

Identification of Eco-tourism Potential of Horton Plains National Park in Sri Lanka through Visitor Preferences Assessment

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ABSTRACT

Horton Plains which is situated in the central highlands of Sri Lanka is a unique National Park in terms of geological formation, bio-diversity, historical, cultural and archaeological values and hydrological values and landscape. At present, Horton Plains is the only National Park under the Department of Wildlife Conservation where the visitors can walk through the park to visit different eco-system and interesting places. Most of the visitors to the park have been attracted by the Park's landscape creation and this is the second highest visited National Park in the country.

The total visitation to the Park is being rapidly increased showing nearly 60% increase over the last two years. Although there is a slight decrease in the foreign visitation, local visitation is showing a considerable increase in the visitation. Although, the Department of Wildlife Conservation has taken several progressive interventions to improve the visitor services, implementation and maintenance of these facilities and interventions are still not upto the expectation. Main reasons for this include ineffective visitor management and service provision, poor recognition of visitor preferences, lack of research and incorporation of research findings, interpretation facilities and non-recognition of the values of the natural resources of the Park.

Inadequate initiative on identification of eco-tourism potential of the Park hinders an immediate attention of the conservation of bio-diversity of the Park while highlighting the undervaluation of Park's unique eco-system to the world. Co-ordination between the stakeholders in eco-tourism promotion and the perspectives of the visitors, industries and communities on eco-tourism are poorly or untouched areas which need higher attention of the Park management authorities to ensure the sustainability of the tourism. Visitor preference assessment, interpretation facilities, information sharing, well maintained service provision, involvement of local community and the private sector, promotion of eco-tourism marketing etc are suggested as most effective strategies for the promotion of eco-tourism and the conservation of bio-diversity of the National Park.

The present study to identify the eco-tourism potential of the Park through visitor preferences assessment was done through visitor services survey and identification of government, hoteliers and community perspectives on introduction of eco tourism to the National Park. The survey results revealed that there is high potential for eco-tourism promotion in the Park provided that a well planned eco-tourism strategy is exists with the incorporation of visitor preferences. Interpretation services and information sharing of the uniqueness of the Park also need much attention.

Recommendation are suggested to promote ecotourism in the Park covering the aspects of infrastructure facilities, eco-system conservation with adaptive management , visitor preferences, community and private sector involvement, marketing of eco-tourism products, interpretation & information sharing, co-ordination of relevant government institutions etc.,

The present study also suggests recommendation on economic development through promotion of eco-tourism, innovative approaches, research needs, awareness creation and the capacity building of the staff of the Department of Wildlife Conservation. Based on the recommendations, an Eco-tourism Strategy for the Park can be developed and a model eco-tourism strategy process developed by the WWF International is given as an Example.

The way forward, review of the recommendations and its applicability can be done by the respective implementing stakeholders to put them into practise. In promoting the Horton Plains as the National Eco-tourism Park, some effective methods and operational mechanisms are essential.