



## Evaluating Stakeholder Dynamics and Barriers to Effective Ecotourism: Evidence from Horton Plains National Park, Sri Lanka

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### Abstract

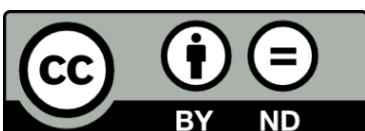
Stakeholder commitment is required in the successful implementation of ecotourism in the environmentally sensitive areas, in particular. Horton Plains National Park (HPNP) in Sri Lanka is a notable illustration of a critical case where conservation goals are conflicting with the growing tourism pressures. The article addresses the dynamics of stakeholders and the key limitations to effective ecotourism activities in HPNP revolve around governance, participation, and benefit-sharing. The approach employed was the qualitative case study, which was based on semi-structured interviews and in-the-field observations of four groups of stakeholders: state-centered agencies, local communities, outside tourism facilitators, and tourists. The thematic analysis was carried out with the help of the Relative Importance Index (RII) as the means of interpreting the results. Results revealed that the stakeholders put a high emphasis on environmental conservation (RII = 0.90), which is a high awareness and conservation intent. Such an intention is, however, not reflected well in practice. Thematic analysis indicates structural impediments that have prevailed, such as youth exclusion (28%), frequent cases of poaching (20%), illegal mining across the borders of the park (16%), and pollution by tourists (14%). Even though the stakeholder is highly dependent on the HPNP, local communities allege that they are not involved in making key decisions and have limited access to tourism-related benefits. Governance weaknesses, such as inadequate communication, inadequate infrastructure, and centralized decision-making, further undermine cooperation and long-term commitment. The study concludes that effective ecotourism in HPNP requires more than environmental concern alone. Participatory governance should be further enhanced, and transparency and equitable economic inclusion must be enhanced to gain the trust of the stakeholders and ensure sustainable outcomes. These results justify the implementation of co-management strategies, specific infrastructure development, and improved local economic integration as ways to reach resilient community-based ecotourism governance in Sri Lanka.

**Keywords:** Barriers, Dynamics, Ecotourism, Effective, Stakeholders

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## INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism has been important in helping to reconcile the diverse conservation of biodiversity with local economic development, especially in biologically diverse and environmentally sensitive areas. The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) differentiates ecotourism from mass tourism by emphasizing sustainability, education, and community involvement, and the TIES principles constitute a globally accepted set of guidelines defining authentic ecotourism. They include mandates to (1) minimize physical, social, behavioral, and psychological impacts; (2) build environmental and cultural awareness and respect; (3) provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts; (4) provide direct financial benefits for conservation; (5) Generate financial benefits for both local people and private industry; (6) deliver memorable interpretative experiences to visitors that help raise sensitivity to host countries' political, environmental, and social climates; (7) design, construct and operate low-impact facilities; (8) recognize the rights and spiritual beliefs of the indigenous people in your community and work in partnership with them to create empowerment (TIES, 2015).

Sri Lanka, with its rich endemic flora and fauna, has incorporated ecotourism into its national development agenda and is aware of its potential contribution to both

conservation and poverty alleviation (Fernando & Shariff, 2013). Among the most ecologically significant protected areas of Sri Lanka, Horton Plains National Park (HPNP), located in the central highlands and designated as a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site, stands as an important example of a protected area with dual use, where conservation objectives are coupled with nature-based tourism opportunities (UNESCO, 2010). HPNP is a unique high-altitude grassland-dominated montane cloud forest with high endemism; its ecological value and future prospects in ecotourism development are extraordinary (Gunawardene et al., 2015). Unique ecological, institutional, and governance peculiarities make HPNP an important case study area to understand stakeholder dynamics in ecotourism. Other than that, it has been facing continuous growth of increased tourist visitation over the years, which places an additional strain on conservation management, infrastructure, and governance structures.

In contrast to several other national parks in Sri Lanka, ecotourism at HPNP is managed in a relatively state-based management framework and with only a few formal local community involvement or co-management mechanisms. This ecological vulnerability, coupled with



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increasing tourism pressure and centralized decision making, provides an analytically convenient environment with which to study the relationship between the commitment, participation, and governance structures of stakeholders and the effectiveness of ecotourism. HPNP is therefore a representative and theoretically relevant case, based on which the implications of the ecotourism governance of broad challenges in the preserved areas can be explored critically.

Even though the ecotourism projects in Sri Lanka have been growing over the last few years, there are still a number of unresolved concerns that are threatening the sustainability of the industry. Poor infrastructure, overcrowding, and lack of community involvement, as well as governance systems, tend to hamper the outcomes of long-term ecotourism (Bandara and Tisdell, 2005; Ministry of Tourism and Lands, 2017). Empirical research also emphasizes that effective ecotourism relies on the observance of the ecotourism concepts by the government agencies, local communities, tour operators, and tourists (Byrd, 2007).

Therefore, this study focuses on stakeholder dynamics and barriers to effective ecotourism practices at HPNP. Specifically, it evaluates the interaction of institutional cooperation, community involvement, equitable benefit-sharing, and environmental responsibility under conditions of

ecological and socio-political stress. With the help of qualitative analysis, the research defines major obstacles to stakeholder commitment in ecotourism governance and offers possible ways to develop ecotourism management that is more inclusive and resilient in Sri Lanka.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The Concept of Ecotourism

According to the definition of The International Ecotourism Society (TIES, 2015), ecotourism is the responsible travel to natural areas that conserve the environment, sustain the well-being of local people, and require interpretation and education. Ecotourism also focuses on low-impact journeys, biodiversity protection, cultural awareness, and community affiliation, unlike mass tourism. Its main doctrines are reducing environmental footprint, creating environmental awareness, and cultural awareness, as well as causing direct economic gains of the conservation effort and the local people (Honey, 2008).

Ecotourism can also be used as a sustainable development opportunity, where a country is able to achieve its environmental agenda as well as its social agenda, which includes employment and education (Scheyvens, 1999). Consequently, ecotourism has been incorporated into national development strategies of various countries in the world with



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biodiversity as a tool of conserving the fragile ecosystems, as well as addressing the issue of economic inclusiveness.

### Importance of Ecotourism

Ecotourism is important because it promises to solve several global issues, like loss of biodiversity, climate change, and poverty in rural areas. Ecotourism stimulates conservation financing in the form of entry fees, contributions, and local economic relationships (Kiss, 2004). It also informs the people visiting these places on the importance of life diversity, and it promotes cultural heritage by applying indigenous knowledge and local customs to tourism-related products (United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP] & World Tourism Organization [WTO], 2002).

