Tourism and its implications for management in Ruhuna National Park (Yala), Sri Lanka

J. Buultjens\textsuperscript{a,*}, I. Ratnayake\textsuperscript{b}, A. Gnanapala\textsuperscript{b}, M. Aslam\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a}School of Tourism and Hospitality Management, Southern Cross University, PO Box 157, Lismore 2480, Australia
\textsuperscript{b}Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka

Received 6 September 2003; accepted 25 March 2004

Abstract

Tourism in protected areas in Sri Lanka has the potential to provide economic development as well as sources of the funding for maintaining the environmental values of national parks. However, for this to occur it is important tourism is managed in a sustainable manner. This paper uses a case study approach to examine the characteristics and problems associated with tourism in the most popular National Park in Sri Lanka–Ruhuna (Yala). It is clear there are a number of environmental effects arising from tourism that are degrading the natural values of the protected area resulting in lower amenity value for tourists. The problems associated with tourism are exacerbated by the lack of recognition given to the impacts resulting from religious tourists visiting the area and the lack of controls placed on their behaviour within the Park. Management has introduced various measures aimed at alleviating the problems caused by tourism, such as monthly meetings with tour operators and the provision of educational and interpretative material for local people. In addition, there are plans to construct a new road to reduce congestion currently experienced on the Park roads. However, unless funding is increased and more consideration is given to the religious tourists and their impacts, tourism in the Park will not be sustainable.

\textcopyright{} 2004 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Protected area tourism; Sri Lankan tourism; Religious tourism

1. Introduction

Protected areas and nature protection in developing countries are often seen as a luxury since there are generally few opportunities to earn income from them (Tisdell, 1999). In addition, governments in developing countries are finding it increasingly difficult to provide sufficient funding for the maintenance of their national parks (Krug, 2000). Tourism offers the potential to provide economic development, through the provision of increased income and employment, and funding for maintenance of national parks while at the same time, conserving nature. Many developing countries, for example, Kenya, successfully use the attractions of nature in promoting tourism in protected and non-protected areas (McNeely, Thorsell, & Ceballos-Lascurain, 1992; Nepal, 2000; Tosun, 1998).

Protected areas have important environmental values and they are often established in sensitive environments. Therefore, it is important tourism in these areas is sustainable. Despite sustainable tourism being a vague concept that is difficult to operationalise (McKercher, 1993), it is still a very important consideration to ensure on-going benefits are realised. The World Tourism Organisation defines sustainable tourism as one that improves the quality of life of host communities, provides high quality experience for guests and maintains the quality of the environment on which they both depend (WTO, 1993). The attainment of sustainable tourism requires careful management of tourists to prevent deleterious effects on the environment, the host community and visitor satisfaction.
In situations where management has been less than optimal, tourism development has been a source of environmental degradation resulting in a loss of amenity, reduced demand for the tourism site and reduced economic benefits accruing to local communities. In developing, as well as developed countries, the adoption of unsustainable practices have often been encouraged because of the political pressure to attain short-term economic benefits from tourism at the expense of delayed environmental impacts (Tisdell, 1999).

There are a number of potential environmental effects that can arise from tourism that degrade the natural assets of protected areas and lower their amenity value. These factors include overcrowding, inappropriate infrastructure development, various forms of pollution and inappropriate human behaviour that impacts on a park’s fauna and flora (McNeely et al., 1992).

Sri Lanka is a developing country with many natural attractions that are used to invite tourists. This paper examines how the Department of Wildlife Conservation (DWLC), the authority charged with managing the country’s national parks, manages its most popular park, Ruhuna National Park (Yala) (referred to here-after as Yala). This paper examines the characteristics and problems associated with tourism in Yala. In addition, the management strategies adopted by the Department of Wildlife Conservation to ameliorate the problems are examined.

This paper begins by presenting an overview of tourism in Sri Lanka. This is followed by a description of protected areas in Sri Lanka, followed by a more in-depth description of Yala and the characteristics of tourism in the Park. The methodology used in this study is outlined next. The methodology section is followed by a description of the tourism impacts in the Park. The next two sections in the paper outline the strategies being adopted by the management agency in regards to tourism and a discussion of these strategies. This is followed by the conclusion to the paper.

