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Reframing Ecotourism through Stakeholder Perspectives: Toward Effective Development in Yala National Park

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Abstract: One of the most influential factors shaping effective ecotourism practices is the commitment of stakeholders, particularly in protected areas with high biodiversity. This article investigates stakeholder commitment and its effect on ecotourism development in Yala National Park, Sri Lanka. A qualitative case study method was employed to collect data, drawing on semi-structured interviews and field observations with various stakeholder groups, including state agencies, local communities, external tourism facilitators, and tourists. Thematic analysis, supported by the Relative Importance Index (RII), suggests that while issues such as environmental protection and collaborative decision-making remain highly valued by stakeholders, several challenges persist. These include weak governance, inadequate infrastructure, socio-cultural disparities, and economic inequality in the distribution of tourism benefits. Environmental concerns highlighted by stakeholders included poaching (31%), habitat destruction (13%), tourist overcrowding (19%), and pollution (8%). Moreover, a majority of local residents reported exclusion from both decision-making processes (10%) and revenue-sharing (42%). Other commonly cited challenges included inadequate infrastructure (26%), political interference (32%), and insufficient visitor warnings (15%). The RII analysis confirmed these concerns, showing that mutual understanding and agreement (RII: 0.63), reaching common decisions (RII: 0.63), and environmental considerations (RII: 0.62) were ranked as top priorities. In contrast, power decentralization received the lowest emphasis (RII: 0.54), indicating limited influence of local agencies in governance. Indicators such as trust among stakeholders (RII: 0.60), transparency (RII: 0.59), and comprehensiveness (RII: 0.59) also scored relatively low, reflecting a fragmented yet partially collaborative governance framework. Similarly, socio-cultural pride and local economic development (RII: 0.58) ranked low, aligning with qualitative evidence of cultural erosion (16%) and youth marginalization (14%), pointing to broader social consequences of the current tourism regime. The findings highlight the need for participatory governance, cultural sensitivity, and inclusive development approaches. This study proposes actionable reforms aimed at strengthening cooperation, improving ecotourism management, and promoting community-led ecotourism models in protected areas.

Keywords: Development; Ecotourism; Perspectives; Stakeholders; Yala

1.0 Introduction

With the rise of ecotourism worldwide, the challenge of balancing conservation with community benefits has become central in sustainability discourses. In biodiversity-rich countries like Sri Lanka, ecotourism is often promoted not only as a means of conserving natural ecosystems but also as a driver of local economic development. Yala National Park (YNP), one of Sri Lanka's most renowned protected areas, epitomizes both the opportunities and tensions inherent in this approach. Celebrated for its wildlife, landscapes, and geography, Yala attracts thousands of tourists annually. However, this popularity has heightened concerns over environmental degradation, unregulated development, and unequal distribution of benefits among stakeholders. While policies such as the National Sustainable Tourism Policy (Ministry of Tourism Development, 2017), the mandate of the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA, 2017), and the Department of Wildlife Conservation (DWC, 2020) emphasize participatory ecotourism, implementation remains limited. These frameworks prioritize community engagement, benefit-sharing, and sustainable management, yet in practice stakeholder participation is partial and often exclusionary, underscoring a persistent gap between policy design and on-the-ground realities.

In this study, stakeholder commitment is considered one of the central factors influencing the effectiveness of ecotourism practices in Yala National Park (YNP). Commitment here refers to the readiness, capacity, and long-term involvement of stakeholders in ensuring ecological sustainability while also promoting an equitable distribution of tourism benefits. The study seeks to identify which parties have access to and shape perceptions of ecotourism, the obstacles to full engagement, and the ways in which existing governance structures may hinder inclusive decision-making. Through a qualitative case study approach, this paper provides both a diagnostic evaluation of current challenges and a set of recommendations to foster more inclusive and sustainable ecotourism governance. The findings also carry broader implications for other countries facing similar challenges in managing ecotourism within protected natural landscapes.

2.0 Study Area

Yala National Park, located in the southeast dry zone of Sri Lanka, is the country's oldest and second-largest national park, covering approximately 97,880 hectares across the Hambantota and Monaragala Districts. Initially designated as a wildlife sanctuary in 1900, it was declared a national park in 1938 and is internationally recognized for its role in biodiversity conservation and ecological research (DWC, 2020; IUCN, 2006). The park comprises five blocks, of which Block I, covering about 14,100 hectares, is the most accessible, most studied, and supports the highest wildlife densities (Ratnayeke et al., 2007). This study was conducted in Yala Block I and the surrounding areas of Yodakandiya, Tissamaharama, and Kataragama. These sites form an important ecological and socio-environmental interface, functioning both as highly protected areas and as access corridors influenced by agriculture, tourism, and religious pilgrimages. This geographic gradient provides a dynamic setting for examining ecological processes, women's roles, and human–wildlife interactions (Fernando et al., 2005).

The Yala landscape is characterized by dry monsoon forests, open grasslands, thorn scrub, rocky outcrops, and seasonal wetlands. Situated in the island's dry zone, the area receives between 900 and 1,300 mm of rainfall annually, with most precipitation occurring during the Northeast Monsoon (October–January) and the first inter-monsoon period (March–May) (Chandrapala, 1996; DWC, 2020). A pronounced dry season occurs between June and September, during which water availability plays a critical role in shaping animal movements and behavioral patterns. The dominant vegetation includes Palu (Manilkara hexandra), Weera (Drypetes sepiaria), Burutha (Chloroxylon swietenia), and riparian species such as Kumbuk (Terminalia arjuna) and Ficus spp. These ecosystems support a wide range of herbivores—including spotted

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deer (Axis axis), sambar (Rusa unicolor), and wild boar (Sus scrofa)—which in turn sustain predator populations, most notably the Sri Lankan leopard (Panthera pardus kotiya), an apex carnivore endemic to the island (Kittle & Watson, 2008).

