

The Potential of Developing Caves as a Community Based Eco Tourism (CBET) Activity in Rathnapura District, Sabaragamuwa Province in Sri Lanka: A study of Batathota Lena and Batadomba Lena - Kuruwita DS Area

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Abstract

Community Based EcoTourism (CBET) is one of the developing industries in Sri Lanka that contributes to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). It is a form of Eco Tourism where the local community has substantial control over and interest in its development and management and a major fraction of the benefits are with in the community.

The study is based on identifying the potential of developing caves in Sri Lanka as a supportive activity and a major attraction of community based ecotourism. This study of caves is significant for professionals who are in tourism field to build up new tourism in potential areas and foster them for tourists while giving benefits to the surrounding ethnic groups. This research explores the potential of developing and managing these archeologically and naturally valuable sites as a tourist attraction and a community based ecotourism activity in Rathnapura district, Sabaragamuwa province. It was conducted as case studies of Batadomba Cave and Batatota Cave at Kuruwita DS area.

The convenience sampling method was employed to select the 30 respondents to interview to capture views of developing caves as a CBET activity. Fifteen respondents were interviewed from each area representing both local and foreign tourists.

Finally, the study leads to give the impression of using caves with the intention of developing the hidden potential of it for CBET.

Key-Words: Community Based Ecotourism (CBET), Cave Tourism, Cave Resources, Sustainable Development

Introduction

The argument is that ecotourism depends on maintaining attractive natural landscapes and a rich flora and fauna; it provides both an incentive for conservation and an economic alternative to destructive activities. The term 'community based ecotourism' (CBET) takes this social dimension a stage further. In addition, it gives substantial control over the behavior of using natural resources and it opens a path to sustainable development (Boo, 1990).

Sri Lanka is bestowed with a scenic natural environment and a high biodiversity, which are considered major attractions in ecotourism. Developing archeologically and naturally worth caves as an attraction for community based ecotourism activities is an important aspect in sustainable development. This is still a new concept to Sri Lanka. Although there is a high potential of developing caves as an attraction, attention has not been paid for the expansion of them. According to the archeological, historical and natural value, caves are different from each other. Therefore, it is significant to identify the major factors of cave tourism, which influence benefits of local community.

Cave Resources can be defined as material or substance occurring material in caves on Federal lands (Federal Cave Resources Protection Act, 1988). When tourists visit those places to study the cave resources, it will cause for many benefits to the local community. Therefore, cave tourism is one of the alternative tourism, which can be developed under the community based ecotourism.

CBET is a type of sustainable tourism that promotes pro - poor strategies in a community setting. Communitybased ecotourism initiatives aim to involve local residents in the running and management of small environmental friendly tourism projects as a means of alleviating poverty and providing an alternative income source for community members. CBET initiatives also encourage respect for local traditions and culture as well as for natural heritage (Ward, 2007).

The overall aim of this research was to find out the Cave Tourism potential in Kuruwita DS area in order to develop CBET practices for sustainable development. The study expects to assess the potential of local community participation in ecotourism development in the area situated.

Problem Definition

Based on the above situation the researcher has defined the problem statement for the study as follows.

“What is the potential of developing caves as a community based ecotourism activity in Kuruwita DS area, Rathnapura district, Sri Lanka?”

Objectives of the Study

The researcher has derived the following research objectives based on the above research problem in order to simplify the research study.

Broad Objective of the Research

The overall aim of research is to carry out a study of the potential of developing cave tourism in Kuruwita DS area as a CBET activity in order to prepare plan for sustainable development.

Specific Objectives

To identify the potential for local community participation in ecotourism development in the area.

- To identify the cave resources and activities that can be developed in the area
- To assess the difficulties of developing community based ecotourism in the research area.

Literature Review

Community Based Ecotourism provides many benefits to the society, which includes the protection of ecosystem, increase the foreign exchange of the country and living standards of the people, swift regional development, reduction of waste, minimize the negative impacts to the environment etc. (Sri Lanka Tourist Board, 2001). Being a good business opportunity and the fastest growing segment in the tourism industry, Sri Lankan tourism is changing its outlook to sustain this new product. Since Sri Lanka is rich with much cultural and natural diversity, it has the potential to develop the ecotourism concept better than other destinations for the benefit of the Sri Lankan economy and community (SLEF, 2001). As a result implementing the ecotourism concept in to Sri Lankan context is very much reliable and beneficial to the society.

