

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Local Insights into Rural Tourism: A Study of Heeloya in the Knuckles Mountain Range

DMC Dassanayake<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Department of Tourism and Hospitality Management, Faculty of Management Studies, Rajarata University of Sri Lanka, Mihintale, Sri Lanka*

**Abstract:** With its natural attractiveness and cultural prosperity, the Knuckles Mountain Range presents an exclusive opportunity for rural tourism, which Heeloya, a village nestled within this biodiverse area, has begun to embrace. This article investigates the local community's perceptions and attitudes towards tourism, examining the meaning of tourism in their traditional lifestyle, economy, and environment. Employing a mixed-methodological approach, the study integrates qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys analyzed through qualitative descriptive analysis and descriptive statistics. The qualitative descriptive analysis enabled the emergence of concepts underlying rural tourism. These concepts were further validated with selected quotations. A concept map created using Leximancer further substantiated these underlying conceptions and clarified the interconnectedness between the concepts. The findings suggest that the community is thoughtfully optimistic about the potential of rural tourism, encouraging a participatory approach to tourism development and engagement to ensure that it remains in congruence with Heeloya's cultural essence and the grand Knuckles Mountain Range. This research contributes to the broader discourse on sustainable rural tourism, providing valuable insights for policymakers, stakeholders, and communities considering tourism as a pathway for rural development.


**Keywords:** *Community views, economic perspectives, rural tourism, sustainability*

### Introduction

Sri Lanka, an impressive tropical island settled in the Indian Ocean, has seen its tourism sector flourish and is well-known as a premier destination in South Asia. Following the termination of the 30-year-old war in 2009, the nation has experienced an enormous flow in tourism, with prominent attractiveness attributed to its strategic location. Beyond its location-oriented advantages, the island's rich series of attractions, from pristine beaches to pleasant climates and wildlife-rich national and eco-parks, has contributed to its attraction (Dassanayake, 2021). Despite the recent unfavorable issues like the Ester bomb attack, political instability, the COVID-19 pandemic, and economic crisis, the tourism sector is expected to play a pivotal role in earning foreign exchange for the economy, contributing substantially to Sri Lanka's Gross Domestic Product (Central Bank, 2021).

Recent trends in tourism demonstrate a shift toward non-urban tourism, which has remarkably strengthened the livelihoods of rural societies (Pattiyagedara and Fernando, 2020). This paradigm is associated with Community-Based Tourism (CBT) features, which Richards and Hall (2003) postulate as a participatory approach involving local groups in the growth and upkeep of tourism to foster a sustainable industry. The philosophy of CBT echoes broader community development principles that empower local people (Blackstock, 2005). Lane's seminal work on rural tourism postulates a meaning that positions it ideally within rural settings, highlighting the uniqueness of these groups and their cultural and heritage upkeep (Lane, 2009). The spirit of rural tourism exists in the lifestyle and hospitality of communities in remote and rural areas, extending beyond the mere provision of accommodation to include activities, excursions, and cultural interactions (Vidickienė et al., 2020).

\*corresponding author: [chamindad@mgt.rjt.ac.lk](mailto:chamindad@mgt.rjt.ac.lk),

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6211-8897>



This article is published under the Creative Commons CC-BY-ND License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/>). This license permits commercial and non-commercial reuse, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is not changed in any way and is properly cited.

Sri Lanka's plentiful natural atmosphere and exceptional cultural tradition are crucial in shaping and developing rural tourism on the island. Heeloya is an exciting example of rural tourism in the mid-country of Sri Lanka, situated in the Dumbara Valley and bounded by the picturesque Knuckles Mountain Range (Thilakarathne and Dassanayake, 2020). A community with a deep bond with nature also increases the region's support for rural tourism. Moreover, Heeloya can offer visitors an authentic and unique travel experience through the lush landscapes and community traditions. In particular, the village is featured by exciting trails that spread through the paddy fields and vegetable cultivations, providing a sight into the agricultural practices that have sustained its community for years. The natural attractiveness of Heeloya is unforgettable, with the village offering a gateway to experience biodiversity (Pattiyagedara and Fernando, 2020). In Heeloya, tourism extends beyond mere sightseeing and natural beauty to contain immersive cultural interactions. Homestays, a cornerstone of Heeloya's hospitality, provide visitors with a unique opportunity to live alongside local families, participate in daily tasks, and learn about sustainable living styles.

