

**Sixth Operational Phase of the
GEF Small Grants Programme in Sri Lanka**

**Report on Projects Progress on Achieving Good
Ecotourism Practice and Guidelines**



By
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Report on Projects progress on Good Ecotourism Practice and Guidelines

1.0 Introduction

This UNDP/GEF/SGP project is aimed at enabling community organizations to take collective action for adaptive landscape management for socio-ecological resilience through design, implementation, and evaluation of grant projects for global environmental benefits and sustainable development in three ecologically sensitive landscapes: the Knuckles Conservation Forest and its buffer zone, the coastal region from Mannar Island to Jaffna, and the Colombo Wetlands.

The proposed interventions are aimed at enhancing social and ecological resilience through community-based, community-driven projects to conserve biodiversity, optimize ecosystem services, manage land and water sustainably, and mitigate climate change. These Coordinated community projects in the landscape will generate ecological, economic and social synergies that will produce greater and potentially longer-lasting global environmental benefits, as well as increased social capital and local sustainable development benefits.

The Consultant serves on a part-time basis to provide necessary technical advice to the selected grantees on ecotourism opportunities in their respective projects based on internationally recognised standards on ecotourism.

2.0 Scope of the Report

This consulting assignment expects the Consultant to prepare three reports;

- (a) Report on technical advice given on eco-tourism to all projects in Knuckles, Mannar and Colombo
- (b) Report on the projects progress on achieving good ecotourism practice
- (c) Report on a cohesive ecotourism plan that are interconnected in the landscapes

The consulting assignment is being carried out according to the methodology submitted by the Consultant in his proposal, which was accepted by the client. This is the second report developed on the assignment; the report listed as (b) above.

UNDP small grants programme shared 26 project proposals they received for this grant round, with the Consultant. After analysing the project concept and the envisaged project content and the work plan, the consultant identified 12 projects that contained ecotourism components within them. The first report by the consultant included this analysis along with the list of 12 ecotourism related projects. It also contained technical advice for them

(including guiding principles, best practice guidelines and a guiding and monitoring tool) in implementing these projects.

The Consultant has visited sample of projects selected by the UNDP (7projects) during the four day period, May 27 - 30, 2019. This report records observations by the Consultant on the current progress of the projects on incorporating ecotourism concepts and adhering to the guidelines provided in the Report 1. Moreover, this report contains details of in-situ guidance provided by the Consultant to the project proponents and future actions proposed to further strengthen the technical and operational capacities of them.

3.0 Details of the Ecotourism Projects Visited

3.1 List of ecotourism projects visited

Ref. No	Grantee	Project
K2	Arunalu Community Development Centre	Biodiversity conservation at Telegamu Oya reserve; Atanvala and Rathninda villages
K4	Paramparika Danum Paddathi Samodanika Madyasthanaya	Kandegama, Kobonilla and Hare Park villages adjacent to Knuckles reserve
K5	Community Resource Protection Centre	Model green tourist village project - Dumbara Valley
K6	Dumbara Mithuro Environmental and Cultural Foundation	Community-based biodiversity conservation Project
K7	Grama Abhivurdi Parisara Sanrakshana Padanama	Conversion of an abandoned Tea Plantation to an Environment Service Area - Rattota, Meddawatta
K9	National Ethnic Unity Foundation	Community based ecotourism project, Rathna ella
K10	Nirmanee Development Foundation	Developing eco-tourism services in Grama Niladari Divisions of Naragamuwa and Lakegala.

Table 1 List of Ecotourism projects visited

For easy identification and reference, Ref. Nos indicated in the Table 1 are the same reference numbers used for these projects in the first report submitted by the Consultant. All the above projects are located in the Knuckles cluster.

