

Striking a Balance between Conservation and Tourism Growth: A Research on the Management of Heritage Sites in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Tourism is an important facet of the economic growth of Sri Lanka, which has been contributing to the earning of foreign exchange and generation of jobs. Some of the top attractions in the country include the cultural and heritage sites of the country, which have been recognized by UNESCO, including Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Sigiriya, and Kandy, and are critical in forming the tourism identity of the country. The mushrooming tourism in these regions has, however, led to increasing issues regarding sustainability, conservation, and degradation of heritage. This essay will look into the correlation between heritage conservation and tourism development, with a special concern for how management can balance both the economic gains and the conservation needs. In this research, which employs qualitative research methods, such as interviews, field observations, and document analysis, the research assesses the effects of tourism development on the chosen cultural heritage sites. The results show that although tourism has benefited by creating economic opportunities, employment, and improving infrastructure, it has also caused related problems of over-visitation, unauthorized constructions, misinterpretation of cultural narratives, and poor management of sites. The study concludes that key strategies in managing the heritage tourism industry in Sri Lanka, involving community involvement and effective protection policies, are necessary to make the heritage tourism industry sustainable. It provides recommendations on how the cooperation between the Department of Archaeology, the Central Cultural Fund, and the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority can be enhanced to preserve the cultural integrity of these locations as a heritage for future generations.

Keywords: Cultural Tourism, Heritage Management, Conservation, Sustainable Tourism

Introduction

One of the most vibrant sectors of the Sri Lankan economy has been identified as tourism, which is known to be an important contributor of foreign exchange and rural development. The heritage assets of the country have received less than two million visitors every year, with six UNESCO cultural world heritage sites and two natural sites. By concentrating on heritage tourism, the government strives to use these resources as an economic booster and at the same time maintain them as a national identity and a cultural continuum. The combination of conservation and tourism development, however, is a challenge that has continued to exist. The high levels of visitation have heightened the stress on delicate heritage settings, and commercial activities surrounding sacred and archaeological areas have cast doubt on the concepts of authenticity, overcrowding, and the decay of these areas. This study examines the manner in which Sri Lanka can be able to better handle heritage tourism without creating an imbalance between economic benefits and the conservation of cultural integrity.

Literature Review

Heritage tourism and conservation emphasize the importance of protecting and preserving historical, cultural, and natural heritage sites for the benefit of present and future generations. These heritage resources not only represent a nation's identity and cultural legacy but also serve as major attractions for tourists worldwide. According to the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS, 1999), heritage tourism refers to travel undertaken with the intention of experiencing authentic cultural and historical resources. As one of the fastest-growing sectors of international tourism, heritage tourism contributes significantly to economic development while promoting cultural understanding and appreciation.

However, the rapid growth of tourism presents significant challenges for heritage conservation. Richards (1996) argues that heritage destinations should be managed according to the principles of sustainable tourism to ensure the long-term protection of both tangible heritage (such as monuments, archaeological sites, historic buildings,

and cultural landscapes) and intangible heritage (including traditions, customs, languages, rituals, and performing arts).

If tourism development is poorly planned or inadequately managed, it can negatively affect the integrity and authenticity of heritage sites. Excessive visitor numbers, uncontrolled infrastructure development, environmental degradation, and the commercialization of local culture may damage historical monuments and erode traditional cultural practices. As noted by Dogan (1989) and Robinson (1999), unregulated tourism growth can compromise the authenticity of heritage resources, diminish local cultural identity, and threaten the long-term sustainability of heritage destinations.

Therefore, achieving a balance between tourism development and heritage conservation is essential. Sustainable heritage tourism requires effective conservation policies, community participation, responsible visitor management, stakeholder collaboration, and educational initiatives that promote respect for cultural and natural heritage. Such an approach ensures that heritage sites continue to provide meaningful experiences for visitors while safeguarding their historical, cultural, and environmental significance for future generations.



