

The scopes of rural tourism and regional development: A case study of the selected areas of Ampara district

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Abstract

Rural tourism involves activities in rural areas, where tourists interact with local culture, heritage, lifestyle, and the natural environment. Developing rural tourism is essential for social, economic, and environmental benefits, while private and public investment enhances regional development and community participation. The study examines the benefits and challenges associated with rural tourism, including economic empowerment, cultural preservation, community engagement, and ecological sustainability. Therefore, the study mainly focuses on identifying the scopes of rural tourism in Ampara district, to find out the regional developmental causes for preferences of tourist arrival and to find the association between preferences of tourist arrival and regional development activities. This study utilizes qualitative methods, gathering primary data through direct observation, field visits, and structured questionnaires. Secondary data includes annual reports from the Divisional Secretariat of Ampara District, related articles, and journals and for the analysis, the study employs SWOT analysis, ArcGIS 10.8 and Google Earth Pro. The findings suggest that Ampara can serve as a model for rural tourism and regional development in Sri Lanka with a committed approach to sustainable tourism practices. Rural tourism influences ampara's economy by 50%, and social, cultural, and environmental dimensions by 10%, 25%, and 15%, respectively. The study offers recommendations for policymakers, stakeholders, and local communities to harness rural tourism benefits while positively impacting visitors and residents. It emphasizes training locals in hospitality and sustainable tourism practices, addressing infrastructure deficiencies through investments, and promoting sustainable tourism, eco-friendly accommodations, and cultural tourism to preserve local heritage and foster environmental conservation.

Keywords: Cultural Preservation, Regional Development, Rural Tourism, Sustainable Practices, Ampara District

1. Introduction

Tourism is a rapidly growing sector around the world. It is a social, cultural and economic phenomenon involving the movement of people to countries or locations outside their usual environment for personal or professional purposes. Rural tourism in North America is a story of domestic tourism (Gartner, 2004). Much of the tourism industry in North America, particularly in the West, depends strongly on the presence and management of national parks, forests, wildernesses, wild and scenic rivers, and other protected federal and state lands (McCool et al., 2001). In the 1970s and 80s, the decline in traditional farming agriculture and rapid degradation of natural resources caused a shift in the rural economy and led the rural communities to seek non-traditional service-oriented economic avenues to sustain rural livelihoods (Fleicher and Pizam, 1997; Sharpley, 2002, 2003; Timothy, 2005; Tribe et al., 2000; Aslam and Awang, 2015). The current public funding situation for rural tourism development, however, has simultaneously worsened and improved (Wilson et al., 2001).

Rural domestic tourism in the USA is heavily tied to highway infrastructure (Gartner, 2004). Diverse and fragmented natural and human geography in rural areas envisage great tourism potential, nevertheless, the fragility and susceptibility nature of the rural fabric is hesitant to accommodate large volume mass tourism (Aslam and Awang, 2015). The main economic sectors of Sri Lanka are tourism, tea export, apparel, textile, rice production and other agricultural

products. In Sri Lanka, there are nine regional development programmes (Ismail, 2014). Rural development has not been integrated appropriately, previous tourism planning attempts have considered rural development and emphasized rural-urban balancing through tourism development (Aslam and Awang, 2015).

Exploring the influence of rural tourism on the economic development of selected areas in the Ampara district involves examining several key aspects. Firstly, it's important to understand how rural tourism contributes to economic growth in these areas. Additionally, assessing the effectiveness of community involvement in tourism planning and development is crucial. Another significant factor is the impact of rural tourism on the preservation of local traditions and heritage. Lastly, investigating the role of public and private investments in developing rural tourism infrastructure in Ampara is essential for a comprehensive understanding of the topic. Thus, this study stipulates and examines the scopes that help rural communities develop tourism and entrepreneurship opportunities. Therefore, the study mainly focuses on identifying the scopes of rural tourism in Ampara district, to find out the regional developmental causes for preferences of tourist arrival and to find the association between preferences of tourist arrival and regional development activities.

2. Materials and Methods

Background of the study area

Ampara district is one of the attractive places for all the economic and regional sectors, especially its coastal belt. It is an ancient colonization area which covers an area of 4,415 sq. km of surface and out of that the land extent is 4222 sq. km along with 193 sq. km of water area. The district is bounded by, the north – border of Batticaloa and Polonnaruwa district boundary, East – of the Indian Ocean (Bay of Bengal), West – and South East - Monaragalle District, North West – Badulla and Matale District. The district is divided into 20 administrative Divisions with 503 Grama Niladari divisions and also which consist total of 20 local Authorities including 02 municipal councils and 01 urban councils.

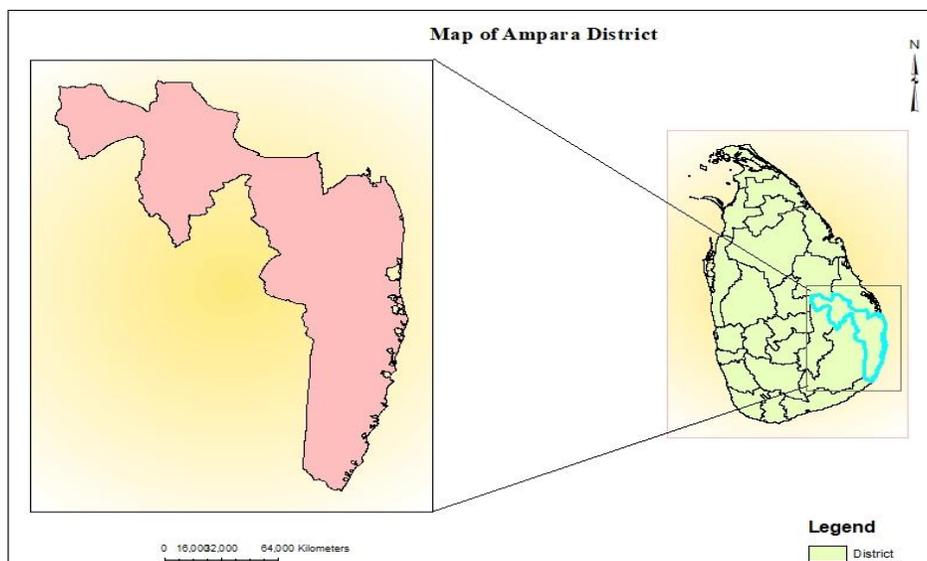


Figure 1: The study area map of Ampara District
Source: Computerized by the author using ArcGIS 10.8

