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Ver 17 May 2023

Ecosystem Restoration Verification

Report for:
Talawakelle Tea Estates PLC
in
Dimbula, Central Province, Sri Lanka

Report Finalised: 26th March 2024
Audit Dates: 18th January 2024
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Certificate issue/expiry: 2nd April 2024 / 1st April 2029

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INTRODUCTION

This report presents the findings of an independent audit conducted by a team of specialists representing Preferred by Nature. The purpose of the audit was to evaluate the ecological, economic and social performance of Talawakelle Tea Estates PLC (TTE) restoration initiative as defined by the established Ecosystem Restoration Standard Version 3.1 by Preferred by Nature.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Project description

The Talawakelle Tea Estates PLC (TTE), as part of its commitment to environmental stewardship and sustainability, has embarked on an ambitious reforestation initiative aimed at planting one million native trees across its plantations over a ten-year period (2019-2029). This project aligns with the overarching environmental strategies of the Hayleys Group and targets ecosystem restoration, biodiversity enhancement, and long-term sustainability.

TTE has been a key player in biodiversity conservation for the past five years, leading initiatives like the St. Clair's Falls Ecosystem Restoration Project. Since 2021, TTE spearheads the 'KIRULU' project under the Hayleys Group, focusing on ecosystem restoration and habitat preservation in High Conservation Value Areas (HCVA). Additionally, TTE supports the Wildlife Nature Protection Society PLANT (WNPS PLANT) project in collaboration with Preserving Land and Nature (Guarantee) Ltd. This partnership is committed to creating biodiversity corridors and preserving forest ecosystems in Sri Lanka. As part of this commitment, TTE and its sister companies in the Hayleys Plantation sector have pledged zero deforestation and contributed over 2,500 acres of land for biodiversity corridors.

There are several objectives as to why TTE carry out such initiatives:

1. Enhance Biodiversity and Wildlife Habitats
2. Water Conservation and Catchment Protection
3. Social Uplift and Employment Opportunities
4. Promote Good Agricultural Practices (GAP)
5. Contribute to Hayleys Group Environmental Sustainability Strategies
6. Address Soil Degradation and Improve Carbon Levels
7. Mitigate Uncontrolled Fires and Climate Change Impact
8. Enhance Crop Yields and Livelihoods
9. Mandatory Catchment Protection
10. Attract and Protect Faunal Biodiversity
11. Provide Ecosystem Services to Multiple Stakeholders

The initial phase (2019-2020) of the project was dedicated to planning and preparation. It included conducting site assessments, analysing soil conditions, securing seedlings, and engaging with the community. A pilot planting of 2,000 trees was carried out to test planting methods and seedling selection. From 2020 to 2022, the project scaled up, involving the planting of 3,000 trees across multiple estates. This phase also focused on diversifying the range of native species, continuous monitoring, and further engaging the community. The period between 2022 and 2024 marked a phase of consolidation and expansion. During this time, 5,000 trees were planted, monitoring methods were refined, and community involvement increased. The subsequent phase aimed at accelerated growth, with a target to plant 20,000 trees. This involved filling gaps in existing plantings, establishing wildlife corridors, and developing strategies for future funding and sustainability. The final phase encompasses evaluation and transition. It focuses on assessing the project's overall success, sharing findings, developing long-term management plans, and exploring opportunities for future funding and partnerships.

To ensure the success and longevity of the project, a multifaceted approach is being employed. Funding is a key pillar, with resources being secured through a blend of internal investments,

corporate partnerships, grants, and carbon offset programs. This financial support is vital for sustaining the project's momentum. Another critical component is Monitoring and Evaluation. This involves regularly monitoring the growth and survival of the trees, as well as potential environmental threats. The gathered data will be used to adapt and refine strategies, ensuring the project remains effective and responsive to changing conditions.

