

How does Eco-Tourism Contribute to the Island Country Tourism Industry's Sustainability

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Abstract: The purpose of this research is the exploration of ecotourism and how this will help enhance sustainability in the tourism sector in Sri Lanka. This comes as a result of the diversity of ecosystems and biodiversity in the country and therefore ecotourism has the chance of offering ground breaking combination of tourism development and conservation. The study explores the role played by ecotourism in economic development, conservation of the environment and the communities' welfare as well as the problems encountered in the sector. Secondary research was conducted with information collected from secondary sources such as Reports and publications from Sri Lankan Ministry of Tourism, other international organizations and publications existing academic research studies. This research study aims at discovering that ecotourism has assumed a central role as a component of sustainable tourism. As such, it strengthens the opportunity to develop a closer link between tourists and nature to appreciate the need for conservation of the species' diversity. Nonetheless, hurdles like climate change, infrastructural deficits, and emergent need for enhanced legal frameworks may still trail ecotourism program, and offset the long-pitched architecture for sustainability. Implications of the barriers found in the study suggest government, local communities and tourism operators need to work together to minimize the barriers in order to fully harness the potential of ecotourism. The conclusion of this research is that planning and balanced policies are important to the development of Sri Lankan ecotourism in the context of the country's overall tourism industry.

Keywords: *Eco-Tourism; Sustainable Tourism; Community Engagement.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Sustainable tourism as a sub-product deals with tourism that involves the conservation of the natural environment for use by the people. Rich in bio-diversity, beautiful beaches and ancient culture Sri Lanka is a country that can provide maximum opportunities for the development of eco-tourism. This approach is consistent with the general trend of sustainable tourism in the world and is also in line with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations, especially the goals related with environment protection and eradication of poverty (Fernando et al., 2016). Sri Lanka eco tourism is a vital part of the country's productive balance as it support the tourist industry sustainability while respecting the environments. Tours like the National park, Wild life sanctuary, Marine parks, and other standard tourist features that give the aspect of the natural environment in the island with strong promotion of conscience in the preservation of sounds environment. For instance, Yala National Park and Sinharaja Forest Reserve are some of the major sites of ecological tourism, which embark world tourists towards protective efforts to nature. In the view of De zoysa (2022), eco-tourism activities

developed in these areas are also promoting the enrichment of biodiversity as well as raising funds for ensuring the continued existence of the relevant conservation program.

Also, the activities to be undertaken during eco-tourism also has the positive impacts on the society by availing employment and promoting the local goods and services. Trials including the community-based eco-lodges and guided wild life trips make sure there are appropriate revenues going to the rural economy thereby tackling the issue of revenue disparity (Sriyani, 2022). Such practices bring social justice as well as support the local communities and help them develop sustainable utilization of resources. Instead of just responding to climate change tourism also minimizes the negative impact of it through eco-tourism. Biking tours, an environmentally sensitive place to stay, and promoting the use of renewable energy systems in tourism related infrastructures demonstrate sustainable measures. Sugathapala (n.d) has discussed that many eco-tourism locations in Sri Lanka give preference to the certification which supports the country's image as an environmental friendly tourism zone.

Therefore, this present study establishes that eco-tourism is essential as a tool for sustaining economic benefits, preserving the environment, and fostering the improvement of the society in Sri Lanka. While implementing the eco-tourism features the nation and especially the hotels go on enhancing their competitive advantage of the country as sustainable tourism destination which also complies with the international level of sustainability.

Even though the concept of eco-tourism has been recognized as a viable development model for the global tourism sector the applicability of the model has its challenges in Sri Lanka. Even though the country has several unique natural and cultural tourism attractions such as diverse ecosystems and UNSECO world heritage sites, eco-tourism is still not fully exploited. Inadequate human capital, inadequate involvement of this sector in policy and legislation, and lack of capacities for regulation thus limit the potentialities of tourism to support effective environmental conservation efforts and economic progress (Fernando et al., 2016).

Among them there is still the defining conflict between the job-creation value of tourism and the negative externalities engendered by its growth. This is contrary to the principals of eco-tourism because mass tourism practices negatively impact on the environment by contributing to habitat loss, depletion of resources, and augmented emission of carbon. For instance, Sugathapala (n.d) posit that most tour operating businesses in Sri Lanka have fallen into the vice of earning quick money at the expense of conservation. Another issue relate to is lack of adequate participation of local communities in eco-tourism related activities. According to Sriyani (2022), most communitarian eco-tourism developments receive insufficient training, facilities, and marketing, thus preventing a positive financial contribution. In addition, there is lack of a consistent policy approach to the promotion of eco-tourism at the national level and this worsens the challenges above.

Therefore, this research aims to examine the best way in which eco-tourism can be developed to improve sustainability in the Sri Lankan tourism industry through examining these improper management, the non-participation of the communities, and the ineffective policies.

➤ *The Following Objectives Guide this Study.*

- To identify the contribution of ecotourism for tourism industry sustainability in Sri Lanka.
- To identify the community involvement in ecotourism in Sri Lanka.
- To identify the challenges and benefits of ecotourism in Sri Lanka.

