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**Cultural Heritage and Sustainable Tourism: A Community Study in
Ratnapura District, Sri Lanka**

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Abstract

The Ratnapura District of Sri Lanka is celebrated for its rich cultural heritage, particularly in gem mining and traditional craftsmanship. With tourism rapidly expanding in this region, there is an urgent need to balance economic growth with the preservation of local cultural identities. Understanding this balance is critical for fostering sustainable community development and ensuring that tourism benefits the local populace without compromising their heritage. This study aims to explore the interplay between cultural heritage and sustainable tourism in Ratnapura. The primary objectives include assessing the impact of tourism on local traditions, evaluating the economic benefits derived from tourism activities, and identifying strategies to preserve cultural heritage while promoting responsible tourism practices. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining qualitative and quantitative research techniques. Qualitative data were gathered through in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, including community leaders, artisans, and tourism operators. These interviews provided insights into local perceptions and experiences regarding cultural heritage and tourism. Additionally, quantitative surveys were distributed to visitors, allowing for the collection of data on tourist behaviour and attitudes toward cultural experiences. This comprehensive methodology facilitated a robust analysis of the relationship between tourism and cultural heritage preservation. The findings indicate that tourism significantly contributes to the local economy, with many residents benefiting from increased visitor spending. However, concerns were raised regarding the potential commercialization and dilution of cultural practices. Many locals expressed a desire for more meaningful tourist interactions that respect and honour their heritage. Successful initiatives, such as cultural festivals and artisan workshops, were identified as effective ways to engage both visitors and the community, promoting traditional crafts while enhancing the tourist experience. The study highlights the need for sustainable tourism practices that prioritize the preservation of cultural heritage. Collaborative efforts among government bodies, local businesses, and community members are essential for developing strategies that promote responsible tourism. By fostering community engagement and creating awareness of the importance of cultural heritage, Ratnapura can enhance its appeal to culturally conscious travellers. This approach not only supports economic development but also ensures that the unique cultural identity of Ratnapura is preserved for future generations. Ultimately, this study contributes to the broader discourse on sustainable tourism, emphasizing the vital role of cultural heritage in fostering community resilience and development.

Keywords: *Cultural heritage, Economic, Tourism, Commercialization*