

Revival of Sri Lankan Wildlife Tourism Operation in New Normal Conditions of Covid -19: Challenges and Readiness

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Abstract

Purpose: This study explores the ways and means to the revival of wildlife tourism operations with the challenges of COVID-19.

Research Methodology: This study used a qualitative research approach. Primary data was collected from 16 wildlife service providers at Minneriya national park using the purposive sampling technique. Content analysis was used to analyze the data.

Results: The study's findings revealed operational, financial, labor-related, communication, technology & economic impact as the existing challenges in wildlife tourism operations during pandemics & introducing recreational activities, health & safety measures, technology, policy planning, etc. should be key priorities to revive the wildlife tourism sector in post-COVID-19 times.

Limitations: The study is limited to the Minneriya National Park, and given the number of existing national parks in Sri Lanka, its geographical region is comparatively smaller.

Contributions: The outcome of this study recommends Sri Lankan policymakers identify the gaps to promote wildlife tourism from the perspective of service providers. The pandemic has created a sustainable platform to rejuvenate wildlife tourism which has enabled it to address issues in the long term.

Novelty: Based on the results, there should be strong transformational strategies to avoid the worst effects of future operations: such as government involvement, financial facilities, promotions, and research & development. This study identified a response mechanism to attract travelers to achieve a niche market segment. It will manifest significance to the future generation, policymakers, and academic students to grab value scale for future operation in new normal conditions and post-COVID-19 times.

Keywords: *Challenges, COVID-19, Readiness, Service Providers, Wildlife Tourism*

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1. Introduction

Tourism is a significant industry in both developed and developing countries which contributes to the national economic growth, and diversification of a country. National parks and protected regions are more attractive and compelling to tourists compared to other worldwide tourist destinations. The potential to observe wild animals in their natural environment is the most crucial component & eagerness to view animals in their native habitats, such as wildlife parks and protected regions, is identified as the dominant factor (Sharpley, 2002). Asian countries are enriched with biodiversity

hotspots, and natural beauty, providing opportunities for expanding the tourist sector. Sri Lanka is an Asian country too has a vast extent of diverse biodiversity hotspots especially related to wildlife. Sri Lanka offers a wide range of travel experiences with new tourist concepts such as agro-tourism, eco-tourism, and wildlife tourism, and is prominent as the most spectacular wildlife paradise in the world (Tessema, Lilieholm, Ashenafi, & Leader-Williams, 2010).

Wildlife tourism is a niche tourist market segment that could be an aid to boost tourism revenue and recently, there has been an increased curiosity in nature-based and wildlife tourism in natural protected areas. Sri Lanka contains 22 national parks across the island thus leading to attracting many tourists and a variation of tourism activities. This has resulted in the wildlife tourism service providers in the vicinity improving their economic status (Sumanapala & Wolf, 2022).

According to SLTDA statistics, revenue from national parks has gradually increased since the end of the civil war which prevailed for 30 years and wildlife tourism product has highly contributed to the growth of the Sri Lankan economy (SLTDA, 2019). Nevertheless, the novel corona virus, has become a global economic disaster that has significantly influenced the travel and tourism sector, globally and in Sri Lanka (Ranasinghe, Kumudulali, & Ranaweera, 2019) and also in generating revenue from foreign visitors to Wildlife Parks as well. According to SLTDA Statistics, income from foreign visitors to national parks decreased comparing previous years. It has significantly influenced the travel and tourism sector & hurts those who depend on tourism-related businesses by having themselves found in a precarious position and may intensify the estimated exponential growth of wildlife tourists (Duminduhewa, Wimalarathana, & Kaldeen, 2020; Nicola et al., 2020).

