

DEVELOPMENT AND CONSERVATION CONTRADICTIONS IN SRI LANKA: A CASE STUDY IN BUNDALA NATIONAL PARK

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Abstract: Aim of this study was to evaluate the impact of upper catchment development activities on the Bundala National Park (BNP), Hambantota and the livelihoods of buffer zone villages. Bundala is the first Ramsar Wetland in Sri Lanka in the Southern tip of Sri Lanka. To evaluate the ecological impacts of development projects on the conservation of BNP, a literature review and a field survey was conducted with the participation of selected key informants from the surrounding villages of the park. BNP consisted of five shallow Brackish-water Lagoons. Generally, brackish water has more dissolved solids than fresh water and less than seawater. Bundala wetland is fed by two catchments: Malala Oya and Embilikala Oya. Besides these two, Kirindi Oya is one of the other major catchments developed as the Kirindi Oya Settlement and Irrigation Project (KOSIP) in the Late 1980s. Before the KOSIP, Bundala and other surrounding villages were sparsely populated due to the harsh climatic conditions and water scarcity. As a pro-development strategy, the KOSIP was introduced. As a result, new settlements and cultivation fields developed over the upper catchments of BNP and gradually waste irrigation water flow to the lagoons increased. Findings highlighted that the pH values of the main lagoons were closer to seven, and the electric conductivity level was lower. This affected aquatic habitats and reduced species living in the lagoons, challenging the Ramsar title and fishermen's income. Further, KOSIP caused reduced forested areas and grasslands in the vicinity. The curd industry declined due to the reduction in grasslands, which increased illegal access to the BNP grounds for grazing, further deteriorating the habitat. Overall, 22% of buffer zone residents had to find alternative livelihoods due to restrictions and environmental changes. To overcome these two major issues, integration of the views of the community in protected area management and implementation of development projects are recommended.

Keywords: Conservation; Bundala national park; Development; People-protected area relationship; Ramsar wetland