Methodology

This research is based on a qualitative and quantitative approach. Primary and secondary data will be used to gather reliable information. Thus, primary data will be collected through direct observation and field visits to the study area. In addition, it is expected to collect more reliable data through interviews, and structured questionnaires. Additionally, annual reports of the Divisional Secretariat Ampara district and related articles, and journals will be considered furtherly. In addition, ArcGIS 10.8, and Google Earth Pro were used for the analysis purpose of the study.

3. Results and Discussion

Potential for Rural Tourism

The Ampara District, located in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka, offers a remarkable opportunity to explore rural tourism's potential and influence on regional development. This district is a tapestry of scenic beauty, ranging from verdant hills and lush paddy fields to pristine beaches and ancient ruins. The area is home to several natural reserves and wildlife sanctuaries, making it an ideal location for eco-tourism. This region, with its diverse landscapes, rich cultural heritage, and underdeveloped tourism infrastructure, provides a unique case study for understanding how rural tourism can be harnessed to drive economic growth and social development. Additionally, the district's cultural heritage, including traditional villages, ancient temples, and vibrant local festivals, offers a wealth of attractions for cultural tourists.

The Ampara District in Sri Lanka has immense potential for rural tourism, offering a variety of unique experiences that can attract different types of tourists.

Cash inflow sources are:

The primary sources of cash inflow in the Ampara district include agricultural sectors such as rice production, crop production, livestock, milk and egg production, meat production, and fishing. Small and medium-scale enterprises (SMEs) also play a significant role in the district's economy, contributing to job creation and economic growth (Lank et al.,)

Potential growth prospects for cash inflow in Ampara District include addressing marketing obstacles encountered by SMEs, such as product and service marketing, competitiveness, access to capital, education and training, market requirement analysis, and market segmentation. Addressing these difficulties can boost industrial output, resulting in economic development. Additionally, strategic orientation and performance among small business firms in the Ampara district can contribute to economic growth and regional development (Hilal, 2015).

Cash outflow sources are:

The primary sources of cash outflows include capital investments, production costs, and infrastructure depreciation. Additionally, promotional expenses, employee salaries, and property maintenance contribute to the outflows. Moreover, conducting training and workshops for various skill development programs also incurs significant costs. These factors collectively impact the financial stability and liquidity of the organization.

The need for rural tourism

Rural tourism plays a pivotal role in promoting tourism sustainability by fostering economic development, cultural preservation, and environmental conservation in rural areas. By diverting tourist activities away from overcrowded urban centres and famous tourist spots, rural tourism helps decongest these areas, reducing the strain on their resources and infrastructure. It provides alternative sources of income for rural communities, thereby alleviating poverty and stimulating local economies through job creation and entrepreneurial opportunities. This economic boost often leads to better infrastructure and public services, enhancing the quality of life for rural residents. Furthermore, rural tourism encourages the preservation of local traditions, crafts, and cultural heritage, which might otherwise be at risk of fading away. Promotion and responsible marketing approaches help the host community and local entrepreneurs recognize the intrinsic value of rural tourism (Gantait & Singh, 2021).

It promotes an appreciation of cultural diversity among visitors, fostering greater understanding and respect for different ways of life. Environmentally, rural tourism supports the sustainable use of natural resources by raising awareness about conservation efforts and encouraging responsible tourism practices. The presence of tourists can also lead to increased investment in environmental preservation and restoration projects. Additionally, involving local communities in tourism planning and operations ensures that they have a stake in maintaining their environment and culture, leading to more sustainable tourism practices. Overall, rural tourism not only provides enriching experiences for visitors but also significantly contributes to the social, economic, and environmental sustainability of rural areas.

Several key factors are driving the growth of rural tourism. Firstly, there's a strong desire among people to escape the monotony of city life and seek the tranquillity that rural areas offer. This is coupled with an increasing interest in outdoor recreation, eco-tourism, and special interest tourism, which rural locations perfectly accommodate. These areas are ideal for relaxation and rejuvenation, starkly contrasting the hustle and bustle of urban environments. The over-familiarity and congestion in traditional tourist resorts have also led travellers to seek alternative and offbeat attractions. Additionally, curiosity about rural India, including its culture, customs, and heritage, draws many visitors. The accessibility of rural areas has improved, making these destinations more appealing. There's also a growing number of special interest tourists looking for unique experiences, and a general trend towards short-break holidays, which rural tourism caters to perfectly. These factors collectively expand the scope of rural tourism, making it an increasingly popular choice among travellers.

Table 1: Notable rural tourism sites in Ampara District, Sri Lanka

Attractive Places	Tourists arrived per year (Nos)	
	Local	Foreign
1. Kumana National Park	28165	7,306
2. Addalaichenai Light House & beach, Beach Park	8500	24
3. Water Park Entertainment Place, Akkaraipatu	32000	-
4. Estuaries, Aalayadivembu	1650	105
5. Ruins belong to Ovagiriya temple in Namaloya I, Peace Pagoda in Samapura, Namaloya tank, Konduwatuwana tank, Ampara tank, Ampara park	30000	60
6. Ekkaloya Tank, Senenayake samudhra, Damana	250	150
7. Lahugala National Park	380	37
8. Hot Water Spring, Weheragala Aranya, Henanigala ansians temple, Maduruoya Forest, Rambakanoya Tank, Maha Oya	2,620	320
9. Arugam Bay	2358	2019
10. Corcodile Rock, Pottuvil	320	64
11. Kottukal	368	2863
12. Padiyathalawa, Hot water spring (Wahawa)	20000	-
13.		

