

## ECOTOURISM IN DELFT: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR COMMUNITY BASED SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Delft Island (Neduntheevu) has been prioritized for ecotourism due to its unique ecological, cultural, and historical value. This study aims to identify ecotourism opportunities, analyze key challenges, and propose community-based strategies to promote sustainable development on the island. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with government officials, focus group discussions with community organizations, and field observations. Secondary data, including policy documents and literature, were also reviewed. Thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring patterns and stakeholder perspectives. Qualitative descriptive analysis was used to clearly describe local people’s experiences and perspectives in relation to the island’s culture, community, and environment. Geographic Information Systems (GIS) were used to map existing and potential tourist sites, providing visual support for planning, while opportunities and challenges were identified through the qualitative analysis of interview data, field observations, and secondary sources. Findings reveal significant opportunities for ecotourism through attractions such as wild horses, migratory birds, colonial-era ruins, traditional cultural experiences, and handicraft production using local materials like coir and bamboo. However, major challenges persist, including inadequate infrastructure, poor transportation, water scarcity, weak institutional coordination, resource overuse, limited conservation efforts, and low community awareness. The findings emphasize the importance of interdepartmental coordination, stakeholder collaboration, and integrating community perspectives in ecotourism planning. The study recommends developing eco-friendly accommodations and skill development centers to empower locals. Promoting environmental education and inclusive stakeholder engagement is essential for capacity building and long-term sustainability. With targeted efforts, Delft Island has the potential to emerge as an eco-friendly tourism destination, fostering both community well-being and environmental conservation.

**Keywords:** *Challenges, Community, Delft Island, Ecotourism, Sustainability*