

IDENTIFYING TOURISM AS A STRATEGY TO MINIMIZE HUMAN-ELEPHANT CONFLICTS: A CASE STUDY OF UDAWALAWE NATIONAL PARK AND ITS ADJACENT AREAS

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the potential of tourism as a strategic approach to mitigating human-elephant conflicts in and around Udawalawe National Park in Sri Lanka. This study aims to assess how tourism can contribute to reducing these conflicts, which significantly affects both local communities and wildlife conservation efforts. Despite elephants being a central attraction for tourism, they are also at the heart of ongoing conflicts, necessitating a detailed investigation of sustainable solutions. The purpose of this research is twofold: (1) to identify the root causes of human-elephant conflicts and (2) to evaluate how tourism can be leveraged to address these challenges in a sustainable manner. This study adopts a qualitative research approach with a case study research design grounded in an interpretivist philosophical view. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, including park rangers, residents, conservationists, and tourism service providers, using purposive and convenience sampling to ensure a wide range of perspectives. A thematic analysis was conducted using a rigorous approach to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings. The findings revealed that human invasion and agricultural expansion into elephant habitats are major drivers of conflict, posing threats to both community livelihoods and elephant conservation. However, tourism has the potential to be a catalyst for positive change, as Udawalawe's economy depends heavily on tourism, and elephants are valuable resources in this context. The key themes identified include promoting responsible tourism and supporting conservation initiatives to mitigate conflicts. The sustainable strategies highlighted in this study include physical barriers such as electric fences, ditches, and fences made from old rail tracks, alongside innovative natural solutions such as honey beekeeping, which act as deterrents to elephants. Additionally, the findings emphasize the importance of educating local communities on sustainable land-use practices and fostering cooperation among tourism stakeholders to minimize conflicts. The study concludes that tourism, when managed responsibly, can play a pivotal role in balancing human-elephant interactions, supporting both wildlife conservation and livelihood development of communities in the Udawalawe region. This research contributes to the existing knowledge by offering theoretical and practical insights with implications for conservation management, tourism development, and future research directions.

Keywords: Conservation efforts, community livelihood development, human-elephant conflict, innovative methods, responsible tourism, Udawalawe national park