The success of such rural tourism efforts depends on the active participation and support of the local community (Richards and Hall, 2003). The participation of these local people not only improves the tourism experience and smooths the flow of tourism revenue to villages. In the case of Heeloya, tourism has also been prominent in providing long-lasting economic pathways to its local people while permitting the conservation of cultural and natural resources.

However, understanding community viewpoints is pivotal for the development and sustainability of rural tourism. By recognizing local understandings, tourism can be customized to benefit rather than interrupt rural life. An understanding of community views covering all aspects of issues and their comparative intensity is necessary, with an exploratory sequential mixed methods approach. Such an approach integrates the insights and results generated through a qualitative phase of a study and a subsequent quantitative phase through which the findings of qualitative studies are validated and gauging the comparative strength.

#### **Rural tourism as a catalyst for empowerment, conservation, and cultural preservation**

Rural tourism is tourist activities in the countryside, with the rural setting being the primary attraction for

visitors. It often involves small-scale enterprises and offers specific activities and cultural experiences (Zhou, 2021). Community-based tourism refers to a form of tourism that underscores the involvement of local communities in the development and management of tourism activities, aiming to benefit both the community and the environment (Lindström and Larson, 2016). Community-based and rural tourism represent prominent aspects of the tourism sector, highlighting sustainable implications and local community empowerment (Okazaki, 2008; Kumara, 2016). In particular, community-based tourism emphasizes the strategic approach progressively involved and implemented in rural areas to encourage economic development, promote environmental preservation, and upkeep cultural heritage (Piartrini, 2018). Rural tourism is powerful for community empowerment, environmental upkeep, and cultural safeguarding (Richards and Hall, 2003). The niche of rural tourism enables village communities to earn extra money, through which the exploitation of natural resources can be controlled as the community gets an income for its expenses (Gartner, 2005; Iannucci et al., 2022). Further, when tourists visit and appreciate the local cultures and environments, it can indirectly force the protection of those valuable assets (Wijaya et al., 2022). Developing infrastructure and related services because of rural tourism can benefit residents and tourists. Notably, improved transportation and access roads, opening avenues to markets, water, and electricity supply are crucial (Richards and Hall, 2003). Tourism in rural areas offers a chance to experience and value the region's distinct customs, crafts, and traditions, which could have faced jeopardy without the inclusion of tourism (Muresan et al., 2016).

Even though the merits of rural tourism have been admired and appreciated frequently, the real benefits of the business can be reaped if the development and its benefits are fairly distributed among the different parties involved in the process (Nicolaidis, 2015; Rahmawati et al., 2023). The effort should be sustainable, and the development should avoid harm to the environment, culture, and social well-being (An and Alarcon, 2020). However, Arintoko et al. (2020) argued that the long-term success of rural tourism projects depends on the communities' capacity to manage the project and develop the required skills.

#### **Rural Tourism a niche market of tourism**

The niche market concept applies to any industry, including tourism (Ali-Knight, 2010). A niche market is a small, particular segment of the market

comprising a small group of customers with specific needs for niche items. This notion emphasizes the exclusive requirements of the targeted users and the specialized nature of the market, distinguishing niche markets within the broader market landscape (Dalgic, 2006). Rural tourism is a niche market segment catering to unique expectations regarding rural travel experiences (Rid et al., 2014; Pattiyagedara and Fernando, 2020). This particular market touches on the rich features of rural life, highlighting natural beauty, traditional customs and practices, and a calm and quiet pace of life.