This research stands important because it seeks to respond to the following research question which goes along the line of recognizing and establishing the importance of

eco-tourism in enhancing the sustainable development of the tourism industry within Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka has rich and varied topography and traditions that qualify it as the first choice for eco-tourism; yet, it lacks the necessary protection for potential investors and minimal active participation from the local inhabitants. Thus, analysing the possibilities for improving the practices associated with eco-tourism, this research advances discussions on sustainable development of the tourism sector. The results will give a clearer understanding of the relationship between economic development and environmental protection and will present effective ways to minimize the untoward effects of unmannerly tourism. Furthermore, the study promotes community-based eco-tourism, the importance of necessary economic development as well as distributive equity for the rural people. To encourage the right practices among tourists, government, tourism agencies, non-governmental organizations and other stakeholders need to adopt some main recommendations that the research noted below for the sustainable development of the tourism industry. In conclusion, the study provides evidence that Sri Lanka is on the right track with the development of its tourism sector promoting it as a sustainable destination with environmental and cultural values intact.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Eco-tourism has therefore evolved as an innovative form of tourism which usher sustainable tourism by conserving the natural and cultural resource without compromising the needs of the people. To Sri Lanka, with its diverse bio-diversity, historic sites, and unspoiled natural beauty, eco-tourism offers a chance to catch up with other countries while preserving the environment.

➤ *Environmental Impact of Eco-Tourism*

Eco-tourism have be greatly lauded for corridors on providing a means through which the exploitation and utilization of the natural resources can be done without harming the environment. Eco-tourism has emerged as a possible solution in view of protecting Sri Lanka's bio-diversity as well as promoting the country's tourist industry. For instance the Sinharaja Forest Reserve, Horton Plains National Park, and Yala National Park are areas where eco-tourism facilitates conservation. These effort cannot be over emphasized as revealing the potential of eco-tourism as a tool for restoring depleted ecosystems and conserving threatened species. Zoysa (2022) established that practices in t eco-tourism in protected zones have brought improvement in re-afforestation and wildlife conservation. For example, regulated eco-tourism in Sinharaja Forest Reserve world heritage site, the country's biggest bio-sphere has helped controlled deforestation to aid in the recovery of endemic species of plants and animals. Similarly to it, Fernando et al. (2016) underlined that eco-tourism has become the major key to preserving wildlife in Yala Nationa Park since the received incomes are used for increasing anti-poaching efforts as well as for launching restoration programs. However, the same study also revealed some issues such as increased traffic density around the natural habitats of animals which may in

turn cause stress and habitat loss due to overcrowding especially during the peak tourism seasons.

The role of compliance evaluations in sustainable eco-tourism practices was also highlighted by Perera et al. (2023) and how they suggested the quantity restrictions of carrying capacity in the significant eco-tourism areas. For instance, the Horton Plains National Park now has restrictions on the number of visitors allowed into the park and the implementation of green policies of the park. Eco-certification programmes were also discussed as the best ways of encouraging responsible tourism. They are instrumental in policing the adjust activities of tour operators and accommodations to use environmental friendly products that help conserve the environment. Eco-tourism has been among the strategies that have been named viable goals of community conservation programs in the society. In the study conducted by Sriyani, (2022), they affirmed that inclusion of the local community will enhance ownership and responsibility. For example the eco-tourism projects Want for example the Eco tourism projects in the remote rural areas of Sri Lanka like the Knuckles Mountain range where the local people are involved in tree planting and in maintaining nature trails with minimal impact on the environment. In addition to preserving fauna and flora, many of these initiatives support the diversification of the local population's income streams and act as free natural resources, thereby preventing pressure on the territory for logging and agricultural purposes.

However, there are still many challenges that must be overcome when it comes to the times when the tourists and the stakeholders will be willing to embrace and encourage sustainability. Analysis made by Sharmini et al. (2022) showed that it is due to the lack of knowledge many traveler contaminate the environment or interfere with the animals' undisturbed life cycle. The authors recommended that awareness and educational activities should be directed at specific tourists such as providing and participating in ecotourism workshops, installing signs labeling environmentally friendly behaviors, and using social networks to promote responsible behavior of travelers. Moreover, Pathmasiri (2024) confirmed the convention that in capacity-building programmes recruiting the operators of tourism and local guides should be trained for sustainable eco-tourism. Another problem in relation to environmental goals of eco-tourism is climate change. Higher temperatures, altered rainfall regime, and successive flooding endanger wildlife countries for example coastal mangroves and forests for ecological tourism. Changes for example in the natural environment therefore require the consideration of measures that would strengthen the eco-tourism exercises for sustainability in the ecological systems.

➤ *Economic Contributions of Eco-Tourism*

The importance of eco-tourism as a way to support local economic development, especially in agricultural regions or for disadvantaged populations is becoming more obvious. As tourism is one of Sri Lanka's most important sources of income, eco-tourism has become a viable solution to mass tourism. Through a combination of conservation and community development, eco-tourism is an economic activity

which seeks to sustain natural resources exploitation. The economic effect of eco-tourism is another interesting aspect, for instance, the community-based projects successfully launched in Dambana, where Veddha, the indigenous people of Sri Lanka, live. Such programs offer jobs to people in these areas and demonstrate their traditions to tourists, serving as guides, host, or artists. According to Pathmasiri (2024), it also makes them financially produce through direct selling of local souvenirs, local fashion accessories, and organic foods among others. They not only enhance incomes of a host of the households, but also bring out the cultural aspects of these cultures which attract most Eco tourist. Furthermore, the models of community-based eco-tourism play the role of decreasing regional economic disparities as the funds are spent in remotely located, poorly developed centers that are not popular with conventional tourist offering, unlike beach tourism.