2. Tourism in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is a developing country whose economic development has been severely hamstrung by civil war that surfaced openly in the early 1980s between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the government. Since this time the country’s economy has stagnated and many economic and social indicators have deteriorated substantially. The tourism sector has been particularly affected by the war.1

The potential of tourism to contribute to economic development was initially recognised by the government in the early 1960s. Since then there have been serious efforts to develop the industry beginning with the release of the first Tourism Management Plan in 1967 (Ceylon Tourist Board, 1968). The 1970s were a period of substantial growth in the tourism industry, however, since the early 1980s, the sector has been highly volatile due to the civil war.

In 1999 the tourist industry contributed approximately 2 per cent to GNP and US$ 274.9 million to the foreign earnings of Sri Lanka. The industry has been based, to a large extent, on mass international tourism. A majority of visitors arrive from European countries, especially England and Germany. In 2000 there were 400,414 international arrivals. The domestic tourism market has, to a large extent, been ignored by governments and the private sector (Shantha, 1999). Therefore this market segment is still relatively undeveloped. However, there is an exception and that is the large number of domestic religious tourists (referred to as pilgrims) who visit religious sites throughout the country.

Nature-based and eco-tourism products have not been developed, however there is an increasing awareness amongst government and private-sector organisations that these are important market segments that can provide substantial benefits with minimised impacts. In mid-2001, the Ceylon Tourist Board, the body responsible for promoting tourism, and the Sri Lankan Ecotourism Association were developing an ecotourism framework for the country. Despite the lack of development of the nature-based market, a number of international and domestic tourists are interested in viewing wildlife, especially elephants, in their natural habitat. As a result of this interest there are many tourists who visit national parks in the country.

3. Protected areas in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka has a number of national parks and reserves. The country has a tradition of nature protection dating back to the world’s first wildlife sanctuary created in 3rd century BC. Some of these ancient reserves still exist today, including Sinharaja National Heritage Wilderness Area and the Udawattakelle Sanctuary (Niven, Noble, Forsyth, & Wheeler, 1999).

British colonialists arrived in Sri Lanka in 1796 and by the late 19th and early 20th century a number British planters, who were inveterate hunters, were promoting the need for conservation of native wildlife. This need resulted from the rapid decline in native species as a result of indiscriminate slaughter (Uragoda, 1994). In 1872 the Governor gave notice of the first bill for the preservation of wildlife. The Ceylon Game Protection

---

1A ceasefire was agreed to between the government and the LTTE in 2002. Since the ceasefire there has been an increase in tourism numbers, however it is likely to some years before full confidence is restored in the market.
Society was formed in 1894 with the objective of increasing government support for wildlife protection. The Game Protection Society was the predecessor of Wildlife and Nature Protection Society of Sri Lanka.

In 1889 the Game Protection Society began lobbying the government to create sanctuaries in a few game districts and to appoint rangers to these sanctuaries (Uragoda, 1994) because of the lack of success of government ordinances in protecting wildlife. The government accepted the position of the Game Protection Society and in November 1889 established the first sanctuary in Asia at Yala (Uragoda, 1994). The Sanctuary was a success and resulted in other areas throughout the country being set up to provide protection of wildlife. A number of these sanctuaries, including Yala, were converted into national parks from the 1930s.

In 2001 there were 11 national parks in the country covering 466,070 ha. However, due to the civil war only four national parks, Yala, Uda Waluwa, Horton Plains and Bundala, were open to visitors in 2001. During 2000 there were a total of 495,153 visitors to these parks of which 85 per cent were domestic tourists. Park fees earned from these visitors were approximately US$1.15 million.

Elephants are an important attraction for both international and domestic tourist and they feature prominently in most of the promotional material produced by the tourism industry. In 2001 there were only an estimated 2500 wild elephants compared to 12,000 at the beginning of the 20th century. There are an estimated 200 elephants in Yala I (pers comm, Ranjith, Park Warden). The popularity of elephants and the reputation of Yala for providing good viewing, ensures that Yala is the most heavily visited national park in Sri Lanka.

4. Yala National Park

Yala, covering 151,177.8 ha, is situated in the south-east of the country. The Yala Group of National Reserve is one contiguous system of Reserves consisting of National Park Blocks I, I I, I I I, I V, V, Yala East National Park and Strict Natural Reserve, as well as the adjoining Kataragama—Katagamuwala and Kudimbiga-la Sanctuaries (Fauna International Trust, 1993).