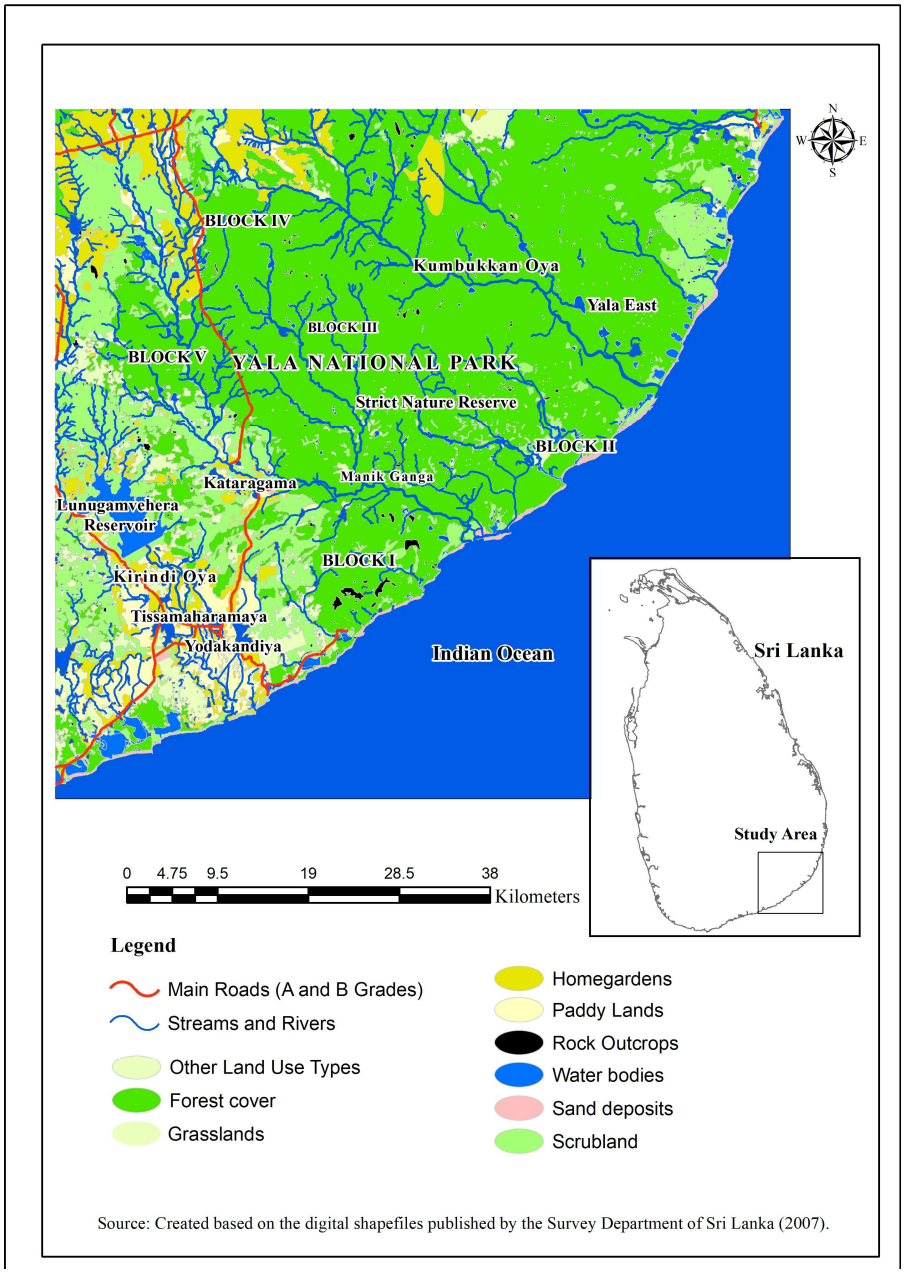

Figure 1: Land use and land cover types of YNP and the surrounding area

Yala is also recognized as an Important Bird Area, with more than 215 recorded bird species, including endemics such as the Sri Lanka junglefowl (Gallus lafayettii), as well as numerous migratory waterbirds that frequent its lagoons and tanks during the migration season (BirdLife International, 2021). Key water bodies in and around the study area include the Menik Ganga, Yodakandiya Wewa, and several seasonal tanks in Tissamaharama, which are vital not only for wildlife but also for agriculture and religious practices， particularly in Kataragama, a major pilgrimage site (Kotagama & Bambaradeniya, 2006). These hydrological features play a critical role in sustaining biodiversity during the dry season and serve as focal points of human and animal activity. However, the surrounding human-modified landscapes, especially in Yodhakandiya and Tissamaharama, present both conservation opportunities and challenges, including habitat fragmentation, crop raiding, and increasing tourism pressure (Fernando et al., 2005; DWC, 2020). As such, this region provides a valuable context for examining ecological sustainability, wildlife management, and human–wildlife coexistence within Sri Lanka's dry-zone ecosystems.

3.0 Literature Review

Sri Lanka's ecotourism policies echo international commitments to community-based natural resource management, yet their practical implementation remains weak. Research in YNP and other protected sites (Esham & Garforth, 2013; Weerakoon, 2019) highlights recurring

issues such as inadequate stakeholder consultation, ecological misuse, and inequitable distribution of tourism income. Community dissatisfaction often stems from exclusion in park management, limited employment opportunities, and the erosion of cultural and ecological values due to unregulated tourism. Moreover, studies show that stakeholder behavior and involvement vary significantly across ecotourism areas depending on socio-geographic contexts and land connections. For instance, in Dambana and Kudawa, stakeholder commitment is shaped by traditional identities, heritage ties, and differing expectations of tourism benefits (Pathmasiri, 2019). These variations underscore the need for smaller, culturally responsive governance structures rather than a one-size-fits-all model. The literature also emphasizes the importance of infrastructure development, policy coherence, and decentralization in strengthening ecotourism, yet persistent challenges—including political interference, weak enforcement, and poor transparency—undermine progress (Kuvan & Akan, 2005; Mahadevan & Suhardiman, 2021). Structural governance gaps are evident in Sri Lanka, including fragmented mandates across institutions, inadequate monitoring mechanisms, and limited community involvement in decision-making (Pathmasiri, 2021). Additionally, mismatches between planned and perceived stakeholder roles frequently cause disengagement and confusion, as seen in Hummanaya (Pathmasiri & Fernando, 2023). Similar findings at Udawalawa reveal that stakeholder satisfaction is strongly linked to transparency and mutual understanding—elements often neglected in national park governance. Reform priorities therefore include building trust, ensuring inclusive decision-making, and strengthening local capacity (Nimalasiri & Bandara, 2024). These insights resonate globally, with comparable patterns observed in Kruger, Serengeti, and the Galápagos, where stakeholder alignment has proven essential to sustainability (Biggs et al., 2012; Tumusiime & Svarstad, 2011).

4.0 Materials and Methodology

4.1 Study Design

This study adopted a qualitative case study approach to examine how stakeholder commitment shapes effective ecotourism practices within YNP. The case study method was chosen to enable an in-depth, contextual exploration of the complex interactions among multiple stakeholder groups engaged in ecotourism, focusing on their values, motivations, and perceived responsibilities in both conservation and tourism development.

