

## Chapter 8

### Ecotourism in Chundikulam and other potential areas: A drive for reconciliation in Northern Sri Lanka

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#### **Introduction**

Northern Province, a region that was in the dark for decades due to conflict and socio-economic challenges (Uyangoda, 2010), is slowly emerging as a key player in the country's tourism sector. The rich biodiversity, unique ecosystems (Gunatilake et al., 2017), along with the cultural heritage offer tremendous potential for ecotourism and sustainable tourism in the region. Cultural heritage of the region is very rich in diversity and history. Biodiversity resources in this region, ranging from its wetlands, coastal areas, and forests to its unique species of fauna and flora (Gunatilake et al., 2017), are invaluable assets that can be used carefully to promote tourism. The region, with its rich biodiversity and unique cultural heritage, holds immense potential for ecotourism, a form of sustainable tourism that promotes environmental conservation and provides socio-economic benefits to local communities. Among the emerging ecotourism destinations, Chundikulam stands out as a vital region where nature's tranquility and the remnants of a tumultuous past coexist, offering a unique platform for fostering peace and reconciliation.

Chundikulam, located along the northeastern coast, is home to the Chundikulam National Park, a haven for birdwatchers, nature enthusiasts, and those seeking to connect with the natural world. The region's wetlands, lagoons, and forests are not only critical habitats for a variety of wildlife but also carry the scars of decades of conflict. This duality of beauty and history makes Chundikulam an ideal starting point for promoting ecotourism as a means of healing and rebuilding trust within and between communities in the Northern Province.

This chapter explores how ecotourism in Chundikulam and other potential areas can serve as a catalyst for reconciliation in Northern Sri Lanka. It examines the interplay between environmental conservation and peacebuilding, highlighting the ways in which responsible tourism

can contribute to the region's socio-economic recovery while preserving its natural and cultural heritage. Through the lens of ecotourism, we will delve into the opportunities and challenges of creating a sustainable future that honors the past and nurtures a shared vision of peace and prosperity.

### **Ecotourism**

Ecotourism is not just about travelling through nature and explore the pristine beauty of it; it is a philosophy and a way of life that encourages responsible interaction with natural and cultural environments. A “real” ecotourism approach should be able to provide visitors with enriching experiences while ensuring that the benefits arisen from the tourism are shared equitably within the local communities. In the context of the Northern Province, ecotourism offers a pathway to economic recovery and social healing, making it a critical component of the region’s post-conflict development strategy.

Ecotourism is a form of responsible travel that emphasizes the conservation of natural areas, the well-being of local communities, and the importance of education and interpretation. It is guided by several key principles that ensure its positive impact on both the environment and society. Firstly, environmental conservation is central to ecotourism, with activities designed to minimize ecological impact while prioritizing the protection of biodiversity and natural resources. This approach ensures that the delicate balance of ecosystems is maintained and even enhanced through sustainable tourism practices.

Secondly, cultural sensitivity is a fundamental principle of ecotourism. It involves engaging with local communities in a manner that honors and sustains their cultural heritage and traditions. This not only enriches the visitor experience but also helps preserve the cultural identity of the host communities. Another core aspect of ecotourism is its contribution to the local economy. By creating jobs, supporting local businesses, and ensuring that a portion of the tourism revenue is reinvested into the community, ecotourism helps improve the economic well-being of the regions it touches. This economic benefit is a crucial incentive for local communities to support and participate in ecotourism

initiatives. Education and interpretation are also integral to ecotourism. The goal is to educate both tourists and locals about the importance of conservation and sustainability. Through interpretive programs and educational experiences, ecotourism fosters a deeper understanding and appreciation of the natural and cultural environments, encouraging responsible behavior and stewardship.

Finally, sustainable practices are promoted to ensure that ecotourism does not deplete the resources it depends on. Instead, it aims to replenish and sustain these resources, ensuring that ecotourism can continue to thrive without compromising the environmental and cultural integrity of the destinations. These principles collectively define ecotourism as a sustainable and ethical form of tourism that benefits both nature and people.

