

## **IMPACT OF ECO-TOURISM ON LIVELIHOOD OF LOCAL COMMUNITY IN RIVERSTON OF SRI LANKA: A COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Tourism is a massive industry worldwide, affecting the surrounding socioeconomic and environmental systems. The accreditation of a location as a tourist attraction has a direct impact on the area's economic development. Eco-tourism is responsible for traveling to natural areas that conserve the atmosphere and improve the local people's well-being (Bricker, 2017). It is expected to promote the local community's livelihood through socioeconomic and environmental impacts of eco-tourism in a given area. Riverston is a vital eco-tourism destination in Central Province because of its rich biodiversity, diverse plants and species, and climate.

Most researchers were interested in learning about eco-tourism practices and community perspectives (Sharmini & Bandusena, 2020). Riverston is an excellent environment for responsible travelers seeking nature, conserving the environment, and improving the well-being of locals. People's livelihoods have been combined with a specific area's political, environmental, and social elements. Riverston has more eco-tourism attractions oriented toward the livelihood community. Therefore, the researcher wanted to add some further findings related to the impacts of Riverston eco-tourism on the livelihood of the local community. The study focuses on the local community's livelihood factors influenced by eco-tourism activities. The findings of this study help travelers and eco-tourism-related organizations to know how to behave and deal with nature and the environment. Moreover, it helps to understand what opinions the local community has regarding tourists traveling to such eco-tourism destinations and how it impacts the local community.

### **METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative approach was taken for the research, with face-to-face interviews to collect data. The population of the study was the local community engaged in tourism; hotels and resorts, restaurants and bars, local product manufacturers, conservation officers in the ecological park, three-wheel drivers, and other relevant local communities who are providing their houses for eco-tourists to enjoy the culture. A total of 25 interviews were conducted to collect the required data. There were 80% of male respondents and 20% of female respondents in the sample. When it interpreted the age of the respondents, it has clearly shown that all the respondents were above 25 years old. Moreover, the researcher has found that 52% of owners of the respondents, 24% were employees, 16% were three-wheel drivers, and 8% were managers from the respondents.

The thematic analysis, along with a frequency analysis of occurrences, was used for analyzing data.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Through a qualitative statistical approach, the researcher has done a frequency analysis that quantifies how eco-tourism positively or negatively affects the livelihood factors of people in Riverston, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Eco-Tourism Impact on the Livelihood Factors

Livelihood factors	Negatively impact %	No Impact %	Positively impact %
Average monthly income	0	16	84
Employment opportunities	0	28	72
Local product industry	0	40	60
Job security	12	32	56
Working hours	04	16	80
Cost of living	76	24	0
Income disparity	08	40	52
Public facilities	36	52	12
Transportation network	04	64	32
Real estate value	0	24	76
Housing standard	36	24	40
Education of the community	0	64	36
Community attitudes and community intention	12	48	40
Local culture	12	20	68
Nighttime functions	0	0	0
Illegal activities	04	20	76
Level of pollution	08	12	80
Disaster resilience	0	80	20

The researcher has used thematic analysis to interpret the narratives of the community members on their perspectives on the effects of eco-tourism on livelihood aspects. The researcher has developed several themes based on identified livelihood factors. Here, the researcher has identified education of the community, community attitudes and community intention, local culture, and illegal activities as social aspects, average monthly income, employment opportunities, local product industry, job security, cost of living, and income disparity are as economic aspects, public facilities, transportation network, and nighttime functions are as physical aspects, and real estate value, level of pollution, and disaster resilience are as environmental aspects in this study. According to the results, the majority thought that eco-tourism would positively impact employment opportunities in the Riverston area due to the eco-tourism activities. According to a respondent;

*"Riverston mainly depends on tourism, and with the increase in visitors' arrival, their hotel provides more job opportunities to the villagers with their busy schedules."*

According to the interviews, no nighttime functions occurred in the Riverston destination. Nighttime functions refer to theaters, camping, music events, stag parties, and other festivals that occur at night time. There is already an excellent local product industry in the Riverston

area, which is relatively sparse. Kithul products and coconut and wood products, which are endemic to the area, have created a market for local and foreign tourists. According to the respondents;

*"Not only tourists but also travelers also enjoy local food like these Kithul products. Therefore, they earn a considerable income from this. However, villagers should pay more attention to these local products selling."*

Most people who provided information for the data assessment said that eco-tourism allows many to earn enough to narrow their income gaps through job creation. In the Riverston area, 36% of respondents said that eco-tourism was detrimental, as state-sponsored development projects had not been implemented for some time, and the existing road network was being damaged due to overcrowding. According to the data analysis, the public transport network in the Riverston area has not improved. People said that eco-tourism has not led to the development of the transportation network.

