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**SRI LANKA**

## SNAPSHOT

Working together for sustainable lagoon management breaks down barriers between previously conflicted groups.



As part of the “Lagoon Rangers” program, Sinhalese and Tamil school students work side-by-side to plant mangrove trees around the lagoon.

*“After these training programs, both our communities became closer. Before the program, it was as if an invisible line was drawn between the two ethnic groups and no one would cross into the other’s area. Now we have been welcomed by the Tamil community to use more wells in their premises.”*

*- M.M. Ganga Kumari, 32,  
Sinhalese fisheries cooperative*

### Telling Our Story

U.S. Agency for International Development  
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<http://stories.usaid.gov>

## Common Resource Unites Groups

**October 2013** – The Kokkilai Lagoon lies on the border between Sri Lanka’s Northern and Eastern provinces. Its shores are home to 448 families, split nearly equally between Sinhalese and Tamils. During the 30-year civil war, many of these families were displaced. When the war ended and they began returning in 2009, misunderstandings between the communities soon arose, often around fishing, the area’s main livelihood. To address rising tensions and promote community reintegration, USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives brought the communities together through the collective development of a lagoon management plan to ensure an equitable distribution of income from the shared natural resource.

In partnership with Rainforest Rescue International, USAID convened the two predominant fisheries cooperatives in the area – one Sinhala and one Tamil – for workshops on business management and organizational governance. USAID then facilitated a lagoon mapping exercise and the shared development of a lagoon management plan. These exercises required unprecedented inter-communal interaction, through which members of both communities grew increasingly comfortable with one another. Meanwhile, USAID also supported a “Lagoon Rangers” program for children in the community to learn about the lagoon ecosystem.

Today, the neighbors move freely throughout the area and share common resources. The Sinhala community, for example, used to travel by boat to the Muslim village on the other side of the lagoon for basic groceries; now, they shop at the Tamil-owned store in Kokkilai. Similarly, the Sinhala and Tamil schools – completely isolated from each other at the beginning of the program – began engaging in sporting events together for the first time following the “Lagoon Rangers” initiative. Most dramatically of all, the members of the two fishing societies recently decided to merge their groups into a single unified body – demonstrating both the depth and durability of this communal transformation.

The impact of this grant only continues to grow. As part of the activity, USAID arranged for leaders of each fisheries cooperative to visit their counterparts in Sri Lanka’s South, with important results, including the establishment of a fisheries cooperative bank. More than ninety families have already joined the bank, and sixteen children have opened special savings accounts. Impressed by the initiative, a national motorboat engine supply company has designated the cooperative its official distributor for the area, enabling it to earn commissions. To support this initiative, USAID provided basic furniture and equipment for the bank, and helped them connect with relevant government authorities.

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