### **Biodiversity in Northern Sri Lanka**

The Northern Province is home to some of Sri Lanka's most diverse and ecologically significant landscapes (Dayananda et al., 2023). The region consists of a variety of ecosystems, including dry zone forests, wetlands, coastal ecosystems, and marine environments. These ecosystems support a wide range of species, many of which are unique. The region's biodiversity is not only important for ecological balance but also offers significant opportunities for tourism development.

*Dry zone forests:* Dry zone forests in the province, such as those found in Vavuniya, Mullaitivu, Kilinochchi and Mannar districts, are characterized by a variety of floral species, including several endemic ones. These forests provide habitat for a diverse range of wildlife, including some animals such as sloth bears, leopards, elephants, and various bird species which can attract any tourists prefer to be closer to the nature. The presence of these charismatic species makes these forests attractive for wildlife tourism, particularly for camping, and birdwatching tours. Unlike other forests or nature parks, the potential for safari is not fully exploited in these areas. Figure 1 illustrates the coverage of forests in the in the province

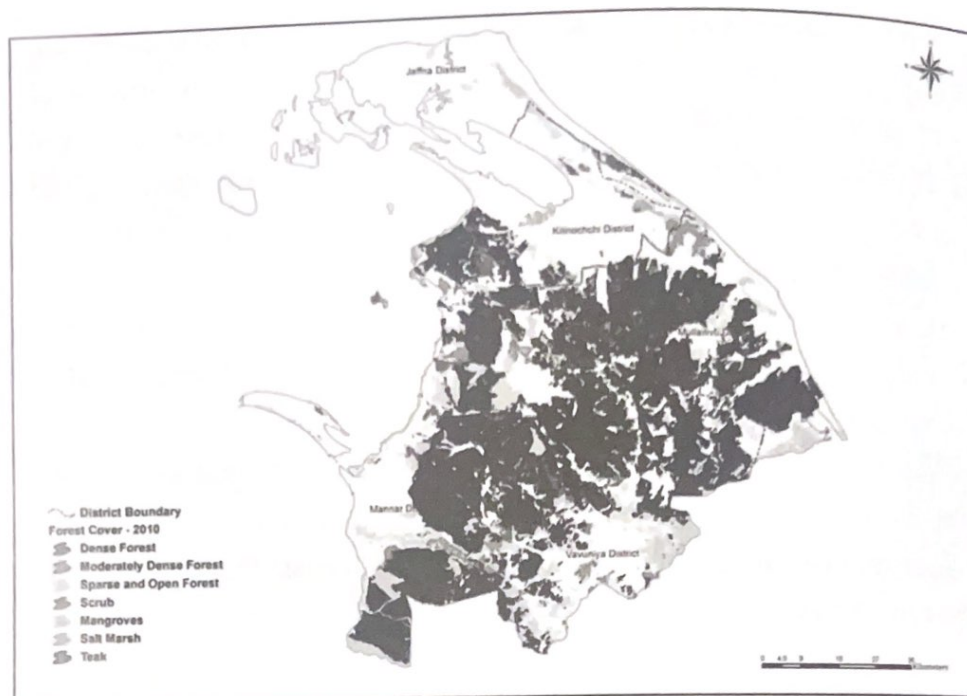


Figure 1: Forest cover in the Northern province (Mallawatantri et al., 2014)

*Wetlands:* Northern Province harbours several important wetlands, including Vankalai Sanctuary and Chundikulam National Park. There are multiple ponds and other permanent reservoirs along with a rich lagoon system which are potentially critical to harbor an array of biodiversity. These wetlands serve as critical habitats for migratory birds, making them key sites for birdwatching tourism. The seasonal influx of many attractive bird species offers unique opportunities for ecotourists and bird enthusiasts.

