

## **103 Challenges and potentials of sustainable ecotourism management and conservation: A case study of Kanneliya rainforest in Sri Lanka**

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Tourism has become a major income source in the Sri Lankan economy. During 1980s, beach tourism was a prominent industry in Sri Lanka. This trend has been changed over time and according to the new world trends. At present, tourism has various sub-divisions such as ecotourism, agro-tourism, adventure tourism and heritage tourism (Fernando & Meedeniya, 2009; SLTDA, 2015). Out of these, ecotourism can be identified as the most popular and fastest growing sub-division of the tourism industry (Donohoe & Needham, 2006; Page & Dowling, 2001; Fennell, 2003).

Ecotourism, according to Fenell (2001) is 'traveling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these areas.' Fennell (2001) identifies five of the most frequently cited variables within ecotourism: (1) reference to where ecotourism occurs (natural areas); (2) conservation; (3) reference to culture; (4) benefits to locals; and (5) education. The practice of ecotourism has generated interest of many stakeholders as it attempts to satisfy contrasting conservation and tourism development needs (Donohoe & Needham, 2006). For Das & Chatterjee (2015), proper management of the ecotourism sites at each of economic, social and environmental could help in the long-term conservation.

The increasing popularity of ecotourism industry, on the other hand, has developed risks to the natural environment upon which it depends, to the environmental ethics upon which it has been conceptualized and to the legitimacy of the ecotourism industry itself (Boo, 1990; Adams, 2009). Certification of ecotourism faces accusations of greenwashing (Haaland & Aas, 2010). Due to lack of proper management of protected areas and environmental consciousness among the tourists, ecotourism does not always serve the purpose of conservation (Das & Chatterjee, 2015). Sri Lanka

faces the same issue towards developing ecotourism industry. Based on the ecotourism practices in the Kanneliya rainforest, this research explores why the ecotourism practices in Sri Lanka are unable to manage sustainable experiences and conservation initiatives simultaneously. The research identifies challenges and potentials of ecotourism practices in Sri Lanka.

This research adopts the definition developed by The International Ecotourism Society (TIES). TIES defines ecotourism as, 'responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education' (TIES, 2015). Along with this definition, TIES identifies that those who participate and implement ecotourism activities should adopt the following principles: 'minimize physical, social, behavioral, and psychological impacts; build environmental and cultural awareness and respect; provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts; provide direct financial benefits for conservation; generate financial benefits for both local people and private industry; deliver memorable interpretative experiences to visitors that help raise sensitivity to host countries' political, environmental, and social climates; design, construct and operate low-impact facilities; and recognize the rights and spiritual beliefs of the indigenous people in your community and work in partnership with them to create empowerment' (TIES, 2015). The research was based on the assumption that conservation and income generation through sustainable resource management are mutually supportive activities (Jamal et al., 2006).

Using a qualitative methodology, the primary data of this research were collected conducting semi-structured and un-structured interviews with forest officials, tourist guides, representatives of the community-based organizations and local and foreign tourists who visit Kanneliya rainforest. Participatory rural appraisal (PRA) was used to collect information from the communities live in the Kanneliya forest periphery.

Observations done in the forest contributed in triangulating the data and information.

The research findings suggest that although the authorities have identified and introduced certain tourism practices in the Kanneliya rainforest under the name of ecotourism, such practices do not embody at least the basics of ecotourism definition. The responsible authorities do not have the knowledge to identify or promote ecotourism and hence, their activities have led to certain discouragements of tourism promotion. Some of the community members received government funding to provide homestay facilities for tourists and there is an established community tourist guide service whilst they do not have the knowledge to manage sustainable ecotourism experiences. However, the communities in the Kanneliya forest periphery have an interest and a potential to involve in tourism. The existing ecotourism practices introduced by the authorities have neglected such communities and their potentials.

Some of the ecotourism development decisions implemented by the responsible authorities have led to the destruction of the natural

environment and become a threat to biodiversity. Such decisions have linked with corrupted officials and misadministration of foreign funds. The uncontrolled, mismanaged and indecent ecotourism practices have resulted in bio-piracy, wildlife crimes, drug dealing and illegal alcohol businesses. Extensive numbers of tourists, unplanned and unwanted constructions in the forest under foreign-funded and government-led mega projects, lack of waste management, and water pollution have resulted in rapid environmental degradation.

The findings further suggest that without promoting sustainable environmental conservation practices, the sustainability of ecotourism management would not be a reality. Formulation and implementation of an integrated policy approach, encouraging collaboration between government and non-government sectors and communities has a potential to benefit communities in the Kanneliya forest periphery and contribute in sustainable ecotourism management and conservation.

## References

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