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"It's Seasonal and an Oceanic Burden": Garbage and Everyday Life in Mannar, Sri Lanka

Kithsiri T¹, Senevirathne RPWP², Karunarathne A², Munasinghe A², Pramodya D²

¹*Department of Geography, Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya*

²*Department of Geography, Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya*

Background: This work explores how island residents in Mannar, Sri Lanka, perceive and coexist with coastal waste, much of which is imported from outside national boundaries. While coastal waste in trash sites is typically studied as an environmental concern, very little has been published regarding how island communities perceive and comprehend this waste in their daily lives.

Objective: The research aims to explore how the garbage in Mannar is socially and culturally normalised and what this reveals about broader debates in cultural geography and political ecology.

Methodology: The study employs a photo documentation methodology. In addition, a three-day field trip in Mannar was conducted using qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews with 10 residents and field observations. Ten photographs were used for analysis to capture spatial and cultural patterns of waste collection, and the interviews provided insights into the local community's perception of seasonality, responsibility, and the role of the ocean in the waste cycle.

Findings: The findings suggest that this garbage is not primarily a local problem, but rather a seasonal phenomenon related to the ocean. The community here views the ocean as a waste carrier and remover, underscoring the urgent need for community-led waste management. While these perceptions are often generalised as 'part of nature', much of the debris found here originates from countries such as India, China, and Japan, thereby obscuring issues of transboundary responsibility.

Conclusion: The study concludes that Mannar's waste acts more as a burden on the ocean than a societal responsibility, reinforcing narratives of nature's agency in dealing with waste. This highlights the need for policy attention to transboundary marine debris management, while also contributing to theoretical debates about how people construct ecological normalisations in the face of environmental risks.

Keywords: Coastal waste, marine debris, cultural geography, ecological normalisations, Mannar