Figure 1: Cultural Triangle of Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's ancient civilization is represented by the renowned Cultural Triangle, which comprises the UNESCO World Heritage Sites of Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Sigiriya, Dambulla, and Kandy. These destinations are among the country's most significant cultural and historical attractions, drawing both international and domestic tourists. They offer visitors unique opportunities to experience Sri Lanka's rich cultural heritage while providing spiritual, educational, and recreational experiences.

Despite their popularity and cultural significance, these heritage destinations face several challenges related to tourism development and conservation. According to Gnanapala and Sandaruwani (2016), issues such as unauthorized constructions, inadequate infrastructure, insufficient visitor management, and weak coordination among tourism authorities and heritage conservation agencies continue to threaten the sustainable management of these sites. These challenges highlight the need for integrated planning and collaborative management strategies that balance tourism development with the long-term preservation of Sri Lanka's invaluable cultural heritage. The major issue is how to balance economic gains and conservation needs. The primary responsibility for preservation rests with the Central Cultural Fund (CCF) and the Department of Archaeology, though tourism-related pressures often lie beyond their control.

The concept of sustainable heritage management is based upon the view that management practices should be sustainable to provide a viable and efficient production system. Sustainable heritage management is founded on the notion that management activities must be sustainable in the process of delivering a viable and efficient production system. Sustainable heritage management is the fusion of tourism planning, environment, cultural and social concerns all over the world (Sunlu, 2003). The UNWTO (2015) recommends that heritage management needs to involve the community, control visitor numbers, and attract reinvestment of tourism revenues in conservation. The models that have worked well, like those used in Angkor (Cambodia) and Bagan (Myanmar), illustrate the significance of participatory governance and visitor capacity constraints.

Methodology

The present work will be a qualitative study utilising the six cultural world heritage sites in Sri Lanka: Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Sigiriya, Dambulla, Kandy, and Galle Fort. This study adopted a qualitative research approach using multiple data collection methods to obtain a comprehensive understanding of heritage tourism and conservation in Sri Lanka's Cultural Triangle. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 30 participants, comprising 10 heritage site officers, 10 licensed tour guides, and 10 local community members. These participants were purposively selected based on their direct involvement in heritage tourism and conservation activities.

In addition, three focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with a total of 24 participants (8 participants per group) to explore perceptions of visitor behaviour, conservation challenges, and destination management practices. Participant observation was also employed at selected heritage sites to document visitor behaviour, conservation practices, site management, and tourist–community interactions.

Secondary data were obtained from official publications and reports of the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA), the Central Cultural Fund (CCF), UNESCO, and other relevant government documents and scholarly literature. These sources provided valuable information on visitor statistics, heritage conservation policies, tourism development, and site management.

Findings

4.1 Economic and Developmental Advantages

The heritage sites have also received a lot of revenue through tourism, especially in the Cultural Triangle. An example is that Sigiriya and Polonnaruwa are able to bring in a lot of revenue, which is used to fund restoration initiatives and jobs as well as

community-based businesses. The local people gain from cottage industries, like the production of crafts, guiding, and homestays.

Visitors to tourist attractions administered by the Central Cultural Fund

Location	No of Foreign Visitors	No of Local Visitors	Total No of Visitors	Local Visitor Income	Foreign Visitor Income	Total Visitor Income
Abayagiriya	702	8565	9267	943149	6218700	7161849
Jethawanaramaya	34601	6770	41371	782036	212086717	212868753
Sigiriya	255838	295906	551774	33959751	1955626240	1989585991
Polonnaruwa	94842	14212	109054	1441232	636596429	638037661
Kandy Museum	7808	24884	32692	2599702	13295016	15894718
Dambulla Museum	202	271	473	33310	185265	218275
Galle Museum	7808	24884	32692	2599702	13295016	15894718

Table 1: Visitors to tourist attractions administered by the Central Cultural Fund (January to June)2024.