Pathmasiri (2024) revealed that eco-tourism targets quality clients who are willing to spend a lot of their money to experience green tourism in lieu of packaged tourist attractions. It also provides foreign exchange earnings which is an important source of income for the country Sri Lanka. Specialty lodges include those in Yala and Knuckles, of which are gentle marketing themselves towards the high end clients, who are willing and able to pay to enjoy eco-tourism products like wildlife viewership, forest trilling and cultural expeditions among others. These visitors also are willing to spend more on the environmental friendly accommodation, local artefacts and organically grown foods which is an extra source of income for those business people. However, few challenges surround difficulties in distribution of the proceeds accrued from eco-tourism ventures in Sri Lanka. The authors Kularatne et al. (2018) supported the argument that there is a significant problem that while the profits generated by eco-tourism are impressive the positives do not reach the base level. While allowing the creation of employment opportunities and incomes for locals, it is clear the tour operators and other large-scale businesses earn the most or, in some cases, capture the most benefits. Such imbalance diminishes the ability of eco-tourism to act as equal economic opportunity besides catering for the need of the oppressed groups. This is an area that researchers have recommended the use of profit-sharing tools that should ensure a reasonable proportion of the revenues go to the locals. For example, arrangements such as revenue sharing between the Tour Operators and community cooperatives for receiving revenue that is proved to be informative in the equitable distribution of incomes.

Furthermore, it has the potential to cause wider development of the related economy, as such it creates demand for development of infrastructure and services. Eco-tourism is in most cases, calls for infrastructural development like roads, transport, and communication in the regions hence helping the common good. As pointed out by Fernando and others (2016), these infrastructures go far beyond the Direct selling of tourism, though they also enhance the accessibility to market, education, and Health information to the local people as well. Furthermore, through eco-tourism, SME businesses like accommodations, local cuisine, and crafts are

promoted benefiting the local economy in specific rural areas. However, for the achievement of sustainable economic returns from eco-tourism, some form of planning and governance must be put in place. De Silva et al. (2020) stressed that there is a need to achieve two goals, which are sustainable economic growth and protection of the environment. For example, excessive commodification of eco-tourism sites may contaminate these locations making them unfit for habitation and thus lower any future economic value of the area. In order to manage these risks there has been a call by researchers for policies that support community participation, environmental awareness, and other capacity development initiatives. These measures help prepare local population to properly run eco-tourism businesses and at the same time, achieve high returns.

➤ *Socio - Cultural Impacts of Eco-Tourism*

However, few challenges surround difficulties in distribution of the proceeds accrued from eco-tourism ventures in Sri Lanka. Similarly, Kularatne et al. (2018) pointed that there is hardly benefits of financial kind that are derived from eco-tourism which can be channeled to the lower levels of society. While allowing the creation of employment opportunities and incomes for locals, it is clear the tour operators and other large-scale businesses earn the most or, in some cases, capture the most benefits. This inequity is a barrier to utilization of eco-tourism as a sustainable source of income for the vulnerable groups of people. This is an area that researchers have recommended the use of profit-sharing tools that should ensure a reasonable proportion of the revenues go to the locals. For example, arrangements such as revenue sharing between the Tour Operators and community cooperatives for receiving revenue that is proved to be informative in the equitable distribution of incomes.

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Another issue is that empowered structures where there is poor balance of power are likely to be tilted in favour of external organizations like tour operators and developers in the formulation and execution of eco-tourism projects. Jayasekara et al. (2024) opined that if local communities are excluded in the decision making process then there may be a loss of socio cultural benefits with regards to eco-tourism. People might lose ownership over their cultural heritage, and what is more, such assets may be turned into a profitable business. In order to allude this problem, researchers have resorted popular and community-based planning which has the support of the community. Such strategies help in ensuring that all tourism activities that may be earmarked, respect the general community feel as well as the long term vision of sustainable development. The role of eco-tourism in the promotion of the socio-cultural rights also include the promotion of power of women and youths. Sriyani (2022) observed that eco-tourism allows women engage in other business ventures such as running guest houses, crafting souvenirs, and behaving as tour guides. It helps in reducing gender disparity and social exclusion among human beings. Likewise, young people's participation in projects such as the eco-tourism venture help in skills acquisition and awareness on cultural and natural resource preservation. Thus, in order to fully achieve the socio-cultural returns to eco-tourism, several recommendations regarding cultural sensitivity, policy and practices must be undertaken. For example, Wijesundara and Fernando (2019) paid much attention to the need for formulating policies on regulating tourism operations at cultural asset destinations. Such guidelines should comprise of; limiting the number of people that are allowed to access the locations, protection of sacred areas as well as ensuring that those in the vicinity conduct interpretative activities. Furthermore, eco-tourism programs should have a focus on informative functions which help tourists to become conscious to cultural values and appropriate behavior.

III. METHODOLOGY

Data collection of the research mainly uses secondary data collection techniques using resources like e-books, e-journals and other literature. Secondary data was obtained from sources that could be easily found on the internet since it was free for public use. This was done because of covid -19 restrictions because direct access to participants and physical records were not possible. Out of all the approach methods, a case study approach was chosen as this affords a comprehensive analysis of a subject industry, namely Sri Lankan tourism. This method is particularly appropriate in the study of everyday phenomena in a given context and may involve analysis of one or many cases to be as exhaustive as needed. The secondary data adopted in this study were Reports & publications in the Ministry of Tourism of Sri Lanka, World Travel Organization statistical data, electronic media reports and relevant and academic journal articles. These data sources made the analysis richer by compiling opinions and accurate information from different sources.