Community Engagement is also at the heart of the project. By actively involving estate communities in all stages of the project, from planning to implementation, a sense of ownership is fostered among the participants, which is crucial for the project's long-term sustainability. Lastly, Research and Collaboration are integral. The project seeks to partner with relevant organizations and institutions to study the ecological impact of the reforestation efforts. These collaborations aim to generate valuable insights that will inform future conservation efforts, ensuring that the project not only benefits the immediate environment but also contributes to broader ecological understanding and preservation.

The main issues identified during the assessment that need to be dealt with by TTE are:

1. Management of weeds and alien species.
2. Further research is needed on the use of *Acacia decurrens* in providing competition to the native planted trees.
3. Monitoring of workers in using personal protective equipment e.g. safety boots and suitable attire for work.
4. Inflated cost of doing restoration due to external factors requires contingency planning.
5. Lack of details pertaining to the restoration techniques within the restoration plan.
6. Lack of boundary marking within the restoration area.
7. There is a lack of records for information gathered from workers, particularly regarding verbal and unwritten comments.
8. Lack of reporting for indicators that are being monitored by the project.
9. Lack of description of lessons learned from the pilot phase in the restoration plan.
10. Lack of written contract for workers

Project scale and risk

The scale and risk of the project defines how frequent desk and field audits must be performed during the 5-year duration of the verification.

Scale and risk	Justification
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Small	The restoration is undertaken at Dessford Estate and Holyrood Estate in a 25 hectares of land.
<input type="checkbox"/> Medium	
<input type="checkbox"/> Large	
Comments:	

1 AUDIT CONCLUSIONS

1.1 Audit Recommendation and Decision

Based on Organisation's conformance with the requirements, the following recommendation is made:

-
- Verification approved:
Upon acceptance of NCR(s) issued below
-
- Verification not approved:
Conformance with MAJOR NCR(s) required
-

Additional comments, including issues identified as controversial or hard to evaluate and explanation of the conclusion reached: [Explicit identification and discussion of any issues that were hard to assess, for example because of contradictory evidence or difficulty in interpreting the standard(s) in the field, and explanation of the conclusion reached.]

1.2 Non-conformity Reports (NCRs)

Note: NCRs refer to non-fulfilment of a requirement. In simpler terms this means that some part of the standard has not been correctly fulfilled and need to be corrected in order to maintain the verified/validated status.

No NCR(s) issued

NCR: 01/24	Minor
Standard & Requirement:	Preferred by Nature Ecosystem Restoration Standard vs. 3.1, 3.1.3
Report Section:	Annex I
Description of Non-conformance and Related Evidence:	
The forestry manager explained that an alien species, i.e., <i>Acacia decurrens</i> was used to provide competition to the native trees that were planted in the restoration project. <i>Acacia decurrens</i> , an Invasive Alien Plant Species (IAPS), may pose a serious threat particularly in areas affected by pyroclastic flow. Originating from Australia, this plant belongs to the Fabaceae family, Mimosoidae subfamily, and the <i>Acacia</i> genus. Within its native distribution	

range, *Acacia decurrens* is known as a fast-growing pioneer species. However, it raises significant concerns due to its invasive potential in new habitats. In disturbed areas, IAPS like *Acacia decurrens* can quickly establish themselves and begin to outcompete native vegetation, leading to ecological imbalances. Through field observation, it was confirmed that alien species were present on site. There was no scientific evidence that supports the effectiveness in using *Acacia decurrens* to help tree seedlings establish and grow. Presence of other invasive species such as *Lantana camara* must also be addressed.

Corrective action request:	<p>Organisation shall implement corrective actions to demonstrate conformance with the requirement(s) referenced above.</p> <p>Note: Effective corrective actions focus on addressing the specific occurrence described in evidence above, as well as the root cause to eliminate and prevent recurrence of the non-conformance.</p>
Timeline for Conformance:	By next surveillance audit
Evidence Provided by Organisation:	PENDING
Findings for Evaluation of Evidence:	PENDING
NCR Status:	OPEN/CLOSED
Comments (optional):	

