

**ASSESSING STAKEHOLDER PERCEPTIONS ON AQUATIC
INVASIVE PLANTS: CASE OF LUNUWEWA TANK HABITAT IN THE
DRY ZONE OF SRI LANKA**

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Invasive Alien Species (IAS) generates threats to both ecological and socio-economic systems across the globe. They compete with native species and grow rapidly, causing damages to the ecosystem, human health, livelihoods and economy is recognized as a major threat to the biodiversity of Sri Lanka. Research on socio-economic aspects of IAS is quite limited. This study explores the stakeholder perceptions on the impacts of the spread of aquatic invasive plants in a Dry Zone tank in Sri Lanka. Literature review following expert consultation, *Lunuwewa* Tank Habitat in the *Thambuttegama* Divisional Secretariat in the Anuradhapura District was selected. Interviews supported by a structured questionnaire were carried out to collect data from four pre-identified stakeholder groups; (1) members of the farmers' association; (2) fishermen; (3) local government administrators, and (4) officers of the Mahaweli Authority. Quantification of attitudes and perceptions on invasive species in the tank habitat was carried out by Mean Ranks and Mean Scores, and non-parametric tests such as Kruskal Wallis and Friedman Tests. The outcome of analysis showed that although aquatic invasive plants are a critical problem, the primary stakeholders recognized of aquatic invasive plants as a threat and controlling them was necessary. Among the aquatic invasive plants present, all were not defined as "invasive" by respondents. Latent conflicts on the priority use of the tank resources and involvement in the management of the tank were evident. These findings reiterate the need to deeply assess and integrate social and human dimensions of the invasive issue before rolling out extensive strategies for their management.

Key words: Aquatic invasive plants, Invasive Alien Species (IAS), Social perceptions, Stakeholder analysis