Yala I was initially declared a national park on 25 February 1938 and since that time sections have been added to the estate. The last two blocks, IV and V were added to the National Park in 1969 and 1973. Yala has been administered by the DWLC since 1949 (see Fig. 1).

The environment of the National Park, including its fauna and flora, has experienced substantial changes through the centuries. Since its declaration as a national park Yala has continued to experience changes, many of which have resulted from human impacts.
Yala is a relatively flat plain of Vijayan rocks formed over 600 million years ago dotted with rocky outcrops or inselbergs reaching heights of up to 800 feet. The vegetation is generally scrub jungle as well as mangroves in the lagoons that are scattered throughout the Park. In addition to elephants, the Park is home to the highest density of leopards in the world as well as accommodating the sloth bear, the spotted deer, the sambar, wild buffalo, jackals, monkeys, crocodiles and the mongoose. There are also more than a 130 species of birds such as the jungle fowl, painted stork, blue-faced malkoha and the pompadour green pigeon (Kataragama Devotees Trust, 2004).

Yala is located in one of the arid regions of Sri Lanka and has a hot and dry climate. The area receives its annual rainfall during the north east monsoon from November to January. The dry season lasts from June until mid-October. The major river, the Menik ganga, is now a seasonal river due to damming that has occurred upstream. There are also a number of natural and artificial waterholes and tanks that ensure the survival of the wildlife within the area (Fauna International Trust, 1993). The Park is closed from August to mid-October due to a lack of water and in order to allow the animals some respite from human contact during the breeding season.

Yala Block I, also known as Ruhuna National Park or Yala West, has been the most frequented due to its accessibility and the presence of open glades which makes the wildlife easy to observe (Fauna International Trust, 1993). Block I has good access roads while access to the other parts of the Park are limited to mainly dry weather. Yala I has 96 kilometres of road network covering its length and width. There are also eight bungalows in Yala I and one in Yala IV. However, in 2001, one bungalow was being used by the military while another two were out of commission because of damage caused by the LTTE in 1997. The bungalows accommodate up to 10 visitors. There are also two campsites within Yala I, which accommodate one group each. Accommodation at the bungalows and campsites have to booked via the Head Office of the DWLC. There are long waiting lists for such accommodation.

Also inside the park is a restored monastic settlement, Sithulpawwa, which is believed to have at one time accommodated 12,000 inhabitants. This site now is an important pilgrim centre in Sri Lanka.

The main administrative centre is located at the entrance to the Park. At this centre, known as Palatupana, is the Warden’s office, the office for issuing permits, a very outdated museum and a small canteen. Palatupana also houses the accommodation for the park rangers, park guides and army personnel.

There are two four-star hotels with approximately 50 rooms and a small low-price motel with 8 rooms located on the border of Yala. However, a majority of wildlife tourists stay at Tissamaharama, 16 kilometres to the north of Palatupana. A majority of safari businesses operate from Tissamaharama.

In August 2001, because of the presence of LTTE militia throughout the rest of the Park only Yala I was open to the public. In Yala I there is a heavy presence of government army troops who are there, in part, to ensure the safety of tourists.2

5. Tourism in Yala

Yala attracts two distinct types of tourists—wildlife and religious (pilgrims)—although at times pilgrims may engage in wildlife viewing. The groups are treated quite differently by DWLC. In fact pilgrims are not even considered to be tourists. The limited literature on tourism in Yala does not discuss pilgrims. The authors were only made aware of the large number of pilgrims visiting Yala after a passing comment made by the Park Warden. This view of pilgrims has important implications for sustainable tourism in the Park. This will be discussed in more detail later in the paper.

The numbers of wildlife tourists since 1980 are shown in Fig. 2. In 2000 there were 153,661 wildlife tourists, of which 81 per cent were domestic. These visitors used 20,061 vehicles, ranging from jeeps to buses and lorries (pers comm., Ranjith, Park Warden). The income from visitors, including bungalow and campsite fees, was equivalent to approximately US$468,629.3 A majority of wildlife tourists, approximately 80 per cent according to a tourist operator, take a half-day safari (pers comm., Ratnapala, Tour Operator). The rest of the tourists are either full-day, bungalow or campsite visitors. The wildlife visitors must purchase a permit before entering the park. Visitors are charged differentiated rates with local tourists paying Rs20 (approximately US$0.25) and international tourists paying US$12. These are similar to rates charged in other developing countries (for example, see Hearne & Salinas, 2002). Part of the cost of entry is payment for a compulsory park guide. The guides must also accompany bungalow and camp visitors. During times when visitor traffic is very high visitors may be accompanied by game guards or park rangers or they may be unaccompanied. All vehicles are required to remain on the road network and visitors must not leave their vehicles.