The niche of rural tourism is desirable to people seeking a rest from their highly hassled urban life. In particular, it offers to enjoy the simplicity and to connect with local communities, witnessing and participating in various activities like agriculture, sightseeing, hiking, trekking, local cuisine, traditional festivals and cultural activities, and crafts (Thilakarathne and Dassanayake, 2020; Mahmud et al., 2022). An increasing interest in sustainable travel practices also fuels the growth of rural tourism (Nicolaidis, 2015; Muresan et al., 2016). Notably, travelers in this niche are naturally more mindful of their nature and environment, look for eco-friendly experiences, and eventually assist preservation efforts. More importantly, they are always ready to pay a premium for the uniqueness and authenticity of the experiences they get through a village tour (Arthur and Yamoah, 2019).

In marketing rural tourism, the weight should be on quality, which guarantees an authentic village experience (Poruțiu et al., 2021). It should be essential to make every possible means to provide a personalized experience that can embed the visitor in the local environment (Li et al., 2019). The niche of village tourism does not produce a vast market but a valuable tiny market through which both the host and guest expectations are met (Giampiccoli and Mtapuri, 2021).

### **Residents' Attitudes and Perceptions Towards Rural Tourism**

Community attitudes and perceptions about tourism have been a pivotal point of research, recognizing that local support is imperative for the sustainable development of tourism activities, especially in rural tourism as a segment of community-based tourism (Muresan et al., 2016). Past studies suggest that a range of factors, such as the level of involvement in tourism development, perceived benefits and costs, and the placement of tourism with community values, determine the perceptions and attitudes of rural

people regarding tourism (Demirović Bajrami et al., 2020; Marzo-Navarro et al., 2020).

The influence of tourism on rural groups has been investigated from numerous viewpoints, including economic dependency, socio-cultural, spatial factors, residents and community typologies, and ecological dimensions (Uslu et al., 2020). As the literature suggests, community members are also concerned about what they get against what they give, which is the balance between benefits gained and the cost incurred (Wang and Pfister, 2008; An and Alarcon, 2020).

While the positive consequences of rural tourism are promptly admired, the villages are also concerned about the negative impacts, such as cultural commodification and environmental degradation, which can eventually discourage the community members from being involved in tourism (Sharples, 2002; Naradda Gamage et al., 2017). Community members often question rural tourism's sustainability and long-term consequences. As past studies highlighted, transforming unique cultures into tourism hotspots can lead to cultural abuse and manipulations where the cultural essences are changed to cater to the tourists or the tourist cultures are embedded in the local cultures (Hwang et al., 2012).

The present study was conducted addressing the research questions of, (i). what are the perceptions held by the community regarding rural tourism in the Heeloya region? and (ii). what is the comparative intensity of the community's perceptions of rural tourism as identified in the qualitative phase of the study?

## **Materials and Methods**

### **Research Design**

This study applies an exploratory sequential mixed methodological design, characterized by an initial qualitative phase followed by a quantitative phase. Applying a mixed methods approach corresponds with the pragmatic epistemological philosophy, which underpins the mixing of qualitative and quantitative research approaches. To maintain methodological consistency, distinct epistemological stances are applied to each phase: constructivism underlies the qualitative aspect, while post-positivism informs the quantitative aspect.

In the qualitative phase, a phenomenological research strategy is employed to investigate participants' lived experiences and their meanings attributed to the consequences of rural tourism. The phenomenological strategy with the qualitative data is particularly pertinent for addressing the first research question, which seeks to explicate the spectrum of community perceptions regarding rural tourism activities. The qualitative phase is appropriate due to its capacity to uncover a breadth of attitudes and beliefs held by community participants about rural tourism.