*Coastal and marine ecosystems:* The coastal areas of Northern Sri Lanka, including the Jaffna Peninsula and the islands surrounding it, boast rich marine biodiversity. Many productive ecosystems like the mangroves, sea grass and coral reef are ideal habitat to numerous marine species, including fish, crustaceans, and sea turtles. These coastal and marine ecosystems provide opportunities for marine-based tourism activities such as snorkeling, diving, and turtle watching beyond its potential to be a rich hub for fisheries.

*Flora and fauna:* Northern Sri Lanka is rich in both floral and faunal diversity. Many unique species contribute to the region's bio diversity and offer potential for niche wildlife tourism. Additionally, the region's plant diversity, including medicinal plants and rare endemic species, holds potential for promoting botanical tourism and educational tours.

### **Biodiversity resources and tourism development**

The use of biodiversity resources to promote tourism in Northern Sri Lanka aligns with the broader objectives of sustainable tourism and conservation. By integrating both these aspects, the region can create a sustainable future where tourism supports conservation efforts while providing economic benefits to local communities.

*Ecotourism and wildlife tourism:* Ecotourism, which focuses on travelling with responsibility to natural environment that helps in the conservation of the ecosystems at the same time improves the well-being of local people, is an important strategy for utilizing biodiversity resources in the region. Wildlife tourism is considered as a subset of ecotourism. This can be developed around the region's protected areas, like Chundikulam National Park along with other unexploited regions like the forests in and around Vanni region and Mannar. These parks are home to a variety of wildlife species, and with proper management practices, can attract tourists interested in safaris, camping, wildlife photography, and nature-based experiences. The possibility of encouraging the education-based wildlife tourism can also be an option. This can contribute to the conservation efforts of the resources by adding more knowledge base.

*Birdwatching tourism:* The Northern Province is a paradise for a birdwatcher, especially during the migratory season (Dayananda et al., 2023). Wetland areas like Vankalai Sanctuary and lagoons such as Jaffna Lagoon attract thousands of migratory birds, including the Greater Flamingos each year. Birdwatching tours, guided by local ornithologists or trained guides, can be developed to cater to both local and international bird enthusiasts. These tours can be complemented with educational components, such as bird identification workshops and

conservation talks, to enhance the visitor experience and raise awareness about bird conservation (Dayananda et al., 2023).

*Marine and coastal tourism:* The Northern coast, with its rich marine biodiversity, offers potential for various forms of marine tourism, including snorkeling, diving, and whale watching. The coral reefs around the islands off the Jaffna Peninsula, such as “Kaarainagar” and “Neduntheevu” (Delft Island), are ideal sites for snorkeling and diving. Sustainable management of these marine resources is crucial to prevent overexploitation and ensure that tourism activities do not harm the delicate marine ecosystems. Delft Island is an ideal place to develop a center for marine resources which can attract tourists who want to learn about the marine ecosystems and diversity of species in the region. In addition to the Delft Island there are many small islands which can be exploited to promote marine-based tourism. One such initiative is taken place where the tourists are taken by canoe drives through Jaffna lagoon to Pooneryn to see the seascape and landscapes such as sand dunes.

*Cultural and biodiversity integration:* Cultural heritage of the region is deeply woven with its natural environment. Traditional knowledge related to the use of medicinal plants, sustainable farming practices, and wildlife conservation can be integrated into tourism offerings. The classical example can be a place where visitors can participate in guided tours that explore traditional healing practices using local medicinal plants or join workshops on sustainable indigenous agriculture practices including the rituals like songs, festivals etc. These activities not only enhance the tourism experience but also help preserve and promote indigenous knowledge.

*Community-based tourism:* Engaging local communities in tourism development is essential for making sure that the benefits arising from any nature-based tourism are distributed evenly among the locals. Such community-based tourism initiatives, where local communities are involved in and benefit from tourism activities, can be established in areas rich in biodiversity such as mangrove forests and seasonal wetlands. For example, community-run eco-lodges, guided nature walks, and cultural exchanges can provide authentic experiences for

tourists while generating income for local residents. One example is the initiative taken to involve the local people in Mannar in running seasonal boat operations in flooded forests during the wet season, which will have a unique ecology to explore. Additionally, involving communities in conservation efforts can strengthen the link between biodiversity conservation and tourism, fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility among local people. This is highly critical for sustaining any initiative.