Source: Statistical Handbook, Ampara, (2022)

These sites offer a mix of adventure, natural beauty, and cultural heritage, making Ampara District a fantastic destination for rural tourism.

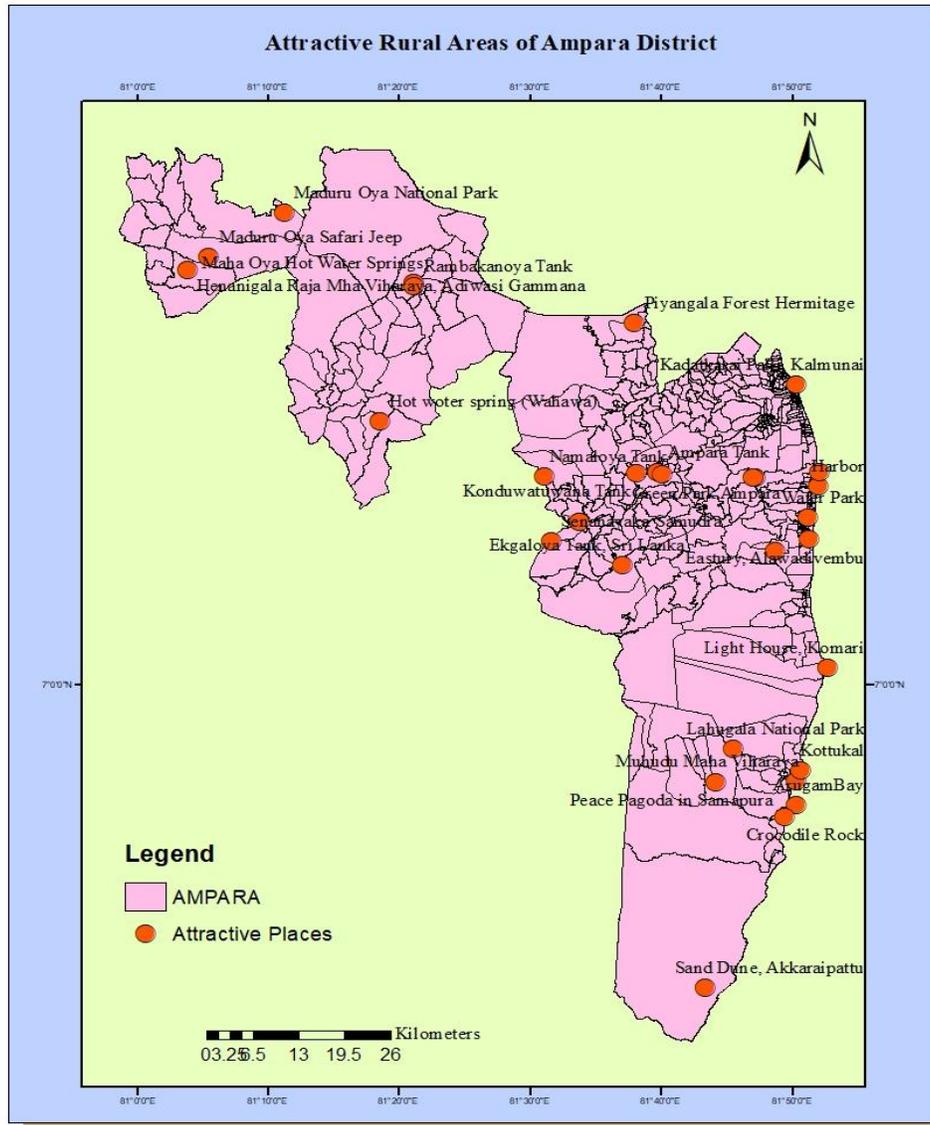


Figure 2: Attractive Places of Ampara District
 Source: Computerized by the author using ArcGIS 10.8

Potential for Eco-tourism

Ampara is endowed with rich biodiversity, including the Kumana National Park, a haven for bird watchers and wildlife enthusiasts. Developing eco-tourism in these areas can attract nature lovers and promote conservation efforts. This Park is renowned for its avifauna, especially its large flocks of migratory waterfowl and wading birds. Many local and foreign tourists attract bird watching, wildlife safaris, and nature trails.

Kumana National Park, located on Sri Lanka's southeastern coast, is a birdwatcher's paradise with over 35,664 hectares of land. The Park hosts over 200 bird species, including rare species like the Black-necked Stork and Greater Flamingo. Visitors can also see majestic elephants, leopards, spotted deer, and crocodiles. The Ampara District's coastal belt is home to numerous lagoons. The park's landscape features lagoons, mangroves, and swamps, providing a rich ecosystem and stunning backdrops for photography. The well-known lagoons in Ampara District are Pottuvil, Arugambay, Panama, Urani, Thuvve, Periya Kalappu, Thonna, Komari, Kaliodai, and Karaidivu. Visitors can enjoy wildlife safaris, birdwatching excursions, and wildlife safaris to explore the park's depths. Thus, the eco-tourism here can promote environmental conservation, educate visitors about biodiversity, and create jobs for local guides and conservationists.

