

SRI LANKA LOSES TUSKER RAJA, ITS 'NATIONAL TREASURE'

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Biodiversity, Ecology, and Wildlife Related Issues

Nadungamuwa Raja being escorted by a security personnel. AFPLAKRUWAN WANNIARACHCHI | Photo Credit: LAKRUWAN WANNIARACHCHI

Sri Lanka is mourning the death of a much-loved Indian elephant that made the island nation its home for nearly half a century, and was named a "national treasure" by President Gotabaya Rajapaksa on Monday.

Sixty-nine-year-old Nadungamuwa Rajawas known widely as the towering tusker that carried the casket containing the 'Sacred Tooth Relic' at the 'Perahera' festival or annual pageant in Kandy district. Following his passing on Monday, scores of people, including children and Buddhist priests, bid adieu to Raja, offering prayers at the site where the giant was laid. President Rajapaksa instructed officials to preserve Raja's body "for future generations to witness", his office said in a statement. Raja was handed over to taxidermists for stuffing, following Buddhist funeral rites, news agency AFP reported.

Raja was born in Mysuru in 1954 and belonged to Maharaja Jayachamarajendra Wadiyar. The king gifted him to a Sri Lankan monk physician for treating an illness, according to Dr. Harsha Dharmavijaya, an ayurvedic physician, whose family has been caring for Raja from 1978.

A 2021 feature published in the State-run Daily News said the monk, who received Raja as a gift could not maintain him, and sold him to a timber mill in Horana, south of capital Colombo. Troubled seeing the magnificent elephant — tall and with striking tusks — lifting and transporting logs, Dr. Dharmavijaya's father purchased him.

In addition to his routine diet of coconut palm and an assorted fruit platter every day, Raja loved a jaggery treat every now and then, his mahout Wilson Koddithuwakku had recalled.

Famously, Raja would walk from north Colombo to the central Kandy district, covering some 90 km over seven days, stopping at Buddhist shrines along the way for a quick bath and food.

Scores of Sri Lankans paid tributes to Raja on social media, sharing images of the tusker. Animal rights activists posted messages such as "Finally free from chains" and "may you find freedom and peace", reflecting prevalent concerns over the treatment of elephants in captivity.

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