There are approximately 31 park guides but the number is variable since a guide will leave if they can find better paying employment elsewhere. However, they usually return because often the alternative employment is only temporary (pers comm., Ranjith,

2Since the ceasefire in 2002 the number of military camps has been reduced to two and military personnel has been reduced accordingly.

3The exchange rate US$1 = 71.45 rupees.
Park Warden). These guides are generally members of the neighbouring community and are able to become guides because they have a very good knowledge of the Park and its wildlife. They have gained this knowledge before they become park guides. The DWLC only considers the personal interests of the guides when employing them and the employment process is often subject to high level of political interference. The guides are employed on a voluntary basis and are paid only a small allowance (Rs 125 or approximately US$1.30) by the DWLC. The small of payment from the DLWC means that the guides are very dependent upon tips from tourists for a substantial proportion of their income. The reliance on tourist tips for income ensures that guides are very keen to please visitors and to make sure they gain a good view of wildlife. The DWLC guides are also expected to ensure that tourists and safari operators observe the Park rules. As discussed later this may cause a dilemma for the guides.

Park guides receive only limited and rudimentary training in the following areas: the structure and organisation of the DLWC; wildlife flora and fauna ordinance; first aid and some interpretation of wildlife. Training is conducted at the Park or at the National Wildlife Training Centre in Giritale. No further training is provided to the guides during their employment. Both the Assistant Director and the Park Warden are dissatisfied with the level of training received by park guides and are investigating ways of raising funds to improve the level of training provided to them.

The other group of tourists to Yala are pilgrims. Kataragama, 31 km north of Palatupana and adjacent to the Park is, along with Adam’s Peak, the most important pilgrim site in Sri Lanka. It is a holy place for Buddhists, Muslims and Hindus, the three significant religious groups in the country (Niven, Noble, Forsyth, & Wheeler, 1999). Many pilgrims also visit Sithulpauwa, which is located in Yala, during their pilgrimage. In contrast to wildlife tourism, there are no official statistics on religious tourism. Religious tourists enter the park at the same site as wildlife tourists, however they do not have to purchase a permit so their entry into the park is unrestricted. Pilgrims are not required to be accompanied by a DWLC tour guide. As a consequence they have few, if any, restrictions placed on their movements through the Park and their behaviour while in the Park.

Despite a lack of official statistics the Park Warden estimates that up to 400,000 pilgrims visit Yala annually (pers comm, Ranjith, Park Warden). In the three-month period between June and August there can be up to 200,000 pilgrims visiting the Park. Further, it is estimated that there can be up 1000 pilgrims enter the Park in more than 10 large buses on a given day during this period. The authors confirmed this level of vehicular traffic during several on-site visits. During certain years, for example 1995, there can be up to 20,000 pilgrims travelling by foot through Yala I and II. Religious tourism is likely to be having a considerable impact on the environmental values of Yala. The other important consideration regarding religious tourism is the relative low contribution pilgrims make to local economic development because they tend to bring their food requirements with them and camp in the open or at pilgrim rests.

Yala attracts a large number of visitors and therefore tourism has, and will continue to have, important environmental impacts that need to be managed effectively to ensure sustainable use of an important resource.

6. Methodology

The information used for this research was based a review of the literature and documents relating to the
administration and visitor management in protected areas in Sri Lanka. In addition, semi-structured interviews with various members of DWLC including the Yala Park Warden, the Assistant Director of the DWLC who is responsible for tourism management in national parks and other protected areas was also used to gain data. Other sources, such as the officer with the Ceylon Tourist Board responsible for tourism and ecotourism development, representatives from the private sector in the Sri Lankan tourism industry, including the President of the Ecotourism Association, two Yala tour operators and various representative from conservation groups were also consulted.