Cultural Tourism

The district Ampara has 64% of Muslims, 37% of Sinhalese, and 16% are Sri Lankan Tamils meanwhile the District also has many indigenous community settlements. Digavapi is an ancient Buddhist site, while Magul Maha Viharaya is known for its historical significance and unique architecture. The district's cultural assets provide a unique cultural experience. Promoting these sites can draw tourists interested in history and heritage. Guided tours of temples, participation in local festivals, and cultural performances are well attracted by many people here. Therefore, cultural tourism can preserve and promote local heritage, providing income for local artisans and historians, and fostering pride in cultural identity.

Agritourism

Given the predominance of agriculture in Ampara, agritourism can be a significant draw. Surrounded by paddy fields and greenery, the study area offers visitors the chance to experience traditional farming, stay on working farms, and enjoy fresh local produce. Thus, tourists can enjoy natural farm stays, hands-on farming activities, and cooking classes using farm-grown ingredients. Tourists can engage in farming activities, learn about traditional agricultural practices, and enjoy farm stays, offering a hands-on rural experience.

The majority of people in the Ampara area cultivate paddy as a means of subsistence, and the area plays a significant part in Sri Lanka's paddy output. Approximately 21% of the paddy needed in the country is produced in the Ampara area. In the Ampara District, where there are approximately 95,606 hectares of paddy land suitable for both the Maha and Yala seasons, farmers cultivate paddy in addition to late Maha, or interseasonal, cultivation that occurs in some areas from February to May with the aid of small tanks. In addition, several crops are grown, including maize, sugar cane, vegetables, and chilli. Agritourism can support local farmers by providing them with an additional income stream, educating tourists about sustainable farming, and promoting organic produce.

Adventure Tourism

Ampara District in Sri Lanka offers several adventure areas for nature enthusiasts and thrill-seekers. Kumana National Park, Gal Oya National Park, Raksagala (Kinihira Kanda), Maha Oya Hot Water Springs, Senanayaka Samudraya, and Pallan Hela are notable places for the advantages for all kinds of tourists.

Ampara District offers several mountainous areas perfect for hiking enthusiasts. These locations provide a mix of adventure, natural beauty, and historical significance, making Ampara District a fantastic destination for hiking enthusiasts.

1. Nuwaragala Mountain: This ancient mountain, part of the Gal Oya range, stands at 658 meters and offers a challenging hike with historical ruins and stunning views.
2. Kudumbigala Monastery: Located in Kumana National Park, this trail leads to an ancient monastery with fantastic sunset views.
3. Wadinagala Kanda: Known for its natural beauty, this area is ideal for hiking and exploring caves.
4. Pallan Hela: This region is famous for its caves and scenic landscapes, making it a great spot for adventurous hikes.
5. Gal Oya National Park: Offers various trails for hiking and wildlife spotting, providing a unique outdoor experience.

These locations offer a mix of adventure, natural beauty, and wildlife encounters, making Ampara District a fantastic destination for outdoor activities. Ampara's diverse landscape, featuring hills, rivers, and forests, offers opportunities for hiking, trekking, camping, and water sports like kayaking and canoeing, attracting both locals and tourists. Promoting these activities can attract adventure enthusiasts and diversify the tourist demographic. Adventure tourism can attract younger, more adventurous tourists, create opportunities for local guides and outdoor activity providers, and encourage investment in safety and infrastructure.

Community-Based Tourism

The study area offers authentic experiences of local life, culture, and customs in rural villages, making homestays, cultural exchange programs, and community-led tours popular with foreigners. Community-based tourism ensures that the benefits of tourism are distributed among residents, empowering communities and preserving local traditions and ways of life.

Impact on Regional Development

The impacts of tourism on regional development in Ampara District are multifaceted. Tourism influences the region's economic, social, cultural, and environmental dimensions, with 50%, 10%, 25%, and 15%, respectively. Based on the questionnaire survey, we take a detailed look at these impacts with specific examples below.

Economic Impacts

Eco-tourism initiatives in Kumana National Park can create employment opportunities for residents as tour guides, park rangers, and hospitality staff. This increased employment

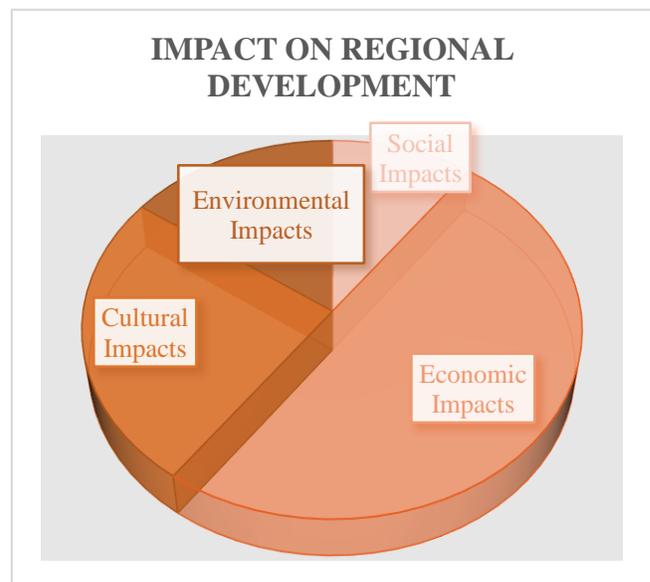


Figure 3: Impacts of Regional Development
Source: Questionnaire Survey, 2024

reduces poverty and boosts the local economy by providing stable income sources. 80 responses emphasized job creation's impact on regional development through enhanced rural tourism.

- **Hotels and Lodges:** The development of new hotels, guesthouses, and eco-lodges to accommodate tourists will create direct employment opportunities for locals in roles such as managers, receptionists, housekeepers, and chefs.
- **Tour Guides and Rangers:** Trained local guides and park rangers can be employed to offer tours and safaris, providing jobs directly connected to tourism activities.