Moreover, ecotourism helps in diversifying local economies, which are usually in places where citizens lack other forms of livelihoods and thereby reduces the dependence on environmentally degrading activities like logging, poaching, or unsustainable farming ventures (Weaver, 2001). Ecotourism can also be used as a conservation incentive in protected areas since it will result in biodiversity becoming an economically appreciable value to the local stakeholders (Salafsky et al., 2001).

### Ecotourism in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka has an excellent potential in the context of ecotourism, based on its high degree of ecological diversity with a number of 26 national parks and more than 7,500 different species of fauna and flora, many of which are endemic (Gunawardene et al., 2015). The government has been a major marketing agent of ecotourism as a conservation and development initiative, particularly after the 2004 tsunami and post-conflict reconstruction (Fernando & Shariff, 2013).

The development of ecotourism policies in Sri Lanka is also reflected in the literature of historical analyses, which is trying to trace how the sustainable practices were to be institutionalized in the state relations, as evidenced by the change of the state policies on ecotourism (Pathmasiri & Bandara, 2019). Nonetheless, there seems to be a significant distance between policy formulation and practice. Ecotourism is yet to be a fully realized practice in many countries because of differences between how it is conceptualized in national planning documents and how it is implemented in practice (Pathmasiri & Bandara, 2019).

These outcomes are supported by case studies carried out in Udawalawa National Park. The research shows that there is an ongoing inequality of power, a lack of influence of the stakeholders, and the supremacy of governmental



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authorities, all of which are hindering a successful communal management of ecotourism (Nimalasiri & Bandara, 2024). Also, long-term issues, such as disjointed administrative jobs, poor communication, and lack of contact with local populations, still undermine the success and sustainability of ecotourism projects (Nimalasiri et al., 2025).

### Problems of Ecotourism Practices

Even though ecotourism has a lot of potential, there are a variety of issues with its implementation. Among the most commonly referred ones, we may note the mismatch between theoretical ecotourism principles and practices. Ecotourism projects, in most cases, do not have the right environmental protection and involve the community (Honey, 2008). Mishandled ecotourism may cause problems of environmental degradation, and even habitat disturbance, and waste growth, particularly when the number of visitors surpasses the carrying capacity.

HPNP has been widely acknowledged for ecological fragility and level of endemism (UNESCO, 2010; Gunawardene et al., 2015), and prior research has identified rising levels of tourism stress and the associated management issues in protected areas in Sri Lanka, including in HPNP (Bandara and Tisdell, 2005).

Weak enforcement of conservation laws, lack of monitoring, benefit-sharing processes, and involving the

local stakeholders in the decision-making process are problems in Sri Lanka (Fernando & Shariff, 2013; Bandara & Tisdell, 2005). HPNP and Yala are two of the biggest ecotourism destinations where seasonal congestion, human wildlife, and pressurization and cultural commodification are some common developments facing those areas. Governance structures tend to be non-transparent and uncoordinated, a fact that causes difficulties when it comes to responding to local circumstances appropriately (Pathmasiri, 2021). Also, the level of perception and participation of the stakeholder with geographical and cultural contexts to ecotourism (Pathmasiri & Fernando, 2023). These studies emphasize that it is necessary to use localized approaches that reflect the socio-cultural specifics of certain areas.

### Stakeholder Commitment

The main aspect of efficient ecotourism governance is stakeholder commitment. It consists of the continued involvement, trust, and cooperation of all those interested in the planning, implementing, and evaluation of the ecotourism programs (Freeman, 1984; Byrd, 2007). Stakeholders are usually key groups of actors, such as government agencies, managers of the protected areas, local communities, tourism operators, non-governmental organizations, or even tourists themselves. Stakeholder commitment has been related to better



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conservation performances, equal distribution of benefits, and an increase in observation of laws (Jamal & Getz, 1995). Meaningful involvement of the stakeholders will enhance support of efforts aimed at conservation, provision of local knowledge, and resolving conflicts between ecological and economic interests.

On the other hand, under-commitment among stakeholders may be presented through ineffective communication, fraudulent behaviour, or unbalanced power forces, which can compromise ecotourism projects. Perceived influence, transparency, and trust in decision-making structures are critical to the commitment of the stakeholders (Nimalasiri & Bandara, 2024). The authors also illustrate how the marginalized communities tend to be alienated and find no interest in engaging in conservation activities. Further, stakeholder engagement mechanisms, such as inclusive dialogue platforms, regular communication, and shared benefit structures, are the key mechanisms in establishing trust and accountability (Nimalasiri et al., 2025). Such findings can also match the general literature that outlines the necessity of co-management, decentralized governance, and locally based ecotourism models (Weerakoon, 2019; Pathmasiri, 2021).

According to recent research, there is a growing trend where the success of ecotourism initiatives in areas of protection is based not only on

conservation awareness but also on the quality of governance structures, mechanisms of stakeholder participation, and systems of benefit sharing. Research on protected-area tourism revenue sharing demonstrates that benefit-sharing schemes can strengthen relationships between communities and park authorities; however, such mechanisms remain vulnerable to equity and governance challenges when transparency and accountability are weak (Snyman, 2023).

More recent findings on nature-based tourism in Sri Lanka point to the fact that an increasing number of visitors has led to environmental damage and disruption of wildlife, and recommend more responsible and ethically based tourism planning through better-enforced governance changes and community involvement (Perera et al., 2023). Similar results of comparative analysis of the protected areas indicate that participatory governance frameworks and the substantial engagement of a local community are linked to more sustainable tourism delivery, whereas centralized management and infrastructural drawbacks are likely to limit the sustainability even in high-value conservation settings (Matović et al., 2025).

Simultaneously, the syntheses of the recent literature in the field of participatory governance have found transparent communication, early engagement of stakeholders, and fair



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allocation of benefits as essential facilitating factors of sustainable conservation performance, with exclusionary decision-making processes and inability to handle stakeholder conflicts remaining significant obstacles. The current evaluation of the perception of the stakeholders also demonstrates that the stakeholders often acknowledge both positive and negative environmental effects of tourism and offer to strengthen the participation, adaptive regulation, and monitoring over the long term to contribute to the sustainability (Shang et al., 2025).