Subsequently, the quantitative part of the research adopts a survey strategy, using a questionnaire informed by perceptions gained from the qualitative findings. The inclusion of a quantitative component serves to quantify the prevalence and magnitude of the perceptions identified earlier. Although this phase is less prominent than the qualitative phase, it is crucial in complementing and enriching the qualitative data, providing a comprehensive understanding of the community's views on rural tourism.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The qualitative data collection took place in Heeloya village, employing a semi-structured interview guide to clarify the study's primary objectives and central focus. The interviews were steered with a flexible approach, allowing for a natural progression of discussion while still navigating towards the central focus of the study. This approach enabled a deeper examination of the phenomenon under inquiry. For the data collection, participants were carefully chosen using purposive sampling techniques, confirming that each participant had specific experience and knowledge regarding tourism in the area. This sampling method is intended to gather varied and insightful viewpoints directly pertinent to the study's focus on the rural tourism landscape. The participant sample was diverse, including individuals in different capacities within tourism-related services adopting maximum variation sampling. In total, 17 interviews were conducted, with data saturation achieved in the final sessions. All interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed to ensure the accuracy and easiness of data analysis.

The research, which was conducted in Heeloya village, adhered to strict ethical procedures to safeguard the integrity of the study and secure all the participants involved. Informed consent was secured from all participants, with privacy strictly upheld through data security and anonymized transcripts.

Participants were informed of their right to withdraw, confirming voluntary participation. The complete research process, from data collection to analysis and reporting, was steered with honour and faithfully confirmed the participants' integrity.

The quantitative stage of the research was executed through a questionnaire precisely designed to replicate the perceptions that emerged from the qualitative data analysis. The core findings from the qualitative data analysis were synthesized into eleven precisely formulated items that created the questionnaire. A convenience sampling method encompassing 105 participants was employed for data gathering.

The qualitative data from the study was analyzed through descriptive qualitative analysis (Kim et al., 2017), which involved grouping participant ideas into various concepts to understand better the dimensions of rural tourism in the Heeloya area. The Leximancer portal was also utilized to visualize and explore the underlying concepts and their interrelationships. Then, the quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics to uncover the intensity of each factor identified in the qualitative research. Overall, the discussion of the results incorporated a synthesis of outcomes from three distinct approaches, employing a strategy of data and methodological triangulation (Oppermann, 2000).

## **Results and Discussion**

### **The qualitative data analysis**

In the qualitative phase of the study, the transcription and examination of face-to-face interview audio clips were conducted precisely by the researcher. The data analysis process involved an attentive review of the recordings to understand the key points and detailed statements given by the participants about rural tourism. The analysis was carried out entirely manually, without the help of software. However, the Leximancer portal was used to develop the concept map from the data to validate the findings derived through the manual analysis of qualitative data. After transcription, the researcher engaged in an inclusive inspection of the text, reading and re-reading the stuff to establish initial codes. From these initial codes, patterns began to emerge, leading to the formulation of the final concepts.

### Emergence of concepts from qualitative data Sustainability

The theme of the need for sustainability emerged as a crucial aspect, with many community members voicing a solid desire to maintain their cultural and ecological integrity in the face of tourism development. The preservation and protection of culture and environment were frequently stated, emphasizing an integrative view of the community's desire for sustainability. This context is highlighted in the reflection of one interviewee, a farmer:

*"Tourism carries a spotlight to our customs and practices, but we should be thoughtful to preserve our heritage and cultural artefacts" (Interview 1, Male, Farmer, 52 years old, interviewed at Heeloya village in April 2023).*

This quote highlights the prevalent concern about the value of cultural artefacts among community members. Moreover, at the same time, it highlights the importance of preserving and protecting them. It reflects that the villagers fear that the arrival of tourists can negatively affect their traditional customs. Therefore, the preservation or protection concern of the villagers highlighted that they highly expect sustainable tourism practices that lead to the preservation and protection of the environment, natural resources, and cultural values. Moreover, one participant, a school teacher, stated:

*"Our land is more than a background for tourist photographs; it is the foundation of our heritage" (Interview 2, Male, School teacher, 42 years old, interviewed at Heeloya village in April 2023).*

It reflects the link between the community and the natural landscape; it emphasizes that tourism development should not cross the borders of culture and the natural environment.