Participant observation was used to collect primary data and also allowed the authors to determine the accuracy of the information gained in interviews. The researchers spent a total of 14 days during June and July, 2001 on-site at Yala examining tourist behaviour and the consequences of tourism in the Park. During the time spent within the Park the researchers travelled with a DWLC ranger and guide in a jeep that followed other day visitors and pilgrims.

7. Tourism impacts in Yala

As noted previously there are two distinct types of tourists visiting Yala, and in many respects they provide distinct issues for the managing agency.

7.1. Overcrowding

The social and environmental carrying capacities of wildlife tourists to Yala appear very close to being exceeded if not already exceeded through overcrowding. As one guide book notes “…and with so many people visiting, it can at times seem uncomfortably overcrowded, with a dozen or so jeeps all searching the same small area where elephants are thought to be” (Niven et al., 1999, p. 190). Another commentator notes “we saw more vehicles on our rounds than animals” (Katugaha, 2001, p. 18).

Currently, there are no official limits placed on wildlife visitation to Yala despite recognition for the need of visitation control. For example, in the wildlife strategy of the Tourism Master Plan for Sri Lanka (1992–2001) a suggested priority for Yala, and all other wildlife attractions, is to have carrying capacity studies undertaken and used as guideline for visitor management plans to safeguard habitat and the well-being of fauna and flora while maximising accessibility to tourists (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), & World Tourism Organisation (WTO), 1993). Although carrying capacity is not a management framework in itself, it is a useful planning tool that provides a base of information on resource capacity for different types of visitor activity and for the evaluation of increased activity in the context of sustainability.

Despite the lack of formal control on wildlife tourist numbers, visitation, as Fig. 2 shows, has been substantial regulated by the civil war since the early 1980s. During times when fighting between the LTTE and government troops escalate, for example, 1989 and 1997, visitation falls. Visitation fell to 17,498 in 1989 then built up to 245,737 in 1994. During 1996 there was another escalation in the war that again impacted on tourism. This was followed by a period of recovery during 1999 and 2000. However, this recovery was again aborted in August 2001 with the bombing of Bandaranaike/Colombo Airport.

While the civil war has limited visitation, the carrying capacity is still under threat of being exceeded. The social carrying capacity is affected by the nature of the industry. There are two periods during a day when wildlife viewing are at a premium, and it is at these times when most visitors and safari tours operators visit the Park. These times, 6–10am and 4–6pm, coincide with wildlife visiting the waterholes that are clearly visible from the road network within the Park. There is only one entry/exit point and a limited road network available for visitors. Therefore, at peak times there can be up to 150 vehicles arriving at the park at the same time to view the wildlife (pers comm, Ranjith, Park Warden). This can have a significant affect on the quality of the visitor experience. A safari tour operator estimates that about 25 per cent of his clients complain about other operators and the lack of satisfactory viewing because of these operators (pers comm, Ratnapala, Tour Operator).

Exceeding carrying capacity not only reduces visitor satisfaction but also has substantial impacts on wildlife. For example, when there is a sighting of one of the moreusive or popular animals, a number of vehicles congregate where the animal is sighted. With the congregation of vehicles, there is pressure on safari tour operators to get a closer sighting of the animal. This problem is experienced in number of other countries (for example, see Sindiga & Kanunah, 1999). This sometimes results in vehicles leaving the road network and encroaching upon the animals. Obviously, this can alter the natural behaviour of wildlife. Katugaha (2001, p. 18) voicing concern for the safety of tourists suggests that “the herds are provoked and prevented from getting to water by rows of vehicles that drive up to them … and keep trying to get closer to them”. Leaving the road network can also exacerbate the erosion already taking place in heavily visited sites. The presence of park guides is supposed to prevent this but there are three factors at play that may prevent this from happening. The first is that at times of heavy visitation there are not enough guides to accompany all vehicles. Second, DWLC guides are under pressure to ensure the visitors gain a good
viewing since this is likely to influence the size of the tip they receive for their services. Tips from tourists, as stated previously stated, constitute a large proportion of a guide’s income. Finally, Sri Lanka is a very hierarchal society and this can make it difficult for a poor, uneducated village park guide to give directions to middle-class local and international visitors.