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study followed a qualitative case study design to investigate the dynamics and barriers of stakeholders for practicing effective ecotourism in the HPNP. The case study approach was chosen to allow an in-depth and contextual examination of the interaction between different stakeholder groups, including their values, motivation, and perceived roles in conservation as well as tourism development.

The main sources of data collected included key-informant interviews and field observations. The semi-structured interviews were carried out (n=34) with purposely chosen stakeholders who represented four communities, namely state-centered agencies, members of the local community, outside tourism facilitators, and tourists. The interview

guide was presented as a common core to all the stakeholder groups to provide thematic consistency, and group-specific prompts were added to address the group-based experiences and views. Interviews were set by the principle of data saturation, according to which data collection ended when no additional substantively new themes or insights were found. Saturation was determined when repeating patterns and story lines were found to be the same across the interviews and stakeholder groups, which meant sufficient depth and breadth of qualitative analysis.

Field observations were done in an orderly manner in the form of detailed field notes by repeatedly visiting HPNP. The subject of the observations was tourist behavior, relationships between officers and visitors of the park, the state of infrastructure, waste management, and obvious conservation issues. The analysis of these observational notes was conducted in parallel with the interview transcripts, and the same thematic coding framework was used. Observational data were not considered an independent dataset, although they were employed to put the interview narratives into perspective to validate and triangulate them, thus increasing the credibility of the qualitative results.

Thematic analysis was performed on interview transcripts and field notes, and its development was based on familiarization, initial coding,



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development, and refinement of themes in accordance with the framework offered by Braun and Clarke (2006). The six key themes were inductively determined as a result of the recurring patterns within the narratives of the stakeholders and observational notes, which reflected essential socio-environmental, governance, and economic aspects of ecotourism and conservation. The themes include analytically discrete codes that represent common patterns of the participant descriptions. Table 1 defines the themes and their corresponding codes.

Table 1. Emergent Themes and Codes

Theme	Codes
Conservation Threats and Environmental Barriers	Human-animal conflict, Poaching, Mining Activities, Overcrowding by Tourists, Lack of Park Monitoring, Habitat Destruction, Pollution
Disparities in Stakeholder Commitment	Conflicting Interests in Park Utilization, Lack of Collaboration, Inconsistent Engagement, Communication Barriers, Differing Priorities Between Stakeholders, Marginalization of Local Communities, Unequal Access to Resources
Infrastructure Deficiencies	Inadequate Visitor Facilities, Poor Waste Management, Infrastructure Insufficient Signage and Information Boards, Limited Access and Connectivity, Underdeveloped

	Observation and Viewing Platforms
Governance and Policy Gaps	Political interference, Overemphasis on tourism revenue, Weak Enforcement of Laws, Lack of Comprehensive Conservation Policies, Ineffective Stakeholder Engagement, Inadequate Monitoring and Surveillance, Limited Funding for Conservation Efforts
Cultural and Social Disruptions	Drug Addiction Among Locals Prostitution, Erosion of Local Traditions and Culture, Youth Marginalization, Income Inequality, Social Tensions Among Stakeholders,
Economic Benefits and Disparities	Unequal Distribution of Tourism Revenue, Employment Opportunities for Locals, Dependency on Seasonal Tourism, Limited Support for Local Businesses, Lack of Reinvestment in Local Economy

In order to elaborate on the thematic analysis of the stakeholder perceptions, quotations from the key informants' interviews were included in the Findings section. To make sure that the study participants were anonymous, pseudonyms (e.g., HPT1 [Horton Plains Tourist 1], HPLC2 [Horton Plains Local Community 2], HPOTF3 [Horton Plains Outside Tourism Facilitator 3], HPSCA4 [Horton Plains State-Centered Agency 4]) were used.



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Gender (M), which referred to male, and (F), which referred to female, were also used to show the gender of each participant where necessary. The practice enhances the relationship between the emergent themes and the experiences of people engaged in the ecotourism activities within the HPNP.

The research is mainly qualitative, but the RII was used as an aid tool in analyzing the research to improve the methodological triangulation. There was no statistical inference, percentage-based analysis, or generalization to RII. After thematic coding, the review of qualitative statements was conducted to determine the relative frequency and priority of the major issues in the groups of stakeholders. Ordinal weights were drawn and were attributed with collective emphasis, and RII values could be calculated as relative thematic prominence. RII has also been applied in this study, hence in a descriptive and interpretive manner, not to replace qualitative findings. Integrated interview, field observation, thematic analysis, and RII helped to enhance the transparency of the analysis and allowed the triangulation between data sources.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RII was used to assess and rank the variables that influence stakeholder commitment, and the results are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2. The Current State of Stakeholders' Commitment in HPNP

Index	RII	Mean	Rank
Environmental or ecosystem considerations	0.9	4.5	1
Comprehensiveness	0.8	4	2
Trust between and among stakeholders	0.765	3.825	3
Willing to implement Decisions	0.764	3.82	4
Mutual Understanding and Agreement	0.618	3.09	5
Reaching Common Decisions	0.536	2.68	6
Socio - Culture pride and local economic development	0.527	2.635	7
Transparency	0.518	2.59	8
Power decentralization	0.494	2.47	9

Source: Author's fieldwork data derived from key informant interviews, 2023

The RII was used to measure and rank the relative weight of the stakeholders on the contribution of factors to commitment in ecotourism governance (Table 2). The environmental or ecosystem issues became the most notable priority, then came comprehensiveness in the making of decisions, trust between stakeholders, and readiness to make decisions. Junior indicators were transparency, decentralization of power, and common decision-making reach, which portrayed perceived weaknesses of participatory governance and institutional openness.



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On the whole, the findings of RII show that the stakeholders are highly interested in conservation and collaborative intentions; however, structural and governance-related constraints prevent successful engagement and common decision-making. These rankings were taken as an analytical help to direct and contextualize the further thematic analysis, as opposed to being autonomous quantitative results. In this summary, the percentages presented in the following section are used solely for illustrative purposes. As this study is qualitative in nature, the following figures are not intended for statistical analysis or generalization. Rather, they serve to indicate the relative prominence of issues as perceived by the participants, based on their subjective responses.

### Conservation Threats and Environmental Barriers

Human-induced pressures and environmental stresses are becoming more susceptible to the HPNP (Figure 1). It was noted by the stakeholders that the existing trend of tourism and exploitation of natural resources might not guarantee ecological sustainability in the long-term. Even though ecotourism is being encouraged as a major conservation strategy, the weak ecosystems in the park are put under pressure because of poor enforcement, lack of personnel, poaching, pollution, and unethical visitor conduct.

