

## **Eco-tourism potential and constraints in in Kirala Kele wetland area of Matara District**

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There is overwhelming evidence that both the developed and the developing countries have given much emphasis on eco-tourism as a strategy for development. Hence, its potential needs thorough examination with a view to framing appropriate policies for future expansion. A lot of benefits could be derived by the inhabitants of the surrounding areas with the development of the eco-tourism industry. It facilitates the marketing of local products relating to agro-based industries and handicrafts and generates numerous employment opportunities; improves infrastructural and marketing facilities in the region; provides income through accommodation and offering communication facilities for both local and foreign tourists; allows international attention for significant historical and archaeological sites, culture, norms and customs in the region and develops remote and neglected areas through receiving the attention of both the government and private sectors. Despite its importance there are limited research undertaken for identifying the existing eco-tourism potential and constraints in the kirala kele wetland area of the Matara district. Therefore, the present study is specifically geared to (i) identify the eco-tourism potential and constraints in kirala kele and (ii) determine the ways in which eco-tourism can contribute to the overall development of the region.

Out of 11 G.N. divisions, three (Nadugala I and II, and Hiththatiya East) were selected for a detailed study. Random sampling technique was used and a sample of 10% from each G.N. division was selected. A pilot survey, interviews, observation and a questionnaire survey had been employed to collect data at the field level while photographs are utilized to substantiate the field evidence.

The overall findings of this study are that there were four major kinds of eco-tourism potential existing in the region. Namely the potentials in; i) observation and study of various kinds of birds and butterflies, animal habitats and their behavioural patterns, ii) observation of specific plants, flowers and mangrove forests, iii) participation in water related eco-tourism i.e. surfing, boat safari and observation of fish and crocodile cages, and iv) observation and study of community based eco-tourism activities. Based on the existing potentials, environmental friendly eco-tourism activities can be introduced to the region. The study further suggests that identified constraints should be minimized to develop this region through the utilization of existing eco-tourism potential in the future.