*"With the eco-tourism concept, the Riverston community began to give more attention to their culture and environmental protection. I think eco-tourism changes peoples' attitudes and beliefs in a good way."*

Through such a response from the interview, it was evident that from the eco-tourism concept, people have learned to protect nature and environment while traveling and doing tourism-related activities in their living place. Because they believed that many tourists visit to enjoy the pure nature and environment in Riverston, the word 'Eco-tourism' implies the minimum pollution for the environment and society. Moreover, the community has shown a highly positive impact on the pollution level or pollution reduction. Moreover, the foreigners have understood their responsible traveling role within the Riverston area.

Eco-tourism has become a key source of income in Riverston. Restaurants, hotels, tour guiding, three-wheel drivers, and homestays are all well-known revenue generators in the area. The average monthly income of the community in Riverston has increased, as well as increased their employment opportunities and contributed to the growth of the local production industry. It seems that eco-tourism has made a positive contribution to the economic aspect.

Restaurants and homestays were suitable income generators, and people expanded their homes without consulting anyone. According to the villagers, there has been no improvement in the local road network or other infrastructure development in Riverston over the years, which can negatively impact physical aspects. Absorbing its beauty in an environmentally friendly manner is very evident in the context of eco-tourism in Riverston. The Riverston community believes this is a significantly destructive effect on the environment due to the behaviour of many local travelers. According to them, a few local travelers do not understand how to preserve the beauty of the eco-tourism environment, and their illegal littering has become a significant problem. Livelihood assets aid in the redesign of a better living environment and promote socio-cultural participation. Human assets are here to maintain interpersonal connections consistently, while physical assets make the physical surroundings more comfortable. The research findings clearly show that the local community's economic growth

and physical aspects can be seen in proportion to the growth of livelihood assets related to eco-tourism.

It has different nature of the impact eco-tourism has on the community's livelihood. The majority said that eco-tourism positively impacts average monthly income, employment opportunities, local product industry, job security, working hours, income disparity, real estate value, housing standards, community intention, local culture and illegal activities, and level of pollution. The results show that eco-tourism has no impact on Public facilities, Transportation networks, and education in the community, Disaster Resilience, and Community Attitudes. Admittedly, Riverston is a tremendous natural conservation forest in Sri Lanka. Hence, eco-tourism has spread all around Riverston, and it has significantly affected the local community in the destination.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The study's purposes were to determine the local community's livelihood elements that are influenced by eco-tourism, as well as to identify the significant factors and the direction of the eco-tourism influences. Aside from the breakdown with Coronavirus, it is clear that the Riverston community's livelihood is directly or indirectly linked to tourism. Therefore, the stability of the tourism industry is an essential factor for the people of the Riverston area. The study has provided suggestions and recommendations to overcome drawbacks within the eco-tourism activities in Riverston and to improve the eco-tourism in that area. Therefore, this study would be aided by many stakeholders in Sri Lanka. Through the analysis, the researcher has found the factors that impacted eco-tourism and the nature of the impact. This study concludes that eco-tourism has a significantly positive on income level, employment opportunities, and local product manufacture, while there were some significant negative impacts on the cost of living of the local community in the Riverston area and that there is a need for a mechanism that understands eco-tourism contexts to regulate such impacts. Finally, recommendations are made to reduce harmful impacts while encouraging favorable influences from the Riverston. They have observed that local people dispose of polythene and other harmful materials to nature during their tour. Therefore, the respondents have mentioned that local travelers should be aware of how to travel while protecting the environment and a guide or a villager. Moreover, the local community suggests that the relevant authority construct the road to travel without difficulties for tourists. Moreover, the researcher has recommended to availability of some motivational programs to enhance the motivation level of the local community to manufacture more local products and sell to eco-tourists.

**Keywords:** Eco-tourism, livelihood factors, livelihood activities, Riverston community

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