As illuminated by the findings, the analysis of the consequences of rural tourism on cultural and environmental safeguarding echoes significant conceptualizations in the literature on sustainable tourism. It aligns with government intervention and developing an environmentally aware market in rural Europe, emphasizing the need for a tourism approach that respects cultural and natural values (Hall, 1998). This notion is further supported by Bhuiyan et al. (2016), who highlight the importance of balancing current and potential tourism activities to safeguard cultural integrity and environmental sustainability. The preference of the community for tourism models

that defend their cultural and natural landscape, as emerged in this study, resonates with the identifications that agro-tourism as a viable, sustainable rural tourism model Barbieri (2013) and Marzo-Navarro et al. (2020) emphasis on preserving cultural integrity in tourism practices.

### Community Attitudes

The community's attitude towards rural tourism was multidimensional, incorporating divisions of trust, fear, freedom, and uncertainty. Trust, in particular, was a frequently occurring concept within the data, as community members recognize the need for trust between themselves and those operating the tourism-related services. One respondent expressed that;

*"Trust is the key to tourism. We must trust that our leaders and visitors respect and acknowledge our way of life" (Interview 5, Male, Village tour guide, 30 years old, interviewed at Heeloya village in April 2023).*

This statement encapsulates the idea that trust is the foundation for a positive way of operating rural tourism services and businesses, and that is a two-way street: the community must trust visitors to admiration their cultural values and environment setup, and visitors must trust the community to get a genuine and inspiring experience. Therefore, according to the data, the community attitudes related to rural tourism are multilayered, which consist of trust, fear, uncertainty, culture, and environment. The following statement of the same respondent further reflects this notion,

*"We accept visitors with open arms, but there is always the risk that our village might lose its passion" (Interview 5, Male, Village tour guide, 30 years old, interviewed at Heeloya village in April 2023).*

This multifaceted community attitude towards rural tourism, characterized by trust, fear, and uncertainty, resonates with community's emphasis on trust as a cornerstone for sustainable tourism development, aligning with Kelliher et al. (2018), who stress the centrality of trust in rural tourism. Concurrently, the apprehensions about cultural dilution and loss of authenticity, highlighted by the community, reflect the concerns, where An and Alarcon (2020) identified regarding the critical role of community attitudes in shaping the direction of rural tourism.

### **Economic Considerations**

Economic and beneficial concepts like the sharing of income, the creation of job opportunities, and the integrated benefits of tourism to the community were also evident. The community members wished for tourism to contribute to the local economy in a manner that benefits all. One senior citizen in the community expressed:

*"Tourism is not just about the income it carries. It is about how those incomes are dispersed. It is about ensuring wealth is shared in every household" (Interview 8, Male, 67 years old, interviewed at Heeloya village in April 2023).*

This declaration underscores a shared ambition for inclusive economic growth and benefits, where the financial gains from rural tourism are justifiably shared among community members, uplifting the overall quality of life.

*"With the money flowing in, our village and region have better facilities and services now" (Interview 04, Female, Service provider-food, 29 years old, interviewed at Heeloya village in April 2023).*

However, the data suggested that many participants admired the income and job opportunities created through rural tourism.

*"Many people have found work because of the tourism in the village. This was not imaginable before" (Interview 16, Male, Tour guide, 35 years old, interviewed at Heeloya village in April 2023).*

In line with these findings, the community's ambition for comprehensive economic growth, where tourism-derived income benefits every home, reproduces the principles postulated by Gascón (2015) and Shi et al. (2020) on the need for reasonable income distribution from rural tourism activities. This requirement of fair wealth sharing is vital in confirming that the economic benefits of rural tourism are utilized by the entire community, aligning with the principles of sustainable and inclusive growth. Moreover, the improvements in local infrastructure and the creation of job opportunities validate the findings of Lenao (2014) and Uslu et al. (2020), who argue that tourism can suggestively uplift rural development and progress livelihoods. Almeida and Machado (2021) further highlight the development of infrastructure and facilities as a direct benefit of rural

tourism, a perspective reflected in the context of Heeloya's inhabitants.

