

Perceptions of Host Communities towards Heritage Conservation and Tourism: The Case of the Sacred City of Anuradhapura

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Local community perception, among many other stakeholders, is a strong factor in determining successes and failures of heritage policy and plan implementation of a heritage site. In the context of a world heritage site, reconciling the balance between heritage conservation, tourism and local public aspirations is a tremendous and growing challenge. Using the Sacred City of Anuradhapura (SCA), a UNESCO world heritage site (1982) and a main religious tourist destination in Sri Lanka, as a case study from a local community perspective, this research examines the nature of the linkage between heritage resource conservation and tourism development at the particular site.

Various types of quantitative and qualitative data were analysed from three perspectives of heritage sustainability: quality of the heritage resource, quality of heritage tourism, and quality of life of the community. Majority of the community believed that they had a high sense of safeguarding the Buddhist religious heritage of SCA, but they indicated that past plans had not reflected their anticipation and neither were they clear about future plans. Villagers lack interest about being informed about resource conservation and in expressing their views. The data also provide useful information for local benefit and local engagement. Many respondents held government or private sector jobs related to heritage and tourism, but only a small proportion was satisfied with their income. Local involvement in heritage and tourism planning and management is very low and many of them felt that they did not have an effective mechanism to get their views heard. Complaints were heard constantly about the consequences on their life from implementation of projects such as relocation and resettlement. This has not been completed at the time of research, as was indicated in development plans of Anuradhapura Preservation Plan 1942, Anuradhapura Sacred Area Planning Scheme (1984) and Greater Anuradhapura Development Scheme (1998). When villagers were asked whether they were willing to move from the site, most of them were positive about the move although there were a few residents in the Citadel area who had some problems such as loss of means of living, dissatisfaction with compensation and equity issues.

Judging from the feedback, certain conclusions could be drawn. Majority of the community displayed interest and enthusiasm towards heritage conservation and tourism activities, although only a few were satisfied with the economic gains and seemed to lack motivation to take part in heritage and tourism planning and decision-making. However, overall impressions reflect both positive and negative public attitudes towards heritage conservation and tourism at SCA.

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