



Original Article

ASSESSING DETERMINANTS OF STAKEHOLDER COMMITMENT AND POWER-INTEREST DYNAMICS IN ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT: INSIGHTS FROM UDAWALAWA NATIONAL PARK

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Abstract

Ecotourism combines conservation, communities, and responsible travel to ensure a tourism development that is environmentally friendly, economically viable, and socio-culturally responsible. Even though ecotourism is considered a strategy to conserve national parks, ineffective ecotourism practices create substantial challenges due to the insufficient commitment of stakeholders to uphold ecotourism principles. Therefore, identifying the factors that influence stakeholder commitment to develop ecotourism is crucial. The general objective of this research is to identify the determinants of stakeholder commitment and their power and interest in practicing the determinants for developing ecotourism at Udawalawa National Park. Data from 33 key informants representing state-centered agencies, local communities, outside tourism facilitators, and tourists were analysed using regression analysis and the Relative Importance Index (RII). The study examines nine critical determinants. A comprehensive regression analysis revealed nine significant variables influencing stakeholder commitment. The RII prioritized these variables and “Environmental or ecosystem considerations” emerged as the most critical determinant (RII = 0.648), emphasizing stakeholders’ focus on environmental sustainability. “Socio-cultural pride and local economic development” (RII = 0.564) and “Power decentralization” (RII = 0.491) were critical but lower in priority, reflecting recognition of socio-economic and governance aspects. The power-interest matrix analysed the stakeholder distribution across categories. The integration of these data sets highlights the need for inclusive, transparent, and action-oriented management approaches to enhance stakeholder commitment and satisfaction.

Keywords: Commitment, Ecotourism, National Park, Stakeholders

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1. INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism, a distinct segment of the tourism business, is concerned with the enhancement or preservation of natural systems through tourism and it is a highly effective technique for assisting local communities worldwide in combating poverty and achieving sustainable development as it boosts local capacity building and employment opportunities. Over 90 nations today have national and regional ecotourism initiatives. This has occurred over the previous three decades no other kind of tourism or enterprise has gotten so ingrained in the global economy at such a rapid pace. Travelers, who visited natural areas in excess of ten billion times in 2019, have significantly boosted both their understanding of ecotourism and their willingness to spend more for a more sustainable travel experience. Ecotourism has become the preferred travel experience for several large conservation organizations. Ecotourism places a premium on environmental sustainability over recreational activities and its principles help to connect visitors more intimately to the conservation of the places they visit. In Sri Lanka, out of all the protected places such as nature reserves, jungle corridors, and sanctuaries, national parks receive the greatest number of tourists. However, deforestation is one of the major reasons for visitor dissatisfaction in national parks in Sri Lanka. Aside from that, visitor dissatisfaction occurs during defective ecotourism activities in national parks. Therefore, the problem arises as to how far these parks contribute towards achieving the main ecotourism components called nature conservation, environmental education, and local participation. Deforestation, lack of park coordination, conflicts over resources, issues of boundary, illegal logging, underdeveloped local livelihoods, hunting, reckless driving by safari vehicle drivers, a lack of animal viewing options, and the sheer volume of safari vehicles lead to visitor dissatisfaction in these national parks. There have been extensive researches on ecotourism in Sri Lanka and around the world and most of these studies have emphasized the benefits of ecotourism in minimizing impact, building environmental and cultural respect and empowering the local population, etc. However, no studies have been conducted on the extent to which stakeholders' commitment influences the

ecotourism practices in national parks. Stakeholder commitment is a cornerstone for successful and sustainable ecotourism development. Understanding the key factors that drive commitment and how these factors relate to stakeholders' power and interest levels is essential. This study aims to identify and prioritize the determinants of stakeholder commitment and correlate these with the stakeholders' power-interest distribution to provide actionable insights for Udawalawa National Park management.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Importance of Ecotourism

Ecotourism has emerged as a significant segment within the broader tourism industry, emphasizing the conservation of natural environments and the promotion of sustainable travel practices. Its role in fostering economic viability and socio-cultural responsibility is well-documented. Honey (2008, pp. 6–7) defines ecotourism as responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of local people, and involves interpretation and education. This concept has evolved to integrate the principles of sustainable development, aligning tourism practices with environmental conservation, community involvement, and economic benefits (TIES, 2015).