NCR: 02/24	Minor
Standard & Requirement:	Preferred by Nature Ecosystem Restoration Standard vs. 3.1, 3.1.5
Report Section:	Annex I
Description of Non-conformance and Related Evidence:	
<p>Based on the interview with RM, the main approach of the project is to protect the planted trees with gunny sacks to provide shade and protection from wildlife disturbance. The gunny sacks were evident during the field audit. However, invasive species and weeds were observed on the ground. Despite that the survival rate remain high (80%), TTE's lack of maintenance to control the restoration threats such as weeds and other invasive species may hinder tree growth if not addressed.</p>	
Corrective action request:	<p>Organisation shall implement corrective actions to demonstrate conformance with the requirement(s) referenced above.</p> <p>Note: Effective corrective actions focus on addressing the specific occurrence described in evidence above, as well as the root cause to eliminate and prevent recurrence of the non-conformance.</p>
Timeline for Conformance:	By the next surveillance audit
Evidence Provided by Organisation:	PENDING

Findings for Evaluation of Evidence:	PENDING
NCR Status:	OPEN/CLOSED
Comments (optional):	

NCR: 03/24	Minor
Standard & Requirement:	Preferred by Nature Ecosystem Restoration Standard vs. 3.1, 3.3.4
Report Section:	Annex I
Description of Non-conformance and Related Evidence:	
According to the RM, TTE has a non-negotiable policy for all workers to comply with the government regulation on occupational safety and health requirements. During the interview with one of the workers, he was wearing slippers and inappropriate attires for work. Based on the interview with the worker, he received the necessary PPE such safety boots but was not using it.	
Corrective action request:	Organisation shall implement corrective actions to demonstrate conformance with the requirement(s) referenced above. Note: Effective corrective actions focus on addressing the specific occurrence described in evidence above, as well as the root cause to eliminate and prevent recurrence of the non-conformance.
Timeline for Conformance:	By the next surveillance audit
Evidence Provided by Organisation:	PENDING
Findings for Evaluation of Evidence:	PENDING
NCR Status:	OPEN/CLOSED
Comments (optional):	

1.3 Observations

Note: Observations are issued for the early stages of a problem which does not of itself constitute a non-conformance, but which the auditor considers may lead to a future non-conformance if not addressed by the organisation; observations may lead to direct non-conformances if not addressed.

No observation(s) issued

OBS: 01/24	Standard & Requirement:	Preferred by Nature Ecosystem Restoration Standard vs. 3.1, 1.5.8
	Report Section	Annex I
Description of findings leading to observation:	The Restoration Manager (RM) clarified that the costs of carrying out the restoration project have increased compared to the initial budget projections. Consequently, the project must either absorb these additional costs or engage in exploring new financial resources as resilient as possible to ensure sufficient funding for its successful completion.	
Observation:	The Organisation should keep exploring new actions and resources to ensure the project can be continued in the long term	

OBS: 02/24	Standard & Requirement:	Preferred by Nature Ecosystem Restoration Standard vs. 3.1, 1.6
	Report Section	Annex I
Description of findings leading to observation:	According to the RM and the Forestry Manager, "analog forestry" is a forest restoration technique designed to establish ecosystems analogous to the original natural forests in structure and function, thereby balancing ecological restoration with economic needs. This approach involves selecting a mix of species that mimic the native forest ecosystem, focusing on restoring biodiversity by planting a variety of native trees, shrubs, and understory plants. The goal is to recreate the ecosystem services provided by natural forests, such as water regulation, soil stabilization, carbon sequestration, and providing habitats for wildlife. A key aspect of "analog forestry" is fostering sustainable livelihoods for local communities, often achieved by sustainably harvesting non-timber forest products (NTFPs) for income generation. This system also plays a significant role in soil and water conservation, improving soil fertility and enhancing the landscape's water-holding capacity. Crucial to its success is community involvement and education in sustainable forest management, which ensures stewardship and long-term sustainability. Adaptability and resilience are fundamental features of "analog forestry", making it a robust approach to forest restoration that can respond effectively to environmental changes and challenges. Although the project adopts analog forestry system in the field, it was not described in the restoration plan. It will be useful that the approach is describe in the restoration plan to ensure that the project activities align with the approach.	