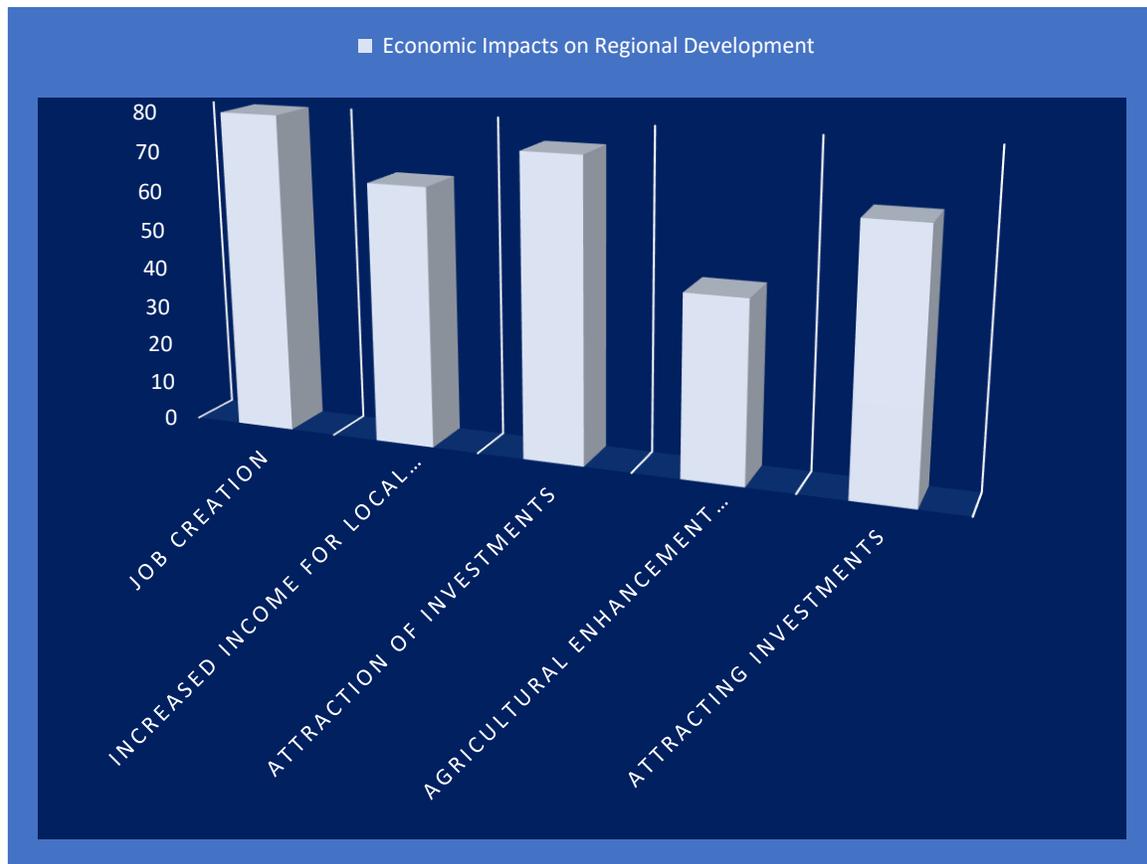


Figure 4: Economic Impacts of Rural Tourism
Source: Questionnaire Survey. 2024

Additionally, responses highlighted income increases for local businesses. Agrotourism activities, such as farm stays and traditional cooking classes, can generate income for local farmers, helping them diversify income sources, mitigate risks, and ensure economic stability.

- **Handicraft Sales:** Tourists often seek unique souvenirs. Local artisans can produce and sell handicrafts, benefiting from an expanded market.
- **Local Markets:** Increased tourism can boost sales in local markets where visitors buy traditional food, clothing, and art, enhancing the income of local vendors.

Furthermore, 75 responses supported developing infrastructure to support rural tourism, including building hotels and improving road networks, which can attract private and public investments. These investments lead to improved facilities and services, benefiting both tourists and locals.

- **Road Improvements:** To accommodate tourists, roads may be upgraded or new routes developed, benefiting locals by improving access to remote areas.
- **Telecommunication:** Enhanced communication networks are necessary for tourism marketing and operation, which also benefits local businesses and residents.

45 responses supported agricultural enhancement through Agritourism namely, farm stays and organic produce. Here tourists staying on farms can provide additional income for farmers. They can charge for accommodation and offer paid activities such as farm tours, workshops, and homemade meals as well, farmers can sell their organic produce directly to tourists, increasing their revenue and promoting sustainable agricultural practices.

Moreover, private investment and public investment also considered economic impacts through regional developments in the study area which represents 65 of the above graph.

- **Private Investment:** Entrepreneurs may invest in building resorts, restaurants, and adventure activities, which can stimulate local economies.
- **Public Investment:** Government initiatives to improve infrastructure, such as building information centres or improving public transport, attract more tourists and enhance regional development.

Social Impacts

18% of responses highlighted infrastructure development, including improved roads and healthcare facilities, driven by tourism, which can significantly enhance living conditions for residents. Enhanced infrastructure leads to better accessibility and services, raising the overall quality of life. The influx of tourists necessitates improvements in infrastructure, such as roads, healthcare facilities, and communication networks. These developments benefit both tourists and locals, enhancing the overall quality of life in the region. For example, the development of better roads and transportation in Ampara has made it easier for residents to access essential services and for tourists to explore the area.