### **Awareness, Understanding, and Knowledge**

The communities' awareness of tourism is also a frequently occurring concept within the data. It is again two-fold: the knowledge about the potential benefits of tourism and knowledge about possible risks associated with tourism. As one respondent pointed out,

*"We have become more conscious of the worth of what we have here—our culture, our environment, and nation" (Interviewee 10, Female, Housewife, 42 years old, interviewed at Heeloya village in April 2023).*

Another respondent depicts in his statement a different dimension of knowledge and understanding by recognizing the mutual educational and knowledge exchange between locals and tourists. A local village farmer described;

*"Both parties learn from each other. We learn a wider view while they learn about our societies and traditions" (Interview 12, Male, Village farmer, 51 years old, interviewed at Heeloya village in April 2023).*

Moreover, as the data further visualize, education and experience also appear as interlinked concepts, with the locales describing education as a pathway to better engage with tourists as rural tourism enables the community to learn foreign languages and the world. A youth in the village stated,

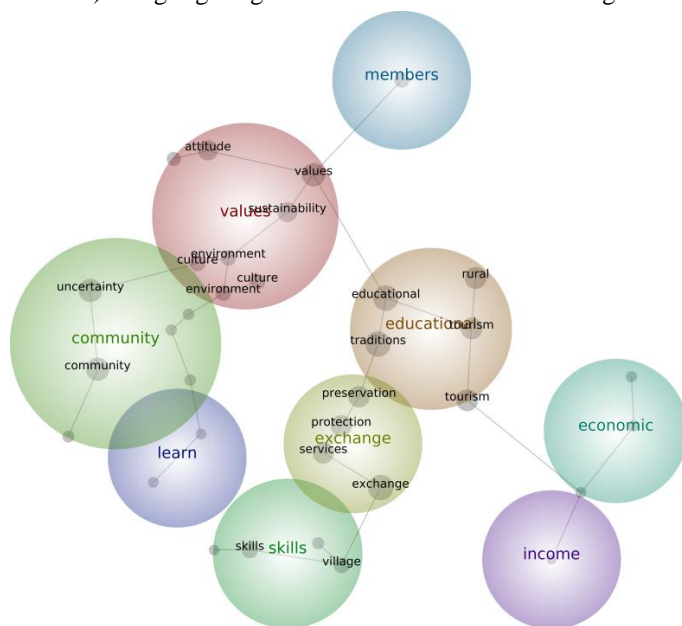
*"Our interactions and involvement with tourists teach us about the world and their languages" (Interview 15, Male, Youth, 21 years old, interviewed at Heeloya village in April 2023).*

Language skills were highlighted within the data frequently. Another young community member said,

*"I have improved my English basically, and I can speak other languages like German and French" (Interview 07, Male, Youth, 23 Years old, interviewed at Heeloya village in April 2023).*

Community awareness and knowledge in rural tourism summarize a dual aspect of consciousness about the sector's potential benefits and risks, aligning with McGehee et al. (2018) and Falak Falak et al. (2016). As expressed by inhabitants, the community's profound appreciation of their cultural

and environmental values and resources echoes an informed perspective on tourism's impacts, aligning with the literature's emphasis on tourism's risks and benefits. The mutual educational exchange between locals and tourists also aligns with (Kastenholz et al., 2013) highlighting tourism's mutual learning



opportunities. This exchange emphasizes that local knowledge about global perspectives imparts to tourists a deeper understanding of local customs and traditions. Furthermore, the importance of language acquisition and global exposure, particularly among the youth, supports the postulations of Takaendengan et al. (2022) on the opportunities tourism presents for language and cultural education.

### Concept map of the qualitative data findings

Figure 1. shows the Leximancer map, which was generated to validate the findings of the manual analysis of qualitative data and to visualize the concepts' interrelationships regarding the community's views on rural tourism at Heeloya village.

The concept map verifies the findings obtained from the manual analysis of qualitative data, with common themes and concepts dependably emerging across both techniques. The concept map assists as a visual validation of the concepts identified in the manual data analysis, demonstrating a solid relationship in the main concepts related to community views on rural tourism. It clearly outlines the themes of sustainability, community attitude, economic impact, and awareness highlighted through manual

descriptive analysis of qualitative data, thereby confirming the qualitative findings. The overlying nodes and connections in the picture strengthen the interrelationship of these themes and concepts, just as they were interlaced in the description of qualitative data. This depiction confirms a dependable and complete understanding of the local viewpoints, as both analytical approaches integrate to present a consistent picture of the community's stance on rural tourism.

