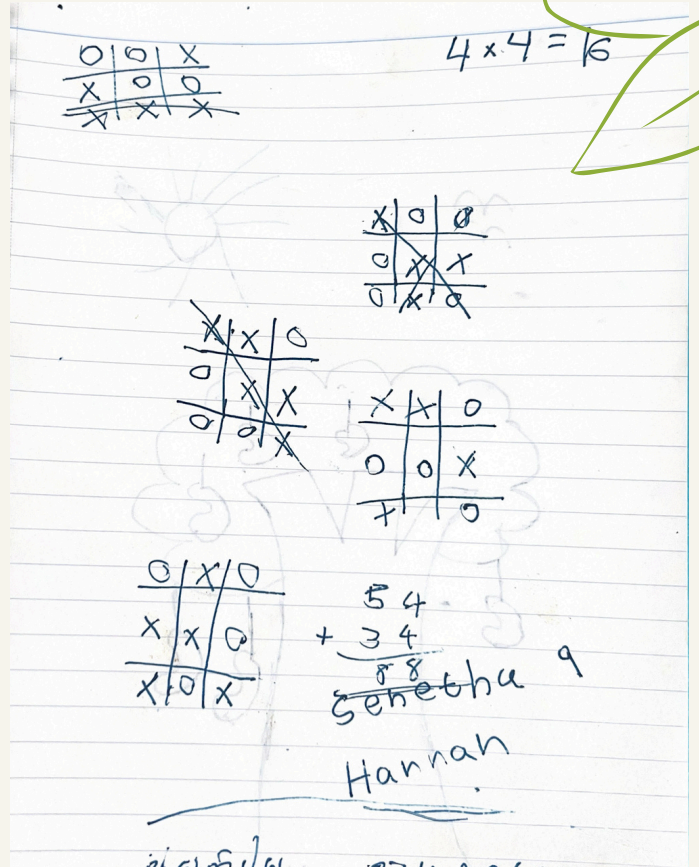








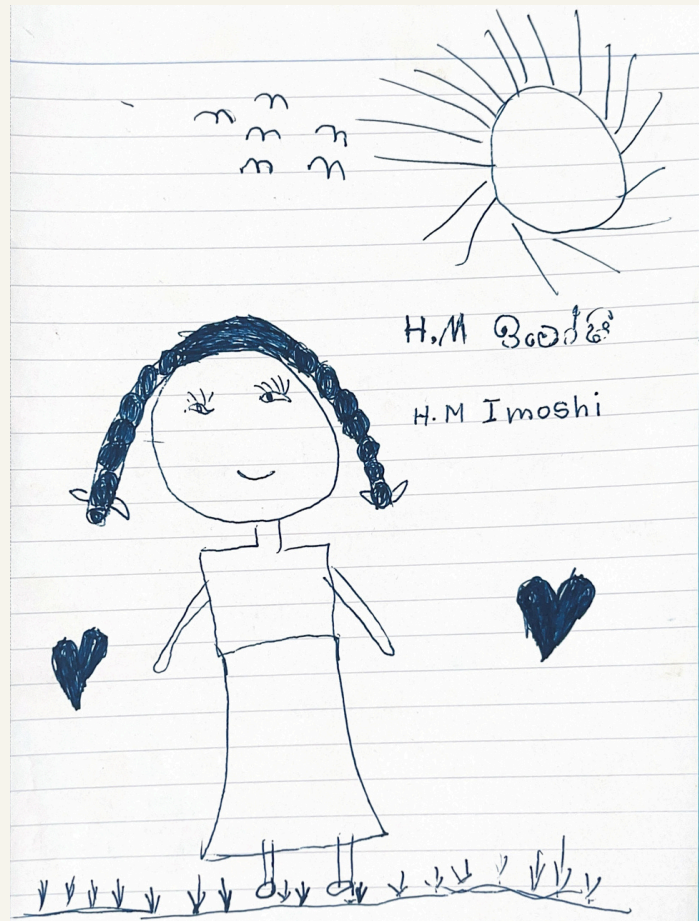
Wakarei



Henanigala



Dambana



# Glossary

## Traditional Medicinal Plants

Belimal (*Aegle marmelos*)

Digestion

Cothalahimbutu (*Salacia reticulata*)

Diabetes

Demata (*Gmelina arborea moldenke*)

Snake bite

Iramusu (*Hemidesmus indicus*)

Digestion, Inflammation

Marathondia (*Gmelina arborea moldenke*)

Heat rash

Monarakudumbiya (*Cyanthillium cinereum*)

Fever, Skin disease, Inflammation, Digestion

Neem (*Azadirachta indica*)

Skin disease, Rashes, Infections

Nelli (*Phyllanthus emblica*)

Immune support, Digestion, Hair/Skin, Diabetes

Nika (*Vitex negundo*)

Wounds, Inflammation, Arthritis, Snake bite

Pawatta (*Pavetta indica*)

Fever, Cold, Cough

Polpala (*Aerva lanata*)

Kidney support, Urinary issues, Cough, Asthma

Rukaththana (*Alstonia scholaris*)

Snake bite



## Wildlife

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Aliya (*Elephas maximus maximus*)

Elephant

Cobra (*Naja naja*)

Spectacled Cobra

Diviya (*Panthera pardus kotiya*)

Leopard

Mapila (*Boigna ceylonensis*)

Sri Lankan Cat Snake

Telwissa (*Hypnale hypnale*)

Hump-nosed Viper

Viper (*Daboia russelii*)

Russell's Viper

Walaha (*Melursus ursinus inornatus*)

Sloth bear



## Foods

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Bada-iringu (*Zea mays*)

Maize

Cowpea (*Vigna unguiculata*)

Black-eyed peas

Gal Siyambala (*Dialium ovoideum*)

Pebble tamarind

Katu Ala (*Dioscorea pentaphylla*)

Five leaf yam

Kurakkan (*Eleusine coracana*)

Finger millet

Mae karal (*Vigna unguiculata*)

Long beans

Mun aeta (*Vigna radiata*)

Mung beans

Vi (*Oryza sativa*)

Paddy

# Acknowledgements

## Stories

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Vedda Women

Storyteller 1

Storyteller 2

Storyteller 3

Storyteller 4

All other Vedda women who shared their time with us

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Translation

Eranga K. Galappaththi

Translation

National Chief Vedda Leader & Village Leaders

Consent to work with communities

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Gwyneth Garbutt

Watercolor

Sithuni M. Jayasekara

Photography

Eranga K. Galappaththi

Photography

## Editing

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Eranga K. Galappaththi

Sithuni M. Jayasekara

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Maama Kachchak Hondamai