Observation:	The Organisation should incorporate the details on “analog forestry” system, which is the basis of the restoration techniques used, into the restoration plan.
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OBS: 03/24	Standard & Requirement:	Preferred by Nature Ecosystem Restoration Standard vs. 3.1, 2.2
	Report Section	Annex I
Description of findings leading to observation:	According to the RM and estate Manager , there are no boundary issues on the ground as the land has long been operated by TTE. The interview with the local communities also revealed that there was no issues pertaining to boundaries. However, during the field audit, no boundary marking was visible to indicate the restoration area. Therefore, TTE should carry out boundary marking to indicate area under restoration.	
Observation:	The Organisation should carry out boundary marking to indicate area under restoration.	

OBS: 04/24	Standard & Requirement:	Preferred by Nature Ecosystem Restoration Standard vs. 3.1, 2.4.2
	Report Section	Annex I
Description of findings leading to observation:	According to the RM, the company acknowledges and supports the necessity for transparent and inclusive participation from affected parties. The RM elaborated that the project employs a participatory reforestation approach, aiming to execute restoration activities in collaboration with various stakeholders, including local communities. Furthermore, the restoration plan indicates the company's intention to motivate partners to lower operating costs and amplify benefits for local communities and rural livelihoods. However, there is a noticeable preference among local communities for tea planting rather than restoring areas with natural, non-commercial species according to the RM. For example, this preference is largely driven by the incentive system in place within the tea estates, where increased tea planting directly correlates to higher income. As a result, these communities tend to favour activities that offer immediate and direct financial rewards, such as expanding tea plantations, over restoration projects with less immediately tangible benefits. However, interviews with local community members revealed a dual perspective. While they support the restoration project and recognize its importance, they also express concerns about their livelihoods. Under the current incentive system at Talawakelle	

	Tea Estates (TTE), there's a clear financial advantage to harvesting more tea, which directly impacts their income. This may create conflict between environmental restoration and personal economic benefits if not addressed .
Observation:	The organization should record all information, whether official or unofficial, as part of its commitment to transparency.

OBS: 05/24	Standard & Requirement:	Preferred by Nature Ecosystem Restoration Standard vs. 3.1, 2.5.1
	Report Section	Annex I
Description of findings leading to observation:	<p>According to the RM, the grievance mechanism in place follows the Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) framework. As an organization certified by the Rainforest Alliance (RA), TTE is also obliged to implement the RA's remedial protocol in the event of any disputes. The RM further explained that all grievances are to be formally recorded, discussed, and resolved during meetings with trade unions or stakeholders' representatives. To date, there have been no grievances recorded through formal channels.</p> <p>However, it's worth noting during the interview, that while not formally classified as disputes, the RM explained that some workers have expressed concerns about their personal preference for tea harvesting over the restoration project, which they perceive as more lucrative. These concerns, however, have not been formally recorded by the management..</p>	
Observation:	The organization should take proactive steps to document any such concerns especially verbal comments or complaints and follow through the dispute resolution mechanism.	

OBS: 06/24	Standard & Requirement:	Preferred by Nature Ecosystem Restoration Standard vs. 3.1, 4.6.1
	Report Section	Annex I
Description of findings leading to observation:	Based on the interview with the RM, the biodiversity surveys include identification of pollinator species, however, no evidence was provided for this particular indicator.	
Observation:	The organization should identify and ensure that such species are protected.	