Global Trends in Ecotourism

Ecotourism initiatives are now present in over 90 countries, demonstrating its global reach and significance (TIES, 2015). The rapid expansion of ecotourism reflects a growing awareness among travellers of the environmental and cultural impacts of their activities. In 2019, tourists visited natural areas over ten billion times, highlighting an increasing preference for sustainable travel experiences (UNWTO, 2020). Large conservation organizations, recognizing the potential of ecotourism, have adopted it as a preferred travel model, further integrating environmental sustainability into mainstream tourism.



Ecotourism in Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, national parks are central to ecotourism, with 26 parks designated by the Department of Wildlife Conservation (DWC), covering 7,466.841 km² (SLTDA, 2017). These parks are vital for both conservation efforts and tourism revenue, contributing significantly to the public sector's tourism income. However, deforestation and ineffective management practices pose substantial challenges. Between 2002 and 2020, Sri Lanka lost 10.2 hectares of humid primary forest, threatening the viability of national parks and diminishing visitor satisfaction (Ranagalage, 2020, pp. 1-24). Many questions remain unanswered at the policy level regarding Sri Lanka's ecotourism development. For instance, despite Wilpattu National Park being identified as an ecotourism destination, it has received several negative evaluations due to a lack of animal viewing options. Unreasonable entrance fees and poor park interpretation were other sources of visitor displeasure. A major source of dissatisfaction for visitors to Udawalawa and Minneriya national parks was the sheer volume of safari vehicles and the resulting traffic congestion. Reckless or incompetent safari vehicle drivers exacerbated the situation. Dissatisfaction with park management at Horton Plains National Park is attributed to a variety of factors, including a high entrance charge, limited opportunity to see a wide variety of wildlife, and a lack of effective application of visitor norms and policies. Tourists at Sri Lanka's national parks felt that park management was less concerned about the ecology and wildlife than they had previously thought. Visitors expressed unhappiness with park administration concerns, whereas tour operator-related issues were almost overlooked (Prakash, Perera, Newsome, Kusuminda, & Walker, 2019, pp. 0780-2213).

Challenges in Ecotourism Practices

Despite its benefits, ecotourism faces challenges such as deforestation, resource conflicts, boundary issues, illegal logging, and underdeveloped local livelihoods. Visitor dissatisfaction often stems from inadequate management, reckless driving by safari vehicles, lack of animal viewing opportunities, and overcrowding (Coria &

Calfucura, 2012, p. 19). These challenges highlight the need for effective stakeholder engagement and commitment to uphold ecotourism principles. Pathmasiri (2019, pp. 45–67) explores the socio-economic impacts of ecotourism on local communities, highlighting both the opportunities and challenges faced by these communities in integrating sustainable tourism practices. The study emphasizes the need for capacity building and empowerment of local stakeholders to enhance their involvement and benefits from ecotourism initiatives. Pathmasiri (2021, pp. 23–38) examines the effectiveness of governance structures in managing ecotourism sites in Sri Lanka. This research identifies key governance challenges, such as inadequate stakeholder coordination and insufficient regulatory frameworks, that hinder the successful implementation of ecotourism principles. The findings suggest that improving governance through inclusive and transparent decision-making processes is crucial for sustainable ecotourism development.