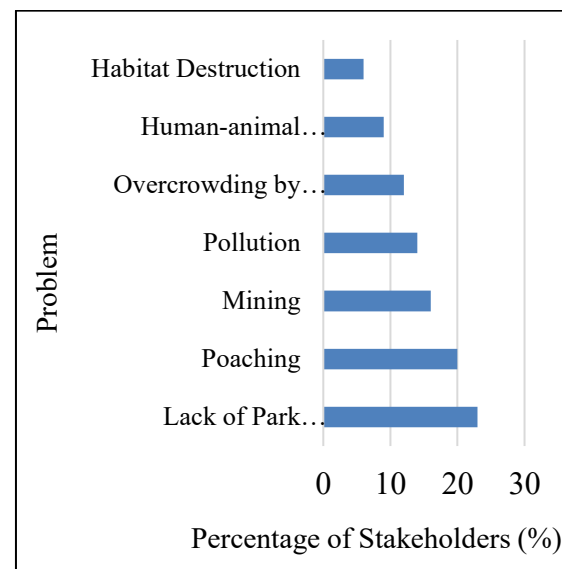


Figure 1. Conservation Threats and Environmental Barriers

Source: Author's fieldwork data derived from key informant interviews, 2023

A significant issue that appeared among the stakeholders was inefficient monitoring of parks. Insufficient capacity to detect and act on environmental violations has been created by the shortage of trained officers and the presence of low real-time surveillance capacity. "There are cases of destruction of habitats. In fact, some tourists even take away valuable and endemic plants, and we cannot have sufficient park officers to monitor such," (HPSCA5, State-centered agencies (M), Personal communication, 10.2023). Such gaps in monitoring allow direct destruction of vulnerable flora and deterioration of conservation laws, which endangers endemic species to a great extent.

Another key threat that was identified was poaching, especially along the park boundaries. "Mining and poaching are going on," (HPSCA1,



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State-centered agencies (M), Personal communication, 10.2023). Another stakeholder emphasized that such activities occur “along the national park boundaries” (HPSCA02, State-centered agencies (F), Personal communication, 10.2023), indicating weaknesses in boundary protection. These activities interfere with the ecological processes of seed dispersal and pollination and lead to the loss of biodiversity in the long run.

Mining activities were also noted as one of the constant environmental threats. According to the reports, there was uncontrolled mining in the park and nearby environs that led to soil erosion and disturbance of the habitat. “Mining is done within the park, which causes a bit of soil pollution,” (HPSCA5, State-centered agencies (M), Personal communication, 10.2023). One stakeholder noted extensive mining activities along the Dayagama and Bagwanthalawa fringes. “Such activities threaten wildlife corridors and water quality, particularly within the sensitive highland watershed of Horton Plains.”

(HPSCA4, State-centered agencies (M), Personal communication, 10.2023).

Tourism-related pollution was also commonly noted, specifically solid waste and noise pollution. “Soil and air pollution, as well as noise, are induced by the vehicles used to access the national park,” (HPSCA6, State-centered agencies (F), Personal communication, 10.2023). Further

highlighted the ecological implications of improper waste management of visitor facilities, about which it is stated that “Food waste attracts scavenger species and disrupts ecological balance.”

(HPSCA3, State-centered agencies (M), Personal communication, 10.2023).

Another environmental stressor that was identified was tourist congestion at peak periods. High population of visitors puts pressure on facilities and manpower, disrupts the behavior of wildlife and increases noise and traffic. One of the stakeholders said that “Prolonged overcrowding could undermine both conservation efforts and the long-term viability of tourism in the park. Infrastructure limitations, including narrow access roads and traffic congestion, further intensify these pressures.”

(HPSCA8, State-centered agencies (M), Personal communication, 10.2023).

There were also cases of human-wildlife contact, especially damage to crops by wildlife and risky tourist activities like feeding animals. “Crop damage caused by sambar deer and purple-faced langurs,” (HPLC5, Local community member (M), Personal communication, 10.2023). In addition, another stakeholder stressed that “Tourists feeding animals increases risks to wildlife health and behavior. The absence of on-site veterinary services further exacerbates these risks, as injured animals must be transported



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long distances for treatment,” (HPSCA9, State-centered agencies (M), Personal communication, 10.2023). Although less frequently mentioned, habitat destruction caused by trampling and the removal of endemic plants remains a concern. “Some tourists pull out useful and indigenous flora and fauna,” (HPSCA5, State-centered agencies (M), Personal communication, 10.2023), point out the cumulative ecological impacts of unmanaged visitor behaviour.

In addition to these immediate threats, it was repeatedly pointed out by the stakeholders that governance and regulatory loopholes were predisposing factors to environmental vulnerability. The lack of manpower, poor enforcement ability, and poor regulatory frameworks remain the major challenges that weaken the efficiency of conservation, which is quite questionable in the long-term sustainability of ecotourism in HPNP. These pressures notwithstanding, the conservation ethic was highly realized by different stakeholders, especially local actors operating within the park. Put differently, guides, community members, and conservation advocates felt responsible and urgent about the protection of the ecosystem, and this is a significant basis for future conservation efforts.

The narratives of stakeholders were supported by field observations made during site visits. Congestion on major trails, hiking off the trails, littering, and a lack of contact between the park

authority and the visitors had been witnessed, especially in peak times. The observations corroborated interview findings concerning poor monitoring, inadequate infrastructure, and poor visitor management and enhanced the credibility of the analysis with triangulation.

### Disparities in Stakeholder Commitment

All these bring up several structural and interpersonal factors, which pose an important barrier to participation by stakeholders in collaborative conservation and ecotourism at HPNP (Figure 2). Communication barrier was the most evident issue, and most of the stakeholders identified a lack of responsiveness and inconsistency of communications as one of the most significant obstacles to collective action. These failures not only undermine trust but also increase the distances among the park officials, communities, and tour guides and tourism providers.

“The park officials fail to cooperate with us. We are clueless about what goes on in the park. It would be of great help to us in case they could talk to us, not just when we are in bad times, but they would also be able to assist us financially as well,” (HPLC2, Local community member (M), Personal communication, 10.2023). This is indicative of operational as well as relational exclusion, where the local stakeholders are sidelined in the



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process of making decisions as well as sharing of resources. Equally, a different stakeholder observed that “Park authorities do not cooperate with other stakeholders, not even us tour guides,” (HPOTF3, Outside tourism facilitator (M), Personal communication, 10.2023), which reflects institutional resistance to inclusive governance and missed an opportunity to find solutions to issues jointly.

