

# Recreationist perspectives, attitudes, and perceptions towards national park management in Sri Lanka

## Abstract

*Sri Lanka's National Parks (NPs) are becoming prime destinations for both foreign and domestic tourists. With rising heterogeneous demand for nature-based experiences, NP administrators are facing the challenge of re-crafting policy and nature-based use-models to meet the diverse expectations of visitors while achieving conservation goals. As such, an understanding of NP visitor perspectives is essential in making sound management decisions to effectively accommodate conservation and recreational uses. This study explores visitor perceptions of roles, functions, policies and best uses of NPs in Sri Lanka. On-site interviews from 682 visitors to two highly-visited NPs revealed that a majority of respondents view "ecological protection" as the most important role of NPs. Recreation and commercial development-related roles were ranked lower in overall importance. Factor analysis and subsequent ANOVA comparisons further identified core belief constructs that ultimately supported the notion of NP policy should be more protection-oriented rather than accommodating to recreation. This is not to say that recreation should not be one of the multiple uses of NPs from the respondents' viewpoint. Although non-consumptive activities were rated most appropriate, visitors also desire that park infrastructure and visitor services to be developed and maintained at an acceptable level in order for them to satisfactorily experience the destination.*

*Key words: visitor attitudes; nature-based tourism; national parks; ecotourism; visitor management; Sri Lanka*

## Introduction

Tourism, the largest service-sector industry in the global economy in terms of value, can play a significant role in promoting national economic development in developing countries endowed with natural assets. Historically, Sri Lanka, the focal country of this study, has lagged neighboring Southeast Asia countries in terms of destination tourism development due to a three-decade civil war that hindered social, economic and environmental stability on a national level. Since the conclusion of the war in 2009, Sri Lanka has been on a rapid and steady path to economic recovery, including developing the potential to create a rich, diverse, and safe tourism industry.

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