4.2 Data Collection Methods

4.2.1 Key-Informant Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were the primary method used to elicit stakeholder perspectives. These interviews explored participants' perceptions of ecotourism, their motivations for involvement, and their levels of commitment to sustainable practices. The flexibility of this method allowed respondents to express their views freely while ensuring that core themes relevant to stakeholder engagement were consistently addressed. Collectively, the interviews provided a rich dataset that captured the diversity and complexity of stakeholder roles within the park.

Prior to conducting the interviews, informed consent was carefully obtained from all participants, ensuring that they were fully aware of the research scope, their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidentiality measures in place. The interviews were carried out with sensitivity, with questions posed empathetically and professionally to minimize potential distress. This comprehensive approach to ethics reflects a strong commitment to upholding the highest standards in research involving vulnerable subjects and sensitive topics.

4.2.2 Field Observations

Complementing the interviews, field observations were carried out in and around YNP to contextualize stakeholder narratives and capture ecotourism dynamics as they unfolded in practice. These observations focused on visitor behavior, tour operations, infrastructure conditions, and community interactions, thereby providing experiential depth to the interview data.

4.3 Study Sampling

4.3.1 Sample Size

The study included a total of 36 participants, representing a diverse cross-section of stakeholder groups involved in ecotourism at YNP. Stakeholders were purposefully selected to ensure representation from state agencies, external tourism facilitators, visiting tourists, and members of the local community. This purposive sampling strategy enabled the study to capture a broad spectrum of insights from actors directly and indirectly engaged in ecotourism governance and operations.

4.3.2 Sampling Techniques

Purposive sampling was employed to identify information-rich participants across different stakeholder groups, including state agencies, local communities, external tourism operators, and tourists. The selection process was designed to capture varied perspectives from those directly involved in or affected by ecotourism activities. However, the study did not systematically incorporate gender and youth perspectives. Although youth-related issues, such as marginalization, emerged during interviews, a more deliberate inclusion of female participants and younger voices would strengthen future research and provide a more inclusive representation of community perspectives.

4.4 Analysis

4.4.1 Thematic Analysis with RII

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, integrating interview narratives to enrich the findings (Table 1). This approach facilitated the identification of recurring patterns, concerns, and priorities across interviews and field notes. Key themes relating to environmental conservation, governance, infrastructure, socio-cultural dynamics, and economic impacts were systematically coded and categorized. To enrich the thematic analysis, the Relative Importance Index (RII) was incorporated as a complementary tool. While RII is typically used in quantitative studies to rank variables based on perceived importance, in this study it was adapted to support qualitative interpretation. Following thematic coding, participants' emphasis on issues such as conservation, governance, and economic concerns was assessed according to the frequency and intensity of reference. These qualitative judgments were then translated into RII scores to highlight which themes were most consistently prioritized across stakeholder groups. Integrating RII in this way offered a structured means of comparing the relative salience of themes while retaining the depth and nuance of qualitative inquiry. Nonetheless, this approach has limitations: RII does not capture the emotional or contextual richness of stakeholder narratives and depends on researcher interpretation to assign emphasis. As such, the RII findings should be considered indicative rather than definitive, serving to complement rather than replace the thematic results.

To further enhance the thematic analysis and provide deeper insight into stakeholder perspectives, direct quotations from key-informant interviews were included in the Findings section. Pseudonyms such as "YT1" (Yala Tourist 1), "YLC2" (Yala Local Community 2), "YOTF3" (Yala Outside Tourism Facilitator 3), and "YSCA4" (Yala State-Centered Agency 4) were used to ensure anonymity while preserving

the authenticity of stakeholder voices. This strategy strengthened the connection between emergent themes and the lived experiences of those directly involved in ecotourism activities at YNP.

Table 1: Emergent themes and codes

Theme	Codes (Sub-Themes)
Conservation Threats and Environmental Barriers	Human-animal conflict, Poaching, Mining Activities, Overcrowding by Tourists, Lack of Park Monitoring, Habitat Destruction, Pollution
Disparities in Stakeholder Commitment	Conflicting Interests in Park Utilization, Lack of Collaboration, Inconsistent Engagement, Communication Barriers, Differing Priorities Between Stakeholders, Marginalization of Local Communities, Unequal Access to Resources
Infrastructure Deficiencies	Inadequate Visitor Facilities, Poor Waste Management, Infrastructure Insufficient Signage and Information Boards, Limited Access and Connectivity, Underdeveloped Observation and Viewing Platforms
Governance and Policy Gaps	Political interference, Overemphasis on tourism revenue, Weak Enforcement of Laws, Lack of Comprehensive Conservation Policies, Ineffective Stakeholder Engagement, Inadequate Monitoring and Surveillance, Limited Funding for Conservation Efforts
Cultural and Social Disruptions	Drug Addiction Among Locals Prostitution, Erosion of Local Traditions and Culture, Youth Marginalization, Income Inequality, Social Tensions Among Stakeholders,
Economic Benefits and Disparities	Unequal Distribution of Tourism Revenue, Employment Opportunities for Locals, Dependency on Seasonal Tourism, Limited Support for Local Businesses, Lack of Reinvestment in Local Economy

4.5 Limitations

This study was designed to provide a rich, qualitative understanding of stakeholder commitment within the context of ecotourism at YNP. While it successfully captures diverse perspectives through purposive sampling and thematic analysis, its qualitative design also means that certain technical dimensions such as spatial mapping or broader quantitative generalization fall beyond its immediate scope.

5.0 Results

The analysis of ecotourism stakeholders' commitment at YNP is based on three key parameters: the RII, mean value, and rank for each index (Table 2). These metrics provide insights into the significance and perceived effectiveness of various factors shaping stakeholder commitment. Among the factors, Mutual Understanding and Agreement and Reaching Common Decisions ranked highest, both with an RII of 0.63 and a mean of 3.14. This highlights the importance stakeholders place on effective communication, respect for differing views, and participatory decision-making, underscoring consensus-building as the foundation of sustainable cooperation. Ranked third was Environmental or Ecosystem Considerations (RII: 0.62; Mean: 3.11), indicating strong stakeholder support for embedding environmental sustainability into ecotourism strategies. Willingness to Implement Decisions (RII: 0.61; Mean: 3.03) followed, showing that stakeholders value not only planning but also the translation of strategies into tangible outcomes. In fifth place, Trust among Stakeholders (RII: 0.60; Mean: 3.00) reflects the necessity of building secure and reliable relationships to sustain coordinated action. Transparency and Comprehensiveness tied for sixth (RII: 0.59; Mean: 2.97), reinforcing the importance of accountability and openness in governance. Local Economic Development and Socio-Cultural Pride ranked eighth (RII: 0.58; Mean: 2.89), suggesting that while recognized, cultural and economic dimensions of ecotourism remain under-integrated into planning and practice. Finally, Power Decentralization ranked lowest (RII: 0.54; Mean: 2.69), signaling limited emphasis on shared power and local-level governance within current ecotourism arrangements. Overall, the findings reveal a strong focus on cooperation, environmental stewardship, and open governance, but weaker attention to socio-cultural aspects and decentralization, pointing to critical areas for future improvement. Strengthening these elements could foster greater stakeholder commitment and lead to a more inclusive and sustainable ecotourism system.

