

Community Perception and Support for Wildlife Tourism: Empirical Evidence from Udawalawe National Park

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Wildlife-viewing has become a popular nature-based tourism activity worldwide providing opportunities for tourists to enjoy wildlife in natural habitats such as protected areas, marinas, and underwater settings. Equally, the significance of wildlife-related activities is increasing though little empirical evidence is available in Sri Lanka. It is critical to understand what drives residents' support for such activities to design successful wildlife tourism activities. The main purpose of this study was to examine residents' attitudes and participation in wildlife tourism and to explore factors that affect residents' support and participation in tourism-related activities around Udawalawe National Park in Sri Lanka. 160 local residents in the study area were the respondents to the self-administered questionnaire. The data were analysed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with smart PLS and SPSS tools. The findings revealed that there was a significant relationship between community participation and community perceived impacts. Hence, there was a significant relationship between community participation and support for wildlife tourism and there was no significant relationship between the perceived impact and wildlife tourism support. It can be concluded that community participation can be increased by the education level of residents to understand their rights and the need for greater participation in the decision-making process. Thus, the study argues that increased education and understanding of the importance of wildlife of local residents can result in successful wildlife tourism in a community. A qualitative approach to understanding deeper thoughts, attitudes, and feelings of individuals is recommended as a future research area to further understand this context.

Keywords: Wildlife tourism, Community participation, Community perceived impact, Tourism support