

**IDENTIFICATION OF TOURISM POTENTIALS AND CHALLENGES TOWARDS
SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT: A CASE STUDY OF
MORAGAHAKANDA-KALUGANGA PROJECT**

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism involves people moving from their origin to another location for leisure, business, or other activities (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2010). It can have both positive and negative impacts. Sustainable tourism serves the demands of existing visitors and host regions while safeguarding and improving their potential for the future (Bramwell & Lane, 1993). Sustainable tourism is a growing trend in Sri Lanka, aiming to balance environmental, socio-cultural, economic, and experiential consequences for visitors and locals (Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, 2017). However, tourism's contribution to rural development in Sri Lanka is small and gradual (Dissanayake & Samarathunga, 2021). Proper implementation of sustainable tourism plans can help address the underdevelopment of rural populations in Sri Lanka.

The Moragahakanda-Kaluganga Development Project, part of the Mahaweli Master Plan, aims to increase field irrigation capabilities and produce hydropower. It also focuses on ecotourism, flood mitigation, to increase inland fish output (Mahaweli Authority, 2010; Samarakoon, 2016). In the post-project phase, it is necessary to prevent further environmental impacts from informal mass tourism development. The study was conducted in the Moragahakanda-Kaluganga region of Laggala-Pallegama, Matale, Sri Lanka. The region is bordered by the Knuckles Valley, Wasgamuwa National Park, and the Polonnaruwa District. Laggala is a traditional village with rich biodiversity and diverse vegetation and wildlife. Approximately two-thirds of the region is under forest cover, most belonging to protected areas like Knuckles Conservation Forest, Wasgamuwa National Park, and Minneriya-Girithale Sanctuary (Forest Conservation Department, 2019). The study aims to identify tourism potentials, challenges and make suitable recommendations in collaboration with tourism stakeholders to support sustainable tourism development.

METHODOLOGY

The study utilized a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and field observations to gather data on tourism stakeholders in Laggala-Pallegama Divisional Secretariat. Through the maximum variation sampling method 48 respondents were identified, and 36 semi-structured interviews were conducted. The sample was selected from tourism stakeholders including residents, tourism service providers, government officers, visitors, policymakers, and other concerned parties based on a purposeful sampling method. Two focus group discussions were conducted with local communities, focusing on tourism-related groups and non-tourism related groups as suggested by previous

scholars (Samarathunga, 2018). The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews from May 2023 to June 2023, with an average duration of 15-30 minutes. Field observation was used to understand the study's context. Secondary data was obtained from books, research publications, and journal articles. A thematic analysis was performed using NVivo software, to identify themes and categories, and to code transcribed interviews and word counts. The most representative sentences were analyzed (Krippendorff, 2019; Pu et al., 2023).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The identified free codes were then allocated to one of the thirteen categories and are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Coding hierarchy for Tourism Potentials

Theme	Category	Free codes
Tourism Potentials	Man-made Attractions	Main two Reservoirs, other tanks (Wewa)
		Archeological sites
		Gem mine
		Guruwela model farm
		Laggala Green City
	Natural Attractions	Scenic spots
		Waterfalls
		Climate
		Caves
		Knuckles Mountain range
		Rivers
		Forest-parks
	Cultural Attractions	Flora
Fauna		
Religious believes		
Myths and legends		
Tourism Activities	Folk dance	
	Folk music	
	Buddhist culture	
	Adventure sports	
	Hiking	
	Trekking	
	Climbing	
	Waterfall abseiling	
	Kayaking	
	Cycling	
	Jeep safari	
Gem mining		
Bird watching		
Farming activities		
Fresh water bathing		
Viewing Landscape		
Exploring diversity		
Water-based adventure activities		

Tourism Services & Facilities	Selling products
	Accommodation
	Guiding
	Food & Beverage
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Willingness of the Community	Transportation
	Extra Income
	Welfare
	Women & youth empowerment
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	Infrastructure development
	Protection of nature

Moragahakanda and Kaluganga reservoirs are popular tourist destinations, offering visitors the chance to visit the top and explore the surrounding wonders. The Knuckles Mountain Range adds value to the reservoir's beauty. In addition to those two main reservoirs, as Moragahakanda and Kaluganga, other lakes like Yakakadulla Wewa, Kandepitawala Wewa, Galeyya Wewa, and Dagawilla Wewa, also provide opportunities for water-based adventure activities like canoeing, kayaking, boating, Swan boat service, and floating rest house boats. Hand-rowed boats can avoid environmental impacts. A boating service would be possible to create an opportunity for the visitors to enjoy the beauty of the reservoirs. The Guruwela model farm offers potential for agro-tourism projects, including organic cultivation and residential training.