Ecotourism is a frequently debated term. Sometimes it is used simply to identify a form of tourism where the motivation of visitors and the sales pitch to them, centers on the observation of nature. Increasingly, this general sector of this market is called 'nature tourism'. True 'ecotourism', however, requires a proactive approach that seeks to mitigate the negative and enhance the positive impacts of nature related tourism (Ashley and Roe, 1998). The International Ecotourism Society defines ecotourism as responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the wellbeing of local people. CBET requires an understanding, and where possible a strengthening, of the legal rights and responsibilities of the community over land, resources and development. Ecotourism can be integrated with other sectors of the rural economy, creating mutually supportive linkages and reducing financial leakage away from the area. (The International Ecotourism Society, 1998).

All CBET initiatives should be centered on a clear strategy agreed and understood by the local community and all other stakeholders with an interest in tourism and conservation. The strategy should enable a comprehensive picture to be formed of needs and opportunities in an area, so that a range of

on a strategy is to provide the community with the tools and knowledge necessary for decision-making. A fundamental characteristic of community based ecotourism is that the quality of the natural resources and cultural heritage of an area should not be damaged and, if possible, should be enhanced by tourism. Adverse impact on the natural environment should be minimized and the culture of indigenous communities should not be compromised. Ecotourism should encourage people to value their own cultural heritage (WWF International, July 2001).

Cave is defined as any naturally occurring void, cavity, recess or system of interconnected passages beneath the surface of the earth or within a cliff or ledge and which is large enough to permit an individual to enter, whether or not the entrance, located either in private or public land, is naturally formed or man made. It shall include any natural pit, sinkhole or other features, which is an extension of the entrance (Federal Cave Resources Protection Act, 1988).

Caves can be developed as a tourist attraction, if they possess cave resources and activities based on the cave area. Then the authorities can plan and manage community based tourism activities with the participation of local community while conserving the environment and giving benefits to them for their well being. Cave resources include any material or substance occurring naturally in caves, such as animal life, plant life, including pale onto logical and archaeological deposits, cultural artifacts or products of human activities, sediments, minerals, and speleogems. (Relief features on the walls, ceilings and floor of any cave or lava tube which are part of the surrounding bedrock) and speleothems (any natural mineral formation or deposit occurring in a cave or lava tube) (Kim and Kim, 2008).

Batathota and Batadomba Lena in Sri Lanka are considered as caves, which are having high archeological, historical and natural values. However, the potential of developing these caves for tourism is still not recognized. They are not well recognized by the both local and foreign people (Fernando, 2004).

The *Batatota* cave temple, which had been neglected in a dense jungle, has now become famous as one of the religious sites. *Batatota* cave temple lies on a rocky mountainous range in a tiny village called *Batatota* in Kuruwita, in the Ratnapura district. Legend says that King *Nissankamalla* (1178-1207) built this cave temple during the Polonnaruwa period (Wijesinghe, 2006).

Batatota cave temple is also venerated for 'Diwaguhawa' where Lord Buddha is said to have spent the rest of his day with 500 disciples on his return from the Sri Pada (Adam's Peak). Legend also cites that Lord Buddha has taken

rest in this cave after placing the footprint on Sri Pada (Adam's Peak) on the invitation of God *Sumana Saman*. The most remarkable feature in this cave temple is drops of water dripping from the ceiling even in dry weather. There is also a water pond in the cave itself and the sun's rays fall inside the cave from dawn to dusk. In clear weather condition, the Adam's Peak can be viewed from the cave site (Wijesinghe, 2006).

Although *Batatota* cave temple's original architectural designs are not to be seen at present, the old Sal trees surrounded by different kinds of vegetation can still be seen with flowers in full bloom.

Batadomba lena, or cave, is associated with the Balangoda Apeman or the *Balangoda Manawayaya*. Anatomically modern, prehistoric human remains found in Sri Lanka are commonly referred to as Balangoda Man. In the surrounding area, variety of cave flora and fauna can be seen (Fernando, 2005).