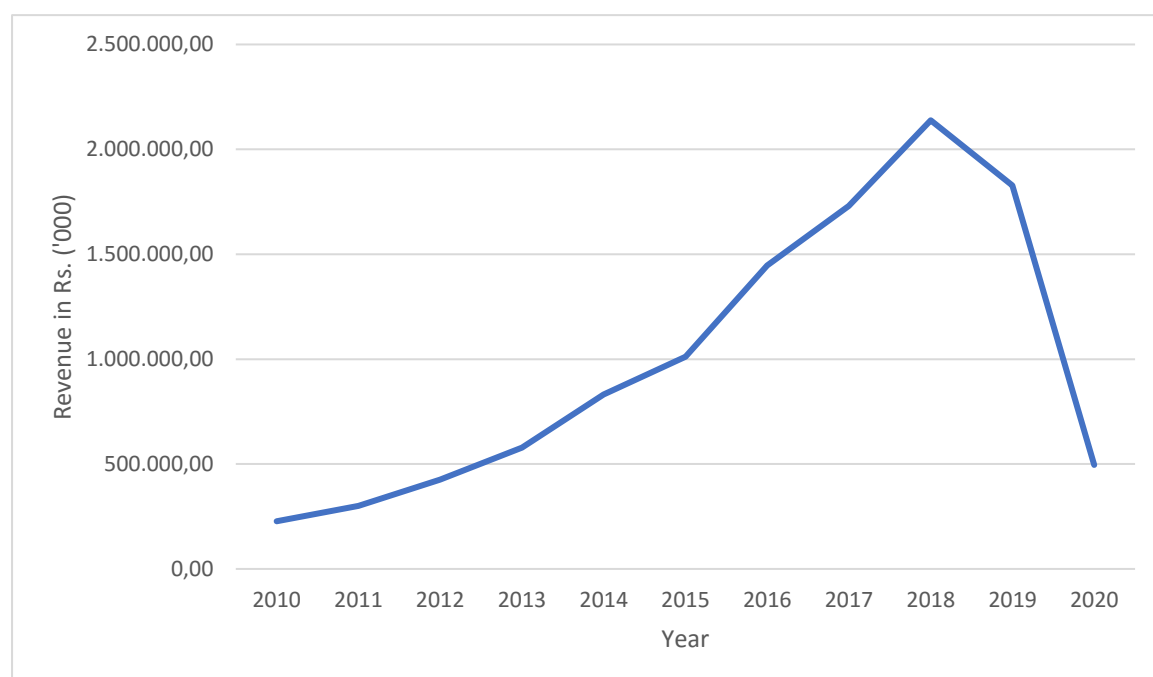


Figure 1. Revenue from Sri Lankan National Parks (2010-2020)
Source: SLTDA (2021)

Regardless of the calamitous aftermaths of the pandemic, the wildlife tourism sector is ready for a rebound since there is a responsibility to manage existing and growing markets efficiently. The pandemic was an opportunity to provide a new direction for rethinking tourism to uplift lower levels of the tourism sector. The COVID-19 scenario turned into a new chapter for visiting and managing national parks and wildlife reserves and trying to value add & re-launch in new ways (Templeton, Goonan, & Fyall, 2021). Newsome indicates that the wildlife tourism sector should revive in the new normal condition of post-COVID-19 with a protective future for wild animals, higher-quality

ecotourism, and more tourist pleasure. Therefore, the pandemic has provided an opportunity to re-launch the wildlife sector in a sustainable manner (Newsome, 2020).

According to Sri Lanka's tourism vision 2025, promoting conservation and enhancing the country's natural environment, and raising standards, with a particular focus on the wildlife tourism sector, includes introducing measures to jeep operation, eco-guide training, and management directives whereas the government has recognized those aspects as a rising market for wildlife tourism (SLTDA, 2022). Although it is a highly demanding market, responsible parties have not prioritized to revival market segment after COVID-19.

The Minneriya National Park's revenue decreased during the pandemic, as evidenced by the 2021 Annual SLTDA statistical report. Minneriya is a well-known tourist attraction in the cultural triangle because of the enormous number of Asian elephants attracted to the grasslands. Moreover, it is recognized as a significant elephant sanctuary, and as a destination with an enormous herd of elephants accumulate in one place. This beauty attracts visitors to this park, and the number of visitor arrivals gradually increased until the pandemic hits while creating a revenue platform for the service providers (Rathnayake, 2016). Researchers have pointed out the tendency of the wildlife tourism operation in new normal conditions and the COVID-19 global pandemic enabled the wildlife tourism sector to turn a new chapter for traveling & management of National Parks. Although Sri Lanka is rich in wildlife tourism destinations, an authorized, responsible party has not been attentive to impose a strong focus on reviving the market segment in new normal conditions. Therefore, this study expects to identify the prospects available for the revival of wildlife tourism operations in new normal conditions of COVID-19 from the perspective of service providers. Further, it explores the existing challenges and readiness of the service providers to rejuvenate this alternative tourism category addressing its sustainable needs.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Wildlife Tourism

Wildlife tourism is an alternative tourism segment grounded on nature-based tourism that involves contact with wildlife, whether in their native habitat or captivity. Essentially, it's about increasing the possibilities of positive wildlife interactions for visitors while also conserving the resource of wildlife. Wildlife tourism recognizes long term financial benefits while also aiding wildlife conservation and local communities (Burns & Sofield, 2001). Wildlife resources provide crucial natural fortifications for human livelihood methods in forest and savanna zones, yet they also lead to disputes (Tiimub et al., 2019).

Wildlife tourism is a tourism segment that emphasizes watching and interacting with local animals and plants in their natural ecosystems. It is also practiced in many countries. In its most basic forms, Wildlife tourism entails either actively (e.g., hunting/collection) or passively (e.g., watching/photography) interacting with wild animals in their natural habitat. It's become popular in recent years worldwide, and many of its components are directly related to sustainable tourism (Puri, 2019).