Source: SLTDA Annual Report 2024

4.2 Visitor Trends at Cultural Heritage Sites

The visitor statistics presented in Table 1 demonstrate the continued importance of Sri Lanka's Cultural Triangle as the country's primary heritage tourism region. Heritage attractions administered by the Central Cultural Fund (CCF), including Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Sigiriya, Dambulla, and Kandy, attracted substantial numbers of domestic and international visitors during the first half of 2024. The findings indicate that these destinations remain central to Sri Lanka's cultural tourism industry because of their archaeological significance, religious value, and recognition as UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

Semi-structured interviews revealed that stakeholders perceived the increase in visitor arrivals as an indication of the post-pandemic recovery of Sri Lanka's tourism sector. Heritage site officers observed that visitor numbers had gradually returned to levels comparable to those before the economic crisis, particularly during public holidays, school vacations, and religious festivals. Tour guides similarly reported increasing demand for heritage-based itineraries, especially among international visitors seeking authentic cultural experiences, while domestic tourists frequently visited these sites for religious worship, educational purposes, and family recreation.

Participants consistently emphasized that visitor growth has generated significant socio-economic benefits for surrounding communities. Residents explained that tourism provides employment opportunities through guiding services, transportation, accommodation, handicraft production, restaurants, and informal businesses operating near heritage attractions. Many respondents viewed heritage tourism as an important source of household income and an incentive for preserving local traditions, cultural performances, and traditional crafts. Consequently, tourism was perceived not only as an economic activity but also as a mechanism for promoting cultural identity and community development.

Despite these positive contributions, respondents highlighted that visitor flows are highly concentrated at a limited number of iconic destinations, particularly Sigiriya and Kandy, resulting in spatial and temporal imbalances in tourism distribution.

Heritage officers reported that peak visitation periods often lead to overcrowding at entrances, viewing platforms, parking areas, and sacred spaces. Such congestion was perceived to reduce visitor satisfaction while simultaneously increasing pressure on fragile archaeological structures and cultural landscapes. Tour guides also noted that overcrowded conditions limit opportunities for meaningful interpretation and diminish the authenticity of the heritage experience, as visitors spend less time engaging with the site's historical and cultural significance.

Another recurring theme emerging from the interviews was the unequal distribution of tourism benefits among heritage destinations. Participants observed that internationally recognized attractions receive the majority of tourism investment, infrastructure development, and promotional activities, whereas smaller archaeological sites within the Cultural Triangle receive comparatively fewer visitors despite possessing considerable historical and cultural value. This imbalance has created disparities in local economic opportunities and has increased management pressure on the most popular heritage sites. Respondents suggested that destination diversification, improved interpretation, and the promotion of lesser-known archaeological sites could contribute to a more balanced and sustainable tourism system.

The findings also revealed that visitor numbers alone cannot be considered a reliable indicator of successful heritage tourism management. Several heritage officers emphasized that increasing arrivals without corresponding improvements in conservation planning, visitor management, and infrastructure may compromise the long-term sustainability of heritage resources. Rather than focusing exclusively on maximizing tourist numbers, participants advocated for a quality-oriented tourism model that balances visitor satisfaction with the conservation of archaeological sites, cultural authenticity, and community well-being.

Overall, the qualitative findings suggest that visitor growth presents both opportunities and challenges for heritage tourism in Sri Lanka. While increasing tourist arrivals strengthen local economies and enhance international recognition of

the country's cultural heritage, they also intensify conservation pressures, management complexities, and concerns regarding sustainability. These findings reinforce the importance of adopting integrated heritage management strategies that combine tourism development with conservation planning, stakeholder collaboration, community participation, and responsible visitor management to ensure the long-term protection of Sri Lanka's invaluable cultural heritage.

4.3 Heritage Conservation Challenges

The findings indicate that the rapid growth of heritage tourism has intensified several conservation challenges across Sri Lanka's archaeological and cultural heritage sites. Although tourism generates significant economic benefits, increasing visitor numbers have accelerated the physical deterioration of monuments through continuous foot traffic, surface erosion, vibration, and accidental damage. At highly visited destinations such as Sigiriya Rock Fortress and the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic in Kandy, visitor congestion during peak seasons reduces the quality of the visitor experience while simultaneously increasing pressure on fragile heritage resources.