### **Biodiversity-based tourism in the province**

To illustrate the potential of biodiversity-based tourism in Northern Sri Lanka, we will explore a few case studies of existing or potential tourism initiatives that leverage the region's biodiversity resources.

*Vankalai sanctuary:* Vankalai Sanctuary, a Ramsar wetland site, is an important habitat for migratory birds. These include Greater Flamingo which attract the adherent bird watchers. Birdwatching tours in Vankalai attract both domestic and international bird enthusiasts. The sanctuary's designation as a Ramsar site emphasizes its ecological significance and provides a strong basis for promoting it as a key birdwatching destination. Efforts to enhance visitor facilities, train local guides, and develop interpretive materials can further boost tourism in the area.

*Delft Island:* Delft Island, located off the coast of Jaffna, is known for its unique biodiversity, including wild ponies which are smaller in size, coral reefs, and Baobab trees. The island's cultural and historical significance, natural attractions, and unique biodiversity, including some of the most unique plants, including herbal plants, make it an ideal location for integrated cultural and biodiversity tourism. Visitors can explore the island's archaeological sites, observe the wild ponies, and snorkel in the surrounding coral reefs. Although the Island has been under the radar for developing tourism, the full-fledge effort is lacking. Developing eco-friendly accommodations and promoting sustainable practices are key to preserving the island's biodiversity while enhancing its tourism appeal.

### Chundikulam as an opportunity to be explored

Chundikulam National Park, located in the province covering three administrative districts namely Kilinochchi, Jaffna and Mulaitheevu) (Figure 2), is a vital natural reserve that boasts a rich floral and faunal diversity; mainly for its bird diversity, making it a significant ecological hotspot. Spanning approximately 19,500 hectares, the park is situated along the eastern coastline of the Jaffna Peninsula, bordered by the Indian Ocean to the east and the Chundikulam Lagoon to the west. This unique location, with terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems, contributes to the park's rich biodiversity, making it an area of considerable interest for conservationists, researchers and tourism sector alike.

Established as a wildlife sanctuary in 1938, Chundikulam was designated as a national park in 2015. This upgrade in status was a recognition of the park's ecological importance, particularly as an ideal habitat for many bird species. The demarcation of the national park was challenged because there are private lands within the boundary of the current national park.

