

(227)

Integration of Biodiversity Conservation with Sustainable Ecotourism in Sri Lanka**Ekanayake, E.J.M.J.K.^{1*}, Fernando, H.C.¹, Widyasekera, E.C.S.²,
Manchanayakke, S.M.A.K.²**¹*Charisma University, Monatana, USA*²*AIMS Campus, Colombo 07, Sri Lanka***kumaraekanayake44@gmail.com***Abstract**

Sri Lanka's status as a biodiversity hotspot underpins a tourism industry with the symbiotic potential to fund conservation and foster local stewardship. However, translating this model from a theoretical ideal into a successfully implemented practice remains a complex global challenge. The objective of this qualitative study was to find themes for a quantitative survey to further investigate the above mentioned model. Through qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with 15 frontline forest and wildlife officers from Hurulu forest reserve of Polonnaruwa, Knuckles conservation forest of Matale, Udawattakele forest reserve of Kandy, Sinharaja world heritage site of Ratnapura, and Wilpattu national park of Puttalam, this research captures the critical perspectives of those responsible for managing this delicate balance. The data reveal six pivotal themes essential for achieving sustainability. Firstly, strengthening governance and enforcement including improved revenue reinvestment and clearer regulatory frameworks can be done by reinvesting revenue generated from park entry fees, guided tours, and accommodations directly into conservation efforts, such as anti-poaching patrols, habitat restoration, and scientific research. Secondly, investing in capacity and infrastructure to address critical gaps in staffing, equipment, and visitor facilities such as well-designed trails, adequate waste disposal systems, and informative signage, can minimize ecological footprints. Thirdly, promoting genuine community partnership to ensure local communities can derive tangible benefits and become active conservation stakeholders. Fourthly, prioritization of education and interpretation for both tourists and locals can be done to foster pro-conservation behavior. Ensuring meaningful stakeholder participation in policy decisions was proposed as the next step for sustainability. Lastly, it was proposed to leverage digitalization for enhanced monitoring, management, and visitor experience. The findings were used as themes for further investigation using a quantitative study to illustrate the synergy between conservation and ecotourism is not automatic but must be consciously built by listening to and empowering its frontline forest officers and wildlife officers, addressing their operational challenges, and building robust partnerships with local communities. This study concludes that the insights of frontline officers are indispensable for formulating effective policies and provides an evidence-based framework for enhancing the sustainability of Sri Lanka's ecotourism sector while safeguarding its unique biodiversity for future generations.

Keywords: *Biodiversity, Ecotourism, Sustainability, Conservation, Restoration*