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Visitor Perceptions of Birdwatching and Ecotourism Potential at Beddagana Wetland Park, Sri Lanka: A SWOT-Based Assessment

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Abstract

Urban wetlands are vital ecosystems for biodiversity and community well-being, and they offer unique opportunities for specialized ecotourism. This study assesses the potential for high-value birdwatching tourism (avitourism) at the Beddagana Wetland Park (BWP) in Sri Jayewardenepura Kotte, Colombo, Sri Lanka. Using Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) framework, the research synthesizes perception data from 83 local and international visitors. The questionnaire systematically assessed a wide range of variables, visitor demographics, birdwatching dedication, conservation ethics, the quality of infrastructure (rated on detailed experiences, such as cleanliness, bird diversity, and signage), and interest in guided services. Results show BWP attracts a specialized market of highly educated environmentally literate visitors. Core strengths supporting avitourism include the excellent urban accessibility of the park (67% of respondents) and its capacity to deliver a unique and highly valued asset in its “peaceful and quiet natural setting” (55%) within the surrounding rush-around metropolis. However, operational failures and unmanaged visitor dynamics critically threaten this inherent ecological and recreational value. The primary external threat is the critical failure of “Destination Carrying Capacity,” cited by 48% of respondents as the top discouraging factor, coupled with noise or disturbances (23%). Overcrowding and disturbances from general park visitors currently affect the specialized birdwatching experience. A major internal weakness is park maintenance, with 31% of respondents identifying poor cleanliness as a discouraging factor. Additionally, 27% of visitors noted a lack of guided tours or trained staff to assist them. However, there is a significant opportunity to address these issues through the visitor's interest in supporting the park, where 97% are willing to support conservation financially, and 84% are willing to pay for specialized guided tours. Furthermore, visitor demand underscores the need for a service like “conservation workshops,” which is a top three desired improvement, quoted by 51% of the participants, indicating a clear market for structured educational ecotourism products. In conclusion, while BWP possesses the necessary ecological and recreational assets for birdwatching, reaching its full potential requires specific improvements in infrastructure, visitor education, and site management. Based on these preliminary findings, park management could consider designated access hours to prioritize dedicated birdwatchers during peak times to reduce visitor conflict. There is also potential to develop professional guiding services and conservation-related fees. Revenue from these initiatives could be directed toward improving facilities requested by visitors, such as specialized bird hides and additional rest areas.

Keywords: *Birdwatching, Ecotourism, Avitourism, Urban wetland, Visitor dynamics*