3.2 Schedule of Visits and On-site Meetings with Project Representatives

Ref. No	Grantee	Location	Representative Met	Date and time Visited
K2	Arunalu Community Development Centre	Etanwala	Mr. Lionel Thilakaratne	May 30, 1030 hrs
K4	Paramparika Danum Paddathi Samodanika Madyasthanaya	Hare Park	Mr. I G S Jayasooriya	May 28, 1430 hrs
K5	Community Resource Protection Centre	Meemure	Ms. Gunawathi Hewagallage	May 28, 0900 hrs
K6	Dumbara Mithuro Environmental and Cultural Foundation	Pitawala	Mr. Nimal Kanahere Arachchi	May 30, 0800 hrs
K7	Grama Abhivurdi Parisara Sanrakshana Padanama	Rattota Meddawatta	Mr. Gamini Jayatissa	May 29, 0900 hrs
K9	National Ethnic Unity Foundation	Ratna Ella	Mr. B W Gunasekara	May 27, 1200 hrs
K10	Nirmanee Development Foundation	Narangamuwa	Mr. Nimal Hewanila	May 30, 1430 hrs

Table 2. Schedule of visits



Figure 1. Locations of the projects visited

4.0 Observations and Future Actions Proposed

4.1 Project Specific Observations

K2. Biodiversity Conservation at Telegamu Oya Reserve; Atanvala and Rathninda Villages

The project has initiated development of visitor facilities with a tea kiosk and a small shop near the popular bathing spot. This is to be operated by six low income earning women in the area. The structure of the building is already completed and the Consultant advised to improve its outlook by adding traditional architectural features to amalgamate it with the surrounding natural and cultural features. The Consultant also advised the project proponent on the possibility of waste creation and disposal through the water way (empty shampoo sachets / bottles, soap covers etc.) hence provide facilities and guide visitors to dispose of them in responsible ways.



Figure 2. Visitor facility being constructed and some of the women who would run the tea kiosk

Toilet facilities for visitors are being developed at a location on the other side of the waterway of the bathing spot in partnership of a private developer, in his land. Once completed, suitable sign posts and clear operation and management modality with the land/facility owner has to be established to ensure toilets offered are easily accessible and always maintained in a clean, ready to use manner.

A footpath of approximately 100m of length is also being developed as a component of the project. The Consultant advised the project proponent to use locally sourced material and traditional technology (rubble masonry) for this purpose avoiding out of place modern technologies such as concreting.

The village offers accommodation facilities to overnight visitors as well, and project contributes to room and toilet improvements at a few selected houses to make them ready to operate as home-stay places.

K4. Kandegama, Kobonilla and Hare Park Villages Adjacent to Knuckles Reserve

The project improves existing nature trail for visitors. The Consultant advised the project proponent to identify the important features, flora and fauna along the trail and mark the trail with proper signage. Importance of using local material in unobtrusive ways for this purpose is highlighted, in order to provide entertaining and educational information without establishing large signboards of artificial material downgrading natural beauty and value of the trail. Project proponent mentioned that they have already initiated communications with local hotels to increase visitations to the area and use of the nature trail being developed.



Figure 3. Visitor facilities being developed

The Consultant advised that when developing other tourism facilities too, to use vernacular designs matching cultural values of the area and construct them with locally sourced materials ensuring minimal use of artificial materials.

K5. Model Green Tourist Village Project - Dumbara Valley

The project has commenced homestay facility improvement and a centre to coordinate travel activities along with a water sports activity management centre. The service centre would act as the activity coordinating centre as well. While selling locally made food and sweetmeats to visitors, it could promote village produce too, especially organically produce spices, the area is famous for. Therefore, training of making quality produce and packaging them suitably for upmarket customers are important aspects in ensuring the long-term sustainability of the venture.