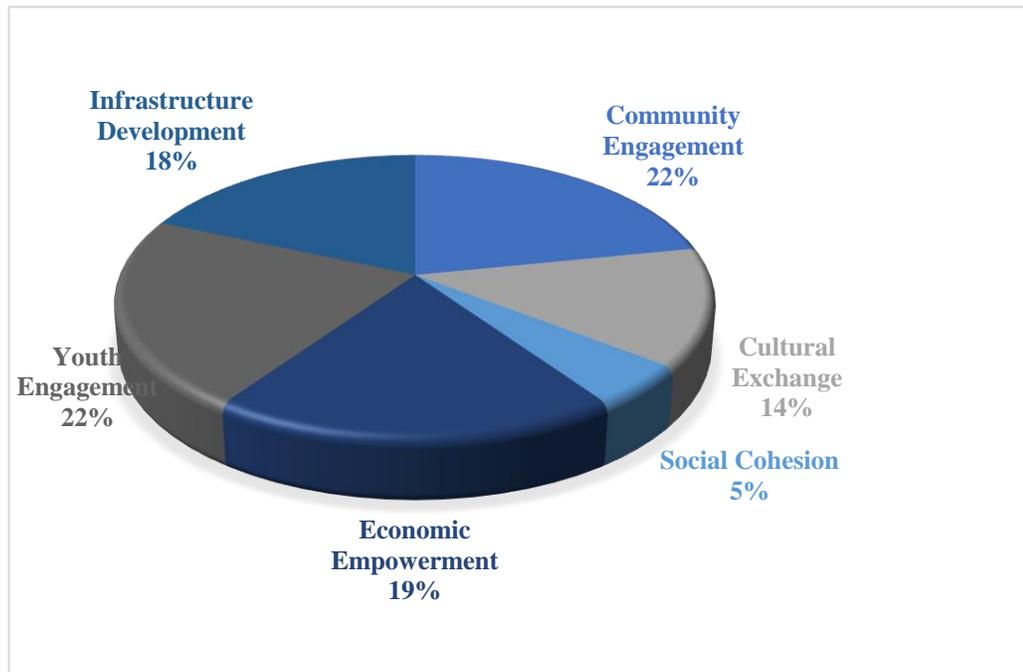


Figure 5: Social Impacts of Rural Tourism
Source: Questionnaire Survey, 2024

Tourism initiatives often involve local communities in planning and decision-making processes, empowering them to take an active role in their development. For instance, community-based tourism projects in Ampara have engaged villagers in activities such as guiding tours, managing homestays, and organizing cultural events, fostering a sense of ownership and pride. Consequently, the questionnaire reflected support for community empowerment for 22%. Visitors to Ampara have the opportunity to interact with residents and learn about their customs, traditions, and way of life. This cultural exchange (14%) enriches both tourists and locals, promoting mutual understanding and respect. For example, tourists visiting the ancient ruins of Rajagala (Kinihira Kanda) can engage with local guides who share stories and historical insights, creating a deeper appreciation for the region's heritage.

Tourism can bring together people from diverse backgrounds, fostering social cohesion and unity within the community (5% of responses). Events such as local festivals and cultural performances attract both residents and tourists, creating a shared experience that strengthens community bonds. The annual Ampara Cultural Festival is a prime example, where locals and visitors come together to celebrate the region's cultural heritage through music, dance, and food. Tourism provides economic opportunities for rural communities, reducing poverty and improving living standards. By offering services such as accommodation, food, and transportation, locals can generate income and improve their quality of life. For instance, homestays in rural areas like Arugam Bay provide a source of income for families, allowing them to invest in education and healthcare. The survey supports 19% of responses for this impact in the study area.

Tourism can inspire the younger generation to stay in their communities and contribute to their development. By showcasing the potential of rural tourism, young people are encouraged to

explore entrepreneurial opportunities and preserve their cultural heritage. Programs that involve youth in tourism activities, such as guiding and hospitality training, help them develop skills and build a future in their hometowns. Thus, 22% of responses indicate youth engagement in the study area. The influx of tourists necessitates infrastructure improvements (18% of responses), such as roads, healthcare facilities, and communication networks. These developments benefit both tourists and locals, enhancing the overall quality of life in the region. For example, the development of better roads and transportation in Ampara has made it easier for residents to access essential services and for tourists to explore the area.

Cultural Impacts

Promoting historical sites like Digavapi and Magul Maha Viharaya enhances awareness and appreciation of local heritage and this ancient Buddhist temple benefits from tourism through preservation efforts funded by visitor donations and government support aimed at maintaining its historical significance which represents 15% of responses during the survey. **Arugam Bay** is a quiet fishing village, it has transformed into a bustling tourist hub, providing locals with jobs in the hospitality and service sectors, thereby boosting the local economy. Through that (17%) economic empowerment is also enhanced. The development of roads and facilities around this attraction has improved access for tourists and enhanced the quality of life for residents, for instance, Maha Oya Hot Water Springs. Thus, it represents 17% in the above chart. 19% of responses supported employment opportunities during the survey. For instance, Gal Oya National Park. The Park employs local guides, drivers, and conservationists, creating job opportunities and promoting environmental stewardship in the community.

