

**(004)****Exploring Sustainable Ecotourism Practices in Ella, Badulla: A Qualitative Inquiry into Community Perspectives and Environmental Conservation****Munasinghe, D.L.N.K.\****Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka**\*nuwanikalhari97@gmail.com***Abstract**

Sustainable ecotourism is increasingly recognised as an effective approach to conserve natural ecosystems, protect cultural heritage, and enhance the social and economic well-being of local communities. The hill station of Ella in the Badulla District of Sri Lanka has become a popular destination for both domestic and international travellers who are attracted by its scenic beauty and authentic rural experiences. However, the rapid growth of tourism has raised concerns about environmental degradation, overcrowding, and limited coordination among institutions. This study aimed to explore community attitudes towards ecotourism in Ella and to evaluate how these practices contribute to sustainable development goals. A qualitative research approach was adopted, and purposive sampling was used to select 160 participants representing key stakeholder groups. The sample included homestay owners, eco tour guides, local residents, small-scale entrepreneurs, government officers, and private sector representatives engaged in tourism and environmental management. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, field observations, and informal discussions. Thematic analysis was employed to identify, analyse, and interpret recurring patterns within the data. Findings reveal that ecotourism has generated significant positive impacts on local livelihoods by creating new income opportunities and encouraging active community involvement. Many residents are engaged in tourism-related activities such as managing guesthouses, operating small cafés and handicraft outlets, guiding nature trails and waterfall tours, conducting traditional cooking and tea tasting sessions, organising cycling and hiking tours, providing transport services for visitors, and participating in cultural performances. These community-based initiatives are strongly connected with environmental conservation practices including waste management programmes, reforestation projects, biodiversity protection, and plastic-free campaigns. Despite these benefits, challenges such as overcrowding at popular sites like Ella Rock and Nine Arches Bridge, inadequate waste management, and weak governance structures were frequently reported. Participants emphasised the importance of establishing stronger institutional coordination, ensuring continuous government support, and fostering effective collaboration among stakeholders to achieve long-term sustainability. In conclusion, Ella demonstrates strong potential to serve as a model for sustainable ecotourism in Sri Lanka by conserving natural resources, preserving cultural heritage, and empowering rural communities. Insights from the experience of Ella can guide future ecotourism initiatives across other rural and highland regions of the country.

**Keywords:** *Sustainable tourism, Ecotourism, Environmental conservation, Community participation, Ella*