The use of case study has the following advantages. It also makes it easy to gather immense and detailed qualitative and quantitative information that helps the researchers to ask how or why questions on the selected research problem. In addition, the method also allows for studying of phenomena in conditions that are close to real-life which makes the method very suitable in the study of tourism phenomena. This analysis shows that, while this methodology is useful, it also has some limitations. They do not have a measure over the situation as they would like to have in laboratory like experiments. Also, there the problem of overwhelming amount of secondary data wherein it becomes difficult to find important data that would add value. Another limitation is the possibility of bias when making selection of data and or its interpretation by the researcher.

IV. FINDINGS

➤ *The Contribution of Ecotourism for Tourism Industry Sustainability in Sri Lanka.*

Ecotourism offers a central role within the advancement of carrying out economic activities for economic improvement while cherishing the environment at the same time benefiting the interested communities. Concerning sustainable ecotourism in Sri Lanka, prior research has focused primarily on the island's capacity to achieve both conservation and socioeconomic development goals simultaneously. De Zoysa (2022) noted that through offset programme launched in Sri Lanka ecotourism projects seek to protect species and habitats, and by shifting the emphasis of the population from over exploiting wildlife for financial gains to producing income generation activities in ecologically sustainable sectors. Natural reserves such as the Sinharaja Forest Reserve can be identified as main ecotourism sites through environmental awareness, conservation and revenue mobilization. Nevertheless, there is conflict every time the development objectives seem to negate conservation objectives, and therefore policy options to solve these conflicts.

The three aspects of environmental knowledge, motives and behaviour have been seen as being especially important for ecological tourism. According to Jayasekara, Rajapaksa, and Gunawardena (2024), tourists, who have higher environmental concern, and ethic interest, favor pro sustainability ecotourism activities. This type of behaviour promotes actions such as habitat restoration, that in due course improve the structure and function of ecosystems. Due to these findings, awareness needs to be created to the

tourists and the stakeholders in the areas of environment to increase the sustainability of the ecotourism activities. Ecotourism as a development factor is now considered critical in the Southern Province. Gedara (2024) notes that ecotourism undertaken here generates revenues to community people and at the same time, protects cultural and natural resources. Sustainability also enters into community living through promotion of traditional crafts and locally produced organic foods. But the study also underlines the calls for sound structural regulation of resource demand and revenue sharing to avoid over-exploitation of resources and unfair distribution of revenues.

Competing objectives for conservation and development are another major issue. Dushani, Aanesen, and Vondolia (2021) are right to highlight this in their study examining the management of coastal wetlands in Sri Lanka. Their work used choice experiments to assess tourists' and hosts' preferences and conclusively showed that efficient ecotourism can achieve these conflicting objectives satisfactorily. The study reveals that local communities should form an integral part of the process of determining conservation and sustainable use strategies in order to ensure that objectives of conservation are achieving in parallel with other socio-economic considerations. A major lesson from the Perera (2022) is that community participation is essential in the maintenance of ecotourism businesses. According to the survey, communities consider ecotourism to be favorable in the following sectors; employment generation, enhance standards of living. However, the study also showed signs suggesting that absence of good governance structures and infrastructure investment could slow down the sustainability of ecotourism.

The figure 1 shows the total visitors of conserved forests and eco-parks found in Sri Lanka. Among the four sites, the Knuckles Conservation Forest receive the most number of visitors (141,205) while Hurulu Eco Park received 111,203 visitors and Sinharaja Conservation Forest received 57,385 visitors. On the other hand, Yahangala site recorded the least number of visitors with 84 and Galwila Eco Park site also recorded the least with 162 visitors. The rate of visitation displayed in the graph shows that while the most frequented forests attain tens of thousands of visitors some forests get less than 1000 visitors. This variation means that the facilities available at each site may not be accessible to everyone; some sites may be frequented by more people than others. It also advocated that there is a need to encourage balanced growth of the sector in terms of promotion.