2.2 Significance of Wildlife Tourism

Wildlife tourism in developing countries has grown into popular tourist destinations, with animal viewing and accessibility to outdoor leisure activities. Wildlife tourism is the country's entire fastest-growing type of tourism, as many countries' tourist industries are dependent on their wildlife and wilderness regions. As a result, wildlife tourism has become a key export sector in several countries worldwide, with Tanzania, Botswana, Kenya, and South Africa serving as shining examples. Protected areas continue to be a vital refuge for wildlife resources, and remote communities must get involved in managing them (Zakaria, 2021). The presence of Wildlife is an essential factor for many visitors to visit a country or extend their stay. The need for wildlife tourism comes from diverse tourists, both local and foreign (Moswete, Nkape, & Tseme, 2017).

These wilderness adventures and protected sites have received international recognition and are regarded as must-see destinations. The government has prioritized diversification to other parts of the nation to extend the sector's socioeconomic advantages. This kind of tourism is linked to environmental protection and community development. Indeed, a growing body of evidence suggests that wildlife tourism in protected regions may help with broad socio-economic issues, including poverty reduction and community livelihoods (Mbaiwa, 2017).

2.3 Socio-Economic Impact of Wildlife Tourism

In the present context, Wildlife tourism businesses play a critical role in generating income for an economy locally and globally. This serves the community in various ways, including education, cultural exposure, and recreational activities. While the expansion of wildlife tourism results from the region's natural beauty, it is also driven by the need to improve the community's dreadful socio-economic situation, including high unemployment and few income-generating activities. As a result, the focus is on promoting community development and service providers' involvement through wildlife tourism. Wildlife tourism management involves enhancing livelihoods while preserving biodiversity, boosting service providers' engagement and conservation. Wildlife tourism, which puts communities in charge of the sector's strategy and growth, can be seen as a method for poverty alleviation (Eshun & Tichaawa, 2020). Moreover, according to a study conducted by Bertella (2018), creating employment opportunities for locals, influencing visitor behavior on-site, and fostering a conservation ethic are just a few methods by that sustainable wildlife tourism can enhance the socioeconomic and environmental conditions.

2.4 Environmental Impact of Wildlife Tourism

Wildlife tourism encompasses a wide range of experiences and categorizing various forms or features of these encounters could benefit multiple related functions. The benefit of wildlife tourist attractions is that they contribute to the long term protection of wildlife and wildlife habitats. Previous studies explored that Wildlife tourism can affect the conservation knowledge, attitudes, and behavior of tourists, thus visitors could provide it in a well-conceived, managed, and delivered manner (Meyer et al., 2021).

2.5 Wildlife Tourism in Sri Lanka

With an increase in local and international tourists, wildlife viewing in Sri Lankan wildlife parks has grown to be a very popular nature-based tourism activity (Eranga, 2021). Tourism is a significant source of revenue for many public sectors institutions such as the Tourism Development Authority, National Wildlife Parks, National Museums, Botanic Gardens, and institutions under the Ministry of National Heritage and Cultural Affairs. Sri Lanka consists of 49 sites listed as unique attractions, 91 rare attractions, seven world heritage sites, and 6 of the world's 300 ancient monuments giving it a significant edge over its tourism competitors (Wijesinghe, 2003).

In Anuradhapura, King Devanam Piyatissa established one of the world's earliest wildlife sanctuaries in 246 BC, starting Sri Lanka's wildlife protection and PA development history. Sri Lanka has the most biodiversity per 10,000 km² in Asia and is one of the world's top 25 biodiversity hot zones. The Forest Department and the Department of Wild Life Conservation are the principal administrators of Sri Lanka's PAs. Approximately 13 % of the country's total land area is protected. There are 61 Sanctuaries, 22 National Parks, 4 Nature Reserves, 3 Strict wildlife zones, and 1 Jungle Corridor included in this list. The Forest Service manages 65 conservation forests and one National Heritage and Wilderness Area (Senevirathna & Perera, 2013).

2.6 COVID-19 & Wildlife Tourism

The novel Corona epidemic has had a broad influence on society and to prevent the outbreak globally, all governments have adopted a range of mobility restrictions, including a continuous curfew, total lockdown, travel limitations, and the suspension of air travel operations, among other things. Nevertheless, the worst hit is falling upon hourly wage workers. And then, middle-income employees were unable to cover their basic needs, and millions of people face loss of employment and heading

with unemployment. Manufacturers, distributors, producers, and sellers are all battling to keep their firms alive, pay their workers, and protect their assets. Therefore, the world economy will enter its deepest downturn due to the unexpected shutdown triggered by the ongoing Covid-19 outbreak in several states (Ranasinghe et al., 2020). Moreover, due to the outbreak, there are no longer any wildlife tourism activities, which has resulted in increased wildlife poaching (Eranga, 2021) and it's noteworthy how wildlife tourists view the resources beneficial for biodiversity policy, which may be used as feedback in the post-pandemic (Ekpah, 2021).