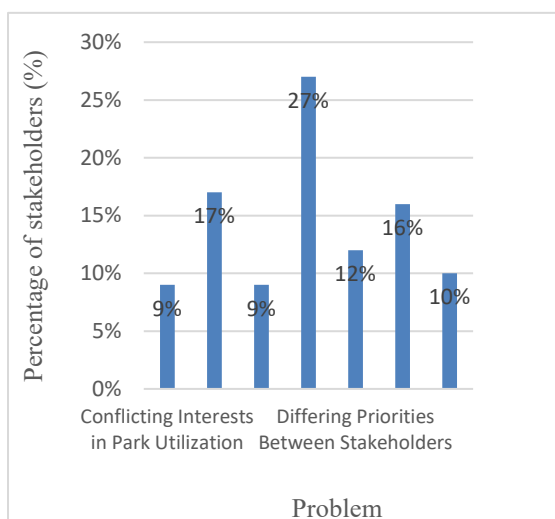


Figure 2. Disparities in Stakeholder Commitment

Source: Author’s fieldwork data derived from key informant interviews, 2023

The second factor that is closely related to communication failure is the lack of collaboration mechanisms. The absence of formal engagement platforms, committees, or feedback systems was cited by stakeholders. “We do not communicate or relate with the authorities of the park. It has no committee or system to speak with us,” (HPOTF4, Outside tourism facilitator (F), Personal communication, 10.2023). Another stakeholder further explained,

“We do not communicate with other stakeholders regularly. Hence, they are not aware of some changing rules and regulations” (HPSCA02, State-centered agencies (F), Personal communication, 10.2023). This disorganized interaction has been a factor in poor adherence to conservation behavior and restrains the common ownership of management actions.

Another overriding theme was the marginalization of local communities. The stakeholders reported being left out of economic gains and tourism opportunities. “No other stakeholders are benefiting other than the department and its officials in the park,” (HPOTF2, Outside tourism facilitator (F), Personal communication, 10.2023). Another stakeholder mentioned that, “We are usually not able to serve foreign tourists since large tour companies already do the work, and this creates an uneven distribution of revenue and access to tourism sites,” (HPLC1, Local community member (M), Personal communication, 10.2023). This kind of exclusion breeds resentment and discourages the locals from joining in conservation efforts.

Other issues were conflicting priorities of stakeholders and inequality in resource availability. “We communicate with the adjacent hotels, but they are not listening to us,” (HPSCA8, State-centered agencies (M), Personal communication, 10.2023), illustrating power imbalances between economically dominant actors and local stakeholders. Conflicting interests



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in park utilization further exacerbate these tensions. One stakeholder described competition between tour guides and local vendors (HPOTF1, Outside tourism facilitator (F), Personal communication, 10.2023). Another stakeholder highlighted “Restrictive access regulations and high entrance fees that divert tourists to alternative attractions” (HPLC7, Local community member (F), Personal communication, 10.2023), undermining both local livelihoods and park visitation.

Lack of consistency in engagement was also pointed out as a common problem, which is marked by unreliable and periodic involvement. “There is nothing between us and the park authorities in the way of communication or relationship. We do not have any committee or system to work with us,” (HPOTF5, Outside tourism facilitator (M), Personal communication, 10.2023). Other than that, another stakeholder added, “Compliance efforts often fail, noting that nearby hotels frequently ignore requests to educate visitors about conservation rules” (HPSCA8, State-centered agencies (M), Personal communication, 10.2023). This type of irregular engagement fades trust and also damages collective conservation efforts.

Field-based observations were used to substantiate these accounts by showing a lack of interaction between park officials and local stakeholders, a lack of visible consultation processes, and poor coordination with local tourism

establishments. On-site visits showed no official stakeholder meetings or information-sharing sites, which supports the interview records on exclusion, uneven involvement, and top-down management systems. On balance, these results demonstrate how a lack of communication, an exclusionary system of governance, and a lack of equal power relations undermine the commitment of the stakeholders in Horton Plains. Such trends point to constraints in the inclusive discussion, transparency, and joint decision-making, and have implications regarding the need to balance conservation goals and development demands in the community.

### Infrastructure Deficiencies

The park has been facing a row of infrastructure inadequacies, which have serious impacts on the visitor experience and the overall management of the park (Figure 3). The stakeholders were always worried because the park could not handle the growing number of visitors because of the old, insufficient, or decrepit infrastructure. These shortcomings lower the satisfaction of visitors and exert more pressure on the environmental sustainability of the park.



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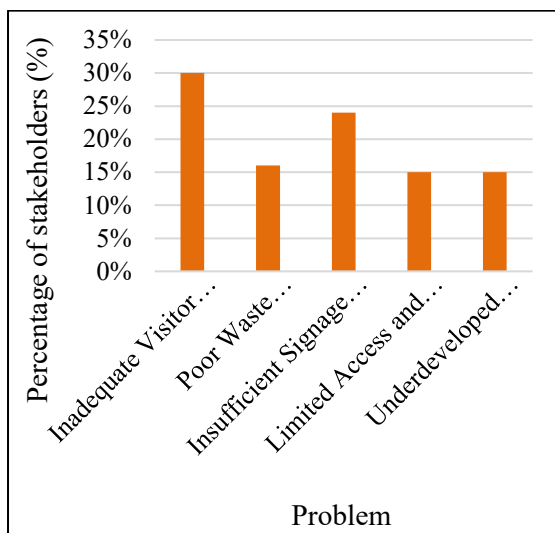


Figure 3. Infrastructure Deficiencies

Source: Author's fieldwork data derived from key informant interviews, 2023

The most mentioned problem was poor visitor amenities (Figure 3). Inadequate facilities, especially toilets, washing facilities, and emergency facilities, were noted by the stakeholders. "There is no ambulance, no proper toilets for foreign tourists, no restroom," (HPOTF3, Outside tourism facilitator (M), Personal communication, 10.2023). Similarly, another stakeholder noted, "The washrooms are in very poor condition, not suitable to anyone, especially foreign tourists" (HPT1, Tourist (F), Personal communication, 10.2023). One state-centered agency member further emphasized the severity of the issue by explaining that "There are only nine toilets within the entire national park, which become insufficient during peak seasons" (HPSCA2, State-centered agencies (F), Personal communication, 10.2023). There are insufficient sanitation facilities, which create inconvenience to

the visitors and also pose a possible health hazard.