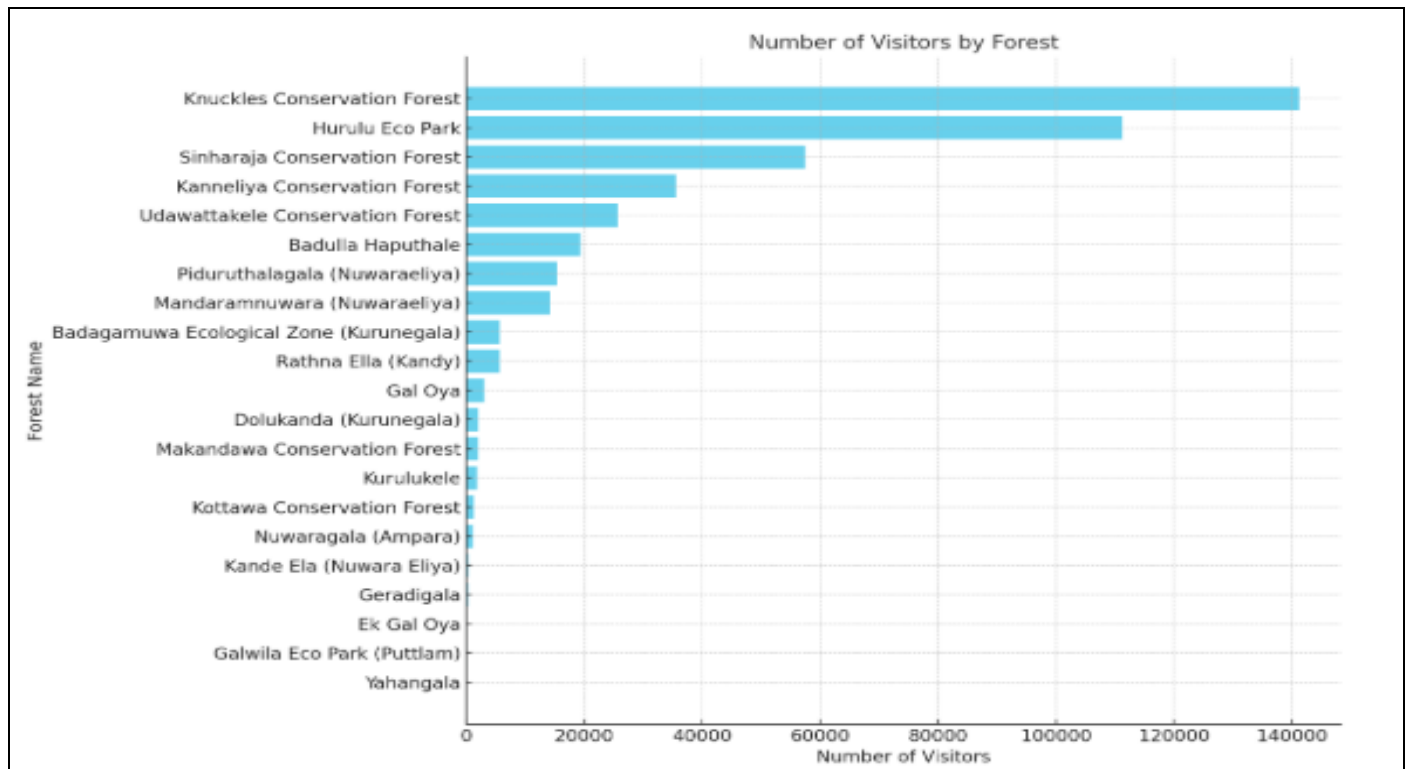


Fig 1 Number of Visitors by Forest
Source: Department of Wildlife Conservation

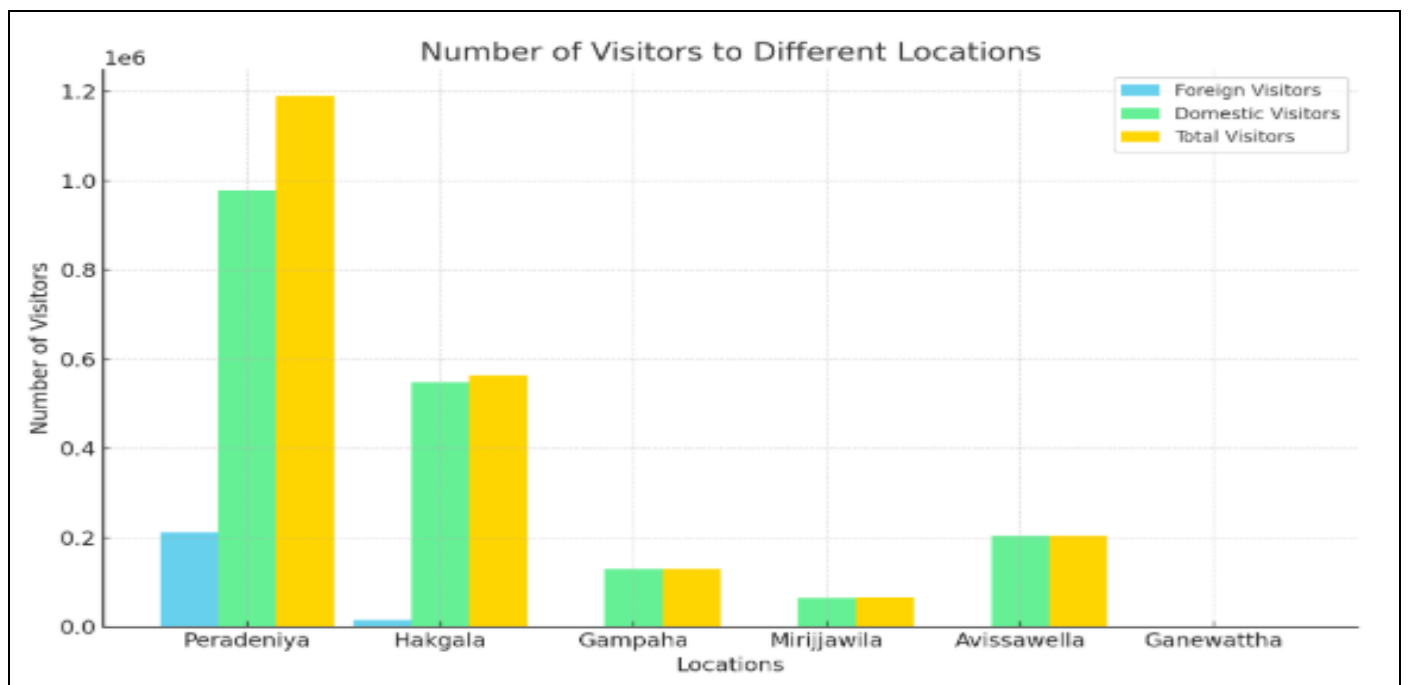


Fig 2 Number of Visitors to Botanical Gardens in Sri Lanka
Source: Department of National Botanical Garden