Local visitors to the wildlife parks increased from 487,265 in 2010 to 1,217,877 in 2019, while international visitors increased from 143,198 in 2010 to 856,804 in 2019 (SLTDA, 2019). In addition, despite being negatively impacted by the pandemic, wildlife parks generate the third highest amount of public revenue for the Sri Lankan economy, according to the (SLTDA, 2021) annual statistical report. Wild animals in captivity live in entirely artificial picturesque environments. These creatures are fed, bred, and cared for by guardians. Unfortunately, their needs and well-being were generally ignored throughout the pandemic, although several nations, such as China and India, implemented various methods to stop the virus from spreading to human societies, and animals received little help or rescue (Yin, Gao, & Zhu, 2021). Due to a lack of supervision by visitors and wildlife park officials, a lack of tracking technology such as drones, and a drop in animal alertness in reaction to people following tourism intervention, poaching operations have increased. Those problematic situations arise due to the pandemic (Yin et al., 2021).

2.7 Readiness to Revive Wildlife Tourism during COVID-19

People are becoming more interested in visiting protected places such as national parks to see wild animals in their natural environments. Therefore, the government has a viable, long term plan for tourism and the national economy. According to Sri Lanka's tourist visions and master plans, the country's natural environment is being conserved and enhanced, and standards are being raised, focusing on the wildlife tourism industry. National Park revenue has progressively grown since the conclusion of the civil war, according to SLTDA statistics. Further, a recent study conducted by Sawitri, Eltivina, and Riawajanti (2021) revealed that the government's ability to develop sustainable policies and foresee the recovery of the economic sector through wildlife tourism operations can be greatly aided by forecasting the annual tourists' arrivals during the epidemic. This wildlife tourism product has a significant economic impact on the country's tourism-generated economy while presenting enormous opportunities to expand the business and highlight the wildlife sector's unique beauty (SLTDA, 2019).

Researchers pointed out the wildlife tourism operation during Covid-19 & should be fully utilized to rejuvenate the sector by making tourists relax and meet their demands in compliance with health and safety laws. It would be an excellent opportunity to attract tourists because, during this time, travelers' desire is to go away from their usual surroundings and enjoy nature. Despite several prohibitions, limitations of the pandemic, and many parks not being fully functioning, these parks have attracted a significant number of people, which is incredible regardless of the challenges posed by COVID's operational changes. Tourists are enthusiastic about getting the benefit of the outdoor National Park experiences and this novel niche market is poised to find a new source of future business prospects. COVID-9 will provide chances for the consumer market in developing nations, and it will be required to make the necessary steps to seize these prospects in order to avoid industries collapsing (Kideghesho, Kimaro, Mayengo, & Kisingo, 2021).

3. Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research technique since it is critical to fully appreciate the respondents' psychological features, concepts, and understanding to assess the situation and find answers to research questions. According to a study conducted by Rathnayake (2016), the Minneriya reservoir aids in the survival of vast elephant herds, with individual elephant numbers ranging from 200 to 300 and its Sri Lanka's only park with a massive herd of elephants in one location. Wildlife enthusiasts travel to see the birds and elephants in the park. Minneriya is the most significant

destination to enhance wildlife tourism and it is hard to estimate a precise number of wildlife service providers. As a result, the population is all wildlife service providers at Minneriya National Park.

