

POTENTIAL OF DEVELOPING ECOTOURISM IN THE KURULU KELE SANCTUARY, SRI LANKA

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Kurulu Kele Sanctuary (KKS) is situated in the Kegalle District in the lowland wet zone of Sri Lanka. In 1941 KKS had an extent of 109 ha. However it is left with only 11.32 ha at present. The objectives of the study were to determine the plant diversity, interactions of villagers with the sanctuary and to identify the potential to develop KKS as an ecotourism destination. Two types of habitats were identified at the KKS, namely the dense forest and the rocky area. The vegetation sampling was conducted using six randomly selected plots per each habitat type from December 2011 to June 2012. A social survey was conducted among 60 villagers using questionnaires to gather information. A map to demarcate appropriate locations for different purposes/activities inside the sanctuary was prepared using results.

A total of 75 species of higher plants belonging to 33 families were recorded at KKS. Twenty five percent of the plant species recorded were endemic, 63% were native and 12% were exotic. Nine percent of the plants were listed as threatened, 4% as near threatened and 6% as globally threatened. The plant density was 6867 and 4617 individuals per ha in the dense forest and in the rocky area respectively. In the KKS, 65% of the individuals belonged to 10 - 39 cm Girth at Breast Height (GBH) class. Though all the villagers living around the sanctuary were aware that the Kurulu Kele is a sanctuary, many villagers were involved in collecting wood as a fuel (44%), food items (18%) and medicinal plants (13%) from the sanctuary. Ninety one percent of the villagers were aware that the KKS is in a threatened state due to over exploitation of forest resources. The villagers suggested that an immediate conservation programme should be initiated with the community participation. Only 8% of the villagers were aware about ecotourism. After an explanation about ecotourism, 83% of the villagers declared their willingness to develop ecotourism project in/around the KKS. There is a great potential to develop KKS as an ecotourism destination, due to high plant diversity, culture of villagers and eagerness of majority of forest officers at the KKS. However, proper planning is needed prior to implementation of any ecotourism activity in the KKS.

Key words: Community participation, Ecotourism, Plant diversity