

IMPORTANCE OF EMBRACING SUSTAINABILITY IN TOURISM PLACE- MAKING: A CASE STUDY IN ELLA

D. L. N. P. Liyanage

*Department of Indigenous Social Sciences, Gampaha Wickramarachchi University of
Indigenous Medicine, Sri Lanka*

Corresponding author (email: nimeshaliyanage95@gmail.com)

INTRODUCTION

Ella, a sleepy mountain hill town in Badulla District, compacted with thousands of emotions, thoughts, and experiences, creates a niche on both local and global levels. It has emerged as a top tourist destination in the country as a base for eco-tourism, which contributes to creating several opportunities for small-scale tourism operators. Though it is a small destination, it is a land of diversity that creates tourist attractions and commodities. Ella is one of the most prominent tourist destinations in recent history, a self-emerged brand in the world tourism industry. According to the Ella-Tourism Development Master Plan (2020), half of the villagers survive through traditional agricultural practices connected to their employment and vegetable farming. Considering the number of benefits a community can earn, more people shifted from traditional agricultural practices into tourism in Ella. Most teenagers and the younger generation are attracted to the benefits they can earn and engage in illegal activities.

Though it earns financial benefits via tourism, it causes various negative impacts on the community, mainly; in socio-cultural, environmental, and economic aspects. According to the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (2020), “Sustainable Tourism refers to sustainable practices in and by the tourism industry, and it is an aspiration to acknowledge all impacts of tourism, both positive and negative.” In order to examine the importance of embracing sustainability in tourism place-making within a particular place, this study aims at investigating the negative impacts on the community in Ella due to place-making in tourism. Moreover, this study aims to emphasize the importance of embracing sustainability in tourism with a particular location, as without sustainability, it causes maximized negative impacts while minimizing positive impacts. The main objective of this study is to examine both negative and positive impacts while studying the importance of embracing sustainability to promote the tourism industry to achieve its goal.

METHODOLOGY

The theoretical orientation influenced the choice of the data to select a qualitative methodological approach to collect data. Using a purposive sampling method, data were gathered from primary and secondary sources. Primary data were collected via interviews and a questionnaire survey, including 30 participants. Among them, 10 participants were interviewed using an in-depth interview method, and the rest were given a questionnaire survey. At the same time, secondary data were collected through the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority Annual Reports and Resource Profile of Ella DS Division. Overall the study aimed at qualitative data to analyze both positive and negative aspects of tourism place-making in Ella. Collected data were analyzed by using various themes arising from the gathered data. The Ella Divisional Secretariat Division (Figure 1) was selected as the study area to examine the community's negative and positive aspects of the tourism industry. This

study is based on a qualitative methodological approach to collect some individuals' feelings, thoughts, and experiences.

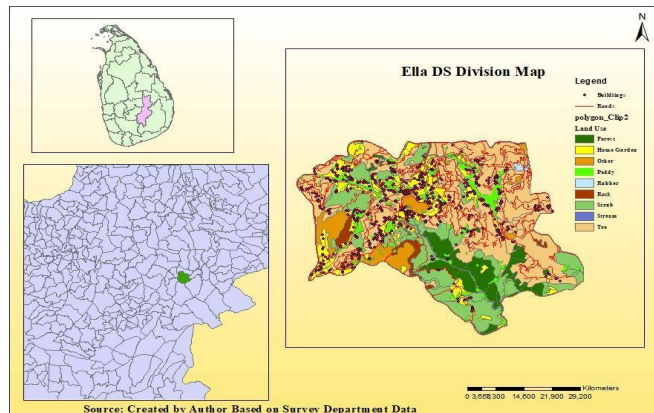


Figure 1 Ella DS Division Map

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As a tourist destination in Sri Lanka, Ella creates thousands of attachments, emotions, and experiences as a place that can be identified as a lived world in tourism place-making. Together with individuals' emotions, Ella became a spot famous for its natural beauty and calm surroundings. After the post-war boom, in 2012, Ella witnessed a fast-growing tourism trend, increased small-scale tourism operators who premise employment opportunities, and additional jobs ranging from low wage entry level to high paying professional positions in management generate more income while increasing the standard of living. Though it provides positive economic benefits to the community due to placemaking, it also has several negative impacts. The study found that it generated several illegal job opportunities, black money frauds, illegal businesses, etc. The participant describes her experiences in illegal job opportunities, *"I am 22 years old, and I went for a waiter job at one of the restaurants in Ella. After two to three years, I realized we could earn more money by doing illegal activities, and I gained more by keeping close contact with foreigners...."* (Interviewee 12, female) describes how serious this process is.

Tourism often encourages increases in the price of goods and services, land and housing, and the cost of living. It improves investments and public utilities with well-developed road networks. The number of apartments, rooms, and workers in selected hotels and homestays in Ella shows a rapid increase from 2012 to 2017 (Figure 2), showing more opportunities given by tourism contributing to the income of the people in the area.