Building on the RII-based assessment, the next stage of analysis employs thematic exploration of stakeholder commitment at YNP. Drawing on in-depth interviews and field observations, six broad themes are identified and examined to reveal common patterns, challenges, and context-specific dynamics that define ecotourism practices in the park.

Table 2: The Present State of Ecotourism Stakeholders' Commitment in YNP

Index	RII	Mean	Rank
Mutual Understanding and Agreement	0.63	3.14	1
Reaching Common Decisions	0.63	3.14	1
Environmental or ecosystem considerations	0.62	3.11	3
Willing to implement Decisions	0.61	3.03	4
Trust between and among stakeholders	0.60	3.00	5
Comprehensiveness	0.59	2.97	6
Transparency	0.59	2.97	6
Socio - Culture pride and local economic development	0.58	2.89	8
Power Decentralization	0.54	2.69	9

5.1 Conservation threats and environmental barriers

A major issue raised by stakeholders was the growing environmental pressures on YNP, largely driven by unsustainable human activities that threaten both biodiversity and the integrity of natural habitats. Among these, poaching was most frequently highlighted as a persistent and escalating threat to wildlife populations, accounting for 31% of conservation-related concerns and ranking as the highest environmental issue reported (Figure 2). Closely following was habitat degradation caused by illegal tree felling and land clearing, mentioned by 13% of respondents. Stakeholders noted that these practices not only reduce forest cover but also disrupt animal movement and feeding patterns. As YOTF3 explained:

"Trees are illegally cut and most of the time the park authorities are either unaware or have not given consent, resulting in deforestation and degradation of habitats."

In addition, increasing and largely unregulated human activity, whether from tourists, local vendors, or unauthorized visitors—was said to disturb wildlife, leading to signs of distress such as avoidance of open areas, changes in feeding behavior, and altered migration patterns.Tourist overcrowding also emerged as a key concern, with 19% of stakeholders identifying the uncontrolled flow of safari vehicles and visitors as a major threat to both wildlife and visitor experiences. YOTF1 described:

"Sometimes, when you see dozens of jeeps surrounding an individual leopard with engines revving and people pushing to take pictures, it shows how much stress is put on the animals."

Similarly, YOTF3 observed:

"A countless number of vehicles come to the park daily, far beyond what the park can comfortably handle. They produce constant noise, annoy the animals, and cause traffic jams along safari tracks. During peak hours, dozens of jeeps can crowd a single viewing spot, creating a hectic experience for both visitors and wildlife. Such vehicle pressure cannot be sustained and has severe consequences on the natural behavior of animals."

Echoing this concern, YSCA1 added:

"Even on normal days, the heavy traffic of vehicles jeopardizes both the visitor experience and the safety of wildlife."

The impact of vehicle activity was also felt by nearby communities. YLC8 noted:

"We even hear the constant roar of safari vehicles from our village," raising fears that persistent noise pollution may push wildlife deeper into remote areas or even beyond park boundaries.

Finally, YOTF2 remarked that "leopards, previously cautious around humans, are now subjected to intense tourist attention at close range," highlighting notable behavioral changes linked to growing tourism pressures.

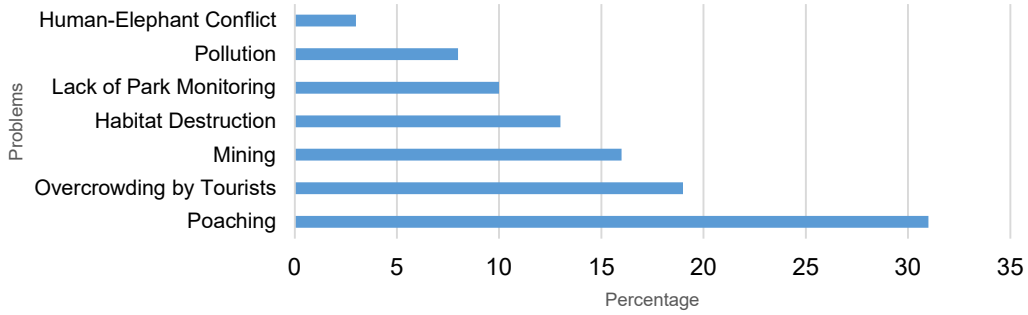

Figure 2: Conservation threats and environmental barriers (Source: Field data analysis, 2023)

Pollution also emerged as a significant concern, particularly in relation to non-biodegradable waste such as abandoned plastic bottles and food wrappings left behind by tourists, which accounted for 8% of reported environmental issues. As YT1 cautioned, "Every non-biodegradable waste added to the environment increases its burden," underscoring the impact of poor waste management practices. Mining activities were highlighted in 16% of responses and were described as having potentially irreversible effects on both land and water systems in the long term. In addition, 10% of stakeholders expressed frustration over the lack of proper park surveillance, citing inadequate manpower and monitoring systems to prevent destructive activities. Although less frequently discussed, human-elephant conflict was also regarded as highly relevant, particularly by 3% of community members living near the park who face risks of damage to their farms and threats to their personal safety.

These environmental concerns were often intertwined with critiques of poor governance and weak regulatory enforcement. While stakeholders consistently framed these challenges as urgent, they also expressed a shared commitment to conservation objectives, especially among those most directly dependent on the park ecosystem. This strong environmental emphasis was reflected in the analytical results, where environmental and ecosystem-related issues ranked third in stakeholder priorities, with a high RII value of 0.62. This underscores the central importance of ecological sustainability among stakeholders. Collectively, these findings highlight the urgent need for the adoption of sustainable practices and long-term, coordinated interventions to safeguard YNP's biodiversity and ensure a sustainable future for its ecotourism (Figure 3).