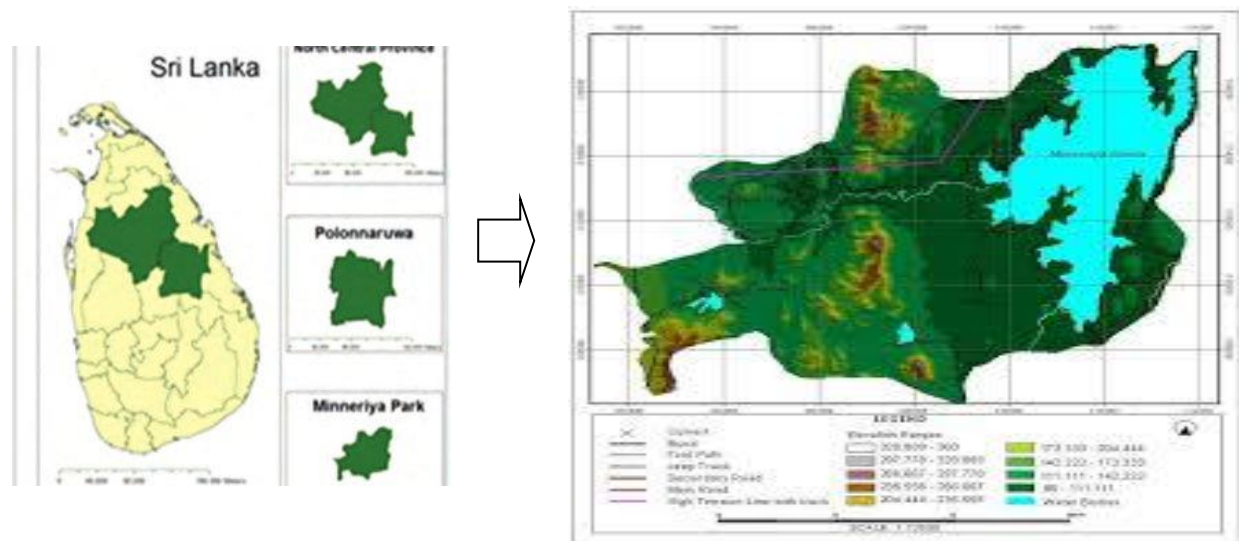


Figure 2 Research Site (Minneriya National Park)
Source: Adopted from Rathnayake (2016)

The qualitative research method allows for a comprehensive understanding of the participants' perspectives. Interviews, observation, and focus groups are the most common data collection methods used in qualitative research (Barrett & Twycross, 2018). The researcher adopted a purposive sampling technique to select respondents and primary data were gathered from wildlife service providers at Minneriya National Park based on the research objectives. Accordingly, 16 wildlife service providers were subjected to in-depth interviews using the semi-structured interview method and moreover, the observation technique was used to analyze their behaviors and changes in facial expressions. The data obtained is relevant to the study's subject and answered the objectives of the research study. Using the content analysis, the researcher analyzed the data gathered from 16 wildlife service providers at Minneriya National Park and studied the data thoroughly to discover how words and word patterns were employed in the context. The researcher then organized the information into categories and subcategories and after categorizing key codes, narratively described challenges & readiness factors for the revival of wildlife tourism activities during the pandemic.

4. Results and Discussions

Except for a few trapped guests inside the island, tourist arrivals have been zero since April 2020 (SLTDA, 2021) until the first quarters of 2021. The industry operation was entirely shut down when the lockdown series was implemented. COVID-19 has been labeled as a global pandemic, and its expansion will have an impact on the economy & wildlife tourism sector on the entire globe (Ranasinghe et al., 2019). Nevertheless, researchers pointed out the opportunity to revive this market segment, but a responsible person didn't take action. Therefore, this study expects to identify existing challenges & revival factors to revitalize the sector in the new normal condition of COVID-19.

4.1 To identify the existing challenges in wildlife tourism operations during COVID-19

According to research findings, the first objective of this study was to identify the existing challenges in wildlife tourism operations during COVID-19. Challenges were identified in the character of operational, financial, and labor-related & communication as the initial data sets to address the study's first objective. Participants in the research were asked to explain the issues that affected the wildlife tourism operation during COVID-19.

4.1.1 Operational Challenges

"Six guests usually travel in safari jeeps, but due to the COVID-19 we had to limit guests up to 4 and use protected health guidelines as well as we cannot stop jeeps in necessary pots within national parks."

(SP01, Safari jeep provider, 2020)

All the responses of the respondents identified operational barriers when operating during the pandemic period. In safari tours, operators had to limit the number of guests within one tour. Another obstacle is that they couldn't change their profession during the pandemic as they were getting used to continuing their usual operation and, career risk is the issue that they had to confront. Service providers have negative feedback referring to the involvement of the sector again. According to wildlife service providers' responses, there can be seen an increment of foreign travelers in the new normal condition of COVID-19. Safari jeep providers stated that they had to involve foreign travelers & actually there was a risk because of infection of diseases. Not only the tour guides, but hotel managers & wildlife photographers also had to move with travelers and this scenario added an adverse impact on their careers. Further, loss of job opportunities, as another issue, was identified by the respondents during the interviews. They mentioned that they have to face many challenges in their lifestyle because of unemployment. Especially, safari jeep providers couldn't pay the leasing for safari jeeps at a proper time. Wildlife photographers had to cancel or postpone their plans & anyone couldn't make precise decisions considering the time duration for conducting tourism activities.

When analyzing the key findings & literature review a similarity between the respondents' responses & the previous studies could be grasped. As per, the identified operational issues can be drawn as existing challenges that have confronted wildlife service providers in the new normal condition of COVID-19.