The Role of Stakeholder Commitment

In tourism, according to Richardson (2004), are those who have an interest in or are affected by tourism. Travel and tourism companies, governments, and host communities are among them (as cited in Sari & Rahayu, 2018, pp. 0–4). Ecotourism can only succeed in ecologically delicate places if all relevant stakeholders are involved, and this requires an equilibrium of interests among these stakeholders (Ding & Cao, 2019, pp. 1083–1092). As Kuang (2010) mentioned, the scope and level of ecotourism stakeholders, as well as their respective roles and responsibilities, should be built into the structure (as cited in Wang, 2021). The core characteristics are the demands of stakeholders' interests (Sun & Zhang, 2019, pp. 1489–1502). However, each potential ecotourism stakeholder should have a distinct viewpoint on the protected areas, as well as different benefits and motivations for ecotourism, which they may share with the group (Dologlou & Katsoni, 2016, pp. 1–21). Even though stakeholders are critical actors in achieving sustainable development through ecotourism (Backman & Munanura, 2015, pp. 95–98), some ecotourism businesses and destinations have been



drawn away from the ultimate goals of ecotourism, and ecotourism stakeholders have built both effective and defective ecotourism destinations (Pathmasiri & Bandara, 2019, pp. 1–18). Stakeholder commitment is crucial for successful ecotourism development. Effective stakeholder engagement can enhance the sustainability of ecotourism practices by ensuring that conservation, community involvement, and economic benefits are prioritized. The commitment of stakeholders, including local communities, state agencies, tourists, and tourism facilitators, influences the implementation and success of ecotourism initiatives (Byrd, 2007, p. 92).

Determinants of Stakeholder Commitment

Research indicates several determinants of stakeholder commitment to ecotourism. These include environmental or ecosystem considerations, mutual understanding and agreement, willingness to implement decisions, transparency, comprehensiveness, trust, common decision-making, socio-cultural pride, and power decentralization (Timur & Getz, 2008, pp. 22–35). These factors are essential for fostering a collaborative and sustainable approach to ecotourism.

The Role of Power and Interest in Stakeholder Commitment

The power and interest of stakeholders significantly influence their level of commitment to national park management. Power refers to the ability of stakeholders to influence decision-making processes, while interest denotes the degree of concern or stake, they have in the outcomes of those decisions. Understanding the dynamics of power and interest among stakeholders is essential for developing strategies that enhance their commitment and engagement.

Influence of Stakeholder Power

Stakeholders with high power are typically those who hold significant influence over the resources, policies, and overall direction of national park management. These include government agencies, conservation organizations, and influential

business entities. Their commitment is often driven by their ability to directly impact park operations and policies. High-power stakeholders can advocate for sustainable practices, allocate necessary resources, and enforce regulations that support conservation goals (Bramwell & Lane, 2013, pp. 15–30).

Influence of Stakeholder Interest

Stakeholders with high interest are deeply concerned with the outcomes of national park management. These stakeholders include local communities, tourists, and environmental NGOs. Their commitment is often fueled by a personal or communal stake in the well-being of the park, such as economic benefits from tourism, cultural heritage preservation, and environmental conservation (Freeman, 2010, pp. 45–60). High-interest stakeholders are likely to participate actively in park activities, provide valuable insights, and support initiatives that align with their interests.

Power-Interest Dynamics

The interaction between power and interest among stakeholders creates a dynamic that influences their commitment levels. The Power-Interest Matrix is a useful tool for categorizing stakeholders and understanding their potential impact on park management (Mendelow, 1981, p. 4). Auvinen (2017) adapted the Power-Interest Matrix by expanding upon the traditional model and adding more nuanced categories to better classify stakeholders (pp. 112–130). Here is an overview of the five categories:

1. Keep Informed:
 - Description: Medium to high interest, low power.
 - Engagement Strategy: Regularly provide updates and keep these stakeholders informed. Their high interest means they are eager to stay engaged, but their limited power means they do not have significant influence over the project.
2. Keep Satisfied:
 - Description: Medium to high power, low interest.