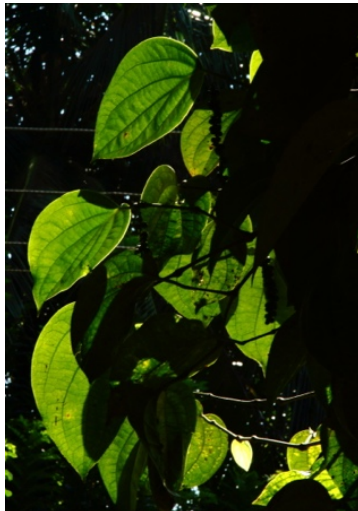


Figure 5. Fruiting pepper vine; local produce of the area



Figure 4. Visitor facilities developed

Water sports facilitation intends to be operated as a ticketed facility providing life jackets and service of an attending lifeguard. This move provides some safeguards and local knowledge for visitors who are not familiar with the waterway and the surrounding terrain. The Consultant highlighted the importance of adhering to adventure tourism guidelines and regulations for this operation, since it is going to be promoted as an attraction to a wider market. Legal aspects of issuing a ticket for the use of the facility, and duty of care obligations in providing safe and secure environment for exchange of money for the service too has to be considered and necessary legal and regulatory advice need to be sought from relevant authorities. Close coordination with local provincial council and Forest Department is essential to keep the project in proper legal framework of the country.



Figure 6. Locations use for water sports

K6. Community Based Biodiversity Conservation Project

This project has included tour guiding service within its revised scope, hence UNDP has selected it for this inspection tour. The project has compiled a pool of guides, who have participated in the training workshops coordinated by the Forest Department, and offers guiding services for visitors along the trails in the Knuckles reserve.

The Consultant suggests project proponents to develop a suitable agreement with the Forest Department for the entry into the forests in the department's custody. There is a considerable distance between the project site and the ticket office of the Forest Department. Therefore, it is not practical to take the visitors already arrived at the site back to the ticketing point, hence more pragmatic arrangement has to be sought.



Figure 7 Entrance to the Pitawala Pathana

K7. Conversion of an Abandoned Tea Plantation to an Environment Service Area - Rattota, Meddawatta

The project site is located within the Meddawatta estate and the project proponent develops a campsite and toilet facilities, which is currently in progress, for visiting tourists. The Consultant advised him to pay attention to soil conservation and use of local materials as much as possible for the site and associated nature trail development. Proper use of local materials and technologies, such as contour stone walls add value and authenticity to the project.



Figure 8 Campsite being developed by a water body

The consultant also highlighted the need of developing interpretation material for trails, identifying interesting locations, flora and fauna etc. to add value and hence the higher attraction towards the facility. These initiatives make the walks around the site more interesting and enriching for visitors and could induce them to appreciate and respect the nature better.

K9. Community Based Ecotourism Project, Rathna Ella

The project works on providing better facilities to visitors arriving in Ratna Ella area to improve local economy while preserving valued ecological resources in the area. The society maintains the area around the Ratna Ella clean and the vehicle parking facility they provide is operates in an orderly manner.



Figure 9. Locally produced homewares for sale



Figure 10. Accommodation facilities under construction

The project had commenced developing accommodation facilities and camp sites for visiting tourists at picturesque location. Locally sourced material is used for the roof cover. The Consultant advised project proponent to use sustainable material for the other parts of the building too, improving its overall value and attraction.

The restaurant managed by the society provides good quality food and its appearance and architecture matches with the surroundings. Locally produced handicrafts and homeware are another source for improving local economy. Overall it seems that the project strives to work within ecotourism guidelines.

K10. Developing Ecotourism Services in Grama Niladari Divisions of Naragamuwa and Lakegala.

The project intends to document traditional knowledge in the area. It is a very important and timely exercise, or else, the future generations may not have access to them. The local guides in this project and other projects too can use this knowledge to develop interesting storylines for interpretation of local practices for the benefit of visitors to the area.

The project also provides guiding services to the visitors to the area, with the guides selected from the local community. Some of them have participated in the workshops conducted by the Forest Department as well. The consultant advised the project proponent to develop a clear understanding with the Forest Department for regulatory aspects of entering the forest for walking / hikes etc., as the department's ticketing office is quite far from the village (approximately 1.5 hrs by vehicle).