OBS: 07/24	Standard & Requirement:	Preferred by Nature Ecosystem Restoration Standard vs. 3.1, 3.3.5.1
	Report Section	Annex I
Description of findings leading to observation:	<p>Based on the interview with the RM it was noted that worker salaries for the tea plantations in Sri Lanka are determined by the Wage Board, with a minimum daily salary set at Rs 1000. However, personal contracts for the staff interviewed were not provided during the audit. Reference was made to an email from the Rainforest Alliance (RA) to certification bodies in Sri Lanka addressing challenges in adhering to an RA standard requirement for written employment contracts for workers. The email aimed to recognize efforts made by the tea industry and to advise that verbal contracts would suffice, ensuring that all workers are informed and educated about their employment details. The interviews with the workers served to verify their awareness of these details, which was confirmed. It's critical to note that this exception is valid only until 31st December 2024.</p> <p>Having written records is Continuous Improvement for small projects like this one, hence only an OBS is raised at this stage.</p>	
Observation:	The organization should provide written contract to workers as necessary and ensure that statutory payment such as Employees Provident Fund (EPF) are paid to the workers as required by the law.	

OBS: 08/24	Standard & Requirement:	Preferred by Nature Ecosystem Restoration Standard vs. 3.1, 4.6.1
	Report Section	Annex I
Description of findings leading to observation:	<p>Based on the interview with the RM, the monitoring result are presented in the progress report on an annual basis. However, upon reviewing the annual progress report, only one indicator was reported in the annual progress report despite that the monitoring plan has outlined a few indicators as described in indicator 4.3.1.</p>	
Observation:	The organization should update the restoration plan by specifying lessons that have been learned during the pilot phase of the restoration project and how has that been incorporated into the current phase of the restoration.	

OBS: 09/24	Standard & Requirement:	Preferred by Nature Ecosystem Restoration Standard vs. 3.1, 4.6.2
	Report Section	Annex I
Description of findings leading to observation:	Based on the interview with the RM, there are several lessons learned that were obtained during the pilot phase of the project. Some 2000 trees were planted in a designated pilot areas to test the methods, seedling selections and survival rates. Monitoring was also performed, and data was collected to inform future planting strategies. However, the lessons learned were not specified in the restoration plan.	
Observation:	The organization should update the restoration plan by specifying lessons that have been learned during the pilot phase of the restoration project and how has that been incorporated into the current phase of the restoration.	

1.4 Stakeholder consultation

The purpose of the stakeholder consultation strategy is threefold:

1. To ensure that the public is aware of and informed about the assessment process and its objectives;
2. To assist the field assessment team in identifying potential issues; and,
3. To provide diverse opportunities for the public to discuss and act upon the findings of the assessment.

This process goes beyond mere stakeholder notification; it aims for detailed and meaningful interaction to the greatest extent possible. The stakeholder interaction process does not conclude after field visits or even after a certification decision has been made. Preferred by Nature actively welcomes comments on verified projects at any time, as these often contribute to the basis of field assessments.

The majority of the meetings were held on-site particularly at the restoration sites.

Stakeholder Type (NGO, government bodies, local inhabitant, contractor etc.)	Stakeholders Notified (#)¶	Stakeholders consulted directly or provided input (#)
National/International NGOs		
Local/Regional NGOs		
Local Community members	1	1
Government Agency		
Labor Union	1	1
Certified Companies		

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The table below summarises the issues identified by the assessment team with a brief discussion of each based upon specific interview and/or public meeting comments.

1: Planning	
Stakeholder comment	Preferred by Nature response
NA	
2: Tenure, Rights & Engagement	
Stakeholder comment	Preferred by Nature response
NA	
3: Implementation	
Stakeholder comment	Preferred by Nature response
NA	
4: Monitoring and Reporting	
Stakeholder comment	Preferred by Nature response
NA	

1.5 Actions taken by Organisation Prior to Report Finalisation

N.A

2 AUDIT PROCESS

2.1 Standard Used

Standards Used (including version):	Ecosystem Restoration Standard – A Social and Environmental Standard for Field Verification of Restoration Initiatives version 3.1
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2.2 Audit Team and accompanying persons