- Engagement Strategy: Ensure these stakeholders are satisfied to prevent any issues. Although their interest may be low, their power to impact the project necessitates keeping them content and informed to avoid potential problems.
3. Minimal Effort:
- Description: Low interest, low power.
 - Engagement Strategy: Provide minimal communication and oversight. These stakeholders have little power and interest, so they require minimal effort to manage.
4. Encourage and Influence:
- Description: High power, high interest.
 - Engagement Strategy: Actively engage these stakeholders, involve them in key decisions, and leverage their influence. Their high power and interest mean they can significantly affect the project, so they should be actively managed and involved.
5. Encourage and Involvement:
- Description: Medium to high power, medium to high interest.
 - Engagement Strategy: Involve these stakeholders in various aspects of the project and keep them engaged. Their moderate to high power and interest means they can contribute positively and should be encouraged to participate actively.

This matrix helps tailor stakeholder management approaches based on their levels of power and interest, ensuring appropriate engagement strategies.

Empirical Evidence from National Park Management

Research on stakeholder dynamics in national park management underscores the importance of balancing power and interest to enhance commitment. For instance, Byrd (2007, pp. 95–98) highlights those stakeholders with both high power and interest, such as park authorities and conservationists, are pivotal in driving sustainable management practices. Their leadership and decision-making capabilities are essential for implementing effective conservation strategies. However state-centred agencies were identified as having played programming and facilitating roles to some extent but neglected the gatekeeping role

(Pathmasiri et al., 2023, pp.66-72). In contrast, stakeholders with high interest but low power, such as local communities and tourists, often require empowerment through capacity-building initiatives and inclusive governance structures. These stakeholders bring valuable local knowledge and a vested interest in the park’s success, making their commitment vital for long-term sustainability (Reed, 2008, pp. 243–262). Pathmasiri (2022, pp. 55–72) addresses the environmental impacts of ecotourism, focusing on the balance between conservation and tourism activities. This research underscores the importance of environmental education and awareness among both tourists and local communities to mitigate negative environmental impacts and promote conservation efforts.

The literature highlights the importance of stakeholder commitment in developing sustainable ecotourism practices. Effective engagement strategies, prioritizing environmental sustainability, transparency, and mutual understanding, are essential for overcoming challenges and ensuring the success of ecotourism initiatives. The case of Udawalawa National Park illustrates how targeted management approaches can enhance stakeholder commitment, contributing to the long-term effective ecotourism practices of national parks.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A mixed-method approach was employed, combining quantitative regression analysis with qualitative stakeholder classification. Data were collected through key-informant interviews and field observations. The data collection involved 33 informants related to Udawalawa National Park, including state-centred agencies, tourists (both foreign and domestic), local communities, and outside tourism facilitators. Semi-structured questionnaires were used to address the four criteria of interest. The data findings related to each criterion were critically analysed using the power/interest matrix and the Relative Importance Index (RII), which helped identify the most important criteria based on participants’ responses. Quantitative data was analyzed using the RII method to measure the significance of different factors related to ecotourism.



Stakeholders were asked to rank items on a Likert scale, with RII calculated to provide a ranked order of importance for variables such as environmental considerations, mutual understanding, trust, transparency, and power decentralization. The formula used for RII was:

$$RII = \frac{\sum W}{A \times N}$$

ΣW = the total weight given by respondents,
 A = the highest possible weight,
 N = the total number of respondents.

This method enabled the identification of the most and least prioritized factors in ecotourism according to stakeholders.

