

THE PRACTICE OF PREVENTIVE ARCHAEOLOGY: THE CASE OF PROPOSED LUNUGAMWEHERA ELEPHANT REHABILITATION CENTRE, SRI LANKA

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Lunugamwehera, one of the most famous national parks in southern Sri Lanka, attracts hundreds and thousands of nature lovers annually. The improper management of natural resources, coupled together with the political and social agenda of the country, have resulted aggravating the human-elephant conflict (HEC). Sri Lanka experiences the highest HEC in the world, with around 60-70 humans and 270 elephants being killed annually due to the conflict. The Department of Wildlife Conservation has proposed to establish a new Elephant Rehabilitation Centre (PERC) to house problem elephants from around Sri Lanka. The proposed facility will be funded by the ESCAM project, with funds from the World Bank. As the main objective of this project, a physical and cultural resource screening was undertaken to identify the threats and the solutions for the preservation process of all the historical and archaeological sites falling within the 3000ha of the PERC. The field observation and irregular exploration methods were used for data recording, and the identification process was conducted according to the World Bank and government policies. More than fifteen archaeological sites were identified. These sites consist of four monastic complexes: Weherahatagala, Bolhodagala, Kemhatha and Ranegala Vehera. Weherahatagala, Ranegala Wehera and Kemhatha are situated within the proposed PERC. The Bolhidagala site is located in the periphery of the proposed PERC. There is a possibility that this project would pose threats to the mentioned archaeological site. According to the findings, Weherahatagala is an important archaeological site in ancient Ruhuna. The environment of the three monasteries in question could yield many more archaeological relics or cultural debris related to the respective sites. Particularly the high density of the abandoned irrigation tanks and some ancient channels are also located in the vicinity of this area, as part of the history of this region. At the same time, some evidence of ancient agricultural activities might be bedded on the land of this area. The study maintains that the project needs to take into consideration the historical and archaeological value of the area in question and the site of the Weherahathagala monastery complex should be spared if possible. The inscription found at the site, which is based on the *Vaharala* category, is the first of the kind discovered in the entire region, and this marks the archaeological importance of the site. It is prudent to take steps to preserve these archaeological sites in the interest of future research.

Keywords: Lunugamwehera, Preventive Archaeology, PERC