

F-06: Ancient irrigation systems of south-eastern Sri Lanka: the Mau Ara and Upper Malala Oya

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The ancient irrigation system of the Mau Ara and Upper Malala Oya were preliminarily surveyed during an environmental impact assessment survey for a modern transbasin diversion irrigation project funded by the Integrated Rural Development Project, Hambantota. Locational and other information was gathered on over 100 ancient irrigation structures (reservoirs and canals). Preliminary results indicate clearly that the ancient systems in the south-east were more complex than previously understood. The "cascades" of small tanks evident on the one-inch sheets may not have functioned as traditionally assumed for downstream re-impounding of water; and may (as reported by D L O Mendis), represent a substantially different irrigation ecosystem. Many of the small and medium tanks were interconnected laterally by contour canals. Transbasin systems, although less common and on smaller scale than in northern Sri Lanka were also operative. Anicut based systems were not evident in the area surveyed and appear to be less prevalent in the south-eastern region in general, probably representing the more intermittent nature of the surface runoff in that region.