The results of the analysis were discussed comprehensively to support the study's aim. The regression model evaluated the impact of nine variables on stakeholder commitment, revealing an R-squared value of 1.000. All variables had identical coefficients (0.1000) and p-values (0.000), indicating a significant impact.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The regression analysis confirmed that all nine variables significantly impact stakeholder commitment. The RII values further prioritized these variables as follows:

According to the table 1, the Environmental or Ecosystem Considerations Index received the highest rank and RII value (0.648), indicating that stakeholders prioritize environmental sustainability and ecosystem conservation in their commitment to ecotourism development. The high mean (3.242) rating underscores the importance of integrating environmental considerations into decision-making processes. Mutual understanding and agreement among stakeholders emerged as the second most key factor. The relatively high RII (0.636) and mean value (3.182) highlight the significance of effective communication and consensus-building in fostering collaborative efforts. Stakeholders' willingness to implement decisions ranked third, indicating their commitment to translating agreements into actionable initiatives. The moderate RII value

(0.618) and mean (3.091) rating underscore the importance of follow-through and action-oriented approaches. Transparency in decision-making processes ranked fourth, highlighting the importance of openness and accountability.

Table 1: The Present State of Ecotourism Stakeholders' Commitment

Index	RII	Mean	Rank
Environmental or ecosystem considerations	0.648	3.242	1
Mutual Understanding and Agreement	0.636	3.182	2
Willing to implement Decisions	0.618	3.091	3
Transparency	0.606	3.030	4
Comprehensiveness	0.588	2.939	5
Trust between and among stakeholders	0.588	2.939	6
Reaching Common Decisions	0.582	2.909	7
Socio-cultural pride and local economic development	0.564	2.818	8
Power decentralization	0.491	2.455	9

The RII value (0.606) and mean (3.030) rating indicate stakeholders' recognition of the need for transparent governance structures. The comprehensiveness of decision-making processes ranked fifth, indicating stakeholders' emphasis on inclusive and thorough approaches to ecotourism development, and the Trust-building among stakeholders shared the sixth position, underscoring the importance of fostering trust and collaboration. Both indices having a moderate RII value (0.588) and mean (2.939) rating reflect stakeholders' expectations for comprehensive planning and implementation and recognition of trust as a critical factor in an effective partnership, respectively. Reaching common decisions ranked seventh, indicating stakeholders' efforts to achieve consensus on key issues. The RII value (0.582) and mean (2.909) rating suggest stakeholders' recognition of the importance of shared decision-making processes. Socio-cultural pride and local economic development ranked eighth, highlighting stakeholders' acknowledgment of the



socio-economic benefits of ecotourism. The RII value (0.564) and mean (2.818) rating reflect stakeholders' emphasis on community empowerment and economic growth. Power decentralization emerged as the ninth-ranked factor, indicating stakeholders' relatively lower emphasis on decentralizing decision-making authority. The lower RII value (0.491) and mean (2.455) rating suggest potential areas for improvement in distributing power among stakeholders.

Before identifying the power-interest dynamics, the researchers classified stakeholders into five categories based on their power and interest levels as Table 2.

POWER	High	KEEP SATISFIED	ENCOURAGE AND INVOLVE	ENGAGE AND INFLUENCE
	Medium	KEEP SATISFIED	ENCOURAGE AND INVOLVE	ENCOURAGE AND INVOLVE
	Low	MINIMAL EFFORT	KEEP INFORMED	KEEP INFORMED
		Low	Medium	High
		INTEREST		

Figure 1: Power/Interest matrix
 Source: Adopted from (Auvinen, 2017)

POWER	High	A04, B05, C04, C05, D03, B03, B06, B07, B08, C01, C02, C03, C07, C08, D06, D07	A06, B02, B04, D04	A01, A02, A03, A05, A08, D05
	Medium			
	Low	B01, C06, D01, D08	D02, A07, D09	
		Low	Medium	High
		INTEREST		

Figure 2: Power/Interest matrix
 Source: Collected data by the researcher

The following bar chart (Figure 3) visualizes the number of stakeholders in each category. The "Keep Satisfied" category has the highest number of stakeholders (12), while the "Keep Informed" and "Encourage and Involve" categories have the fewest (4 each). This visualization helps in understanding the distribution and can be useful for resource allocation and stakeholder management strategies. To enhance stakeholder power and interest, Udawalawa National Park management can implement targeted strategies for each category, aiming to transition stakeholders from lower engagement levels to higher ones.