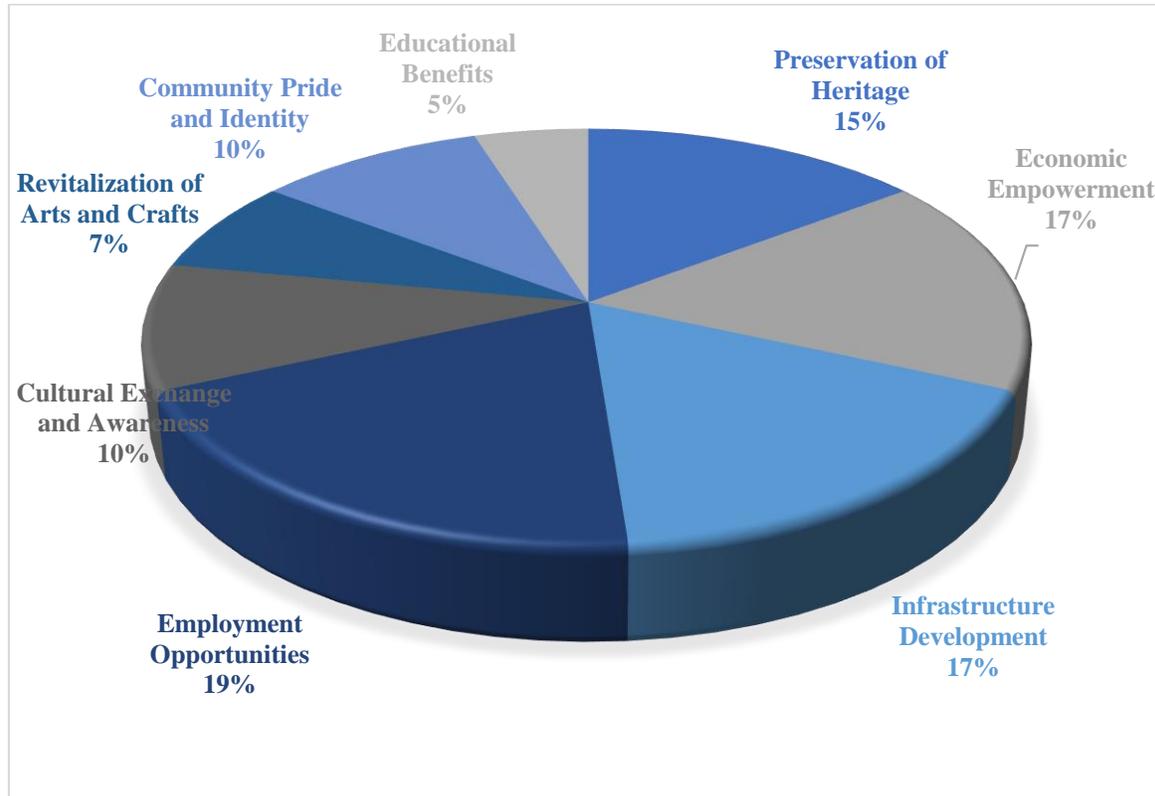


Figure 6: Cultural Impacts of Rural Tourism
Source: Questionnaire Survey, (2024)

Increased awareness leads to preservation and restoration efforts, ensuring the longevity of these cultural sites (10% of responses). Tourists visiting for birdwatching engage with local communities, fostering cultural exchange and increasing awareness of the region’s unique biodiversity, for example, Kumana National Park. In towns like Ampara, tourists' interest in local arts and crafts has led to the revival of traditional handicrafts, supporting artisans and preserving cultural heritage (7% of responses). Cultural festivals and traditional performances (10 of responses), such as Kandyan dance and local crafts, can be showcased to tourists. Programs that teach the history and significance of local customs and crafts to both tourists and locals help preserve cultural knowledge. For example, workshops on traditional dance forms and pottery making are often organized for visitors and youth (5%).

Environmental Impacts

Eco-tourism projects in natural reserves like Kumana National Park promote conservation by educating visitors and funding preservation efforts. This focus on conservation is supported by 40% of responses. Conservation ensures the protection of biodiversity and natural habitats, contributing to environmental sustainability. Additionally, 55% of the questionnaire responses support implementing eco-friendly accommodations and waste management systems in tourist areas. These sustainable practices minimize the environmental footprint of tourism and promote long-term ecological health.

Table 2: SWOT Analysis of Rural Tourism and Regional Development in Ampara District, Sri Lanka

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<p>1. Natural and Cultural Assets: Ampara boasts a rich natural and cultural heritage with attractions such as Kumana National Park and ancient temples like Digavapi.</p> <p>2. Community Involvement: Strong local involvement in tourism activities can ensure that the benefits of tourism are widely distributed. For Example, community-based tourism initiatives, such as homestays and local tours, empower residents and create sustainable income sources.</p> <p>3. Agricultural Base: The district's strong agricultural base supports agritourism, offering authentic rural experiences.</p> <p>4. Biodiversity and Eco-Tourism Potential: The diverse ecosystems in Ampara provide opportunities for eco-tourism. Example: Bird watching and wildlife safaris in Kumana National Park attract nature enthusiasts and promote conservation efforts.</p> <p>5. Cultural Preservation and Revitalization: Tourism can help preserve and revitalize local cultural practices and heritage. Example: Cultural festivals, traditional dances, and handicrafts can be showcased to tourists, encouraging their continuation and appreciation.</p>	<p>1. Infrastructure Deficiencies: Inadequate infrastructure, such as poor road conditions and limited accommodation options, hampers tourism development. Example: Difficult access to remote attractions can deter tourists and limit economic benefits.</p> <p>2. Lack of Marketing and Promotion: Insufficient marketing efforts result in low awareness of the district's tourism potential. Without effective promotion, potential visitors may remain unaware of Ampara's unique attractions.</p> <p>3. Seasonal Variability: Tourism in Ampara may be affected by seasonal fluctuations, leading to inconsistent visitor numbers and income. Monsoon seasons might deter tourists, impacting businesses reliant on tourist income.</p> <p>4. Limited Skilled Workforce: A lack of trained personnel in hospitality and tourism management can affect the quality of service offered to tourists. Poor customer service can negatively impact the overall tourist experience, leading to decreased repeat visits.</p> <p>5. Environmental and Social Impacts: Unregulated tourism can lead to environmental degradation and social issues. Overcrowding at popular sites can strain natural resources and disrupt local communities, reducing the quality of life for residents.</p>
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<p>1. Economic Diversification: Rural tourism can diversify the local economy beyond agriculture. The development of hospitality businesses, such as hotels, restaurants, and tour operations, provides alternative income sources and reduces economic reliance on a single sector.</p> <p>2. Increased Investment: Attraction of both private and public investments in infrastructure and tourism facilities. Improved Road networks, enhanced telecommunications, and modernized</p>	<p>1. Environmental Degradation: Increased tourist activities can lead to environmental damage if not managed properly. Overcrowding in natural reserves can harm wildlife habitats and increase pollution levels.</p> <p>2. Cultural Erosion: Commercialization of local culture to cater to tourist demands can lead to a loss of authenticity. Traditional customs and practices might</p>