The graph depicts the number of visitors (foreign, domestic, and total) across six locations in Sri Lanka: Among them are; Peradeniya, Hakgala, Gampaha, Mirijjawila, Avissawella- and Ganewattha. By categories, Ganewattha had the least number of visitors encompassing both the domestic and international tourists followed by Sorathota and Ratmalane in that order, whereas Peradeniya had the highest amount of domestic tourists out of all three gardens. Local

interest outstripped tourism interest from foreigners in all the areas and this is a clear indicator that more people from within the country are interested in these places. That being said, compared to Peradeniya, Hakgala and Mirijjawila also witnessed a good traffic of domestic visitors. The number of foreign visitors was still limited, with Peradeniya on top of this aspect. In general, the graph reveals the importance of domestic tourism within these areas.

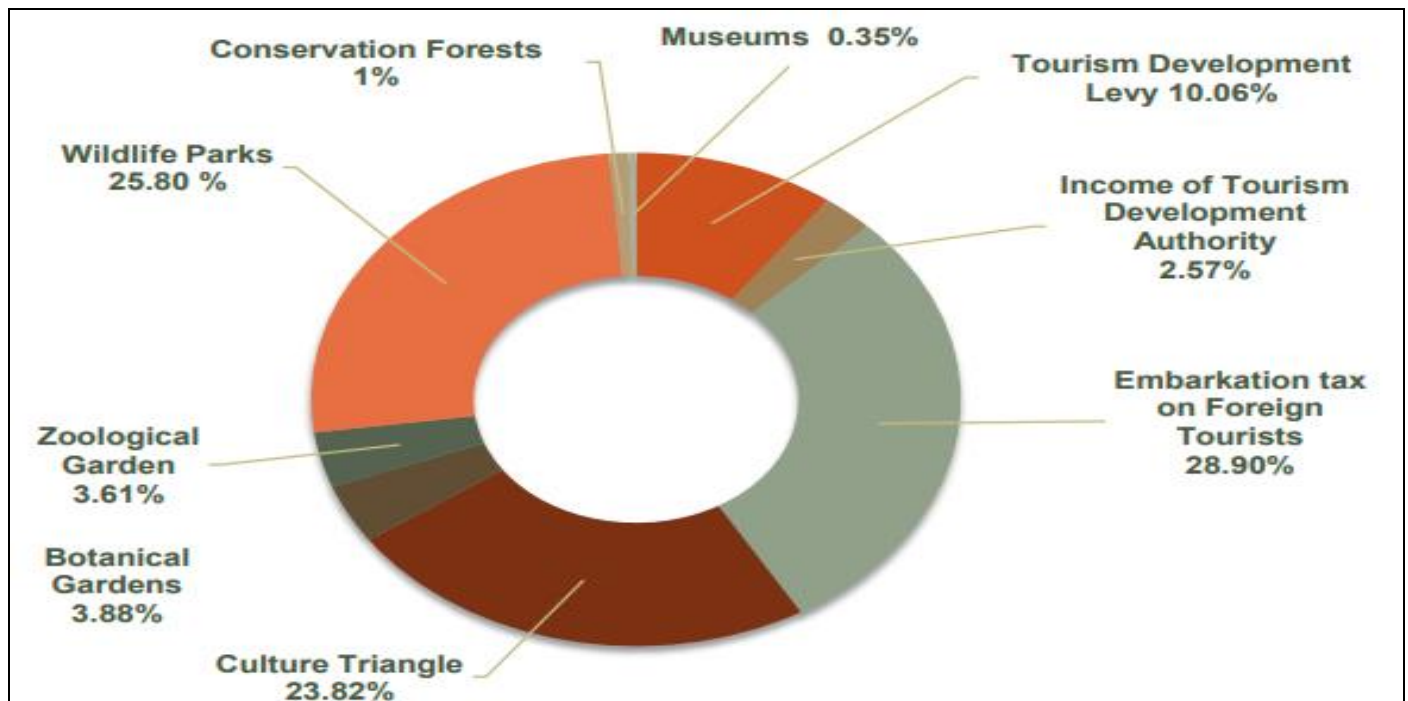


Fig 3 Distribution of Public Sector Revenue from Tourism (Percentage) -2023

Source: Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority

Through taxes, royalties, fees, levies, and surpluses from business ventures, institutions of the public sector themselves earn their revenues through tourism. However, the detailed information concerning the revenue collections is available from few sources like Tourism Development Levy, Embarkation Tax income earned through Sri Lanka. The income consists of hotel turn over taxes with registered the Tourism Development Authority, entrance fees to Cultural Triangle sites, Wildlife Parks Conservation Forests Museums Zoological Garden and Botanical Garden.

