

Issues and Challenges Faced by Park Management due to Visitor Overcrowding: The case of Minneriya National Park

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Abstract

Minneriya National Park, located in Sri Lanka's North Central Province, is internationally renowned for the annual elephant gathering, one of the world's largest wildlife spectacles. However, increasing tourist arrivals have led to severe overcrowding, frequently surpassing the park's ecological carrying capacity and creating significant management, ecological, and social challenges. This study aims to identify the key issues and challenges faced by park management during peak visitation periods and to examine the role of park officers in mitigating these pressures. A qualitative research approach was adopted, involving thirty in-depth, semi-structured interviews with park officers and local visitors selected through purposive stratified sampling. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which revealed three major categories of concern: wildlife disturbance, visitor behavior and safety, and operational and infrastructure issues. Wildlife-related challenges included disruption to elephant behavior, noise pollution, and dust caused by off-road vehicle movement. Visitor-related issues comprised crowding, excessive noise, and unsafe behavior during photography and encounters with wildlife. Operational difficulties were linked to inadequate infrastructure, limited parking, and congested road networks. Based on these findings, the study recommends introducing vehicle entry limits, zoning regulations, and distance-based viewing guidelines, along with digital ticketing systems and improved visitor facilities. Furthermore, diversifying attractions through bird-watching zones, community-based tourism initiatives, and guided nature walks is suggested to distribute visitor pressure more evenly. Strengthening local community involvement and sustainable visitor management practices is essential to preserving Minneriya's ecological integrity while ensuring a balanced and responsible tourism experience.

Keywords: carrying capacity, issues and challenges, national park, visitor management