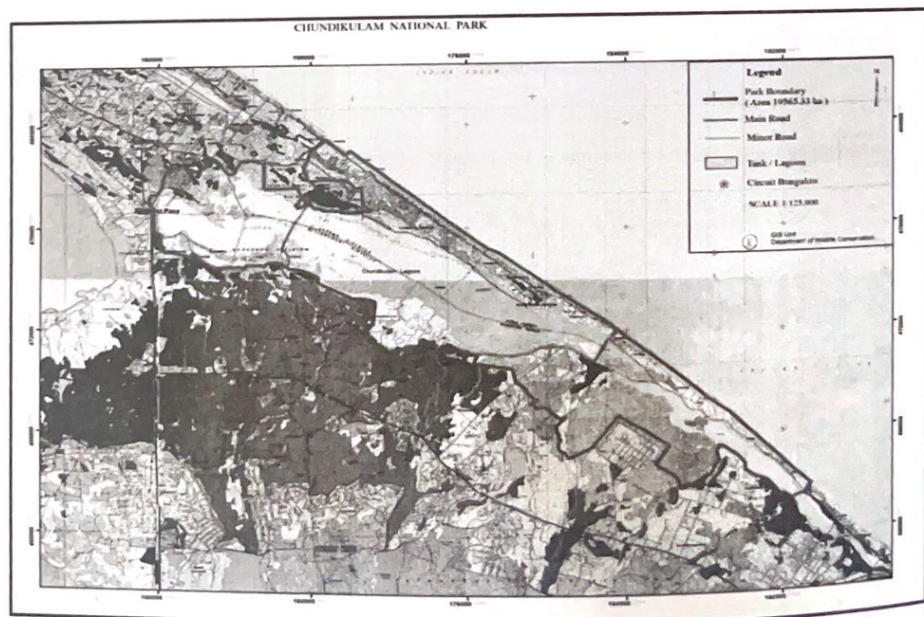


Figure 2. Chundikulam National Park present boundary highlighted in purple



The park is home to numerous resident and migratory birds, including flamingos, herons, and pelicans, which utilize the lagoon and its surrounding wetlands as feeding and breeding grounds. In addition to avian species, Chundikulam supports a diverse array of amphibians, reptiles, mammals and plant species, many of which are unique to the region. The following table illustrates the diversity of different groups of organisms identified in the park by the authors during a survey conducted from 2021-2024.

*Table 1. The diversity of different types of organisms found in Chundikulam national park in 2024*

<b>Organisms</b>	<b>Number of species observed</b>
Medium to larger sized plants	32
Insects	52
Birds	40
Mammals	10
Reptiles	09

The park's landscape is characterized by its coastal and lagoon environments, with patches of mangrove forests, salt marshes, and sand dunes. These habitats provide vital ecosystem services such as protection of coastal zone, purification of water, and carbon sequestration. The rich biodiversity within these ecosystems underscores the importance of Chundikulam National Park as a conservation area, both for the preservation of species and the maintenance of ecological balance in the region.

*The plate 1 illustrates different landscapes in the park.*



*Plate 1. Different landscapes found in Chundikulam national park*

### **Historical context of Chundikulam national park**

The history of Chundikulam National Park is deeply intertwined with the broader environmental and socio-political history of Sri Lanka. The park's initial establishment as a wildlife sanctuary in 1938 was part of a broader colonial-era effort to protect the country's natural heritage. However, the civil conflict significantly hampered the park's development and conservation efforts, which lasted for more than three decades until it ended in 2009. Much of the Northern Province, including Chundikulam, became inaccessible during the conflict, leading to a lack of systematic conservation and research activities.

After the end of the conflict, the state sector and various non-governmental organizations began focusing on restoring and conserving war-affected areas, including Chundikulam. The reclassification of

Chundikulam as a national park in 2015 was a pivotal moment in its history, signaling a renewed commitment to protecting its biodiversity. This period also saw the return of scientific research to the area, with efforts aimed at assessing the impact of the war on the park's ecosystems and species populations.

The post-war period has been marked by a gradual increase in conservation activities, driven by both government initiatives and collaborations with local and international organizations. These efforts have included habitat restoration projects, anti-poaching measures, and community engagement programs aimed at promoting sustainable livelihoods. The recognition of Chundikulam's importance as a biodiversity hotspot has also led to an increase in the idea of promoting the site for eco-tourism, which, if managed sustainably, has the potential to provide economic benefits to local communities while supporting conservation goals.

### **Challenges and Opportunities**

While using biodiversity resources in Chundikulam to promote tourism in Northern Sri Lanka presents numerous opportunities, significant challenges must be addressed to ensure sustainable development with the community acceptance.

#### **Major challenges**

*Environmental degradation:* Unregulated or improperly managed tourism activities can lead to environmental degradation, including habitat destruction, pollution, and disturbance to wildlife. For example, increased traffic in sensitive areas can lead to soil erosion and trampling of vegetation.

*Lack of infrastructure:* The park, having been affected by years of conflict, still faces infrastructural challenges that can hinder tourism development. Poor road networks, inadequate accommodation facilities, and limited access to clean water and electricity are significant barriers to attracting tourists. These facilities have to be developed in and around the park with proper monitoring to avoid excessive vehicle movement.