The new Laggala green city, built under the Moragahakanda-Kaluganga project, serves as an interchange center for tourists traveling from Dambulla to Wasgamuwa. It is conveniently located near popular tourist destinations named Sigiriya, Dambulla, and Wasgamuwa and also offers high demand for gems and the opportunity to experience the gem mining industry. Archeological and heritage tourism sites exist in the region, featuring Elahera World Heritage Anicut and Hattota Amuna, ancient irrigation technology monuments the Buduruwayaya reclining Buddha statue, and numerous historical sites with ruins in Buduruwayaya Vihara and Kumara Ella.

The Knuckles Mountain Range offers a variety of fascinating places for captivating tourists such as caves, rivers, forest-park, and waterfalls. The Knuckles valley, with its isolated communities and unique culture, features a self-sufficient economy. The beliefs of the people of the village are highly related to the legend of Ravana and Seetha. Ravana Yakkama is one such cultural festival held annually. The area's unique climate allows for a quick transition from dry to wet climates, making it an ideal destination for nature lovers. Visitors can experience village culture, and new landscapes, find relaxation, and participate in adventure activities. Hiking, Trekking, Climbing, Waterfall abseiling, Kayaking, Cycling, and Jeep safari can be highlighted under the adventure activities.

Community-based tourism (CBT) is a form of sustainable tourism that involves the participation of the local community in tourism activities (Samarathunga, 2016). Community members offer various services to visitors, including food and beverages, tour guiding, homestay facilities, and transportation. Also, community people can sell their own products (i.e. Spices, Handcraft). These services are tailored to visitors' desires, and the main benefit received is income. The willingness of the village community has also become a potential for tourism. It causes extra income, women's and youth's empowerment, welfare, infrastructure development, and the protection of nature.

Table 2
Coding hierarchy for Tourism Challenges

Theme	Category	Free codes
Challenges for Tourism Development	Economic issues	Economic Crisis
		No visitors
		Labor cost
	Social Issues	Human-Elephant conflict
		Language barrier
		Poor attitudes
		Limited portable water
		Low education level
		Training difficulties
	Environmental Issues	Unfavorable regulations
		Less community awareness
		Waste generation
Climate change		
Other contemporary issues	Deforestation	
	Biodiversity loss	
	Biopiracy	
	Remoteness from other areas	
		Lack of Public transport service
		Poor telecommunication facilities

Hindering the sustainable tourism development, the destination area faces many challenges as listed in Table 2. Tourist absence poses significant problem in this area. Also environmental, socio-cultural, and economic challenges persist. The current economic crisis and the labor cost is adversely affecting the development of these areas. The researcher identified that less community awareness, a low education level, language barrier, poor attitudes, training difficulties, human-elephant conflict, limited portable water access and unfavourable regulations are the social challenges to tourism development. Environmental issues include waste generation, biopiracy, biodiversity loss, climate change and deforestation. Other contemporary issues are poor mobile signal strength and Poor telecommunication facilities. Public transport services are limited due to distance from main city and some road difficulties. Table 3 summarizes suggestions of this study. As it is still a developing area, the facilities here are limited. Therefore, both private and government intervention is needed to address those deficiencies, especially tourism stakeholders' involvement (i.e., Hoteliers, Travel agencies, Government, and Community). Tourism, a clear promotional program is crucial for attracting visitors. A tourism strategy and development plan are necessary (e.g., Tourism zone, Tourism master plan, Resettlement plan), as are updated rules and regulations. Training and facilities development are essential for a successful tourism master plan.

Non-governmental organizations, with the collaboration of the United Nations Development Program and World Bank can implement tourism and livelihood development programs in the country due to the economic crisis. The Sri Lankan government has a crucial role as a facilitator for NGOs, UNDP, and the World Bank.

Table 3
Coding hierarchy for Suggestions

Theme	Category	Free codes
Suggestions	Tourism stakeholders' involvement	Central Government, Provincial Government, & regional Government Hoteliers Travel agencies Community
	Tourism Strategy Development	Tourism zone Tourism Master Plan Resettlement Plan Facilities development Update Rules & Regulations Promotion Training
	Generation of funds	Government of Sri Lanka World bank project UNDP NGOs

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This explorative case study aimed to identify tourism potential in the Laggala-Pallegama area through thematic analysis. Results showed favorable resource potentiality and social and cultural factors, which can promote sustainable tourism development. The Moragahakanda region boasts stunning mountain ranges, rivers, waterfalls, caves, biodiversity, historical legends, and locations, making it an eco-tourism sanctuary. This region offers ecological potential and can be considered a tourism hub. Sustainable tourism benefits village communities by empowering them, enhancing welfare, infrastructure development, and income, increasing nature awareness, and motivating them to protect the environment. Recognizing the benefits of tourism and the community is crucial for promoting sustainable development.

Keywords: Community-based tourism, moragahakanda-kaluganga project, sustainable tourism, tourism challenges, tourism potentials

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