4.1.2 Financial Challenges

According to SLTDA reports, the revenue of wildlife tourism operations annually is statistically proven. Nevertheless, the COVID-19 pandemic drastically hit all industries & payments to the wildlife tourism sector causing numerous issues to be faced by service providers as well as society. Furthermore, service providers lost their revenue sources due to the lockdown & tourist arrival limitations. According to respondents' responses, 13 respondents denoted the cause of revenue losses due to the pandemic.

"We bought safari jeeps for leasing basis. The Monthly instalment is Rs. 40, 0000. We don't have money to buy tires when promoting the tourism industry. Because the cost of tires also increased up to RS. 40, 0000 from 28,000."

(SP03, Safari jeep Provider, 2020)

According to these responses of the respondents, 4 respondents (25%) out of the 16 indicated that they couldn't pay the leasing payments & income generation was low during the pandemic. Further, each service provider mentioned career issues such as paying the lease of safari jeeps and monthly problems; paying water and light bills. Apart from that, lack of feasibility of investments, inability to invest in new projects, lack of possibility of monetary requirements, and lack of government involvement in economic incentives are the key findings of financial challenges according to responses of wildlife service providers.

4.1.3 Labor-Related Challenges

According to study findings, another issue is labor-related problems faced in the new normal condition of COVID-19.

"Due to the COVID-19 situation, employees lost their job opportunities & they tried to find other job vacancies. Rules & restrictions of the countries, lockdown series completely stopped tourist arrival."

We depend on a tourist (foreign & local tourists). Their arrival proved the future of our carrier. But this unfortunate duration lost our revenue source.”

(SP01, Safari jeep Provider, 2020)

In 2018, the tourism business employed 169,003 direct employees and 219,484 indirect employees, according to SLTDA estimates (SLTDA, 2020). Due to the closure of hotels and restaurants, airlines, travel agencies, tourist stores, and other businesses, the vast majority of these people are permanently unemployed. This has had a tremendous impact on households whose sole source of revenue is tourism (Samarathunga, 2020).

According to respondents' responses, employee termination is a severe issue affecting the smoothly conducting operations. Outstretching the pandemic, the impact of diseases, issues of community transmission & lockdown series added adverse effects on employee termination & wildlife service providers had to finish their careers. Negative employee perception is a labor-related issue & this scenario created negative minds towards the industry to join again. Society's perception of employment in the tourism industry is quite doubtful and questionable in the long run when an outbreak hits. Hotel employees and contract-based employees also left their careers because owners ran out of money to pay them & at times, employees were paid half of their salary.

4.1.4 Communication Challenges

Connecting individuals, sharing information, and exchanging ideas are all aspects of communication. Hence, each stakeholder in wildlife tourism activities needs to be connected on a regular basis in order to create links between various types of service individuals. Despite this, authorities had to adjust the system and method due to the pandemic. During this instance, service providers should have a regular procedure to be followed within the destination. This study finds a few drawbacks (Templeton et al., 2021).

“We had to face many difficulties during Pandemic when arranging workshops and conducting awareness sessions for wildlife photography. Because Tourism authorities conducted awareness sessions & we had to deal with particular officers & it was hard to manage when engaging tasks.”

(WP 04, Wildlife Photographer, 2020)

Wildlife service providers mentioned barriers they had to face when arranging awareness sessions and getting license fees. In addition, some respondents also stated that there were some issues arising due to the staff conflicts between the main departments in hotels and also problems in connectivity between managerial levels as well.

4.2 To Identify the Service Providers' Readiness to Revive Wildlife Tourism Operations in the New Normal Conditions of COVID- 19

4.2.1 Readiness in Recreational Activities

Researchers stated that guests' preferences towards recreational activities related to wildlife tourism provide an opportunity to nurture a market with the possibility for return visits, particularly those looking for recreational activities (Hambira, Stone, & Pagiwa, 2022).

“Apart from wildlife tourism-related activities, we can promote Angophora traditional activities in a nearby village because travelers prefer to get traditional experiences involving rural villages. Especially foreign travelers are willing to see the identity of Sri Lankan culture. During the Covid-19 period, we can give priority to Sri Lankan rituals & can promote Minneriya national park area.”

(TG01, Tour guide, 2020)

According to this study, service providers made an effort to revitalize the industry again by introducing new wildlife tourism-related recreational activities. Among soft & hard adventure

activities, they try to present soft adventure activities related to Minneriya national park considering the particular area's potential. Previous studies clearly stated the feasibility of the Minneriya national park to obtain predominance to attract travelers. Wildlife viewing, photography, cycling the streets and valleys, early morning walks, fishing and sitting by a beautiful lake, and watching wild animals are the determining recreational activities for attracting foreign and local wildlife travelers in a new normal condition in order to revive wildlife tourism (Ranasinghe et al., 2019).