*Limited awareness:* There is often a lack of awareness and capacity among local communities regarding sustainable tourism practices. Without proper training and education, communities may not fully understand the value of biodiversity or how to manage tourism activities in an environmentally sustainable manner. There were efforts made to train the local people in the region to be developed as guides and tourism operators, the success of these efforts is questionable.

*Seasonal variability:* The tourism potential of certain biodiversity resources, such as migratory birds or marine life, may be subject to seasonal variability. This can result in fluctuating tourist numbers and income, making it challenging to sustain tourism activities year-round. The better way to manage this park is to open the park for wildlife-based tourism during wet season and create any other attractions such as a crocodile sanctuary and lagoon tours during dry season. The night camping activities can also be a potential to be tried during the dry season.

*Community acceptance:* The declaration of national park in 2015 created a ripple of opposition as the expanded boundary of the park consisted of public and private lands used for various purposes. The declaration was challenged and still the lands of public and private sectors were not released. This is a significant hindrance to obtaining community support to conserve the park.

### **Opportunities:**

*Conservation funding:* Tourism revenue can be used to fund conservation initiatives, such as habitat restoration, anti-poaching efforts, illegal and wildlife monitoring programs. The region can ensure that biodiversity is protected for future generations by establishing mechanisms for channelling tourism profits into conservation. This is critical to manage a park with such larger extent covering three districts with lagoon separation. Currently, monitoring on the western edges of the park is scarce, which results in illegal sand mining.

*Public-private partnerships:* Collaborations between state and private sector stakeholders along with the local communities can drive the development of biodiversity-based tourism. Public-private partnerships can help finance infrastructure development, provide training and capacity-building programs, and market the region as a biodiversity hotspot. This has been tried in Chundikulam park as well. The result should be fruitful if proper arrangements are made.

*International market potential:* The global demand for ecotourism and nature-based experiences is on the rise. Northern Sri Lanka's unique biodiversity and cultural heritage offer a distinctive product that can attract international tourists. Targeted marketing campaigns, participation in international tourism fairs, and partnerships with international tour operators can help tap into this market. The biggest challenge in the eco-tourism marketing based on our resources is that the park is not like the ones such as Yala or Wilpattu which offer the tourists an opportunity to explore the rich wildlife; especially megafauna. Instead the Chudikulam park is unique for its diverse habitats and limited wildlife.

*Research and education:* Northern Sri Lanka's rich biodiversity also offers research and education opportunities. Collaborations with universities, research institutions, and conservation organizations can lead to the development of educational tourism programmes, such as field courses, research expeditions, and citizen science projects. A few such initiatives have already been tried by a few NGOs and the University of Jaffna. These programmes can attract students, researchers, and eco-tourists interested in learning about the region's biodiversity and conservation efforts.

### **Policy recommendations for promoting biodiversity-based tourism in the Northern province**

To fully realize the potential of biodiversity-based tourism in the region, several policy recommendations can be made to guide the sustainable development of this sector.

*Strengthening conservation policies:* The government; including state and central ones, should prioritize protecting biodiversity resources by enforcing existing conservation laws where necessary. The lack of law-enforcement created opportunities for illegal miners and tree loggers to exploit valuable resources in many parts of the conserved areas in the region. Ensuring that tourism activities are regulated to minimize environmental impact is crucial for maintaining the ecological integrity of key sites.

*Capacity building and education:* Building the capacity of local communities, tour operators, and government officials is essential for promoting sustainable ecotourism practices. Training programmes should focus on biodiversity conservation, eco-friendly tourism management, and hospitality skills. Additionally, educational initiatives that raise awareness about the value of biodiversity and the benefits of sustainable tourism can foster a culture of conservation among local communities.

*Developing infrastructure and facilities:* Investment in infrastructure, such as roads, accommodations, and visitor centers, is needed to support tourism. However, such development should be carefully planned and managed to avoid negative impacts on the environment. Eco-friendly infrastructure, such as solar-powered lodges and low-impact Eco trails, should be prioritized.