Field observations also revealed that uncontrolled commercial development surrounding heritage sites has negatively affected the authenticity and visual integrity of several cultural landscapes. Unauthorized constructions, roadside commercial activities, informal vendors, and inappropriate infrastructure development around Galle Fort and Dambulla have altered the historic setting and, in some instances, conflicted with existing heritage conservation regulations. Such developments reduce the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of UNESCO World Heritage Sites and may compromise their long-term conservation objectives.

4.4 Gaps in Heritage Management and Governance

The study identified significant institutional and governance challenges affecting the sustainable management of heritage tourism. Interviews with stakeholders revealed that multiple government agencies—including the Central Cultural Fund (CCF), the Department of Archaeology, the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA), local authorities, and provincial administrative bodies—share

responsibilities for heritage site management. However, overlapping institutional mandates and limited inter-agency coordination frequently result in fragmented decision-making and inconsistent policy implementation.

Participants emphasized that tourism promotion strategies are often developed independently from conservation planning. While tourism authorities prioritize increasing visitor arrivals and improving tourism infrastructure, heritage management agencies focus primarily on archaeological preservation. The absence of an integrated management framework has created conflicts regarding infrastructure development, visitor capacity, commercial activities, and conservation priorities.

Another governance concern identified during the study was the limited involvement of local communities in decision-making processes. Although community members depend on tourism for income generation, they have relatively few opportunities to participate in heritage planning and conservation initiatives. Greater stakeholder collaboration, community participation, and coordinated governance mechanisms would contribute to more sustainable and inclusive heritage management.

4.5 Visitor Behaviour and Cultural Sensitivity

Visitor behaviour emerged as an important factor influencing both heritage conservation and the preservation of cultural values. Interviews with heritage site officers and tour guides indicated that many visitors demonstrated appropriate respect toward cultural and religious sites; however, a noticeable proportion engaged in behaviours that conflicted with local customs and site regulations.

Common issues observed included wearing inappropriate clothing at religious monuments, climbing or touching protected archaeological structures, littering, producing excessive noise within sacred areas, and taking photographs in locations where photography was restricted. In several instances, tourists were observed posing in culturally insensitive ways near religious statues and sacred monuments, actions that were perceived by local communities as disrespectful to their religious beliefs and cultural traditions.

These behavioural issues can largely be attributed to inadequate visitor awareness, language barriers, limited interpretation, and insufficient educational signage at heritage sites. The findings indicate that improving visitor education should become a central component of heritage management. Well-designed interpretation centres, multilingual information boards, mandatory visitor guidelines, trained tour guides, and digital awareness campaigns could significantly improve visitor behaviour while enhancing appreciation of Sri Lanka's cultural heritage.

Discussion

To balance tourism development and conservation, there is a need to re-examine the heritage management framework of Sri Lanka. Although the economic rationale influences the tourism policy, the long-term sustainability is based on the preservation of cultural integrity. The concept of carrying capacity should be integrated into the planning of tourism to avoid excessive exploitation. Further, it is necessary to reinvest the tourism revenues towards conservation and community development. The engagement of the local communities in participatory decision-making empowers them to act as stewards and prevent the opposition between conservation and livelihoods.

Conclusion and Recommendations

There are opportunities and challenges of heritage tourism in Sri Lanka. Although it is playing a significant role in the national economy, unplanned expansion is jeopardizing the genuineness and sustainability of cultural properties. The present study addresses the importance of a balanced strategy with respect to integrated management structures, visitor management plans, revenue reinvestment, community involvement, and capacity building. The preservation of Sri Lanka's cultural heritage requires more than merely the preservation of monuments, as it also requires preservation of meaning, stories, and values of the monuments. Finding a balance between growth and conservation is thus one of the ways to lasting cultural as well as economic sustainability.

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