Name	Role and qualifications
Nicholas Fong (Lead Auditor)	Nicholas is the Lead Auditor for Ecosystem Restoration based in Sabah, Malaysia. He brings over fifteen years of experience in environmental consultancy services, with expertise in environmental impact, social impact, and site assessment studies, as well as auditing and monitoring of air, noise, and water quality assessments across Sabah. Since 2010, he has held various positions at WWF Malaysia, focusing on Land Use and Landscapes. Currently, Nicholas's work is centred around the Strategy and Innovation Division's Ecosystem Restoration Programme in Asia and Southeast Asia. His responsibilities encompass overseeing the technical aspects of Ecosystem Restoration verification assessments, including auditing, quality control, and client relations. He plays a pivotal role in conducting field audits against the Ecosystem Restoration Standard and in advancing the spatial analysis of restoration projects through Geographic Information Systems (GIS). Additionally, Nicholas contributes to the design and execution of restoration training programs, delivering education and resources to both Preferred by Nature staff and external stakeholders as needed. He is proficient in both English and Malay.
Tharindu Chaturanga Weerakoon (Local Expert)	Tharindu Weerakoon is experienced plantation sector executive with a proven track record of success in managing large-scale plantations utilizing skills and expertise to contribute to the growth and success of plantation sector. He has a bachelors (Hons) in Agriculture and Specialized in Plantation Management. He is a plantation executive with over 10 years of experience in Tea, Rubber, Forestry and other agricultural crops. Tharindu served as a Sustainability and Certifications manager in a reputed Plantation companies in Sri Lanka. He is an accredited Energy Manager for the Sri Lanka Sustainable Energy Authority and Associate Member of the Institute of Environmental Professionals Sri Lanka (IEPSL). Possess extensive knowledge in Rainforest Alliance, Fairtrade, FSC/FM and COC, Eco Labelling, Carbon Footprint, Quality Assurance, Energy Management, and Sustainable agriculture and resource efficiency, cleaner production and Forestry Standards. Tharindu is mainly Focuses on audits on Rainforest Alliance, FSC FM/COC, Sustainable Rice

	Platform, UEBT and other Agriculture schemes and he is Served as the point of contact for clients in Sri Lanka and be the public face of the organization in Sri Lanka.
Eranda Lakmal (Observer)	Eranda Lakmal is a local expert, and he is an experienced agriculture sector executive with a proven track record of success in managing & implementing organic, social & sustainable certification requirements in large-scale agriculture companies utilizing skills and expertise to contribute to the growth and success of the company. He has a Bachelors (Hons) in Agriculture. He is an agriculture executive with over 8 years of experience in Coconut, Herbs & Spices and other agricultural crops. Eranda served as an Internal Control System manager in a reputed Organic spices export company in Sri Lanka. Possess extensive knowledge in Rainforest Alliance, Fairtrade trader & SPO, Organic (EU, USDA-NOP, Naturland), FSCCoC, Carbon Footprint, Quality Assurance and Sustainable agriculture. Eranda focuses as auditor (including the on-site visits or remote planning and evaluation, and report writing for appointed clients of Preferred by Nature’s agriculture related certification and verification), quality reviewer, and task managing of Preferred by Nature’s agriculture related certification and verification including but not limited for Rainforest Alliance, Global G.A.P, Union for Ethical BioTrade (UEBT), FSC CoC, Sustainability Framework Programme (SFP) and Sustainable Rice Platform (SRP).
Mateo Cariño Fraisse (Reviewer)	Report Reviewer. The expert has over 20 years’ experience in forestry, ecosystem services, stakeholder engagement, social issues, ecosystem restoration, training, and certification in Europe, Africa, and America, and Asia. Mateo speaks Spanish, French, English, and Portuguese, and is currently responsible for the PbN Ecosystem Restoration Programme.

2.3 Audit Overview

Note: The table below provides an overview of the audit scope and auditors. See standard checklist annex for specific details on people interviewed and audit findings per site audited.