Inadequacy of signage and interpretive materials was also cited as a significant factor of concern (Figure 3). Stakeholders identified that the current signage is not appealing, in bad condition, and hardly legible. "They are not attractive and difficult to read," (HPOTF7, Outside tourism facilitator (M), Personal communication, 10.2023). Another stated, "We cannot read the signage boards; they must be repaired," (HPT2, Tourist (M), Personal communication, 10.2023).

An external tourism facilitator also observed "The absence of directional signage before park entry, which creates confusion and inefficiency for incoming visitors," (HPOTF8, Outside tourism facilitator (F), Personal communication, 10.2023). Such shortcomings undermine the educational capabilities of the park and restrict the interpretive capabilities of ecotourism.

Another important issue was in waste management infrastructure. According to the stakeholders, there was a poor system that could not accommodate the waste that was generated by tourists, especially during peak seasons. "There is a lack of proper waste management systems," (HPSCA1, State-centered agencies (M), Personal communication, 10.2023). In addition, another stakeholder explained that "The garbage truck comes once a week, which is not enough during tourist



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seasons,” (HPLC3, Local community member (F), Personal communication, 10.2023). These constraints lead to the waste build-up, pollution of the environment, and a possible risk to wildlife.

Infrastructure problems are also complicated by access and connectivity problems. It was reported that the stakeholders had narrow roads, traffic congestion, and a lack of access to public transport. One of the tourists explained the old road congestion issues and inefficient road development, and said that “Traffic and noise discourage tourists from staying in the region” (HPT3, Tourist (M), Personal communication, 10.2023). The closure of alternative access routes that would have sustained train-based tourism was mentioned by the local community member (HPLC8, Local community member (F), Personal communication, 10.2023), and another state-centered member of the agency said, “There is no proper vehicle parking area. There are cases where some people have to walk over 3km after leaving their cars in the adjacent streets to get to the main gate,” (HPSCA5, State-centered agencies (M), Personal communication, 10.2023). Such limitations of access influence the experience of visitors as well as the tourism flows in the region.

Moreover, the stakeholders mentioned the absence of observation and viewing platforms. One of the tourists proposed the capability to install a viewing deck at the World’s End because such

facilities would make the visitor experience and feel safer and minimize the destruction of the environment due to off-trail movement (HPT5, Tourist (M), Personal communication, 10.2023). Lack of such facilities undermines visitor management and protection of the habitat.

These issues were supported by field observations that recorded poor toilet conditions, signage, trash piles around tourism sites, traffic jams at entrance points of the park, and a lack of proper viewing platforms at key sites. The findings supported the stakeholder accounts of the poor infrastructure and its effects on visitor management and environmental conservation. In general, Horton Plains still has an inadequacy in infrastructure that limits the management of ecotourism. The outcomes of these studies demonstrate that sanitation, signage, waste management, access, and visitor facilities were limiting aspects of visitor experience and determined the ability of the park to coordinate its operations with sustainability goals.

### Governance and Policy Gaps

Weak governance in HPNP is structural in nature and has continued to affect ecological stewardship and the sustainability of the park management (Figure 4). The stakeholders also overwhelmingly reported that the policy implementation weaknesses, institutional responsiveness, and stakeholder participation continue to



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exist, even though the park is very central in the national strategies of conservation and ecotourism.

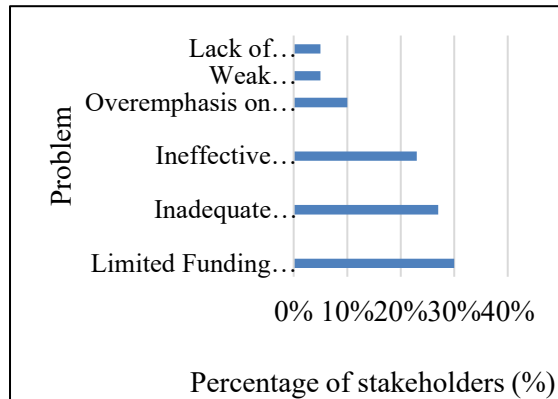


Figure 4. Governance and Policy Gaps

Source: Author's fieldwork data derived from key informant interviews, 2023

The greatest governance challenge that stakeholders have identified is that of lacking financial resources and proper reinvestment in conservation efforts. One of the members of the local community complained about the use of revenues and said, "We do not see any signs of money being earned from tourists as being reinvested in the development of parks," (HPLC4, Local community member (M), Personal communication, 10.2023). This issue is indicative of wider questions of transparency and accountability in the income distribution of the parks. Equally, a different stakeholder pointed out a lack of connection between planning and implementation and marketing, saying, "Each year we are required to present an action plan to the Wildlife Department. However, nothing has been done to meet our requirements" (HPSCA7, State-centered agencies (M), Personal

communication, 10.2023). These experiences lead to a reduction of morale among the stakeholders at the operational level and undermine confidence in the processes within institutions.

Lack of proper monitoring and surveillance also exacerbates the issues of governance. Lack of trained staff and logistical support are some of the factors that prevent the park from dealing with acts of illegality like mining, poaching, and encroachment. "Mining activities occur on the borders of the park; however, we do not have enough employees to observe it," (HPSCA8, State-centered agencies (M), Personal communication, 10.2023). There were also operational failures that were reflected in emergency response and communication systems. An external tourism facilitator recounted a case about sick tourists and a lack of mobile signal or emergency facilities in the park, and how the service points or communication infrastructure should be placed along the major trails (HPOTF7, Outside tourism facilitator (M), Personal communication, 10.2023).

Another common governance issue was inefficient interaction with stakeholders. A large number of the respondents said that they were not involved in making decisions that impacted their conservation and their livelihood. "There is no committee or ways of talking to us," (HPOTF4, Outside tourism facilitator (F), Personal



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communication, 10.2023), while a local community member noted, “As locals we do not know what is going on in the park. Because, the park officials do not talk and stand with us,” (HPLC6, Local community member (M), Personal communication, 10.2023). According to these reports, there are no established participatory processes like advisory committees or co-management schemes, which means that collaborative government has been missed.

Other governance concerns were excessive focus on the tourism revenue, poor implementation of conservation laws, and failure to have comprehensive policies on conservation. All these issues are signs of a system of government that operates in the short-term economic goals at the expense of long-term sustainability and empowerment of stakeholders. Poorly coordinated policy implementation and legal enforcement are other factors that undermine institutional performance.