Even though the cave tourism concept is new to Sri Lanka, globally it is not a new area. There are many countries, which promote their cavern for tourism such as Cacahuamilpa Caverns in Mexico, the Mole Creek Karst National Park in Australia, Waitomo Caves etc however, unfortunately no one has engaged in a research to develop caves in Sri Lanka for tourism. Therefore, this research aims to fill that gap for the development of cave tourism in Sri Lanka.

Methodology

The researcher has carried out the study using the qualitative methodology. Therefore, participant observation and unstructured interviews have been used as the data collection tools for this research study.

Interviews were conducted with tourists and villagers in the study area of Kuruwita, Sri Lanka. The researcher believes method of participant observation and interview are the imperative, valuable, and convenient methods for this research study. Because here researcher tries to get an understanding and give a description on cave tourism practices discovering the Sri Lankan context.

The Sample and Sampling Procedure

In line with the objectives of the study, a convenience sampling method was employed to select the 30 respondents who visited the selected cave areas. This method was chosen in advance to capture views of developing caves as a community based ecotourism activity. Fifteen respondents were interviewed from each area representing both local and foreign tourists.

Data Collection

Both primary and secondary data have been adopted as the major source of information. The primary data is collected by using two methods such as personal interviews with the local and foreign tourists and villagers in the adjacent area and personal participant observations. Secondary data was collected from the related research articles, unpublished researches, and journal articles.

Results and Discussions

According to the observations and survey (conducted at *Batathota Lena*), the researcher observed large number of archaeologically valuable places (croslegged, reclining and standing Buddha statues in the cave temple, 'Makara Thorana' that dates back to the Polonnaruwa period etc.) as well as legends that can be promoted to tourists. The Batatota cave temple, which had been neglected in a dense jungle, has now become famous as one of the religious sites among local tourists. However, it is still not well recognized by the foreign tourists except few. Since it is situated in a rocky mountain, there is a possibility of developing adventure tourism too in that area.

In accordance with the observation and survey results (conducted at *Batadomba Lena*), many natural attractions can be recognized such as large steep rocks, cave flora and fauna, water streams, thick wilderness which can be easily promoted for adventure tourists. It is a unique creation of nature and a thrilling prospect. Not only has that It had a greater archeological value since it is associated with the Balangoda Apeman or the Balangoda Manawayaya. However, unfortunately it has not been well recognized by the both local and foreign tourists.

At the survey, the researcher identified number of factors, which can be used to promote both caves for tourism, especially for CBET. As mentioned in the Figure 1; if cave resources are developed and utilized well, that will give extra development to the surrounding community and the area for instance employment opportunities, infrastructure development, regional development, conservation of resources. Then it will lead to a better living standard of the local community. According to the survey, the attitude of local people towards tourism and knowledge of ecotourism and its concepts are very poor. However, there is an opportunity to get the participation of younger generation, since they are keener on tourism and tourism education.

The selected Kuruwita area includes many younger generations. Therefore, more young people can be promoted to be involved in activities. It will be a good opportunity for them to reduce local unemployment problem (Figure 2);

