

(044)**Ecotourism as a Pathway to Improve the Living Standards, in Sangilipalama, Kotmale, Nuwara Eliya District****Thirunavukkarasu, M. *, Wijeyamohan, S.***Department of Bioscience, Faculty of Applied Science, University of Vavuniya, Vavuniya, Sri Lanka***mathivathanithirukk@gmail.com***Abstract**

Sri Lanka has significant potential for ecotourism, but a few practice all ecotourism principles adhering to the definition. Most focusing on sustainable tourism rather than comprehensive ecotourism. This research examined the role of ecotourism in supporting rural livelihoods in Sangilipalama, Kotmale, by evaluating community support and positive perception towards developing ecotourism, its impact on living standards, youth employment, local goods and services. It also examined changes in students' perception through an awareness session. Thus, to develop a sustainable ecotourism model in Sangilipalama, Kotmale, that can serve as a benchmark for the Nuwara Eliya district. Data was collected through field observations and structured questionnaire surveys from June 2024 to September 2024 and were analyzed using the Self-Determination Theory Framework. Sangilipalama, which is in Kotmale, has various landscapes like rivers, forests and historical locations, that help facilitate activities like boating, bird watching and mammal watching. There are multiple species of plants, birds, mammals, reptiles, fish and butterflies; and residents engage in spice cultivation contributing to its agricultural heritage. Two separate questionnaire surveys were designed; one targeting 50 local residents and other for 50 students, including both school and undergraduate students. The students were assessed using the same questionnaire before an awareness session and after on the ecotourism potential of Sangilipalama. The findings from the local respondents indicated that seventy-two percent of them "Agreed" that the community people support the need for ecotourism in Kotmale. Seventy-two percent of "Agreed" regional development raises the level of living standard and strengthens the local community. 68% "Agreed" ecotourism would lower youth unemployment. Seventy percent "Strongly agreed" ecotourism will support the local goods and services of Kotmale. Principal Component Analysis (PCA) revealed that, before the awareness session, the eigenvalues for the statements on community support for ecotourism and its impact on living standards were 0.86 (factor loading 1.59) and 0.62 (factor loading 1.05) respectively. After the awareness session, these values changed to 0.91 (factor loading 1.373) and 0.22 (factor loading 0.715), indicating a shift in perception among the students. The findings support that Sangilipalama can be positioned as a model for sustainable ecotourism development in Nuwara Eliya district by integrating local involvement, awareness programs and responsible policy measures. In addition, this model can be applied to other locations across Sri Lanka. Key recommendations from the study include involving local communities in ecotourism initiatives, addressing knowledge gaps through targeted awareness programs, and developing policies to promote responsible tourism.

Keywords: *Awareness impact assessment, Community participation, Ecotourism, Livelihood improvement, Student's perception*