

(162)

Understanding public attitudes towards the policies and management of national game parks in Sri Lanka: The case of visitors to Minneriya National Park

Madhusa Senevirathna* and Priyan Perera

Department of Forestry and Environmental Science, Faculty of Applied Sciences, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka.

*madu87feb@gmail.com

Abstract

Nature-based tourism has wider implications for biodiversity-rich tropical countries such as Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka at present is in a rapid post-war recovery process, and the country's tourism sector is also gaining a rapid momentum. As such, Sri Lanka's National Parks (NPs) are increasingly becoming prime destinations for both international and domestic tourists. With rising demand, the nature-based tourism market in Sri Lanka is becoming more heterogeneous, and as a result, the management of NPs are facing the quandary of positively meeting the diverse expectations of tourists while efficiently conserving the biological and natural resources. In making sound management decisions to accommodate the dual mandates of conservation and recreational utilization of NPs, a proper understanding of park visitors' attitudes is essential. Hence, this study explores the visitor perceptions of roles, functions, policies and appropriate uses of NPs in Sri Lanka, based on data gathered from a highly visited national game park.

Data were collected from 682 local visitors to the Minneriya NP. A structured questionnaire was the primary research instrument. Using a systematic sampling method, every one in three visitors were intercepted to administer the questionnaire at the park exit. Only visitors over 18 years of age were interviewed. Results indicated that visitors have predominantly positive attitudes towards NPs. Majority of respondents viewed aspects related to "ecological protection" as most important roles and function of NPs. Recreation and commercial development related roles and functions were least prioritized by most respondents. Limiting visitor numbers, recreational activities and phasing out inappropriate uses of the NPs policy were also supported by most participants. Factor analysis and subsequent ANOVA comparisons of visitor attitudes further buttressed that NP policy should be protection-oriented rather than accommodating recreation. Non-consumptive activities such as observing wildlife and wildlife photography were rated as most appropriate uses by respondents. However, if nature-based tourism/ecotourism to be promoted within NPs in a sustainable manner, it is imperative that infrastructure facilities supporting appropriate visitor activities, visitor education, lodging and other facilities such as sanitary and emergency services be developed according to the carrying capacity of respective NPs, as these were deemed highly or moderately appropriate consumptive uses by respondents.

Key words: Minneriya National Park, visitor attitudes, nature-based tourism, ecotourism, visitor Management