According to the accounts of the listed sources in 2023, there was a significant increase in the revenue collection to Rs. 14,649.40 million from that of Rs. 8,018.60 million in the year before. This is a growth of 82%. The results highlight the fact that the public sector largely earns its income from tourism, the Embarkation Tax being Rs. 4,234.30 million and Wildlife Parks Rs. 3,779.50 million. These two sources constitute more than fifty five percent of the total tourism income. Other important source of income includes Cultural Triangle, Botanical Garden and Zoological Garden etc. These sectors are not only important in generating revenue, but they also have many roles in the economy by providing employment opportunities and income sources, which underlines the importance of the connection between tourism and economic security in the country. Besides the above head of direct taxes, the government also generates huge income from indirect taxes such as taxes from power, water, post, telecommunication and lease rentals. Therefore, ecotourism and sustainability seem to have a complex position in the economic as well as environmental and community context in Sri Lanka. Though the evidence shows that ecotourism works positively for the conservation of biotic resources as well as benefits offered to the communities, the existing problems are still present, including resource over-

exploitation, unfair distribution of benefits, and ineffective governance. Eradicating these problems through policy intervention, raising community awareness, and environmental enlightenment is crucial in harnessing the potential of ecotourism as a development initially in Sri Lanka.

➤ *The Community Involvement in Ecotourism in Sri Lanka*

The engagement of community support is crucial in the viability for ecotourism prospects in Sri Lanka. It makes local people get something from the ecotourism which makes them own the resources and other cultural and natural ones that are in their area. Also, Sharmini and Bandusena (2020) discussed how ecotourism contributes to the welfare of households in Ella, an eco-tourism centre. The generated study also indicated that the ecotourism related chores such as running guest houses, guiding and selling local artefact have boosted up the incomes of the targeted households. In addition to boosting economic returns, such participation activates on one side of the spectrum motivates communities to conserve on the other. According to the publication made by De Zoysa (2022), equal focus in the development of ecotourism in Sri Lanka has been dedicated to the participation of local communities in the activities to conserve their surrounding's bio-diversity. Incorporation of local people is commonly achieved through employment as trackers and eco-guides in ecotourism activities in protected places like the national parks. De Zoysa also observed that conflicts come with restricted community involvement or when ecotourism returns are skewed in such a way that the rest of the populace will not support conservation efforts.

In the Southern province the communal ecotourism models are promising. In Gedara (2024), he has described such efforts made in creating employment and also nurturing

indigenous culture. For example, facilities that include local chefs and traditional products are predisposing the community for economic opportunities while marketing culture. Gedara has emphasized on the need to integrate training programs designed to upgrade the skills of local participants as a way of delivering better needs for services as well as fortify the sustainability of ecotourism firms. Global insight in the promotion of ecotourism also embrace importance of engaging the local community in the process. Khaledi Koure et al. (2023) stressed that it multiplies ownership with regard to natural and cultural processes hence preserving these resources for the next generations. The authors stated that overcoming the obstacles like resource depletion and cultural erosion call for the improvement of additional aspirational elements such as stakeholder engagement in decisions and fair distribution of benefits and efforts to build the capacity of the locals. These strategies are consistent with objectives of Sri Lanka's ecotourism and emphasize the global significance of the community participation in the tourism process.

In the Northern Province, Aloysius et al. (2022) assessed unexplored ecotourism opportunity and stakeholders and their importance for realizing this occurrence. In their study, they found out that community participation could be used in the construction of ecotourism facilities where little attention has been paid to natural and cultural resources in the community. But the problem is that community involvement still has poorly developed awareness and institutional backing in this area. Therefore, the involvement of locals in ecotourism in Sri Lanka plays a central role in promoting the success of the model. Economic and social well-being is provided, cultural and heritage production is encouraged and support of sustainable use of natural resources is observed. Nevertheless, challenges like, unfair sharing and distribution of revenues generated, inadequate training, lack of substantial support from institutions should be effectively, addressed if ecotourism is to reap both social and economic benefits as well as help in meeting conservation objectives.. Subsequent studies should focus on identifying communally appropriate practices, enhancing the capacity of relevant institutions and organizations and developing more people-centered governance approaches to further consolidate and solidify ecotourism in Sri Lanka.

➤ *The Challenges and Benefits of Ecotourism in Sri Lanka*

Sri Lanka's ecotourism opportunities and barriers can be considered being largely both a strength and a weakness for the country as they have unfolded in terms of their influence on conservation, socio-economic development, and livelihood. There is one apparent advantage which is the possibilities to preserve the bio-diversity. In supporting natural ecosystems, ecotourism plays a crucial role in the conservation of Sri Lanka's unique wildlife distribution; including the Sinharaja Rainforest and Knuckles Mountain Range (Perera et al., 2023). Further, it is a key support of community-based travel, which ensure local inhabitants get new income generating and employment chances which in turn boost the countryside economy (Aloysius et al., 2020). For instance Jaffna ecotourism programmes implemented through communities have served as the examples of

successful sustainable economic development. But there are still some constraints which hamper the development of ecotourism in Sri Lanka. The greatest threat is Climate change that affects landscapes and decreases the interest in tourism. Salpage et al. (2020) explain this through a case study of Rekawa coastal wetland, in which Aluthgamage et al. (2015) noted that an increased frequency of natural disasters including storm surges and frequent fluctuations of sea levels and weather systems had discouraged tourists. Transportation problems and accommodation where for instance many landlords of accommodation facilities are reluctant to develop structures in remote areas due to lack of infrastructure hinders the expansion of ecotourism as it is not very popular among international tourists (Sumanapala & Wolf, 2020). However, absence of coherent policies and legal guidelines most of the time results into recklessness that is damaging to the stated objectives of the sustenance of wildlife species. For instance, excessive traveling and any other unauthorized activities in specific areas have pushed some of the habitats and interfere with the wildlife.

