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**Examination of Effectiveness of Environmentally Sensitive Areas in Conservation of Biodiversity outside Protected Areas in Sri Lanka****Bandara W.M.M.<sup>1</sup>, Jayasinghe I.D.C.<sup>2</sup>, Samarasinghe S.S.T.<sup>1\*</sup>, Perera M.S.D.<sup>1</sup>,  
Dissanayake D.M.S.B.<sup>3</sup>**<sup>1</sup>*Climate and Environment Team, United Nations Development Programme, Colombo, Sri Lanka*<sup>2</sup>*Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of Colombo, Colombo, Sri Lanka*<sup>3</sup>*Research Division, Institute of Development Studies, Colombo, Sri Lanka**\*sugandhi.samarasinghe@undp.org***Abstract**

Sri Lanka exhibits remarkable biological diversity and is considered to be the richest country in the Asian region in terms of species concentration. Management of biodiversity is essential for sustainable development. However, population pressure, increasing demand for natural resources, and environmentally insensitive development planning and implementation have caused biodiversity depletion. While Protected Areas are legally established to conserve biodiversity, there is a significant extent of biodiversity outside of Protected Areas around the country without an effective conservation framework. In this context, the Environmentally Sensitive Areas approach (ESA) had been introduced as an Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures (OECMs). The objective of the study was to examine the effectiveness of ESA in conserving biodiversity sustainably. Qualitative methodology was adopted, using primary and secondary data, of Gangevadiya ESA in Wanathavilluwa Divisional Secretariat Division, which is located adjoining the lower Kala Oya Basin, Wilpattu National Park, Weerakkodicholai Reserved Forest, Bar Reef Marine Sanctuary, and in Willpattu Ramsar wetland, was assessed against three criteria on sustainability; participation, voluntary commitments, conservation actions. 2,290.47 ha large Gangevadiya ESA is home to unparalleled biodiversity and is rich with both terrestrial, marine, and brackish water flora and fauna. Among the identified 921 species, 6% endemic and 10% endangered are found. Multidimensional stakeholder participation: the government, community, community-based organizations (CBOs), private sector, and academia have participated in identifying biodiversity within diverse ecosystems, available threats, conservation measures, and resources. Different needs and interests of different communities irrespective of age, gender, and diversities are being visible in the planning process for benefits and burden-sharing. The voluntary commitment of all stakeholders has been inbuilt through the rules in the co-management plan, including transforming from harmful practices to resourcing, and monitoring the progress of conservation. The co-management plan indicates that all activities are aimed at the reducing threats and in situ conservation of biodiversity with associated ecosystem functions and services through various approaches. The study reveals that the ESA is an Other Effective Area-based Conservation measure to biodiversity conservation through conscience building for a conservation culture.

**Keywords:** Biodiversity conservation, Environmentally sensitive areas, Sharing responsibilities