OFF-SHORE PROSPECTING FOR MINERALS IN SRI LANKA

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The establishment of the National Aquatic Resources Agency in 1981 enabled Sri Lanka to initiate its own programme to explore the vast ocean area coming within its control and jurisdiction, for mineral resources. Starting with virtually non-existent expertise and limited resources Sri Lanka had been able to in a short space of five years, achieve considerable progress in its programme of mapping offshore mineral resources.

Reconnaissance to systematic drilling for reserve calculations made as part of this programme have resulted in the discovery of heavy mineral deposits in the Colombo - Negombo coastal stretch off Kaikawela, Kahawa on the south western coast of Sri Lanka.

A series of surveys carried out on Sri Lanka's first research vessel "Samudra Maru" to investigate the offshore occurence of heavy mineral deposits have resulted in the discovery of an area approximately 15 square km off Beruwala averaging 8.6% heavy minerals containing 200,000 tonnes of Monazite, 900,000 tonnes of Ilmenite, 100,000 tonnes of Zircon and 80,000 tons of rutile.

Exploration work carried out on Sri Lanka's first research vessel "Samudra Maru" has also resulted in the discovery of a deposit of glauconite containing 20 - 30% of the mineral with calculated reserves of 39,000 tonnes on the mid-shelf off Panadura.

Detailed surveys carried out on the western continental shelf of Sri Lanka have shown the occurrence of several large concentrations of calcareous sands. These surveys have indicated the occurrence of over 2 billion tonnes of calcareous sands to a depth of 1 metre below the seafloor. The infereed reserves in some areas where no detailed surveys have been carried out are of the order of 1.2 billion tonnes to depth of 1 meter. The sands are of good quality and contain low silica, alumins and iron and can be utilized for cement, lime and chemical industries. Substantial deposits of marine aggregates (sand and gravel) have been discovered off the north western and south western shelf of the island.

More recently the exploration programme has discovered the formation of marine phosphorites on the north-western coast. Preliminary analysis of samples indicate that the phosphorites are recent in origin and have P_2O_5 contents of 2 - 5%.