These findings were backed by field observations that showed that there was limited on-site monitoring, no visible points of the services or information, and that there was a poor communication infrastructure in the park. Actual stakeholder consultation procedures were observed at no point during the field visits, and this further upholds interview assertions of centralized decision-making, poor transparency, and low inclusion of

stakeholders. In general, there are strengths and severe weaknesses of governance at Horton Plains. On the one hand, motivation and readiness of stakeholders are obvious, and on the other hand, there is still a significant lack of transparency, mutual understanding, and power-sharing, which suggests that there are structural constraints in the current governance arrangements. Such trends can be related to the effectiveness of ecological management, the performance of institutions, and the trust of stakeholders in the long-term sustainability of the park.

### Cultural and Social Disruptions

The issues of friction, exclusion, and imbalance are increasingly becoming apparent in the cultural and social environment of HPNP, which is a challenge to the sustainability of both tourism and conservation (Figure 5). The stakeholders raised some socio-cultural tensions and inequalities that have been identified as pressure on both tourism development and the absence of both integrated social planning and community participation.

The most common concern that is mentioned pertains to social conflicts between the tour operators and the local sellers. The same friction was explained by an outside tourism facilitator, who said, “Locals complain that we are not taking tourists to their shops because they are overpriced and not appealing” (HPOTF3, Outside



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tourism facilitator (M), Personal communication, 10.2023). This conflict mirrors a wider economic competition and unmatched expectations between the local businesses and the tourism operators. A local community member further noted that “There are only a few direct or indirect employment opportunities generated by the national park... More than that, there is very little gain to the local economy” (HPLC5, Local community member (M), Personal communication, 10.2023). The existence of such conflicts undermines the collaboration of local actors and adds to the development of negative perceptions in relation to park authorities and tour guides.

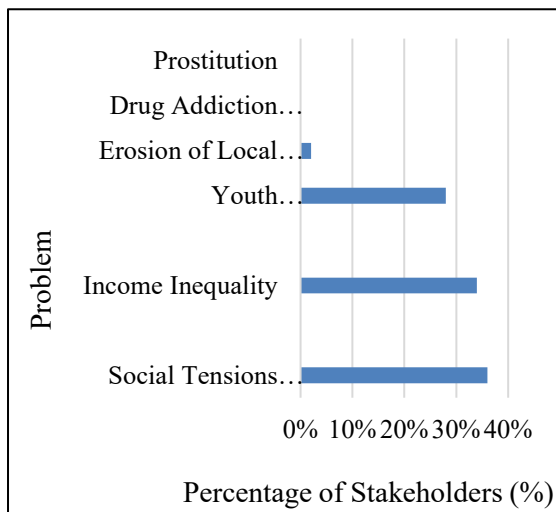


Figure 5. Cultural and Social Disruptions  
Source: Author's fieldwork data derived from key informant interviews, 2023

Another dominant issue appeared to be income inequality. Stakeholders highlighted that the returns to tourism are not evenly spread, yet many community members remain economically vulnerable. “The number of tourists visiting the national park has

declined over the years, and thus the reason why I was back to farming to support myself,” (HPLC2, Local community member (M), Personal communication, 10.2023). An outside tourism facilitator added that “Few benefit and others do not see tourism gains,” (HPOTF4, Outside tourism facilitator (F), Personal communication, 10.2023). Similarly, another observed that “The local community has not experienced any development... since in no way is the national park helpful or even offers a platform,” (HPLC2, Local community member (M), Personal communication, 10.2023). Such unfair distribution of opportunities leads to the development of dissatisfaction and marginalization among local populations.

Marginalization of youths was also emphasized as a major problem. The stakeholders complained that young people had little access to training, employment, and other ecotourism activities. “Few tourists are now coming in numbers... That is why, I also began to farm to feed myself,” (HPLC6, Local community member (M), Personal communication, 10.2023). Such marginalization may result in disengagement, migration, or resistance to conservation norms, threatening long-term community resilience.

Even though the erosion of the local culture and traditions was less discussed by the stakeholders, issues of preparedness in communities and



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cultural orientation were raised. “The few who are here do not have a proper understanding of even the tourism concept and the tourists feel unsafe,” (HPOTF3, Outside tourism facilitator (M), Personal communication, 10.2023), which suggests that cultural awareness or professionalism gaps may adversely influence the image of the local tourism and perceptions of tourists.

Field notes were used to corroborate the above findings by showing that there was little contact between tourists and local sellers, little youth involvement in tourism-related processes, and disproportionate distribution of tourism gains among the local communities. There were also aspects of visitor orientation and local engagement that were observed to be missing, which supports stakeholder discourses of social exclusion and cultural disconnections. All in all, socio-cultural violence at Horton Plains underscores the long-standing issues when it comes to inequality, marginalization, and poor local empowerment. These results show that the existing ecotourism activities and governance systems are unable to respond to fair distribution of benefits, youth involvement, cultural sensitivity, and active community engagement, and their implications are the inclusivity and sustainability of ecotourism in the park.

## Economic Benefits and Disparities

Despite HPNP having a great ecological and landscape potential, it has not been able to completely convert this richness into the wide and fair economic benefits. Stakeholders always noted the disequilibrium in the distribution of tourism incomes and the exclusion of the local communities from the economic benefits of the park (Figure 6).

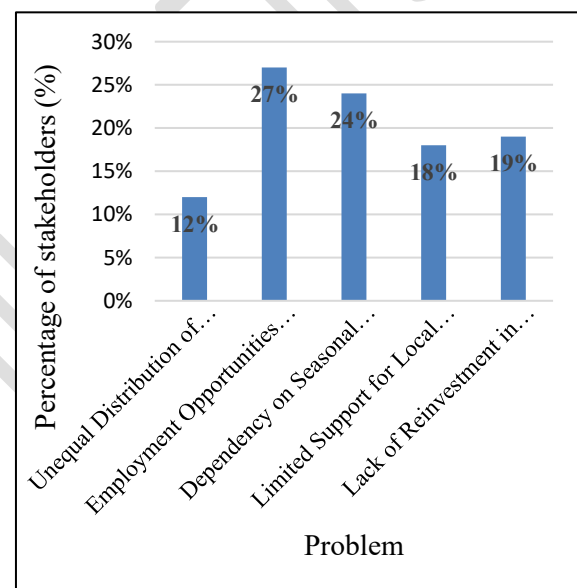


Figure 6. Economic Benefits and Disparities

Source: Author's fieldwork data derived from key informant interviews, 2023

Lack of prospects in employment of the residents became a significant issue. “Very few jobs were offered in the national park to the local community in the area,” (HPSCA1, State-centered agencies (M), Personal communication, 10.2023), which means that employment opportunities for the national park activities are few and selective. Equally, the same stakeholder



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added, "There is no institution to help or attract farmers to sell products to the tourists," (HPLC8, Local community member (F), Personal communication, 10.2023), added that there were no institutional mechanisms to incorporate the local producers into the tourism economy. These observations indicate poor economic connections between conservation and communities around the areas.