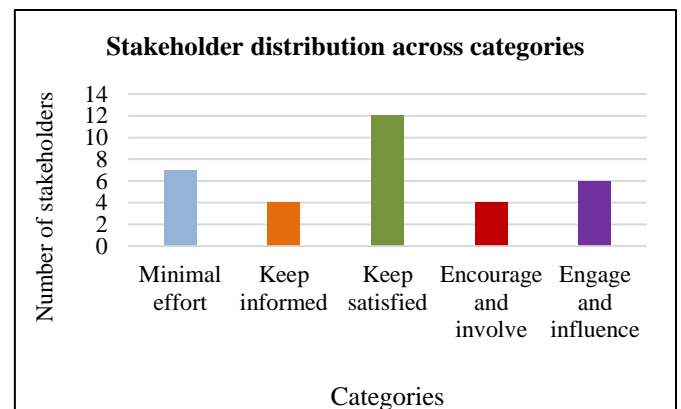


Figure 3: Stakeholder distribution across categories based on their power and interest levels

For stakeholders in the Minimal Effort category (e.g., tourists, local community members, tour guides), the park management can:

- Enhanced Interaction: Organize interactive activities like guided tours, educational workshops, and wildlife conservation sessions to increase their interest.
- Incentive Programs: Offer loyalty programs, discounts, and special access events for frequent visitors.
- Information Campaigns: Provide engaging and accessible information through brochures, websites, and social media about the park's efforts and the importance of conservation.
- Community Engagement: Involve the local community in volunteer programs and community-based conservation projects, giving them a stake in the park's success.



Table 2: Classification of Stakeholders based on their power and interest levels (Illustration of figure 2 data)

No	Category	Stakeholders	Details
01	Minimal effort	Tourists	Physiologist
		Local community	Insurance officer
		Outside tourism facilitator	Safari jeep driver
Tour guide			
02	Keep informed	State-centered agencies	Wildlife ranger
		Outside tourism facilitator	Safari jeep driver/hotel owner
			Chairperson of the safari jeep drivers' association
03	Keep satisfied	State-centered agencies	Wildlife ranger
		Tourists	03 Businessman
			Housewife
			Retired principal
		Local community	Former Vice Chairman – Ambilipitiya Pradeshiya Sabha
			Poter
			Religious leader
			Grama Niladhari (GN)
			03 Businessmen
		Outside tourism facilitator	Safari jeep driver
Tour guide			
Hotel owner			
04	Encourage and involve	State-centered agencies	Wildlife guard
		Tourists	Lawyer
			Nurse
Outside tourism facilitator	Tour planner		
05	Engage and influence	State-centered agencies	Wildlife conservationist
			Wildlife guard
			Wildlife ranger
			02 Wildlife ranger assistants
		Outside tourism facilitator	Hotel owner

For stakeholders in the Keep Informed category (e.g., state-centered agencies, safari jeep drivers), the park management can:

- Regular Updates: Send out newsletters, reports, and updates on park activities, conservation efforts, and upcoming events.
- Feedback Mechanisms: Implement feedback channels such as surveys and suggestion boxes to actively listen to and address their concerns.
- Collaborative Projects: Initiate collaborative projects that involve these stakeholders, such as research studies, community outreach, and tourism development programs.
- Recognition Programs: Acknowledge and reward the contributions of these stakeholders to foster a sense of value and involvement.

For stakeholders in the Keep Satisfied category (e.g. local community leaders, influential tourists, and businessmen), the park management can:

- Partnership Opportunities: Develop formal partnerships and joint ventures with local businesses and influential community members.
- Advisory Roles: Invite them to join advisory boards or committees where they can have a direct impact on decision-making processes.
- Customized Communication: Provide tailored communication and updates that specifically address their interests and concerns.
- Capacity Building: Offer training and development programs to empower these stakeholders with knowledge and skills related to wildlife conservation and sustainable tourism.