Clearly, wildlife tourism presents problems but according to the Park Warden, religious tourists are much more of a problem. These visitors, who are often the less well-educated members of the Sri Lankan community, have little appreciation for wildlife or the natural values of Yala (pers comm, Ranjith, Park Warden). In addition, their behaviour is completely unregulated because they are unaccompanied by DWLC guides. Pilgrims usually arrive in large buses, often leave the road network, and may encroach on and even harass wildlife (pers comm, Ranjith, Park Warden). They are also likely to collect firewood for cooking and recreational purposes. Yet, despite the problems associated with pilgrims, it appears that they are rarely considered when tourism management is being planned.

7.2. Pollution

Waste and noise pollution are two important negative impacts from visitation to Yala. Waste created by visitors has substantial impacts on the environmental integrity of Yala. In daily life, Sri Lankans are used to throwing rubbish out of vehicles and this behaviour continues in Yala, despite the expectations of park managers. Litter from wildlife and religious tourists is clearly visible along the road network and especially around the bungalows, camp sites and religious sites. As Jayewardene (2000, p. 32) notes “the areas surrounding many bungalows have become massive rubbish tips.” The rubbish tips were clearly visible during the on-site inspections undertaken by the researchers. The dumping of rubbish occurs because bungalow residents and campers, despite being issued with plastic bags to remove their rubbish, usually leave it behind and there is no formalised mechanism for handling rubbish in the Park. The rubbish which includes glass, tin cans and plastic, is often burnt by the bungalow caretakers in pits in close proximity to the bungalows.

An obvious consequence of waste is the loss of amenity. Additionally, wildlife can become habituated to litter and they can also suffer physical damage. During on-site visits, various animal species were noted foraging through litter dumps. Another problem with litter is that crows, which proliferate because of the litter, can impact severely on indigenous bird species. Interpretative signs have been erected in various protected areas throughout the country to alert visitors to this problem.

Human waste is also a major problem associated with tourism. The only toilet facilities provided in the Park are at Palatupana, the entrance to the Park, and in the bungalows. The toilet facilities at Palatupana are very rudimentary and at the time of the on-site inspections there was no water available. A result of the poor provision of toilet facilities is that human waste is scattered throughout the Park, especially in areas adjacent to the religious site located at Sithulpauuwa.

Noise pollution, which disturbs the natural sounds in the Park, impacts on wildlife and reduces satisfaction for a number of visitors, is also a problem in the park. Again, noise created by pilgrims is viewed as having a greater impact than wildlife visitors (pers comm, Ranjith, Park Warden). The buses carrying pilgrims often have very loud music playing as they travel through the park. Noise, especially at night, can also be a problem in areas adjacent to the park bungalows.

7.3. Management

A stable and effective management structure enables the development of a consistent approach to the efficient management of park visitors. Unfortunately, this has not occurred in Sri Lanka. For example, there have been seven directors of the DWLC during a four-year period to June 2001. In addition, this position has usually been occupied by career bureaucrats who have little, if any, technical expertise. This means the head of the government department responsible for managing national parks is unlikely to have good understanding of the issues associated with management of protected areas. The high turnover of directors prevents the adoption of a consistent approach to the management of national parks, including tourism (pers comm, Ranjith, Park Warden).

Another problem with the management structure is illustrated by fact that the Assistant Director of the DWLC who is responsible for tourism management in parks is a trained biologist with very limited expertise in tourism management (pers comm, Rathnayake, Deputy Director, DWLC). In addition, it also appears that there has been little tourism planning undertaken at the head office level of the DWLC. The researchers were unable to identify any members of DWLC in head office who were actively involved in any aspect of tourism planning in national parks. The problem with planning is exacerbated by the fact there has been very little academic research conducted into the impact of tourism in Sri Lankan national parks. The lack of research limits the external expertise the DWLC can refer to for advice in their management approach.

The lack of a consistent national approach to the management of national parks has meant that Park Wardens are very influential in determining tourism management strategies. A change in the Park Warden
therefore may result in the adoption of a substantially different approach to the management of tourism (Jayewardene, 2000).

