



Exploring the Potentials of Developing Sustainable Eco-Tourism at Maduganga through the Narratives of Boat Operators

S.D.T.P. Fernando, A.A.I. Lakmali*

*Department of Marketing Management, Faculty of Management Studies, The Open University of Sri Lanka,
Nawala, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka.*

*[*aalak@ou.ac.lk](mailto:aalak@ou.ac.lk)*

Madu Ganga is the second-largest Ramsar wetland in Sri Lanka, comprising a mangrove ecosystem. As an ecotourism activity, the boat operations at Maduganga are becoming popular among tourists visiting the southern part of Sri Lanka. While Maduganga has the potential to be promoted as an ecotourism site, tourism may also lead to adverse effects on the sustainability of the mangrove ecosystem and create socio-economic imbalance within the community. As the boat operators are key stakeholders, their information is an important source for providing strategic direction for developing sustainable mangrove-based ecotourism in the area. Hence, this study explores how boat operators perceive boat operations at Maduganga through their narratives. A qualitative research design was adopted. Using snowball sampling, 10 boat operators were interviewed. Their narratives were categorized based on five themes: 1) benefits of boat operations, 2) costs of boat operations, 3) perception of stakeholder involvement, 4) community engagement challenges, and 5) strategies for sustainable mangrove-based ecotourism. The study contributes to the social exchange theory. Maduganga provides economic benefits by offering multiple employment opportunities and seasonal income sources for local people. Further, they find adverse effects of rapid, unplanned tourism development initiatives on the ecosystem and long-term livelihoods. The boat operators have a strong emotional and cultural connection with the river, but they perceive that their knowledge and ideas are often ignored in tourism development planning. In addition, boat operators face challenges in unfair income distribution, competition, and poor infrastructure development in the area. The findings imply that sustainable tourism in the Madu ganga requires stronger stakeholder support and local community engagement, including boat operators in decision-making processes.

Keywords: *Mangrove ecosystem, Social exchange theory, Sustainability*