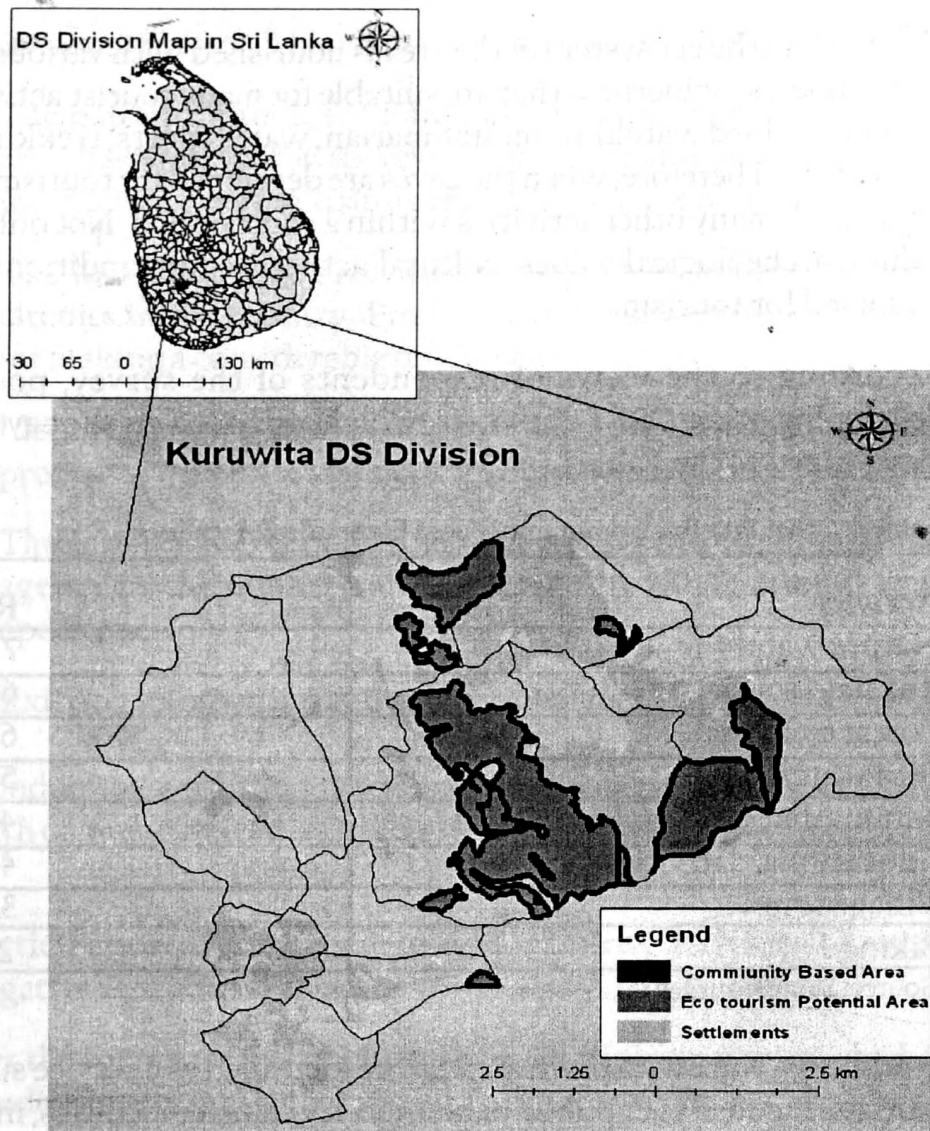


Figure 1: Ecotourism potential area of the selected Kuruwita DS area..