The COVID-19 pandemic even exposed the frailties that exist in the Sri Lankan ecotourism industry. Several countries lost significant income and Encounters such as travel restriction and reduced international arrival was detrimental to the several communities that rely on ecotourism. However, there is a hope for developing the new sustainable ecotourism strategies after the pandemic in accordance with the effective planning and managing. The company needs to adopt sustainable development practices, improve its promotion and sales strategies and engage the public to guarantee lasting success. Thus, this study confirms the boon of launching clever ecotourism in Sri Lanka to support the preservation of species and the improvement of the local population's quality of life, but it also acknowledges the boon of facing limitations caused by environmental, structural, and legal inequalities. Tackling of these problems through effective policies, engagements of communities, and climate smart plans are crucial if ecotourism is to be developed to an effective economic stream. According to Sumanapala and Wolf (2020), it is essential to note that the continued mix of the best practices internationally, with local scenario solutions, continues to be a way forward for ecotourism in Sri Lanka.

V. DISCUSSION

Eco-tourism mainly brings out the ultimate over-arching factor for sustaining the Sri Lanka tourism industry since it brings out the economic, environmental and social benefits, all of which respond to some of the key issues in the tourism industry. As from our research we have discovered that through ecotourism activities environmental conservation is given credence through the protection of biological diversities areas in Sri Lanka such as Sinharaja Rain Forest and Knuckles Mountain ranges. They are designated for ecotourism activities hence they act as paradigm examples of sustainable tourism where tourism activities are held in consideration with the conservation of the ecosystem. Since ecotourism directs its financial capital towards conservation measures it benefits the environment from further

deterioration through pollution. In this regard, ecotourism is a valuable diversification to Sri Lanka's tourism sector because it targets selective tourism segments interested in nature and wildlife products. This study reveals that revenue generation for the ecotourism sites results from both domestic and international tourists. For instance, the Sinharaja Conservation Forest and Knuckles Conservation Forest which provide many travelers annually boost income greatly. It is also important to notice that mentioned financial benefits contribute to both, conservation and the development of the local community. As an activity based on the development of tourism projects, ecotourism helps employ local citizens and support community-run enterprises that mitigate poverty and improve quality of life.

In an organizational perspective, ecotourism makes tourists and residents of Sri Lanka aware of and value their countries' cultural and physical endowment. Sustainable development of ecotourism projects like Jaffna and Rekawa involves the belief in a fair share of credits right from the local community. Nevertheless, climatic bends, dismal infrastructure, and unfriendly policies cause obstacles to optimal achievement of ecotourism benefits. Only by strengthening the frames of reference in these cases, and engaging more people in communities, social problems can be solved. In conclusion, ecotourism is a critical component of Sri Lanka's tourism industry as it incorporates environmental conservation, economic development, and social justice principles. Thus, Sri Lanka must implement respective tactics that will help to challenge the impacts and rely on the development of ecotourism as one of the pillars of the sustainable tourism sector.

VI. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Ecotourism reveals itself as an ideal method of positively changing sustainability practices for tourism in Sri Lanka. The conclusions drawn in this study underscore the multifaceted benefits that ecotourism brings to the economic upliftment, protection of environment and social justice. As opposed to alternative typical models of tourism like beach or cultural tourism, ecotourism benefits Sri Lanka by promising the protection of bio diverse areas including Sinharaja Rain forest and Knuckles Mountain Range for the long term development of tourism sector. At the same time, ecotourism financial returns created through its activities also benefit conservation and local peoples' lives, thereby proving that ecotourism serves an economically and environmentally positive role. The study emphasizes that ecotourism enlarges not only the diversification of tourism business by inviting tourists, who are conscious about the environment, but also contributes to the enshrinement of stable earning avenues. Considering the sampled community based tourism development projects, particularly those at the rural level, the social and economic benefits of empowering the lower strata of the relevant community cannot be overstated. Moreover, they opine that ecotourism works actively for creating consciousness in people about the need for conserving Sri Lankan ecological and cultural attraction with the feeling of ownership among the people of Sri Lanka as well as visitors.

However, there are some constraints that affect ecotourism, these include; climate change, poor infrastructure and lastly there is need to have better policies in place. Removing these barriers is important of reaching the full potential of ecotourism. It is suggested that key challenges which interfere with those objectives may be addressed and alleviated by strategic infrastructural investments, community training, and enhancement of sustainable tourism policies. These implications underscore the importance of the coming together of policy makers, tourism industry and the society to ensure that ecotourism in Sri Lanka integrates in the overall sustainable development agenda. If integrated, ecotourism can represent an excellent example about the way to increase an economy's allure, and the steadiness of its natural resources, while being inclusive of the host population's welfare. Given Sri Lanka's social-cultural push to establish the country as a world-class ecotourism market, it is imperative that the country and the industry will always have to progress through innovation and adaptation so that it can yield sustainable benefits for the Tourist Industry.

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