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An assessment on potential and challenges for promoting ecotourism in the Knuckles forest area in Sri Lanka

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Abstract: Knuckles Mountain Range with a rich biodiversity is a one of the valuable heritages in Sri Lanka. It has a long history, since the prehistoric periods with attractive potentials for ecotourism, such as mountain peaks, crystal clear and perennial waterways, cloud forests, exquisite fauna and flora, natural bridges within the area of 160-170 km². The Knuckles Mountain Range is identified as a highly demanded tourist destination by domestic and international tourists. Therefore, this study aimed to identify the opportunities and challenges for ecotourism development in this study area. Approximately 1,041 flowering plants from 141 families are documented in the Knuckles together with 290 woody plants species. 85-90 woody plants are endemic and 10-15 species are nationally threatened. Similarly, its fauna population, such as Sambar, barking deer, mouse deer, wild bear, giant squirrel, endemic fish, amphibians and reptiles are confined solely to the Knuckles Range. Almost, 247 species of vertebrates (26% endemic and 28% nationally threatened) have been identified. According to the respondents, the deforestation and solid waste disposal in the forest area, including plastics and polythene have become major challenges. The dwellers around the forest invest and utilize the forest products in an inappropriate manner, creating multifarious threats to the biodiversity, of the forest area. The 90% of the biodiversity losses have been taken place, due to the human interventions. This study revealed that potentials and challenges should be reevaluated and to be implemented viable measures to improve the richness of the Knuckles area in the sustainable manner with the collaboration of relevant stakeholders.

Keywords: Ecotourism, biodiversity, potentials, challenges, sustainable and stakeholders