

(122)

A Study of Community Based Eco-Tourism Practices in Biodiversity Preservation in Forest Areas: Special Reference to Wilpattu National Park**Ranasinghe, B.M.^{1*}, Ranathunga, W.P.L.², Weerasinghe, V.W.A.M.K.³**¹*Department of Pali and Buddhist Studies, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka*^{2,3}*Research Center for Social Sciences, University of Kelaniya, Kelaniya, Sri Lanka*
bhagya217r@gmail.com*Abstract**

Community based eco-tourism is increasingly recognized as a sustainable approach to balancing biodiversity conservation with the livelihood needs of local communities. In ecologically sensitive regions such as Wilpattu National Park in Sri Lanka, eco-tourism provides an important platform where surrounding communities engage directly in protecting natural resources while benefiting economically from tourism activities. An ongoing concern is whether these practices genuinely support biodiversity preservation or risk creating additional pressure on forest ecosystems. This study investigates the role of community based eco-tourism in biodiversity conservation, with special reference to Wilpattu National Park. The research problem focuses on how community participation in eco-tourism can be organized in a way that ensures long term ecological protection. The study aims to identify existing eco-tourism practices in the Wilpattu region, evaluate their contribution to environmental conservation, assess socio economic benefits to local communities, examine challenges in achieving sustainable management, and propose strategies to strengthen eco-tourism as a conservation tool. A mixed method approach was used. Data were collected from a sample of 50 respondents, including community members and eco-tourism operators selected through simple random sampling. Quantitative data from structured questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques, while qualitative data from interviews and field observations were examined through thematic categorization to identify behavioural patterns and conservation attitudes. The findings show that eco-tourism has enhanced community income, improved environmental awareness, and encouraged local stewardship of forest resources. Respondents reported reductions in unsustainable practices such as poaching and illegal logging due to increased monitoring and eco-tourism related responsibilities. The study also identified weaknesses, including insufficient training for eco-tourism guides, lack of proper infrastructure planning, limited stakeholder coordination, and occasional stress on wildlife habitats caused by uncontrolled visitor activities. The study concludes that community based eco-tourism in Wilpattu holds significant potential for biodiversity preservation if managed more effectively. Strengthening capacity building programs, improving stakeholder collaboration, enforcing regulated visitor numbers, and reinvesting tourism income into conservation projects are essential to ensure long term sustainability and enhanced community engagement in forest protection and empowering local communities via eco-tourism is key to protecting Wilpattu National Park's ecology.

Keywords: *Eco tourism, Biodiversity preservation, Wilpattu national park, Sustainable tourism, Community participation*