For stakeholders in the Encourage and Involve category (e.g., tourists like lawyers and nurses, tour planners), the park management can:

- Leadership Roles: Encourage these stakeholders to take on leadership roles in community projects and conservation initiatives.
- Frequent Engagement: Maintain regular and meaningful engagement through



meetings, workshops, and events where their input is valued.

- **Empowerment Initiatives:** Provide opportunities for these stakeholders to contribute ideas and lead initiatives that align with their expertise and interests.
- **Networking Opportunities:** Facilitate networking events that connect these stakeholders with other influential parties and stakeholders in the park’s ecosystem.

For stakeholders in the Engage and Influence category (e.g., wildlife conservationists, wildlife guards, wildlife rangers, and hotel owners), the park management can:

- **Collaborative Decision-Making:** Involve these stakeholders in key decision-making processes by including them in advisory boards and strategic planning committees.
- **Advanced Training Programs:** Offer specialized training and professional development opportunities to enhance their skills and knowledge in wildlife conservation and sustainable tourism.
- **High-Impact Projects:** Engage these stakeholders in leading significant conservation projects and research initiatives that directly contribute to the park’s goals.
- **Recognition Programs:** Implement recognition and reward programs to acknowledge their contributions, such as awards, public acknowledgments, and incentive schemes.

Implementing the Strategies

The following actionable steps Udawalawa National Park management can take for developing stakeholder development and ecotourism practices.:

- **Workshops and Training Sessions:** Conduct regular workshops and training sessions focused on wildlife conservation, park management, and sustainable tourism practices.
- **Engagement Platforms:** Create online platforms and community forums where stakeholders can interact, share ideas, and stay updated on park activities.
- **Volunteering Programs:** Develop structured volunteering programs that

allow stakeholders to participate actively in conservation efforts.

- **Educational Campaigns:** Run educational campaigns in local schools, community centres, and online to raise awareness about the importance of conservation.
- **Feedback and Improvement:** Continuously gather feedback from stakeholders and implement improvements based on their suggestions and needs.

By systematically enhancing the power and interest of stakeholders, Udawalawa National Park can foster a more supportive, engaged, and influential community that contributes to the park’s long-term sustainability and success.

Correlation of Key Variables and Stakeholder Groups

High-Impact Variables

Environmental or Ecosystem Considerations emerge as pivotal for stakeholders categorized as Engage and Influence (Category 5). These stakeholders, characterized by high power and interest, prioritize sustainability efforts within UNP ecotourism development. The emphasis on environmental factors underscores their commitment to long-term conservation and sustainable practices. Similarly, Mutual Understanding and Agreement are crucial across all stakeholder groups, particularly among category 04 and 05 stakeholders. These groups value consensus-building and clear communication, fostering cohesive decision-making processes essential for effective management and stakeholder satisfaction.

Satisfaction Correlation

Variables with high Relative Importance Index (RII), such as Transparency and Mutual Understanding, correlate significantly with higher levels of stakeholder satisfaction. This correlation is particularly pronounced among category 04 and 05 stakeholders. These groups appreciate transparent communication and inclusive decision-making, which align with their active involvement and high interest in UNP management. In contrast, stakeholders in the category 01 and 02 express higher dissatisfaction,



indicating a need for targeted engagement strategies to address their concerns and enhance their participation.

Power and Interest Dynamics

Stakeholders categorized as Minimal Effort (Category 01) require heightened engagement strategies focusing on key RII variables such as transparency and mutual understanding. These efforts aim to increase their interest and involvement in UNP activities, ensuring their perspectives are integrated despite their lower influence. Category 02 stakeholders seek more information and greater involvement in decision-making processes to strengthen their engagement. Category 03 stakeholders, characterized by moderate to high power but lower interest, benefit from management strategies that balance detailed information sharing with streamlined communication to maintain their satisfaction without overwhelming them. Category 04 stakeholders are actively engaged in decision-making and implementation processes, benefiting from initiatives that foster their proactive participation. Category 05 stakeholders, with high power and interest, maintain robust engagement through a strategic focus on environmental sustainability and mutual understanding, reinforcing their commitment and support for UNP’s goals.