<p>accommodation options can facilitate better tourist experiences and boost local businesses.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Community Empowerment: Empowering local communities to take ownership of tourism activities. For example, community-based tourism projects allow locals to offer homestays, guided tours, and cultural experiences, ensuring that tourism benefits are retained within the community. 4. Cultural Preservation: Promotion and preservation of cultural heritage and traditions. 5. Environmental Conservation: Encouragement of sustainable tourism practices that promote environmental conservation. For example, eco-tourism initiatives in natural reserves, such as Kumana National Park, can fund conservation efforts and educate tourists about the importance of protecting biodiversity. 6. Infrastructure Development: Development of essential infrastructure to support tourism. Building better roads, enhancing public transport, and improving sanitation facilities not only benefit tourists but also improve the quality of life for residents. 	<p>be altered or abandoned to appeal to tourists, resulting in cultural dilution.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Seasonal Dependency: Tourism-dependent economies may suffer during off-peak seasons or adverse weather conditions. 4. Infrastructure Strain: Sudden influxes of tourists can strain existing infrastructure and services. Overloaded public transport and inadequate waste management systems can lead to deteriorating living conditions for locals. 5. Social Issues: Rapid tourism development can bring social challenges, such as increased cost of living and social displacement. Rising property prices due to demand for tourist accommodations can make housing unaffordable for residents. 6. Economic Leakage: A significant portion of tourism revenue may not benefit the local economy if profits are repatriated by external investors. International hotel chains and tour operators may take a large share of the income, reducing the economic benefits for local communities.
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Some identified challenges in promoting rural tourism

Promoting and marketing rural tourism in Ampara District faces significant challenges due to deprivation, inadequate communication facilities, and the nascent stage of rural markets. Many rural areas are characterized by populations living below the poverty line, who are less involved in promoting their culture and heritage due to a lack of awareness about the potential economic benefits of rural tourism. This often leads to a need for villagers to seek employment in nearby towns. Furthermore, rural markets are often underdeveloped, facing numerous obstacles such as long distances from urban centres, inadequate surface transportation, poor infrastructure, insufficient lodging and food services, inconsistent electricity, and communication problems, all of which hinder attracting tourists despite the promise of abundant tourism resources.

Effective communication skills are essential for attracting potential tourists, yet language differences and lack of basic education pose significant obstacles for rural marketers. Success in tourism marketing relies heavily on the ability to warmly welcome guests, understand their needs, and provide appropriate services. Legislative issues also pose a challenge, as the financial burden of regularly paying taxes is tough for poor rural marketers, who often lack sufficient financial backing and face seasonal business losses. Furthermore, many rural tourism marketers come from poor backgrounds and struggle to secure financial support from local banks or government bodies.

As a result, despite having unique business ideas, they often fail to start or sustain businesses due to insufficient funds, technical knowledge, and skills.

The success of rural tourism is also hampered by the lack of trained human resources. Quality hospitality services are crucial, but rural areas often suffer from a shortage of trained personnel. Trained individuals from urban areas are generally unwilling to work in rural regions due to inadequate infrastructure. Lastly, the lack of proper physical infrastructure such as reliable drinking water, consistent electricity, good telecommunication, and safety measures are critical issues. Nearly half of the villages lack all-weather roads and essential facilities, making it difficult to attract tourists to promising rural sites.

3. Conclusion

Ampara District has immense potential for rural tourism and regional development. Leveraging its natural and cultural assets can attract diverse tourists and stimulate economic growth. Strategic planning, infrastructure development, community engagement, and sustainable practices are essential. Addressing challenges like infrastructure improvement, marketing, and resident training will enhance tourism benefits. Ampara can become a model for rural tourism in Sri Lanka by focusing on eco-tourism, cultural preservation, agritourism, community empowerment, and responsible tourism. This approach will drive sustainable development, benefiting both visitors and local communities. With a commitment to sustainable practices, Ampara can achieve significant economic, social, and environmental benefits, becoming a leading tourism destination over the next 30 years. This vision blends growth and preservation, positioning Ampara as a model for rural tourism and regional development in Sri Lanka by 2054.

4. Recommendations

To maximize the economic benefits of rural tourism in Ampara,

- Provide training for locals in hospitality, tour guiding, and sustainable tourism practices.
- Implement Marketing Campaigns that raise awareness about Ampara's tourism potential through targeted marketing efforts.
- Engage local communities in tourism planning and development to ensure they benefit directly from tourism activities. Training programs in hospitality and tourism management can empower residents to participate in and benefit from tourism activities.
- A significant challenge is the lack of awareness about the tourism potential of Ampara. Efforts to market the district through digital platforms, tourism fairs, and collaborations with travel agencies are essential.
- Addressing infrastructure deficiencies, especially in transportation and accommodation, is crucial. Public and private investments are needed to develop sustainable infrastructure that supports tourism growth.
- Implementing sustainable tourism practices is critical. This includes promoting eco-friendly accommodations, effective waste management systems, and conservation initiatives to minimize the environmental impact of tourism.

- By creating jobs, increasing business opportunities, and attracting investments, tourism can enhance the standard of living for residents. Strategic planning and community involvement are key to ensuring sustainable and inclusive economic development through rural tourism.
- Promoting cultural tourism helps in preserving and revitalizing local traditions and heritage. Increased awareness and appreciation of cultural assets can foster a sense of pride and identity among local communities.
- Eco-tourism can play a pivotal role in environmental conservation. By highlighting the importance of natural resources and promoting sustainable tourism practices, the natural beauty and biodiversity of Ampara can be preserved for future generations.

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