*Promoting public-private partnerships:* Initiatives taken with the collaboration of state sector with the private sectors can play a key role in financing and managing ecotourism projects. The government should encourage partnerships between private investors, education and conservation organizations, and local communities to develop and promote ecotourism activities. These partnerships can also facilitate the transfer of skills and knowledge, helping to build a sustainable tourism sector in the region.

*Marketing and promotion:* Effective marketing strategies are needed to attract both domestic and international tourists to the region. The

government and tourism stakeholders should collaborate on marketing campaigns highlighting the uniqueness of the region's biodiversity and cultural heritage.

*Monitoring:* Ongoing and if needed additional monitoring of tourism activities are essential to ensure that they remain sustainable and not a threat to the nature. The government should establish mechanisms for regularly assessing the impacts on the environment, societies and economy. Adaptive management strategies should be employed to address any issues that arise and to continuously improve tourism practices.

### **Ecotourism and social cohesion**

#### *Promoting reconciliation through tourism*

The Northern Province's history of conflict has left deep scars, but ecotourism offers a unique opportunity to promote reconciliation and social cohesion. By bringing together people from different ethnic backgrounds and fostering positive interactions between them, ecotourism can help bridge the differences and build trust. The environment as a component can be involved in reconciliation in four ways as pointed out below (Geoffrey, 2006).

- As a tool in conflict prevention,
- As a lifeline during any conflict
- As essential component in peace agreement,
- As a trust builder

Cross-cultural engagement, interaction between different communities, and mutual understanding are key elements of reconciliation through tourism. Ecotourism initiatives can promote cross-cultural engagement by encouraging interactions between tourists and local communities from different ethnic backgrounds. Peace is an inherent component required for sustainable development. Nature can be a best tool to achieve agreement between communities with conflict (Geoffery, 2006). In addition to this, understanding different cultures and appreciation for such differences can enhance harmony further. For example, cultural exchange programmes, where tourists stay with host

families from different ethnic backgrounds, can provide a platform for mutual understanding and respect. These programmes can also include activities such as language learning, traditional cooking classes, and joint cultural performances.

Peacebuilding through tourism is another important aspect of reconciliation. Tourism can serve as a platform for peacebuilding by creating opportunities for dialogue and collaboration. Joint tourism initiatives between different communities can promote unity and reconciliation by showcasing the region's shared cultural and natural heritage. For example, joint heritage tours that explore the diverse religious and cultural sites of the Northern Province can highlight the commonalities between different communities and promote a sense of shared identity. For example, the practices that are common in agriculture, food, and water management can be explored and understood more when such approaches are taken. Ecotourism can build trust and help as a bridge between communities when the economic instability is alleviated through using natural environment. The sense of responsibility on a natural resource can bring people with different ideologies together. This has been tried in a few regions affected by conflicts (Zuelow, 1998).

Healing and reflection are also important components of reconciliation through tourism. Ecotourism experiences that emphasize healing and reflection, such as visits to memorial sites or participation in traditional healing rituals, can provide a space for both locals and tourists to process the trauma of the past and move towards reconciliation. These experiences can be designed to be respectful and inclusive, ensuring that all participants feel comfortable and supported. For example, the tourism centers associated with the nature-based tourism can have a space for the tourists to experience the impact of war through art galleries, story boards and small documentary films.

#### *Economic impact and livelihood improvement*

Ecotourism has the potential to significantly improve the livelihoods of local communities in the Northern Province by creating



jobs, generating income, and promoting local entrepreneurship. By providing economic opportunities, ecotourism can reduce poverty, increase resilience, and contribute to the region's overall well-being. This is a much needed one in the region where there are many families have single mothers who lost their loved ones due to the war and are the breadwinners of the families.

Creating new employment opportunities is one of the most direct economic benefits of ecotourism. Ecotourism can create jobs in a variety of sectors, including hospitality, guiding, transportation, and handicrafts. These jobs are often more sustainable and better paying than traditional forms of employment, particularly in rural areas where job opportunities may be limited. Additionally, ecotourism jobs are often more inclusive, providing opportunities for women, youth, and marginalized groups.

