

Promoting Elephant Friendly Tourism in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

Sri Lanka has been identified as one of the most popular destinations in the world by many travel experts. Despite the many attractions, there is one thing that tourists visiting Sri Lanka never miss – the Elephants, who hold a dominant position in the country's religions, both Buddhism and Hinduism, nature and culture. The relationship between elephants and Sri Lankans has deep roots where elephants are always treated as a symbol of strength, prosperity and pride. Many tourists visit Sri Lanka engaging in activities such as elephant safaris, elephant back rides, feeding baby elephants, witnessing/ participating cultural events which use elephants. With this background it can be identified that elephants play a vital role in Sri Lankan tourism industry. However, currently the elephant tourism sector faces two major challenges which should be addressed urgently but carefully as well. More than 100 global travel companies have agreed to stop selling and promoting destinations where elephant rides and shows take place and are discouraging travelers from visiting such places which will severely affect the tourism industry in Sri Lanka. On the other hand, the Sri Lankan elephant population is declining continuously as a result of the destruction of elephant habitats. Therefore conserving these gentle giants is of utmost importance. With this background, the main objective of this paper is to identify the ways and means of promoting elephant friendly tourism in Sri Lanka while ensuring the conservation of elephants. The data was collected through discussions, observations and interviews. The study identified several ways of promoting elephant friendly tourism in Sri Lanka. Mainly, it identified that domestication of elephants, especially targeting the tourism industry is one of the means of elephant conservation. However, with a great awareness of animal rights and welfare, the process will be challenging for the authorities. Therefore, they should be concerned with domesticating elephants within a strong regulatory framework ensuring the rights and welfare of elephants to promote elephant friendly tourism in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: *Tourism, Elephant Tourism, destination, conservation, domestication*

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