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- [Image Gallery](#)
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[Home](#) » » [US banana cultivation continues in National park](#)

US banana cultivation continues in National park

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By Ifham Nizam

Despite the US-based DOLE Company pulling out of the controversial banana cultivation project in the Somawathi National Park, the local company, Let's Grow Pvt. Ltd., is carrying out its activities with the backing of the Army, alleges an organisation known as Environment Conservation Trust (ECT).

Central Environment Authority Chairman Charitha Herath told *The Island* that the project had been stopped but he would send a team from the North Central Province shortly to conduct an inspection.

He said that following the receipt of the inspection report they would decide whether to talk to relevant authorities or institute legal action.

Let's Grow, a subsidiary of the Company, DOLE of the US, which has been carrying out a banana cultivation project utilising 11,600 acres of the Somawathi National Park, last year agreed with the ECT and Environment Foundation Ltd (EFL) to remove their project from the Park site.

Following environmental concerns being exposed, DOLE also requested *Let's Grow* to remove the banana cultivation project from the site.

"The Army has not only allowed the local agents Lets Grow (Pvt) Ltd to trespass on the Park but has also permitted them to clear a vast area of land for cultivation," he said.

Refuting the army's claim that the land belonged not to the Somawathiya National Park, but to the National Live Stock Development Board (NLDB), Chamakara challenged the Defence Ministry to allow the Wildlife Conservation Department (WLCD) to carry out a survey and find the truth. He said: "This land belonged to the NLDB before the Mahaweli project. However, with the accelerated Mahaweli project it was declared Mahaweli development areas under the purview of the Mahaweli Authority. Later, it was given away to the Wildlife Conservation Department and then to the Somawathiya National Park."

The 93,662-acre National Park and the adjoining NLDB lands were home to more than 500 elephants, he said, adding that the park had first been declared a sanctuary through Gazette notification No: 147/12 of September 9, 1966, under the Fauna and Flora Ordinance and later declared a National Park in 1986 by Gazette notification No: 417/5 of September 2, 1986.