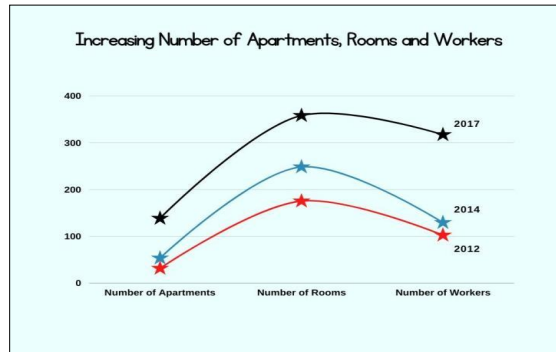


Figure 2: Increasing number of apartments, rooms and workers

Ella promotes itself as a base for eco-tourism with great scenic beauty, tourist attractions, and new homestays with traditional foods that seek emotional and spiritual connections with nature. However, according to the findings, the opposite is happening even faster. Accordingly, the study revealed that the level of pollution, destruction of vegetation, and loss of open and green space are increasing due to tourism in the area. People build their hotels, restaurants, and apartments without assessing the environmental impact and causing damage to the natural environment. According to one participant, *"Ella is a more mountainous area, so people build their hotels without any standard way which flattens the slopes. Last month there was a landslide that injured five tourists..."* (Interviewee, 18, Male), described his experience showing how non-sustainability affects a particular industry. Though it comprises agricultural lands and vegetation, natural land cover is disturbed and reduced after implementing tourism-based projects. Land degradation, excessive tree cutting, soil erosion, and natural hazards can be witnessed in Ella DS Division due to improper land use and construction of hotels.

Resulting tourism place-making in Ella after the post-war boom, tourism made a remarkable recovery, becoming our country's fastest growing economic sector. Thus, most areas are witnessing a fantastic trend, including Ella, which has transferred more than half of villagers into tourism-based livelihoods apart from agricultural-based occupations. Tourism's social and cultural consequences warrant careful consideration, as the impacts can neither become assets nor detriments to communities. Arrivals of tourists bring diverse values to the community and influence behaviors and family lives. The study found that it caused negative impacts like; excessive drinking, alcoholism, gambling, prostitution, HIV/AIDS threat, and rising crime rates, which affect the existing socio-cultural aspects. Most young students used to follow these types of unwanted lifestyles, and it made an unresolvable matter in their traditional lives. Health-related issues are crucial to the community, which cannot recover from a sudden moment. Here is one of the respondent's experiences she heard regarding health-related issues, *".....she kept a close relationship with one of the tourists who came to Ella, and he paid her for that. After some years, she married and got ready to give birth to her first child. Suddenly, she got to know she had HIV/ AIDS. Then that child died when she was giving birth to him...."* (Interviewee, 9, Female midwife)

Concerning the socio-cultural genuineness of the host community and continuing the social-cultural values and norms, protecting natural and ecological balance and providing long-term benefits equally has to be in the tourism industry to promote sustainable tourism. According

to the United Nations World Tourism Organization Agenda 2030, "Sustainable tourism development guidelines and management practices apply to all forms of tourism in all destinations, including mass tourism and the various niche tourism segments. Sustainability principles refer to tourism development's environmental, economic, and socio-cultural aspects, and a suitable balance must be established between these three dimensions to guarantee its long-term sustainability." The study found that tourism place-making in Ella hits the host community with positive and negative economic, environmental and socio-cultural impacts. It harms the goal of developing the sustainability of a place that minimises the positive impacts while increasing negative impacts. The affected community needs some awareness regarding these crucial issues raised by tourism place-making in the country, including Ella.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Tourism is one of the fast-growing economic sectors in Sri Lanka, providing several opportunities for small-scale tourism operators to go through their businesses to raise their standard of living. When a place experiences place attachment and attraction, it becomes a popular tourist destination to create a commodity of perceptions of places. After the post-war boom, Ella was fully converted into a busy, complex city, accelerating the number of tourist arrivals per month. When tourist arrivals are increased, positive and negative impacts also increase. Tourism lies upon the local community's assets and needs to enhance their lives. Though the host community benefits, tourism activities must be regulated to ensure sustainability. The study found that it is essential to embrace sustainability to minimize negative impacts while maximizing positive impacts because there is no plan to secure small-scale tourism operators in Ella when they face the decline in tourist arrivals. To ensure local communities benefit equally, there has to be a proper balance in implementing tourism policies concerning its host community. Reducing land degradation, preservation of the natural environment, improving the appearance of the area, shaping the biological diversity within the area, implementing rules and regulations for illegal activities, and conducting awareness programs for the host community are essential to ensure sustainability within the tourism industry in the country including in Ella. The study proved that even though the government has plans, they are still not in action to minimise the above negative impacts.

Keywords: Ella, negative impacts, place-making, socio-cultural, sustainable tourism

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