4.2.2 Readiness in Training & Development

This refers to an educational activity that could enhance awareness & skills about particular tasks. Readiness behind specific tasks is explicitly training & development and based on that the success of a particular field is determined. Wildlife tourism service providers also conduct their training & development sessions to get practical exposure. Due to Covid-19, service providers had to leave their jobs. Nevertheless, they had to rethink their revitalization period in the new normal condition.

"We conducted some training & awareness sessions for wildlife photographers to promote wildlife photography & provide practical exposure to identifying photography methods."

(WP 04, Wildlife photographers, 2020)

In new normal conditions, training and development assistance in preparedness for wildlife tourist operations. Further, training and development improve the abilities and knowledge awareness of service providers to adjust and react in accordance with the times in post-Covid-19 (Hambira et al., 2022).

The respondents of the study identified the value of training & development sessions for wildlife service providers during the pandemic. It confirmed the validity of the revival in new normal conditions. Apart from that, tour operators also conduct sessions with safari providers & hotel staff is regularly updated regarding readiness to revive wildlife tourism operations in the new normal condition.

4.2.3 Readiness in Health & Safety

"We use sanitizers, maintain a social distance, and gather linen separately. We take their temperature and check to see whether they have a fever. If we have guests, we take their temperature and document whatever they tell us if we have guests. We completely follow the guidelines that have been established."

(AP02, Accommodation Provider, 2020)

The most concerning element in establishing the protectiveness of the visitors, service providers, and the general community is health and safety. It is identified to be an important aspect to influence visitor arrivals to a country and a destination. The health and safety of a tourist need to be ensured by utilizing health protocols continuously, and service providers should have a sufficient framework to use it in an effective manner (Hambira et al., 2022).

Respondent's responses stated the operation's readiness regarding health & safety precautions in new normal conditions. Wildlife service providers give high priority to safety & security measures to attract foreign & local travelers. When assuring health & safety at a guest hotel, employees measure and follow health & safety guidelines & standards. Apart from that, they further utilize technological safety protocols such as QR code system "Suwapetha" surveillance apps. Moreover, hotel staff follows social distancing, sanitizers, and face masking at their optimum level of practice. As per, it was explicitly identified that service providers are ready to revive wildlife tourism operations again on an effective basis.

4.2.4 Readiness in Technology

According to the study, technology's advancement toward the improvement of the wildlife tourism operation was identified. During the pandemic, service providers couldn't reach the guests to build guest engagement with wildlife tourism according to their expected level. In that case, technology potentially plays a significant role in promoting the wildlife tourism sector.

“During the COVID-19 period, we couldn't deal with guests in physically. Therefore, we use Technology to attract tourists by uploading video clips to inform photography.”

(WP 03, Wildlife photography, 2020)

According to the investigations of previous studies, the use of technology during a pandemic was recognized, as along with a method of performing promotional activities to attract more visitors in the new normal conditions. Travelers avoided nature-based tourism-related activities during pandemics, in fact. Tourists and their arrivals also had to withdraw from society as a result of the protective measures. Further, travelers were forced to isolate themselves as well. During that time, technology served as a conduit for travelers to communicate and express themselves. Distinctly, technology-based promotional initiatives play a vital role in recruiting tourists in that circumstance (Weaver & Lawton, 2017).

Respondents strongly recommended that service providers conduct promotional efforts to attract domestic and international travelers to Lankan wildlife destinations. For that, Wildlife photographers upload video clips to receive reasonable responses from travelers and maximize fascinating scales for nature lovers. Aside from that, many hotel managers attempt to raise the hotel's rating scale and boost the hotel's standard quality level by conducting a promotional campaign. Without considering star-rated hotel accommodations, service providers such as homestay operators began advertising efforts to attract travelers.

4.2.5 Readiness in Policy Planning

“The government enacted new policies against COVID-19. As a result, the government provides grievances for registered tourism-related companies. Especially, SLTDA, Tourism bodies & such tourism-related government institutes assigned to Relies license fees.”