Site(s)	Date(s)	Main activities	Auditor(s)
Dessford Estate Office	18.01.2024	Opening Meeting & Interview with RM	Nicholas Fong Tharindu Weerakoon Eranda Lakmal
Dessford Estate Restoration Area	18.01.2024	Field visit to the planting site, interview with local communities and workers	Nicholas Fong Tharindu Weerakoon Eranda Lakmal

Kirulu Restoration Area	18.01.2024	Field visit to the planting site and interview with workers	Nicholas Fong Tharindu Weerakoon Eranda Lakmal
Total number of person days used: 3 (including days spent in travel and report writing and review)			

2.4 Description of Overall Audit Process

2.4.1 List of sites selected for evaluation

Site	Rationale for Selection
Dessford Planting Site	Field verification with RM to check the condition of the planted trees
Kirulu Planting Site	Field verification with RM to check the condition of the planted trees
Holyrood Tea Factory	Field verification with RM to check the native reference site

2.4.2 List of management aspects reviewed by assessment team

Type of site	Sites visited	Type of site	Sites visited
Road construction		Illegal settlement	
Soil drainage		Bridges/stream crossing	
Workshop		Chemical storage	
Tree nursery		Wetland	
Planned harvest site		Steep slope/erosion	
Ongoing harvest site		Riparian zone	1
Completed logging		Planting	
Soil scarification		Direct seeding	
Planting site	1	Weed control	1
Felling by harvester		Natural regeneration	
Felling by forest worker		Endangered species	
Skidding/Forwarding		Wildlife management	
Clearfelling/Clearcut		Nature Reserve	
Shelterwood management		Key Biotope	

Selective felling		Special management area	
Sanitation cutting		Historical site	
Pre-commercial thinning		Recreational site	
Commercial thinning		Buffer zone	
Logging camp		Local community	1
Native reference sites	1	Permanent Monitoring Plot	1

3 ORGANISATION DETAILS

3.1 Organisation specific background information

Ownership and land tenure description (legal and customary)

The land where Talawakelle Tea Estates are operating are being leased by the Government of Sri Lanka following a privatization program which was initiated in 1992. It was formerly established by the British during the colonial period until it was handed over back to the Government. The land are being leased for a period of 99 years.

Legislative and government regulatory context

Forest restoration projects, such as those conducted by Talawakelle Tea Estates, are governed by a comprehensive legislative and institutional framework involving multiple government agencies and regulations. National forestry laws and environmental regulations form the backbone of this framework, ensuring that restoration activities comply with national goals for environmental conservation and biodiversity preservation. Key government bodies include the Forestry Department, responsible for forest resource management and conservation, and the Environmental Protection Agency, overseeing the environmental impact of projects. The Wildlife Conservation Department plays a crucial role in areas where restoration intersects with wildlife habitats, ensuring minimal negative impact on local fauna. Additionally, the Ministry of Agriculture or Plantation Industries may provide guidelines for integrating restoration with agricultural practices. Monitoring and protection are essential components, involving regular assessments of ecosystem health and measures to prevent illegal activities. Successful restoration also requires community involvement and coordination between various government departments, local bodies, and NGOs. Funding and resource allocation by government agencies are vital for project feasibility, complemented by technical expertise from research institutions. Moreover, adherence to international environmental agreements is crucial for countries committed to global conservation goals. This complex interplay of laws, regulations, and multiple stakeholders underscores the holistic approach needed for sustainable and effective forest ecosystem restoration.

Environmental Context

The Talawakelle restoration area in Dessford Estate and the St. Clair restoration project, situated in Sri Lanka's central highlands, represent crucial efforts in environmental conservation and ecosystem restoration. Dessford Estate, likely part of the Talawakelle Tea Estates, is characterized by a humid, subtropical climate and rich biodiversity, including endemic flora and fauna. Historically transformed for tea plantations, this region now faces environmental challenges like soil erosion and biodiversity loss. The restoration efforts here are geared towards re-establishing native plant species, supporting wildlife habitats, and balancing tea production with ecological conservation. In contrast, the St. Clair restoration project, focused on the St. Clair reservoir, is integral to protecting a sensitive ecosystem. This initiative likely involves reforestation with native species, particularly around water bodies, to enhance ecosystem resilience, water quality, and watershed protection. Both projects underscore the importance of community involvement for sustainable management and conservation education. Goals for these initiatives extend beyond ecological balance, encompassing biodiversity enhancement, climate and soil stabilization, and possibly fostering eco-tourism opportunities, thereby integrating environmental conservation with community development and sustainable agricultural practices.