7.4. Lack of funding

Lack of funding, a characteristic feature of protected area management in many developing countries (Shackley, 1996), is also a major problem for the DWLC. The total funding in 2002 for the management of Yala National Park was approximately US$56,500. This means that over US$400,000 in earnings from tourism is being diverted into consolidated revenue by the government. The Sri Lanka Government appears to be locked into allocating a great deal into military funding means that over US$400,000 in earnings from tourism is being diverted into consolidated revenue by the government. The Sri Lanka Government appears to be locked into allocating a great deal into military funding

An obvious consequence of a poor funding is a lack of training opportunities (Katugaha, 2001). Another consequence of the lack of funding in Yala is the poor level of interpretation and education material. This is unfortunate since there is an obvious need to educate domestic tourists, especially pilgrims, about the importance of maintaining the environmental values in protected areas. Additionally, the museum at Palatupana is very outdated and in urgent need of updating.

The Park Warden also laments a lack of funding required to provide a satisfactory income, facilities and extra training for the park guides. These guides depend on knowledge gained from personal experience and need increased formal training to supplement their expertise. In addition, there is a high turnover of these guides who are employed on a voluntary basis and earn low and variable incomes from guiding. As stated previously, the guides will often stop guiding when they find alternative employment. These factors affect the quality of the guiding services provided by the DWLC.

The lack of funding also prevents management from conducting carrying capacity studies that are required to determine appropriate visitation levels. Management recognises the need for these studies but is unable to fund such studies in the current economic climate.

8. Mitigating tourism impacts

Despite the lack of funding available there have been some initiatives introduced by the new Park Warden since he took up his position in May 2001 in an attempt to mitigate some of the impacts from tourism. One initiative is a monthly meeting with safari drivers and operators. During these meetings the Park’s rules and expectations for operators and tourists are explained, some interpretive material distributed and any problems being experienced discussed. The Warden also considered introducing a registration system for safari jeeps operators but this initiative was not instituted because it was felt that small operators would not be able to afford the registration fees.

The Park Warden has also been developing interpretive material to distribute to local school children in an attempt to increase their awareness of the environmental importance of the Park and hopeful modify their behaviour, and that of their parents, when visiting the Yala. This is a small but important initiative that is restricted by a lack of funding.

Another important initiative under consideration is the construction of a new road from Kataragama to Sithulpawa. This road will improve access for pilgrims and reduce the congestion at Palatupana.

There has also been a debate about the future of Park bungalows. Some Sri Lankans, supported by an Asian Development Bank protected-area management proposal for funding, have called for the closure of the bungalows because of the impact they have on the environment and wildlife (see Jayewardene, 2000). There has also been a suggestion that the bungalows be privatised. Both these suggestions, have for the present time, been rejected, probably because of politically sensitive nature of the suggestions. However, this debate could re-emerge sometime in the future.

9. Discussion

A number of people and organisations fear that tourism in Sri Lankan national parks, as in many other developing countries, is not being managed sustainably. Congestion at some national parks is being exacerbated by the closure of other parks to visitors due to the civil war. Yala, the most popular park, probably feels the pressure more keenly than any other park in Sri Lanka because of its popularity amongst domestic and international tourists. The problem is exacerbated further because of the existence of important religious sites within the Park.

In order to ensure sustainable tourism in protected areas it is important to strengthen the institutional capacity to respond to actual or potential tourism impacts (de Oliveira, 2003; Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996). It is clear that in order to increase institutional capacity and improve management of tourism in Sri Lanka, and Yala in particular, there needs to be a substantial increase in funding. As stated previously, over US$400,000 in tourism revenue is being diverted to consolidated income. This suggests that there are funds
available from tourism for the government to spend on protecting the values of Yala. In addition, the government needs to be aware that unless these values are protected future tourism earnings are likely to be substantially diminished. Additional funds could also be raised from tourism by increasing entrance fees for both domestic and international tourists. Management could also consider charging religious tourists an entrance fee. The increase in fees would not only potentially provide funds for management if retained for these purposes but may also deter some tourist from visiting Yala thereby relieving visitor pressure on the Park.

A major priority for the use of increased funding would be for the recruitment of more appropriate and better-trained staff. There could also be increased education and interpretation provided at the Park. Currently, most visitors to the Park are not made aware of the Park rules and regulations. In addition, the interpretation visitors receive is outdated and, in many respects, irrelevant. Unfortunately it unlikely that there will be increased funding made available in the short to medium term because of general economic conditions in the country. However, there is a plan to construct a visitor centre in the near future (pers comm, Rathnayake, Deputy Director, DWLC).