(AP01, Accommodation Provider, 2020)

According to respondent responses, government involvement in making rules & restrictions on wildlife tourism operations & ways of facilitating leasing facilities, and low-interest rates of loan services for service providers have been practiced. This implies the government's readiness for wildlife tourism operations during COVID-19. SLTDA reduces its license fees for the new entrants to the industry, such as small and medium-scale business entrepreneurs and they tried to provide their fullest corporation towards the revival in the new normal condition.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Conclusion

Observing charismatic wildlife species like the Sri Lankan elephant, leopard and other animal species in protected areas has grown to be a key wildlife tourism source of attraction on the island as the industry gains popularity both locally and internationally. However, there have been a number of adverse effects of wildlife tourism on wildlife, including behavioral changes as a result of disturbance caused by tourism and degradation of the natural environment, particularly as a result of over-tourism and unrestrained tourism activities. In search of wildlife attractions, many of these parks have seen an increase in annual visitor arrivals. The burgeoning number of tourists and safari vehicles have had a deleterious social and environmental impact on the environment, the flora and fauna, and their habitat, particularly before the COVID-19 pandemic. The aftermath of the pandemic gave rise to new hopes for the revival of wildlife tourism while addressing its issues on a sustainable platform, which led to a

decrease in the trend of overcrowding in national parks. Due to the globally spread coronavirus epidemic, tourism service providers faced substantial operational issues. Visitor arrivals to Sri Lanka have been reduced to zero due to the fast spread of the pandemic throughout the country and the world. This has resulted in the termination of numerous tourism activities, making it a severe issue for the wildlife tourism niche market sector, particularly for wildlife service providers. Wildlife service providers confronted various challenges throughout the COVID-19 period. As a result, this study aimed to determine service providers' perspectives on wildlife tourism operations under the new normal condition of COVID-19.

The study's main objective was to identify the existing challenges of wildlife tourism operations in the new normal conditions. The pandemic caused service providers to face many difficulties such as operational, financial, labor-related, technology, communication & economic impact. The second objective was to determine the preparedness to revive wildlife tourism operations in the new normal condition of COVID-19. The pandemic created opportunities to revitalize this niche market segment. As a result, respondents identified factors that could rebuild the industry during the pandemic such as Recreational Activities, Training & Development, Health & Safety, Technology, and Policy Planning & Creative Thinking. The findings of this study provide numerous contributions & foundations for future studies concentrating on COVID-19 and the revival of wildlife tourism operations. Future research can broaden the scope of the issue by integrating multiple geographical locations, animal parks, and natural sites in this study.

5.2 Limitation

Future research can broaden the scope of the issue by integrating multiple geographical locations, animal parks, and natural sites that were included in this study. Furthermore, this research was conducted from the perspective of wildlife service providers, and future research may be conducted from the perspective of guests and other stakeholders, with data collected from a diverse variety of respondents such as government, suppliers, and so on. Furthermore, future researchers can use a hybrid approach or quantitative method to conduct research while expanding the number of respondents.

5.3 Suggestion

Primarily, the study recommends conducting an integrated promotional campaign expanding beyond the borders of the country showcasing the sustainable longevity of wildlife tourism. Proper and careful marketing campaigns at international levels may promote the country in terms of health concerns. Moreover, government support can be provided to validate the safety measures which are critical ways to include in the tourism sector. It should be confirmed the protectiveness of the country through the introduction of a QR code system, introducing of a *Suwapetha* surveillance app, enacting new policies, and using face masks & sanitizers. Considering these safety measures will increase the involvement of wildlife service providers & travelers in the sector. Introducing new recreational activities which are compatible with wildlife tourism may add value to the concept. The majority of nature lovers prefer to engage in outdoor recreational activities and consequently, they can be introduced to camping sites in national parks depending on their feasibility and trends. Setting up bird-watching centers with provisioning meals and requirements and facilitating to stay the whole day by charging tickets can also be practiced.

The study suggests that the government should intervene and set a standardized minimum price per day at ticket counters in Minneriya National Park. This will prevent potentially severe financial failures in the post-COVID-19 period at the same time will control the huge price gaps among the service providers. Further, it's crucial to impose restrictions on wildlife service providers tightening the regulatory framework such as imposing daily and monthly quotas to enter into the wildlife parks and zoning the sensitive areas. Since the study revealed that employees lack sufficient training, the authorities should take prompt measures to supplement the employees with adequate training and on-hand experience to upgrade their knowledge and abilities. As a result, they should assign at least twice a year training programs to expand their understanding of technology and current events and can

rotate their service with other national parks in the country. Especially, short training courses for wildlife photographers can be encouraged due to the increasing trend in the field. The government should optimize its involvement in the new normal condition and should take appropriate actions to encourage wildlife tourist operations. The government and the wildlife tourism industry should collaborate to enhance this particular market area. With the COVID-19 pandemic, developing preparations for future promotions is necessary and the government should regularly publish and promote wildlife tourism to see what opportunities could be grasped for growth. Wildlife tourism has clearly been impacted by changes in people's lifestyles and movements following COVID-19. People frequently travel in small groups and favor less populated areas that are less well-known. The wildlife tourism industry can take advantage of this opportunity to re-evaluate and reconsider how wildlife tourism should be effectively managed and run for the benefit of wildlife conservation and the welfare of local communities, which are both neglected prior to the pandemic.

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