

UNDERSTANDING THE PATTERNS OF WILDLIFE CRIMES IN UDAWALAWE NATIONAL PARK, SRI LANKA FROM 2014 TO 2024

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Wildlife crimes constitute an escalating global threat with serious consequences for biodiversity conservation and ecosystem integrity. Udawalawe National Park in Sri Lanka has emerged as a critical hotspot for such activities. This study analysed 1,118 wildlife crime incidents reported between 2014 and 2024, focusing on temporal patterns, offense diversity, and seasonal dynamics. Temporal analysis revealed marked surges in 2014, 2018, 2020 and 2023, with 2020 recording the highest incidence during the COVID-19 pandemic. Offense profiling identified 43 categories of crimes, though 10 accounted for 86.50% of all cases. Illegal entry into the park (37.39%) and Cannabis (*Cannabis sativa*) cultivation (17.89%) were the most frequent. Other common offenses included illegal fishing (6.80%) and illegal cattle entry (5.19%). During the study period, 639 cases were recorded, involving 742 suspects, with an average of nearly two suspects per case. Arrests were made in 435 cases (68.08%), while no arrests were made in 204 cases (31.92%), in those cases, captured items were destroyed or confiscated. Seasonal peaks occurred during the dry season (May – September) and the cultural festival period (March – April), suggesting that both ecological resource scarcity and socio-cultural practices influenced illegal activities. Law enforcement responses, therefore, reflected both notable achievements and persistent limitations in deterrence. These findings collectively emphasise the complex nature of wildlife crimes in Udawalawe National Park and highlight the urgent need for adaptive, evidence-based conservation strategies to protect Sri Lanka's wildlife heritage in the long term.

Keywords: Conservation, Crime diversity, Law enforcement, Protected areas, Wildlife crime