



Determinants of Willingness to Pay for Mangrove Ecotourism with Special Reference to the Negombo Lagoon, Sri Lanka

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Mangrove ecosystems in coastal lagoons are essential for biodiversity conservation, ecosystem services, and coastal protection. In Sri Lanka, mangrove forests surrounding Negombo Lagoon are increasingly threatened by urban expansion, pollution, and overexploitation of natural resources. Understanding visitors' willingness to pay (WTP) for mangrove ecotourism is important for assessing the perceived environmental and economic value of these ecosystems. This study examines visitors' attitudes, environmental awareness, tourism preferences, and WTP for mangrove ecotourism in Negombo Lagoon. A purposeful sampling approach was used to select 136 respondents with prior experience of visiting mangrove ecotourism sites in the Negombo Lagoon. Data were collected from 136 respondents who had visited mangrove ecotourism sites in the Negombo Lagoon using a structured five-point Likert scale questionnaire distributed via Google Forms. The study analyzed five variables: perception, environmental awareness, tourism preferences, facility quality, and willingness to pay. Data validity and reliability were tested using Pearson correlation and Cronbach's Alpha, with a threshold of ≥ 0.70 considered acceptable. The findings indicate that most respondents hold positive attitudes toward mangrove conservation and demonstrate strong environmental awareness. Visitors also show clear preferences for nature-based and environmentally responsible tourism activities. The facilities at mangrove ecotourism sites are generally perceived as satisfactory. The preferred entrance fee was LKR 1,000 (41.2%), but 72.1% of respondents were unwilling to revisit if fees increased. Tourism preferences had the strongest correlation with willingness to pay ($r = 0.76$), followed by perception ($r = 0.71$) and environmental awareness ($r = 0.58$). Key factors influencing WTP include environmental awareness, perceived value of the ecosystem, and quality of tourism facilities. The study concludes that visitors' attitudes, environmental awareness, and tourism preferences are positively associated with willingness to pay for mangrove ecotourism in the Negombo Lagoon. This study contributes to understanding visitor behavior by integrating socio-psychological factors with economic valuation, thereby supporting sustainable mangrove conservation strategies in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: *Mangrove ecosystem, Ecotourism, Willingness to pay, Attitudes, Environmental Awareness, Tourism preferences, Negombo lagoon*