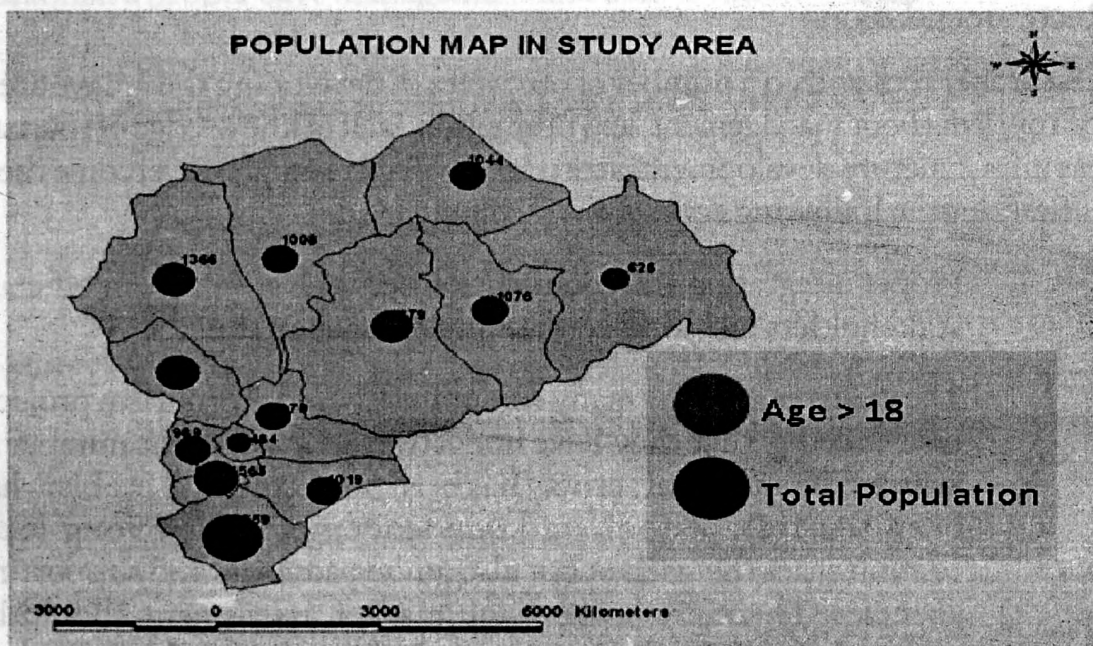


Figure 2: Population map of Kuruwita DS area.

In addition, the ecosystem of the area is nourished with various flora, fauna, water bodies, wilderness that are suitable for many tourist activities such as adventure, bird watching, mountanarian, water sports, trekking, climbing, cycling etc. Therefore, when the caves are developed for tourism, visitors can enjoy with many other activities within a short period. Not only the natural values, archeological values, cultural activities, but traditions also can be endorsed for tourism.

According to the views of respondents of the survey, possibilities of developing other CBET activities, which are based on the caves, have been categorized as the Table 1.

Table 1: Other Possible Community Based Ecotourism Activities

Activity	Response
Nature watching	73%
Tea field tours	64%
Forest trekking	61%
Bird watching	58%
Mountain climbing (Sri Pada)	49%
Educational activities	45%
Village tours	35%
Biking	23%

(Source: Sample survey)

In addition, Kuruwita town area can be identified as a service supply area for tourists. It consists of public banks, money transfer facilities, internet, email facilities, post office, and grocery shops.

Recommendations

Researcher recognized a number of obstacles of developing these cave areas for tourism (Poor management, less promotion, lack of knowledge of tourists, less infrastructure development, attitudes of villagers etc). To overcome these difficulties the following actions are recommended,

- Proper integration and coordination between government officials, stakeholders and local community to develop the site.
- The main reason why many community based ecotourism projects have failed is that they have not attracted a sufficient number of visitors. Promotional activity has been misdirected. A problem has been the lack of tourism knowledge not only among local communities themselves but also among advisors and supporting agencies. Therefore, a thorough market assessment should be undertaken for the destination as a whole and for the individual

ecotourism project. This should consider the following,

1. The patterns, profiles and interests of existing visitors to the area, based on visitor surveys. In principle, it is far easier to get more out of existing visitors than to attract new ones.
 2. The location of the area with respect to established tourist circuits in the country. Proximity to these and opportunities for making a considerable difference.
 3. Identify the level, nature and performance of existing ecotourism products, which are competitors but also potential collaborators.
 4. The activities of inbound tour operators and ground handling agents in the country and coverage by international tour operators.
 5. Existing information and promotional mechanisms in the area.
- Conducting workshops and awareness programmes about CBET with community leaders to show the positive sides and benefits of it.
 - Participation of local community for tourist activities to avoid negative attitudes of tourists
 - Get the support of stakeholders to develop infrastructure which is needed for ecotourism activities (To develop ecolodges, path ways etc.).

Establish a proper cave management and conservation system

- Formulate, develop and implement a national program for the management, protection and conservation of caves and cave resources
- Disseminate information and conduct an educational campaign on the need to conserve, protect and manage our caves and cave resources.
- Tap the cooperation of people's and non-governmental organizations as active partners in the conservations and protection of caves and cave resources.
- Implement rules and regulations to prevent destroying, disturbing, defacing, marring, altering, removing, or harming the speleogem or speleothem of any cave with the participation of local community and visitors.

Conclusion

Finally, it is vital to notice that identifying the main features of caves for ecotourism activities and developing and managing them properly has the potential to gain more foreign exchange earnings and encourage regional development.

According to the findings of this research, *Batadomba Lena and Batathota Lena* caves can be promoted for CBET with the introduction of appropriate cave management practices. The implementation of cave management recommendations is one tool that has the potential to be used to focus everyone's attention on the significant and diverse nature of the cave environment. If the general and sub factors are constantly examined in the management prescription for each cave, then the conservation and management of the cave resource should be foremost in everyone's thoughts.

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