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**Environmentally Sensitive Areas Policy: An Approach for Democratic Land Governance**

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**Abstract**

A public policy is a set of principles to guide decisions and achieve rational outcomes. Nevertheless, several policies are to conserve the environment, in the recent past, the National Policy on Environmentally Sensitive Areas of Sri Lanka was launched to create an enabling environment at all levels for effective conservation and management of Environmentally Sensitive Areas that are outside Protected Areas. This study aimed to analyze the appropriateness of Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESA) Policy from the perspective of conservation of the environment through land management-related problem-solving. A qualitative approach was adopted, the final policy draft was selected as the primary source and analyzed against the remaining problems in the area of environmental conservation that were identified in the IUCN Red List and the Nationally Determined Contributions. The secondary data were obtained from official sources. Nevertheless, a healthy natural environment is key for the social-economic, and environmental wellbeing of people, environmental degradation and pollution increases rapidly due to the behaviour of the State, society, and individuals. Climate change, unsustainable land management, rapid urbanization, and population pressure, and lack of conscience on environmental conservation have been identified as the key causes that accelerate environmental degradation. In addressing such causes, the ESA policy consists of environmental conservation, climate change mitigation and resilience building, and development objectives. The policy is composed of three significant elements; (1) applicability for all environmentally sensitive areas that are outside protected areas and irrespective of the land ownership, (2) carrying environmental conservation, resilience building, and socioeconomic development objectives, and (3) multi-stakeholder engagement in management. While the policy promotes purchasing of development rights for environmental conservation, the policy recognizes the rights to environmental governance in policy-making history in Sri Lanka. The co-management approach of ESAs, which is derived from the policy of common goal, agreed agenda, and shared responsibility creates an enabling environment for all interested parties and mandate holders to pool their interests and resources for environmental and human wellbeing. The new space for all to participate in, contribute to, and enjoy the benefits of the environment directs to a new era of democracy with natural resources governance.

**Keywords:** Environmentally sensitive areas policy, Common goals, Co-management, Right to environment, Democracy