5.2 Disparities in Stakeholder Commitment

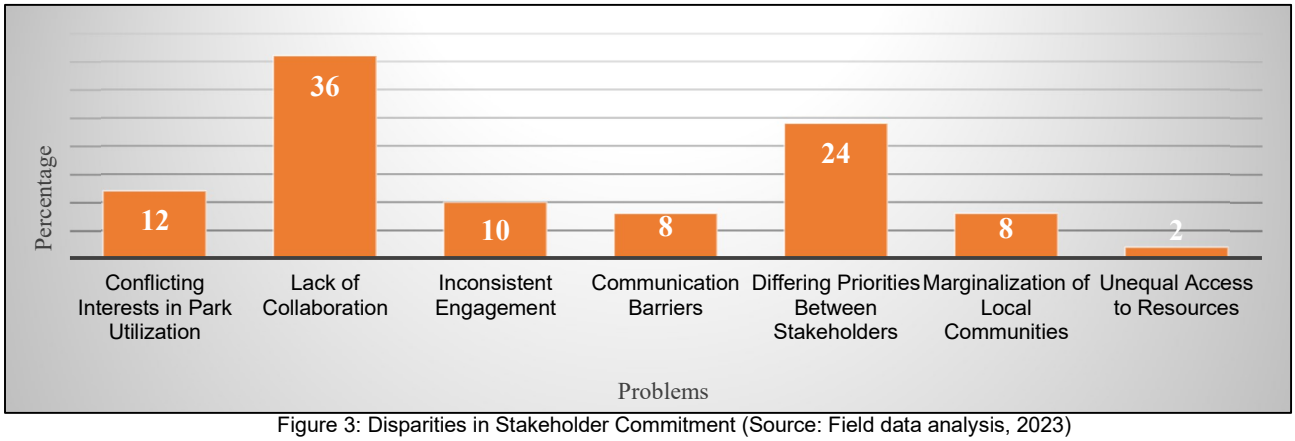

Figure 3: Disparities in Stakeholder Commitment (Source: Field data analysis, 2023)

Besides environmental issues, the assessment results also point to considerable variation in the cohesion and quality of stakeholder commitment to ecotourism. Many participants highlighted a lack of coordination and shared purpose among key stakeholders, reporting fragmented efforts. Indeed, 36% of stakeholders identified poor coordination as a major obstacle, often citing conflicting agendas between government agencies, third-party tourism facilitators, and conservation bodies. Divergent priorities, mentioned by 24% of respondents, typically reflected tensions between profit motives and environmental accountability. Some interviewees further noted that short-term economic considerations often dominated long-term sustainability, a concern expressed by 12% of respondents who highlighted profit-making as a central issue.

YOTF3 articulated this concern: “Park rules change with every new minister. We don’t know who’s really in charge,” illustrating the inconsistency in policy implementation. YLC3 similarly remarked, “We have meetings, but decisions are made without our input. It's just to show on paper that we were consulted,” highlighting superficial engagement processes. YSCA1 added, “Without strict entry limits, Yala will lose its appeal both as a sanctuary and a tourist destination.” Commercial interests also emerged as a challenge: YOTF1 noted, “Our people don’t want to do anything that keeps the environment safe if it reduces their profits,” while YOTF4 observed that politically influential individuals often prioritize short-term gains over ecological welfare. YLC2 added, “Some stakeholders remain disengaged even when the environmental challenges are apparent.” Collectively, these accounts underscore that governance fragmentation and unequal responsibility remain threats to effective conservation planning.

Communication and representation problems further exacerbate this disunity. Ten percent of participants reported inconsistent stakeholder involvement, particularly highlighting the exclusion of local communities from planning processes. Eight percent noted communication gaps that left some stakeholders isolated within decision-making networks. Local communities also expressed concerns about inequitable returns from tourism growth and wildlife impacts, raised in 8% of interviews. A minority of 2% mentioned unequal resource distribution, reflecting power disparities in who receives support or funding for ecotourism initiatives. Similar trends were reported in Udawalawa National Park, where poor cooperation (41%), irregular participation (20%), and weak communication (12%) hindered effective ecotourism (Nimalasiri & Bandara, 2024; Nimalasiri et al., 2025). These disparities contribute to a fragmented governance system that marginalizes local voices, fueling stakeholder grievances in Yala.

While less frequently discussed, issues of broken trust and limited shared decision-making were also evident. These imbalances suggest that although ecotourism in Yala is highly valued, governance remains shaped by unequal power relations and actor networks. This pattern is reinforced by the RII analysis: decentralization of power received the least attention (RII: 0.54), while trust among stakeholders received moderate attention (RII: 0.60). Although trust and power-sharing are recognized as significant, they remain lower priorities compared to mutual understanding, collaborative decision-making, and environmental awareness. These findings align with qualitative accounts of shallow involvement, hierarchical decision-making, and limited cooperation. Taken together, the interviews and RII patterns highlight the urgent need to foster participatory governance, build trust among stakeholders, and ensure equitable partnerships to support inclusive and sustainable ecotourism growth in Yala.

5.3 Infrastructure Deficiencies

Another theme that emanated was that of infrastructure constraints as stakeholders had a general agreement that existing facilities are not sufficient to accommodate sustainable ecotourism. Inadequate visitor facilities, that is, run-down buildings and unpaved roads were mentioned in 26% of the interviews. Such conditions were observed to affect not only tourists but animals as well with some of the participants indicating that hard terrain results in poor driving habits and stress among animals. YT4 highlighted this mismatch when he mentioned, stating, *“We don't even have proper toilets at main entry points, but they charge tourists high fees,”* that indicate the difference between the collection of revenue and the service delivery. YLC1 mentioned that, *“Bad roads damage vehicles and disturb animals. A well-managed road system could control traffic and protect the park,”* highlighting the dual impact of infrastructure neglect. In a related manner, YLC2 termed them as unsafe and poorly constructed roads, whereas YT1 observed that poor road networks are barriers to enjoyment of the tourism industry as well as wildlife conservation. YOTF5 further noted, *“We have not done enough to provide facilities that match international standards or enhance tourist experiences,”* and this poses a lost chance of having better infrastructure with respect to ecological as well as recreational aspects.

One of the most popular concerns was the waste management, which was discussed by 29% of stakeholders. Some of these reported that there were no disposal systems in place and the waste specially non-degradable was usually left lying around or buried in the wrong manner. YT1 cautioned that *“The impact of any non-biodegradable waste in the environment will only add to the burden to the environment,”* this emphasizes the fact that tourism waste has a cumulative effect on the park ecosystems. This problem was particularly severe around popular wildlife-watching areas as well as park access points. Only 9% of respondents cited limited access and connectivity, among whom several also highlighted the lack of transportation infrastructure as a means of preventing the participation of the local economy and responses to emergencies. According to YSCA2, who said, *“They put up rules, but no one explains them to tourists,”* as opposed to the absence of the formal infrastructure that might educate visitors and make them understand and abide by the park rules. On that note, 17% of the respondents also

indicated that lack of informational signs and information boards was one of the major problems and appropriate signs would ease undesirable habits and inform the public. Also, 19% of interviewees mentioned the absence of the properly designed wildlife observation platforms, and they fear the uncontrolled thronging in the ecologically sensitive zones. All these frustrations based on infrastructure indicated a bigger concern with respect to planning and accountability. YSCA1 indicated that the development cost the environment as the roads were constructed and trees destroyed, and the animals lacked their natural routes. Interviewees did not necessarily put their statements in the context of policy, but there was a demand of participatory infrastructure development, as well as enhanced oversight.

