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Eco-Tourism Development Potential in Thannepita: Utilizing Environmental Resources like Natural Streams and Waterfalls for Rural Economic Growth

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Abstract

Thannepita is a rural village situated in the 836C Kapugedara Grama Niladhari Division consisting of approximately 400 families engaged in tea plantation agriculture as their main economic activity. Each family cultivates around one acre of tea and generates a monthly income of about Rs. 50,000. However, this income is often inadequate to cover expenses for fertilizer, education, and daily living, resulting in economic vulnerability. Children's education has suffered due to financial and socio-economic conditions and there are reports of irregular school attendance, as well as a lack of university-level students from Thannepita. Furthermore, these socio-economic challenges overall indicate the need to develop alternative and additional incomes to assure sustainable development for the community. Thannepita has abundant natural resources that are suitable for eco-tourism, such as Yalamediya Dola, Kaluwala, Oliyamala Ella, Hulankadu Ella, and the newly discovered (2022) 'Saripota Ella' waterfall. Kaluwala has clear water suitable for bathing, Gonawala has space for 30-40 guests to camp, nature walks can be developed in Uduwankanda, Maha Ara, Rajakanda, and Heenatiyanwaththa, and where possible, existing adventure casual activities, such as 30-foot jumps and other water-based sports could be expanded to attract additional travellers. This study uses a qualitative case study approach to investigate the viability of eco-tourism development in Thannepita as a means of stimulating economic growth in a rural setting. A purposive sample of 50 participants will be recruited and include local residents, community leaders, and tourism stakeholders. Primary data collection will consist of semi-structured interviews, field observations, and focus group interviews, and secondary data will be gathered from official reports, previous studies on tourism, and socio-economic statistics. The findings generated from the analysis will aim to recommend mechanisms to diversify income streams create greater opportunities for education, and enhance overall quality of life through eco-tourism and community based tourism initiatives. Accordingly, this study proposed eco-tourism activities include guided nature walks and trekking routes, waterfall-based recreational activities such as bathing and swimming in designated safe areas, community-managed camping sites for small groups, nature observation activities including bird watching, and supervised low-risk adventure activities such as stream exploration and cliff jumping. And also, this study further considers community-based eco-tourism developments such as the establishment of basic visitor infrastructure, marked nature trails, small-scale homestays, trained local tour guides, safety facilities, and environmentally responsible waste management systems to support sustainable tourism growth.

Keywords: *Eco-tourism development, Rural economic development, Tea plantation community, Community-based tourism, Nature trails and waterfalls, Sustainable livelihoods diversification*