Another major problem was seasonal reliance on tourism. The stakeholders gave an account of irregular flows of income due to the peaks of tourism, especially during the long weekends and holiday seasons. "During long weekends only, we receive bookings; otherwise, it is low business" (HPOTF7, Outside tourism facilitator (M), Personal communication, 10.2023). Moreover, one of the local community members highlighted how this instability affects household economic security. Fears were also added by insufficient investment in the local business and insufficient promotion to the local community enterprises (HPLC8, Local community member (F), Personal communication, 10.2023).

Structural constraints to the local involvement in tourism were also pointed out. Another member of the local community said, "We cannot cater to foreign tourists because of the activities of big tour companies... This is because of the absence of infrastructure and advertising in these areas like Ohiya and Pattipola."

(HPLC1, Local community member (M), Personal communication, 10.2023). Such dominance limits revenue circulation in the locality and narrows it down to the small-scale businesses, even when the region has several attractions.

The disproportionate allocation of tourism income strengthened the feeling of marginalization. "Besides the department officials, other stakeholders hardly get benefits out of tourism revenue," (HPOTF5, Outside tourism facilitator (M), Personal communication, 10.2023), reflecting centralized benefit-sharing arrangements that weaken trust in park and tourism governance institutions.

These findings were backed by field observations, which revealed that there was limited local business involvement with tourists, a scarcity of local product outlets in the park entry points, and short stays of visitors controlled by externally organized tour groups. These findings supported interview accounts on limited economic spillovers and poor community involvement in the tourism economy. In general, the economic inequality at Horton Plains is based on poor employment opportunities, seasonal reliance on the tourism sector, concentration of revenue, and ineffective institutions to support local businesses. These trends show structural constraints that curtail the capacity of the communities surrounding them to enjoy the benefits



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of ecotourism in the sense that they have future implications for local sustainability to support conservation and sustainable tourism projects.

### CONCLUSION

The effectiveness of the ecotourism practices at HPNP was established in this study in terms of stakeholder commitment. The findings indicate that although the stakeholders show a high importance in the protection of the environment and ecosystem, as is reflected by the high-ranking score on the RII, the outcome of the ecotourism is constrained by the still-existing structural social and infrastructural issues that interfere with long-term collaboration and efficiency. Although RII results are showing that there is a shared concern in conservation, planning, and trust-building, qualitative data reveal that there is a gap between the proclaimed priorities and on-the-ground actions.

The absence of infrastructure, governance, and communications, the continuous environmental risks, and socio-economic injustices have resulted in a divided ecotourism system, with the local communities being sidelined in the decision-making process and receiving fair economic benefits. Thematic analysis also helps to underline the intricacy of those challenges where recurring conservation threats, weak institutional mechanisms, limited youth involvement, and established power

disparities among stakeholders can be identified. Such conditions not only undermine the ecological integrity of HPNP but also undermine stakeholder trust and long-term investment in ecotourism projects.

On the whole, the research proves that successful ecotourism at HPNP cannot be reduced to environmental awareness only. Enhancement of participatory governance systems, transparency, and equitable economic integration are imperative to both developing stakeholder ownership and the realization of sustainable ecotourism outcomes. In line with this, conservation efforts should shift to participatory, co-managed, and locally based strategies that would ensure consistency between ecological goals and community welfare, hence be able to conserve HPNP as a sustainable and ecotourism destination in the long run.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of the analysis, it is possible to make several valuable recommendations that could help make HPNP better committed to stakeholders and promote sustainable ecotourism. The improvement of the cooperation of the stakeholders is the most critical problem that should be resolved in the first place, and it should be done with the help of organized institutions, such as advisory boards or co-management committees. They should consider the involvement of the participants of the local communities,



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park officials, tour operators, and conservation agencies in such a way that they could engage one another and make joint decisions occasionally.

It is also necessary to increase the level of governance transparency and accountability. It will entail explaining how tourism funds are used so that some of them are evidently used in reinvestment, in terms of conservation of the area as well as that of the local populace. Monitoring and evaluation systems will also support the establishment of effective monitoring of the implementation process of the policies and plans, but will also allow a feedback loop to the stakeholders in providing input and oversight on the same.

Infrastructure improvement should also be given priority, especially in the field of sanitation, signage, waste management, access roads to sites, and visitor safety infrastructure. The investment in such spheres will contribute to the improvement of the quality of the visitor experience and the lessening of ecological pressure, in particular, during the tourist season. At the same time, one should establish more chances of community economic inclusion. This can be done through local enterprise promotion, eco-guide and hospitality training, and access to tourism markets among local producers and services.

Education and awareness of conservation are also very important. By means of facilitating structured

programs of visiting with local young people as tourism user environmental ambassadors and offering meaningful work, it might become possible to institute responsible tourism actions. Furthermore, in line with the co-management framework that incorporates the aspect of decentralization of decision-making, the local capacity will enable communities to have a more active role in the management of the park resources and implementation of conservation norms.

It can, at best, only be dealt with proactively, as in greater action against the unlawful practices, like poaching and mining, a greater number of trained staff, and regulation of the visitor traffic, which may not overwhelm the areas. Lastly, there should be an effort to reduce social-cultural tension and inequalities. This involves the incorporation of fair representation of women, young people, and the underprivileged groups in the gains of tourism and inclusion in the planning process. An enhancement of the community identity may be done by the creation of a local cultural heritage experience in a way that is authentic and helps in creating the uniqueness of the tourism product.

Put across, these suggestions show the need to adopt a cross-dimensional and holistic strategy that would integrate the concerns of ecological conservation with the community welfare. The combination of equity, accountability,



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and collaboration in the governance of Horton Plains can change ecotourism to a conservation course or as an agent of local development.

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