Socioeconomic Context

Talawakelle Tea Estates, situated in the central highlands of Sri Lanka, plays a pivotal role in the socio-economic fabric of the region. As a major employer, the estate provides essential livelihoods through tea cultivation and processing jobs, often employing local residents alongside migrant workers. The communities within and surrounding the estates are typically close-knit, with many families having worked in tea cultivation for generations, encompassing diverse ethnic and cultural groups. Despite providing steady employment, these communities often face economic challenges such as modest wages, job security issues, and basic living conditions. Access to education and healthcare varies, with some larger estates offering schools and medical facilities, although the quality of these services can differ significantly. Housing conditions, traditionally in shared line houses, and infrastructure development, including clean water and sanitation, remain areas of concern.

Women, who form a significant part of the workforce, particularly in tea picking and processing, face unique challenges, balancing work with family responsibilities. Tea estates, including Talawakelle, are increasingly engaging in corporate social responsibility initiatives aimed at community development, encompassing education, healthcare, and environmental conservation. These communities' socio-economic status is intricately linked to the global tea market, with fluctuations in tea prices directly impacting income and job stability. Beyond being mere workplaces, these estates are cultural and social hubs where traditions and practices revolve around the tea industry. With a growing emphasis on sustainable practices, Talawakelle Tea Estates is transitioning towards more environmentally friendly and socially responsible operations, a change that holds potential for improved working conditions and overall community welfare. This socio-economic landscape underscores the complex interplay between the tea industry, local communities, and the broader economic and social dynamics in Sri Lanka.

3.2 General overview of the organisation and scope

Talawakelle Tea Estates PLC (TTE), a key player in Sri Lanka's tea industry, operates under the Hayleys Group and boasts a rich history dating back to the colonial era. The company manages numerous tea plantations in Sri Lanka's central highlands, renowned for producing high-quality Ceylon tea. It produces a variety of teas, including black, green, and specialty teas, and is a significant contributor to Sri Lanka's tea export market. Committed to sustainability, Talawakelle Tea Estates engages in various environmental initiatives focusing on biodiversity conservation, water and soil management, and sustainable agriculture practices. Additionally, it actively pursues innovation and market expansion, continually exploring new tea blends and business avenues, including tea tourism. Moreover, its corporate social responsibility extends to community development, encompassing educational, health, and livelihood programs for plantation workers and their families.

The company's dedication to quality and environmental stewardship is reflected in its various certifications and awards. It boasts an impressive array of certifications and accreditations, underscoring their commitment to quality, environmental management, and food safety standards. These include the Rainforest Alliance Certification, which highlights their dedication to sustainable agriculture and conservation practices. They are also certified under ISO 22000:2005, a testament to their effective food safety management systems. Furthermore, their commitment to quality management is affirmed by the ISO 9001:2015 Certification. Environmental stewardship is a key focus, as evidenced by their ISO 14001:2015 Certification, which pertains to effective environmental management systems. Additionally, the ISO

50001:2018 Certification demonstrates their efficiency and sustainability in energy management. Lastly, their adherence to Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) principles is validated by the HACCP Certification, ensuring food safety and quality in their processes.

The restoration project occurs within the Dessford Estate, situated in the Dimbulla Planting District, which falls under the Talawakelle - Nanuoya Agro-climatic District. Positioned at an elevation of 1,382 meters, the estate spans an impressive 432 hectares. It boasts an annual production of 540,000 kilograms of agricultural output. Specifically, the restoration efforts are focused on a designated area of 25 hectares within this estate. This initiative represents a significant step towards ecological recovery and sustainability in a region known for its rich agricultural heritage and diverse climatic conditions.