These concerns also resonated in the supporting tools that were applied during the analysis the themes of comprehensiveness and transparency were included, but with moderate measures as the RII value was 0.59 in both cases. The scores provide evidence that even though the stakeholders are very appreciative of good planning and transparency, the two values are not of the top priority. Moreover, the least RII score (0.54), power decentralization indicates that the decision-making process regarding the infrastructure is rather top-down so that the interest of local and community-based stakeholders play minor role in the prioritization of development.

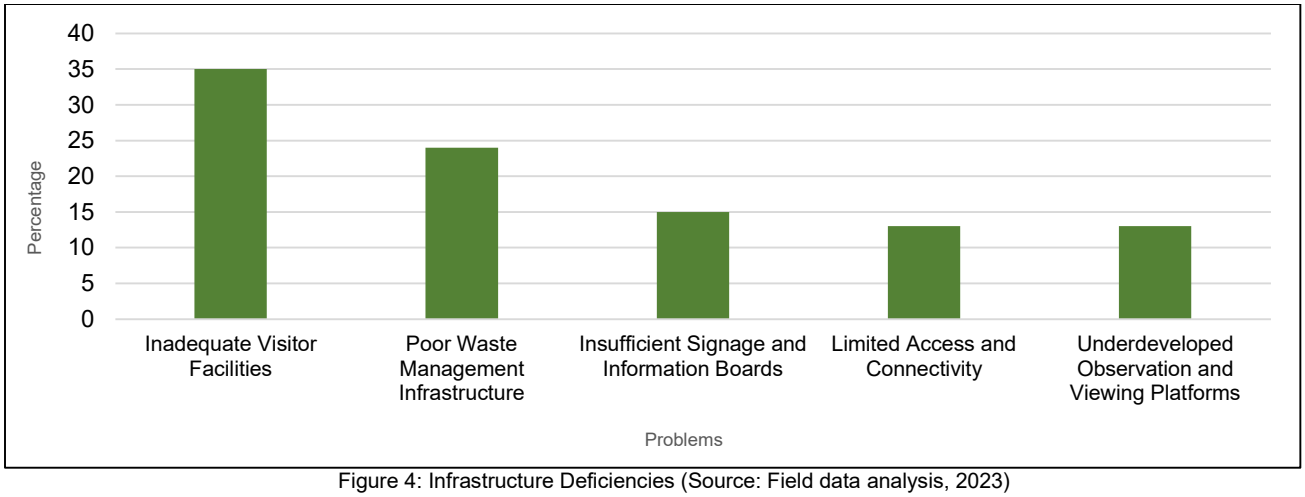

Figure 4: Infrastructure Deficiencies (Source: Field data analysis, 2023)

5.4 Governance and Policy Gaps

Another major theme identified was that of governance and policy related lapses, as the stakeholder groups were quite concerned with the lack of enforcement, reinvestment, and a steer of any strategic control of management, or YNP (Figure 5). YOTF1 mentioned, *"There are rules that are on paper, but outside in the park it is a free for all"* which sums up the perceived difference between rules and the way they are practiced in the field. YLC2 reiterated this by saying, *"Decisions concerning the park are reached elsewhere by the people, who never consult us the people who live by Yala, as to what we see or what we need."* It is here that the voice of the people is barred in giving anything to do with the park consequently rendering it a non-issue. This reflects to the wider dissatisfaction of the absence of the long-term strategic planning and efficient stakeholder action. One of the issues that kept popping up in interviews was political interference as 32% of them would mention that conservation priorities are often superseded by current political agendas.

Financial management was also blamed and specially the low difference between revenue generation and the reinvestment. YSCA1 mentioned that, *"By October this year 2023, the income is close to one billion rupees, but the park sees no significant improvement,"* and YOTF3 had added that it needed that the *"At least the small fraction of the Yala income should be utilized on its development.*" Also there is the issue of tourism revenue being given high precedence over ecological protection that is highlighted by 18% stakeholders who observe that economic motives are at times given high priority than sustainability. YOTF5 stressed this imbalance by declaring, *"The government lacks a concrete policy in balancing the flow of visitors and conservation of the park biodiversity."* Weak enforcement of the current laws particularly relating to overcrowding, off-road driving, and illegal activities were reported by 15% of the respondents, whereas 12% blamed absence of detailed policy sets to govern ecotourism development. Some more gaps were observed with regard to stakeholder involvement and monitoring. Failure by firms to engage effectively with stakeholders was cited by 9% of the respondents as this group had the feeling of being excluded in consultations. The conservation staff reported insufficient patrol and enforcement capability 8%, and 6% voiced worries about under-funded conservation initiatives. Even though most of the participants might not have referred to the language of technical governance, their stories have been congruent on how to involve more inclusive, responsible, and plans-driven decisions.

The supporting analysis also supported these concerns, and RII indicators of 0.59 were achieved in both of the transparency and comprehensiveness, showing that themes related to governance are not the priority of the stakeholders though these are being acknowledged by the stakeholders. The least stressed factor was power decentralization where (RII score = 0.54) indicating an imminent problem of power centralization and poor input of local stakeholders in decision-making. The patterns in this section point towards the necessity of structural changes that support the participatory nature, equal power sharing, and structures of governance offering transparency and responsiveness to the community as three important parts of the sustainable ecotourism future of Yala.

Finding of this research is also supported by paralleled study of Udawalawa, where ineffective governance like insufficient enforcement (40%) and vertical decision-making (25%) also weakened the turns of stakeholders and sustainability of the park (Nimalasiri et al., 2025). The consistency in the governance issues between Yala and Udawalawa is an indication that the system of Sri Lankan parks in general requires a reformation.