Figure 11. An example of a traditional practice – A head of a coconut branch placed midst of a paddy field
This image portrays the traditional practice of placing heads of coconut branches in paddy fields during flowering and grain filling stages of paddy to avoid rodent attacks. It acts as a perch for owls facilitating use of paddy fields as hunting grounds, biologically controlling rodent population.

4.2 General Observations

The consultant observes a few common factors, which relate to most of projects in varying manners. Hence it is appropriate to take further action in a collective manner and sketch out suitable future plans to ensure all projects adhere to the same guidelines and processes.

(i) Website and related promotional activities

Most of the projects have the activity 'development of a website to promote ...' in their activity list. However, the Consultant noted that the knowledge, technology, analysis and content development skills to develop and maintain a website on a tourism facility and to use it as an effective marketing tool to generate more income in this very competitive market is beyond the capacity of the project proponents. Also, trying to acquire this knowledge and technology may distract them from working on main objectives and activities which are based on their core capabilities.

Therefore, the Consultant suggests UNDP to assist them in a more centralised way, providing these technologies and back-office functions through a technologically capable party who understands the present-day tourism marketing strategies and social media marketing, project objectives and has an excellent knowledge in natural and cultural values of the project areas. All project proponents may use one UNDP SGP co-branded website to promote their initiatives.

(ii) Establishing understanding with the Forest Department on entry to the forest for using forest trails for tourism facilities

The forest in the knuckles range is very scenic and hence attract many tourists, both local and foreign. The Forest department maintains several entry points to the forest with ticketing counters and necessary staff. However, the tourists who visit locations mentioned in this report, would like to take nature walks around, and hence several projects under this programme facilitate those requirements. This is a good way to share natural beauty, and cultural practices with the visitors and improve their appreciation towards the resources and conservation while contributing to the local economy. At the same time, it is very important to understand how these practices promoted by the UNDP interact with country's laws and regulations and how authorities (in this instance, the Forest Department and / or local authorities) interpret and act upon them. The Consultant noted that many such project facilities are located at quite a distance to the present Forest department entry/ticketing points and hence taking visitors to those locations to obtain entry tickets is impractical. Therefore, it is advisable to start a dialog and establish a clear MOU with the Forest Department for long term sustainability of the project.

Having better understanding and dialog with the Forest Department will improve quality of the experience and sustainability of the project, especially when the Forest Department too has similar plans to develop and implement in the same area, under the World Bank funded ESCAMP project. By working together, both parties could look for mutual benefits and long-term sustainability complementing each other's projects.

(iii) Provision of Home stay facilities

Although the current practice provides visitors the possibility of night stay at these remote locations, the consultant observed that the most project participants are yet to understand the 'Home stay' concept in the tourism practice properly, to provide immersive cultural experience to their visitors. The terms "Ecotourism" and "Home Stay" have defined meanings in tourism parlance. The visitors who have previously experienced 'Home Stays' and look for similar operation in this project area may not approve of current practices. Specially providing accommodation for 40-50 people within a home with one or two toilets will not be considered as "Home Stay" in accepted tourism practice.

Therefore, it is required to provide them necessary training and exposure to understand how much value could be added to the tourism experience by interacting with the visitors making them to understand how a rural household operates, their practices and traditional hospitality of the hosts.

(iv) Promotion of use of locally sourced material and traditional construction techniques

There are many traditional practices and sustainable materials evolved, which match very well to the climatic conditions of the area and needs of the people. It is important to make all project proponents well understand incorporating them add value to their operations. A few of the examples are given below.



Figure 12 Wattle & daub wall construction



Figure 13 Traditional stone walls around paddy fields to protect them



Figure 14 Locally sourced sustainable material for roofing



Figure 15 Traditionally made stone walls