Implications for Management

Enhancing Transparency and Mutual Understanding emerges as critical strategies to sustain high engagement and satisfaction levels across all stakeholder groups. Clear communication channels and inclusive decision-making processes foster trust and cooperation, crucial for achieving collective goals. Empowering lower power stakeholders involves developing tailored strategies that increase their involvement and interest, thereby enhancing their contributions to UNP initiatives. Focus on Environmental Sustainability aligns closely with the priorities of stakeholders with high power and interest, ensuring their continued support and active participation in ecotourism development. By implementing these strategies, UNP can effectively manage stakeholder relationships, optimize resource allocation, and promote

sustainable practices essential for long-term success.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight the critical role of stakeholder commitment in the sustainable development of ecotourism at Udawalawa National Park (UNP), with “Environmental or ecosystem considerations” emerging as the most crucial determinant. This underscores a shared commitment to conserving natural ecosystems as fundamental to successful ecotourism practices (Buckley, 2009). The emphasis on factors such as mutual understanding, transparency, and willingness to implement decisions reveals the need for clear communication and effective consensus-building to align diverse interests and ensure cohesive action. This aligns with practices in parks like Kruger and Yellowstone, where conservation efforts such as habitat protection, wildlife monitoring, and anti-poaching initiatives are central (Biggs et al., 2012, pp.19-24), (Clark et al., 2000). In Sri Lanka, Yala National Park faces similar challenges, particularly with the need to balance wildlife conservation (e.g., leopard habitats) with increasing tourism. Implementing more controlled tourism activities, with its careful regulation of visitor numbers, would reduce ecological footprints (Weerakoon, 2009., pp.4-7). Other than that maintenance of elephant corridors as safety paths for wild elephants and as crucial places that ensure the security of human life and their property is essential (Bandara, 2020, p.437). This approach ensures that stakeholders focus on ecosystem preservation as the core of ecotourism development. Such sustainable park management strategies can be replicated in Udawalawa and other parks with similar conservation priorities.

The Power-Interest Matrix further categorizes stakeholders into five groups, each requiring tailored engagement strategies: enhancing interaction for those with minimal effort, providing regular updates and collaborative projects for those to be kept informed, establishing partnerships and advisory roles for those to be kept satisfied, encouraging leadership and empowerment for those to be involved, and focusing on sustainability for those who are most influential. Local community members could be involved in community-based conservation efforts



that align with Udawalawa’s engagement model, which promotes local economic benefits from ecotourism. In Serengeti National Park (Tanzania), similar strategies are used, where locals benefit from tourism revenues while engaging in conservation activities. Ecotourism sites like the Galápagos Islands prioritize involving high-power stakeholders in conservation programs (Tumusiime et al., 2011, pp.222-232). Examples from Namibia’s conservancies show the success of giving local communities greater control over tourism and conservation efforts (Fabricius et al., 2004). In Sri Lanka, models from Sinharaja Forest Reserve, where local community engagement is central to conservation efforts, show that decentralized decision-making can empower local stakeholders to take on more responsibility in park management (Ratnayake et al., 2012, pp.37-45). The integration of these insights calls for a comprehensive management approach that includes enhancing transparency, increasing stakeholder involvement, focusing on environmental sustainability, and implementing educational and engagement programs. Such strategies are essential for optimizing stakeholder contributions, fostering cooperation, and promoting sustainable practices, ensuring the long-term success and resilience of ecotourism initiatives while benefiting both the environment and local communities.

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