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Co-existence of Coral Reef Conservation and Tourism at Pigeon Island National Park

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Abstract

Of the five categories of protected areas (PA) coming under the purview of Department of Wildlife Conservation (DWLC), tourism is actively promoted as a source of revenue generator only within national parks (NP). Of the 22 NPs, Hikkaduwa and the Pigeon islands (PINP) are marine NPs with coral reefs being the major attraction. A study was undertaken at PINP with the objective of understanding the opportunities available and challenges encountered in the co-existence of coral reef conservation and increasing tourism potential. Field visits, focused group discussions, expert opinions, web based information and literature surveys were the methodology utilised.

The growth of tourism in the east coast has resulted in an increasing number of visitors to PINP despite the impose of an entrance fee system in May 2011. Within a 40 month period, a total of 146,375 tourists visited the 470 ha park indicating that one hectare of healthy coral reef can earn more revenue than the larger terrestrial parks with charismatic species such as elephants and leopards. Annually there are two peak visitor seasons: April with majority being locals; and in July-September with increased foreign tourists. The percentage of foreign tourist had increase from 11.9% in 2011 to 24.84% in 2013. Main objective of visiting PINP for foreign visitors is snorkeling, while most locals used the lagoon for bathing, only a few tourists venture inside the island to observe other attractions including geological features or the wild rock pigeons.

Presently the reef is being degraded leading to visitor dissatisfaction, indicating that a PA which emphasises user-fee revenues can lose sight of its primary conservation objectives and deploying scarce resources toward collecting fees rather than protecting resources, creating public opposition as pointed by visitor reviews. Park management effectiveness is not at desirable level, mainly due to non-implementation of a scientifically based management plan. There was an attempt to de-list PINP in 2012 to facilitate tourism development in the Nilaveli beach and there is a possibility that the park boundaries will be shifted to cater for this need. A continuous monitoring programme to check the health of the reef need to be addressed in a more systematic manner, while the introduction of a multi-tiered user fee structures can be applied to enhance the economic reruns and thereby making it more attractive to government for keeping it protected.

Keywords: Tourism, Conservation, Pigeon Island national park, Coral reef