There is a recognition that wildlife visitation needs to be regulated and those levels of visitation should be determined through empirical carrying capacity studies. However, a lack of funding has meant that this has not occurred. There appears to be a need to limit tourist access, both religious and wildlife, to the Park. Limiting access has been successfully implemented in developed countries (for example, see Glick, 1991) as well as in developing countries (for example see Gonzalez & Otero, 2002). However, it may be much more difficult to institute such a strategy in developing countries (Butler, 1991) and even more difficult where access to religious sites is involved. However, increasing park fees could help reduce the number of visitors. Another strategy that may help the acceptance of reduced visitation levels is an education program explaining to the community the need for management to reduce the number of visitors to the Park.

It appears the most pressing issue in Yala is the need to recognise pilgrims as tourists requiring careful management. Sri Lanka is a very religious country and there is a belief that citizens pursuing their religious needs should not be constrained. However, the estimated 400,000 pilgrims visiting Yala annually are having serious impacts on the environment, including the fauna and flora. A major issue related to the management of pilgrims is the lack of knowledge of their behaviour and impacts within the Park. There is a serious need for DWLC to collect information about these aspects of visitation. There is also a need for an extensive education program directed at the pilgrims which explains the values of the Park and the need for them to modify their behaviour while in the Park. The current interpretation policy being undertaken by the Park Warden would appear to be a very worthwhile strategy.

In addition to the education program a DWLC guide should accompany pilgrims. Site hardening should take place in areas adjacent to the religious sites in order to better accommodate religious visitors. In addition, Park infrastructure, for example toilets and camping facilities, especially near the religious sites, should be upgraded in order to accommodate the large numbers of pilgrims. Another strategy for management would be to zone the religious sites within the Park and allow the pilgrims to only visit these sites. If the pilgrims wanted to visit other areas within the Park then they would be charged normal fees for this privilege. Obviously any initiatives involving pilgrims will have to be sensitively implemented so as not to cause a political backlash.

The problems associated with religious tourism may be aggravated by the planned construction of the road between Kataragama and Sithulpauwa. An initiative aimed at relieving congestion at Palatupana may actually encourage increased numbers of pilgrims to visit the Park. This initiative needs to be carefully considered before implementation by the DWLC.

Another issue that the DWLC needs to address is the removal of litter from the park, especially by bungalow and campsite residents. It is apparent the expectations of DWLC managers at head office are not being matched by behaviours out in the park. One method of partly resolving this problem is requiring bungalow and campsite residents to pay a bond. This bond could be redeemed once people leave and remove all their rubbish.

Finally, the behaviour of safari tour operators is an important consideration. The introduction of the monthly meetings between the DWLC and safari operators is an important initiative. The issuing of licences at a nominal fee could also be re-examined since the threat of losing a license could be an effective method of ensuring safari operators follow park regulations. The requirement of a licence fee may also discourage any ill-prepared tour operators from beginning to operate into Yala. The DWLC also needs to ensure that their park guides have a clear understanding of park regulations and the confidence to direct the behaviour of tourists and safari operators.

10. Conclusion

Yala is an important environmental and tourism asset. In developing a tourism policy, management must be cognisant of the need to protect the natural values
over and above all other uses and values affecting the Park and its management (EUHOF A, IH&RA, & UNEP, 2001). Domestic and international tourists gain valuable wildlife and religious experiences while providing a significant boost to the local economy. Unfortunately there is concern about the sustainability of tourism in the Park and it seems that this concern is well placed. This concern may become more pressing if the civil war in the country is ever resolved. The resolution of the war would result in the level of both domestic and international tourism expanding considerably placing increased pressures on the natural environment.

The DWLC is attempting to overcome some of the problems arising from wildlife tourism but is handicapped by a severe lack of funding. In the absence of establishing carrying capacities some other initiatives have been established but, while some are worthwhile, they fall well short of ensuring sustainable tourism use in Yala. Despite the measures taken to control wildlife tourists, religious tourists continue to be ignored. Despite the sensitivity associated with the possible management of pilgrims it is important initiatives are introduced to manage pilgrims regardless of how controversial this may be. This group causes more problems than wildlife tourists and if authorities continue to ignore them the natural values in Yala will continue to deteriorate.

References


Kataragama Devotees Trust (2004). Yala national park: location, access, and facilities. (http://padayatra.org/yala.htm); Accessed 02.01.04.