Local entrepreneurship is another important aspect of livelihood improvement through ecotourism. Ecotourism can support the small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in areas such as eco-lodge operation, tour guiding, handicraft production, and local food processing. By encouraging local entrepreneurship, ecotourism can help diversify the local economy and reduce dependency on external assistance.

The role of women in ecotourism is particularly significant. In many rural communities, women are the primary caregivers and household managers and often have valuable traditional knowledge and skills. By providing women with opportunities to participate in ecotourism, whether as entrepreneurs, guides, or artisans, ecotourism can empower women economically and socially. This, in turn, can lead to greater equality among genders and social cohesion within communities. Improving livelihoods with financial stability is another tool to promote equity and cohesion among communities where differences exist based on caste.

#### **A case study in Virunga-Bwindi**

The following is an example where the ecotourism approach was used to reconcile among communities affected by the conflicts in Africa as illustrated by Stron Cvetich and Scorse (2007).

The Virunga-Bwindi region, covering countries like Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda, is an area identified for incredible biodiversity and a turbulent history of violence. The region encompasses four national parks namely; Virunga, Volcanoes, Bwindi Impenetrable Forest and Mgahinga Gorilla national park, which are home to several endemic species, the most notable being the critically endangered mountain gorilla, with only 706 individuals remaining in the wild, all within this region.

The area's history is deeply scarred by conflict, with violence dating back to the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Despite this grim history, there have been significant efforts to protect the region's biodiversity and promote peace through a trans-boundary ecotourism initiative. This initiative, led by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), focuses on the conservation of gorilla population and developing regional tourism. The WWF describes this collaborative effort in their publication "*Beyond Boundaries: Transboundary Natural Resource Management for Mountain Gorillas in the Virunga-Bwindi Region.*" The project aims to manage gorilla tourism collectively across the three countries, reducing costs and fostering regional travel. This initiative was taken to conserve the animals and build peace among communities using the following ways.

*Economic interdependence:* The countries involved create economic interdependencies by pooling resources and sharing revenues from gorilla tourism. For example, from 1994 to 1999, gorilla tourism in Uganda alone generated approximately US\$7.7 million in foreign exchange earnings, contributed US\$15.4 million to the economy, and supported nearly 1,700 jobs. This created a sense of ownership and responsibility among these countries to work for a common cause.

*Enhanced security:* The international focus on gorilla conservation has improved the region's security. This security is crucial for maintaining stability and ensuring the success of the ecotourism initiative.

*Peace through collaboration:* The Gorilla Project has also standardized tourism practices across the parks in all three countries. This joint effort

was designed with the training sessions to cultivate common objectives enabling them to work for a cause and experience sharing for learning from each other, that are essential for building trust among previously warring factions.

Moreover, the day-to-day operations of managing tourism also contribute to post-genocide reconciliation, as former adversaries must work together to ensure the survival of the gorillas and meet the needs of tourists. This collaboration serves as a powerful tool in healing the deep wounds left by the region's violent past. Once defined by conflict and devastation, the Virunga-Bwindi region is now a symbol of hope and resilience through its transboundary ecotourism initiative.

This is a classic example where the effort taken by a conservation organization to build peace among conflicted communities has given hope for the countries. We can take this as an example to use the nature to build harmony among communities.

### **Conclusion**

The use of biodiversity resources to promote tourism in the Northern Province offers significant opportunities for sustainable development, conservation, and community empowerment. By leveraging the region's unique ecosystems, species, and cultural heritage, Northern Sri Lanka can develop a thriving tourism sector that benefits both people and the environment. However, realizing this potential requires careful planning, strong conservation policies, and collaboration among all stakeholders. With the right approach, biodiversity-based tourism can play a key role in the economic recovery and sustainability of such economic activities in the region. This approach can enhance the cohesion among communities and contribute to the long-term sustainability of its natural and cultural resources.

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