Enhancing Cultural Heritage Education Through Digital Interpretation and Sustainable Tourism: A Case Study of Thamankaduwa and Lankapura

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Abstract

Cultural heritage sites are considered important resources for education, national identity building, and sustainable development. The Polonnaruwa region, known for its advanced water management technology and archaeological heritage, holds great educational value. Despite, tourism activities in the Thamankaduwa and Lankapura Divisional Areas are largely entertainment-oriented, and tourists' understanding of the historical, cultural, and scientific significance of these sites is limited. The aim of this study is to investigate how cultural heritage education can be enhanced through sustainable tourism development and to identify suggestions for developing heritage sites as educational tourism destinations. A qualitative research methodology was used for this study. Qualitative data were collected through community discussions and workshops held with the participation of local residents, religious leaders, local government representatives, and forest and forest conservation officers. The findings indicate that, despite the substantial educational potential inherent in archaeological sites and ancient water management systems, many tourists do not gain knowledge due to the lack of physical facilities. Most tourists focus on visiting places and taking pictures and have little understanding of their technical significance. The lack of information boards, guidance services, and digital information systems also limits the educational experience. The need to introduce an information system based on digital QR codes was emphasized. The findings indicate that cultural heritage education integrated with sustainable tourism can transform tourism activities into educational experiences. Digitally enabled tourism activities within local communities are proposed, and they can contribute to enhancing heritage awareness and education, community participation in tourism, and the sustainable development of the region. Another important aspect of this study is the extent to which digital technology can contribute to the educational dissemination of ancient knowledge within the tourism industry. In conclusion, this research is significant in the field of cultural heritage tourism.

Keywords: *Cultural Heritage Education, Digital Technologies, Sustainable Tourism*