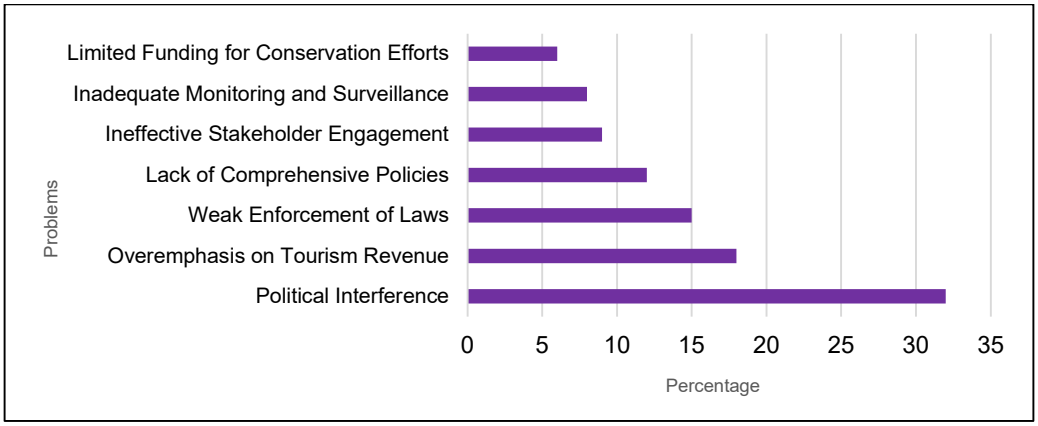

Figure 5: Governance and policy gaps (Source: Field data analysis, 2023)

5.5 Cultural and Social Disruptions

Tourism has not only had effect on the ecosystems in YNP but has also changed the social structure of communities surrounding the village. One of the issues that really bothered 34% of stakeholders was the issue of income inequality since they felt that the benefits associated with ecotourism favored few players like tour companies and hoteliers at the detriment of many local families. This economic inequality has helped give rise to greater social tension such as poor relationships between conservation authorities and local people mentioned in 20% of interviews being frequently focused on land access, crop destruction and a perceived lack of access and influence over decision-making. The erosion of cultural identity was highlighted in 16% of responses, where tourism expansion was seen to displace or commodify traditional customs (Figure 6)..

These themes were affirmed by narratives of community stakeholders. YLC1 noted that *"Children nowadays played dreams of becoming jeep drivers instead of farmers or teacher"* traducing the traditional jobs as devalued and short term in view of the tourism related dreams. YLC2 explained, they are considered as cheap labor, but not partners, and this observation characterized 14% of answers that pertained to the marginalization of younger generations, which is a trend replicated elsewhere. As YLC5 mentioned, economic disparity and unavailability of opportunity associated with easy tourism money have resulted in drinking alcohol and using drugs among youths in the village. These behavioural issues were also supported by interview results where drug addiction and prostitution were identified as a factor in 10% and 6% of the interviews respectively, and this was usually with a feeling that self-reliance and communal identity that were previously characteristic of the local life were being lost.

Such interferences confirm the existence of a more rounded and comprehensive strategy of ecotourism development in Yala which should go far beyond economic indicator to include social equity and cultural preservation. These are corroborated by broader analysis where socio-cultural pride and local economic development has comparatively low ranking (RII: 0.58) as well as power decentralization which is the least (RII: 0.54). These scores show that there is not much integration on personal community voices, cultural sensitivity and joint decisions in the present tourism governance mechanism. The further decline in participatory interaction and decentralized power has led to current disparities and threat to cultural disintegration. Collectively, the results establish the importance of the imperative that any prospective sustainable future of ecotourism in the Yala region should incorporate in its heart valves, namely inclusive planning and youth involvement, as well as the respect of the cultural identity.

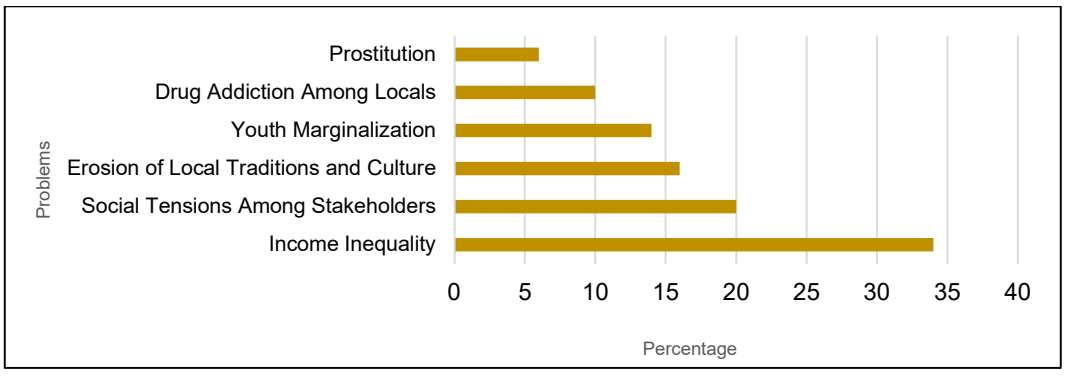

Figure 6: Cultural and Social Disruptions (Source: Field data analysis, 2023)

5.6 Economic Disparities

While ecotourism generates considerable income in YNP, the benefits of this revenue are unevenly distributed. The most commonly cited economic issue, mentioned by 42% of stakeholders, was the concentration of profits among a few dominant players in the tourism sector, particularly those operating larger hotels, safari businesses, and service contracts (Figure 7). YOTF1 acknowledged, "Only a few hotels benefit; the rest of the economy sees little direct gain from tourism," highlighting the limited economic inclusion of smaller actors. YLC2 similarly stated, "We watch as big companies take the profits while locals fight for scraps," while YOTF6 observed, "From hotels to garages and jeep drivers,

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certain groups reap the majority of the financial rewards." These sentiments reflect the frustration of small-scale vendors and community-based entrepreneurs who are left out of the revenue chain, despite playing a critical role in the visitor experience.

Limited support for local businesses was raised in 30% of interviews. YLC3 emphasized the structural barriers to entry, explaining, "Small vendors like us need access to permit and marketing, not just talk." Many participants reported difficulties in accessing financial assistance, marketing platforms, or the licenses necessary to operate competitively. Employment generation, while acknowledged, was emphasized in only 12% of responses, suggesting that job opportunities are often seasonal, insecure, or concentrated in low-wage service roles. This concern was further reinforced by YOTF2, who remarked that peak-season demand rarely translates into long-term security for workers.

The seasonal nature of tourism was discussed by 11% of participants, with several local stakeholders noting that income during the off-season is inconsistent or non-existent. A smaller but significant group (5%) voiced concerns about the lack of reinvestment into community infrastructure, education, and conservation projects. For them, the issue was not only receiving income but also having a voice in how tourism revenue is allocated. YLC4 remarked, "There is business here because of tourists, but not all benefit equally," highlighting a deeper need for equitable representation in ecotourism governance.

These considerations underscore the need for structural adjustments in ecotourism administration to ensure that revenue is not only generated but also fairly distributed, reinvested, and used to build local resilience. Stakeholders consistently advocated for more meaningful economic inclusion and better community representation in financial decision-making. These concerns are supported by broader analysis, where socio-cultural pride and local economic development scored an RII of 0.58, and power decentralization scored 0.54, positioning them among the lower-priority indicators. These findings reflect the inadequacy of current tourism policies in integrating fair benefit distribution with participatory governance. Addressing these gaps is essential to establish a more inclusive and sustainable model of ecotourism—one that is economically just, based on shared decision-making, and invested in the long-term sustainability of Yala.

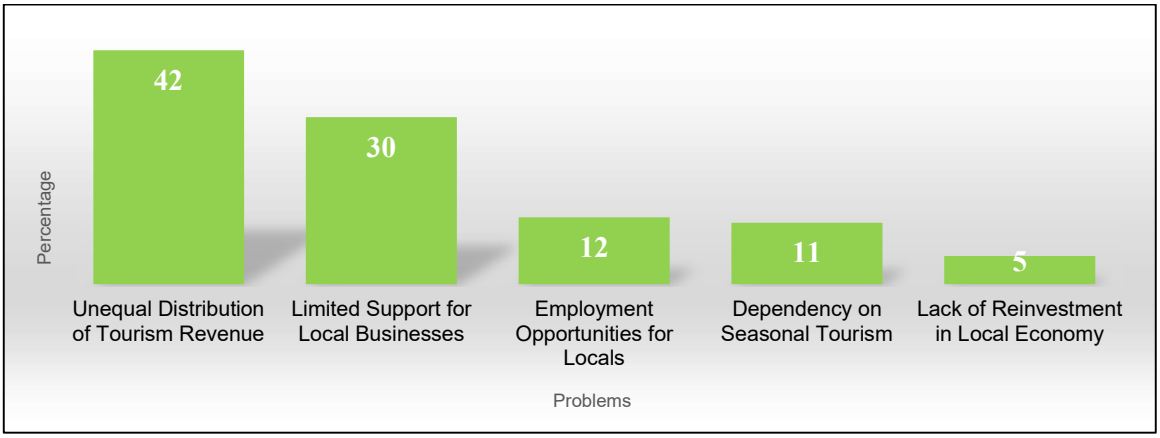

Figure 7: Economic Disparities (Source: Field data analysis, 2023)

6.0 Discussion

Based on the results of the study, it can be concluded that the sustainable development of ecotourism in YNP should rely on the combined efforts of various stakeholder groups. To better define the accessibility and relevance of the recommendations, they are classified according to stakeholder type: local community members, state-centered agencies, outside tourism facilitators, and tourists. This approach provides targeted guidance for each group to reinforce commitment, collaboration, and the sustainability of ecotourism.

- Local community members
  - Intensive Participation and Ownership Local communities should be actively involved in decision-making through empowerment mechanisms, ensuring that local voices are formally integrated into governance structures. This includes participatory planning forums and community-driven monitoring systems.
  - Encourage Youth Involvement: Implement targeted programs in ecotourism education, vocational training, and entrepreneurship to reduce youth marginalization and engage them in conservation and tourism initiatives..
  - Support Cultural Heritage and Identity: Conserve and promote traditional knowledge, crafts, and cultural activities as part of ecotourism, strengthening local pride and socio-cultural sustainability.
  - Enable Fair Economic Gain: Support community-based tourism enterprises, provide access to microfinance, and ensure equitable participation in tourism value chains to guarantee fair income distribution.

- State-Centered Agencies
  - Empower Environmental Governance: Enforce laws related to poaching, illegal land appropriation, overpopulation, and waste management. Equip park authorities with sufficient personnel, training, and modern surveillance technologies to support proactive enforcement.
  - Devolution of Decision-Making: Establish decentralized governance mechanisms that allow local-level input and co-management in matters such as park zoning, infrastructure planning, and revenue distribution.
  - Invest in Sustainable Infrastructure: Improve visitor facilities, transport systems, and signage with ecologically sensitive designs. Ensure that infrastructure development aligns with both conservation goals and community interests.
  - Enhance Institutional Transparency and Accountability: Implement regular public reporting on tourism revenue, budget allocation, and conservation outcomes. Create grievance redress mechanisms and feedback loops to strengthen trust and accountability.

- , Outside-tourism facilitators and tourists
  - Engage in Responsible Tourism Practices: Train employees on environmental ethics, wildlife protection, and cultural sensitivity. Minimize ecological impacts through controlled tourism activities and adherence to eco-certification standards.
  - Foster Community Engagement: Involve local suppliers, artisans, and guides to create shared value. Incorporate cultural and community-based experiences into tour activities to make tourism offerings more inclusive and diverse.
  - Pund Capacity Building and Infrastructure: Participate in public-private partnerships to support local training programs, conservation initiatives, and environmentally-friendly infrastructure that aligns with national park objectives.
  - Education and Awareness: Conduct awareness campaigns targeting both tourists and other stakeholders to promote sustainable tourism principles, the importance of conservation, and responsible practices within protected areas.
  - Monitoring and Evaluation Systems: Establish regular, stakeholder-inclusive mechanisms to assess the impacts of ecotourism, stakeholder satisfaction, and governance outcomes, supporting adaptive management strategies.

7.0 Conclusions

This research paper presents a qualitative case study exploring the perspectives of various stakeholders on sustainable ecotourism in Yala National Park (YNP). The findings are based on in-depth interviews, field observations, and thematic analysis, highlighting both the opportunities and challenges within the park's ecotourism framework. Stakeholders were highly consistent in emphasizing the importance of environmental conservation, gender awareness, and participatory decision-making. However, systemic challengessuch as weak governance, inadequate infrastructure, socio-cultural marginalization, and uneven economic benefits, undermine these commitments. Poaching, habitat destruction, and uncontrolled tourism were identified as the most significant threats to the ecological integrity of YNP. Although stakeholders generally recognize the importance of sustainable practices, conflicting interests, power imbalances, and insufficient coordination often lead to disorientation in their actions. Policy gaps, lack of enforcement, and inadequate infrastructure further impede conservation efforts and contribute to lower visitor satisfaction

` This paper contributes to the literature on ecotourism governance by emphasizing stakeholder commitment within the context of a major South Asian protected area. It addresses critical knowledge gaps in protected area management in Sri Lanka by connecting qualitative stakeholder perceptions with actionable recommendations on participatory governance, equitable benefit distribution, and culturally sensitive tourism planning. To advance these findings, conservation agencies, tourism regulators, and stakeholders should institutionalize mechanisms for stakeholder participation, decentralized decision-making, and fair allocation of tourism benefits. Such measures can inform the design of reform policies and institutional structures grounded in cooperation, transparency, and accountability. Through these efforts, YNP has the potential to serve as a model of community-based sustainable ecotourism not only in Sri Lanka but across the wider region.

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