Figure 1: Leximancer map for the concepts and concept relationships.

### Analysis and Results of Survey Data

A short questionnaire survey, developed based on the qualitative data findings, was carried out to validate the findings of the qualitative phase of the research. A total of 105 participants responded to the survey, of which 58 were male, constituting 55.2% of the sample. The primary age group was 35-50, with 45 respondents, while the lowest group was those aged above 65, accounting for only 5. Also, the sample consisted of 34 participants who are directly involved in tourism and have reaped some benefits.

According to the statistics (Table 1), the results show a firm agreement on the vitality of preserving cultural artifacts and ecological integrity in tourism (Means > 3.8). Trust between and among the community and tourists is critical for providing a pleasant tourism experience (Mean = 4.1). However, there is a concerned response regarding the sufficiency of sustainability efforts by practitioners and the frequency of sustainable practices (Means < 3.1). Economic benefits from tourism are recognized, yet there is prominent uncertainty regarding the fair distribution of tourism-generated wealth (Mean = 3.12).

**Table 1: Descriptive statistics on the community's views about rural tourism**

No	Item	Mean	SD
1	It is essential to preserve cultural artifacts and traditions in the face of tourism development	4.0	1.2
2	Tourism development should be carried out to preserve the community's ecological integrity	3.9	1.1
3	The current efforts made by tourism developers to integrate sustainability are adequate	3.0	0.9
4	Sustainable practices in tourism are frequently observed in the community	2.9	0.8
5	Trust between the community and tourists is essential for positive rural tourism	4.1	0.8
6	Tourism has contributed to equitable economic growth within the community	3.0	2.0
7	Tourism has improved facilities and services in the region	3.9	1.9
8	The wealth from tourism is distributed relatively among community members	3.2	1.3
9	I or my family have personally experienced economic benefits due to tourism	3.8	1.0
10	Tourism has increased our awareness of the value of our cultural and natural assets	3.0	1.4
11	I have a good understanding of the potential risks associated with tourism	3.9	0.3

## Discussion

The connection between rural tourism and community views forms the core of this research study, revealing a multifaceted tapestry of interrelated and interdependent feelings and apprehensions among the locals (Hwang et al., 2012). In a nutshell, this discussion holds the community's solid obligation to sustainability—a commitment that excels in mere environmental upkeep and investigates the protection of cultural and heritage values (Marzo-Navarro et al., 2020). The qualitative data of this study brightens the community's solid wish to balance the arrival of tourists with the

sustainability of their environmental and cultural artefacts. Survey data confirms the qualitative output, with participants demonstrating a high agreement on preserving culture and the natural environment, as postulated by past studies (Poruțiu et al., 2021). However, the moderate scores given to the level of sustainability in the tourism practices postulate that the current practice of tourism does not consider the environmental upkeep as expected by the community; such findings are consistent with the conclusions of previous research (Arthur and Yamoah, 2019). This notion requires re-visiting existing practices and empathetic consideration of the communities' voices to uplift the natural, sustainable tourism in the village (Richards and Hall, 2003; Rahmawati et al., 2023).

The multidimensional attitude of the locals regarding rural tourism reflects a spectrum of trust and anxiety, which also aligns with the findings of Lenao (2014). Trust appears as a foundation, considered crucial for a reciprocal rapport between the community and tourism. The findings further postulate a shared desire for respect towards the locals' way of life—a desire that builds up on the guarantee that the cultural values and ecological artefacts of the village are not just noted but valued by tourists and tourism operators similarly, also depicted by An and Alarcon (2020). Nevertheless, the community is bounded by the fear of over-commercialization, where the people who operate tourism in the region could dominate the village's core values.

Economic considerations are not to be understated, as many of the researchers explored and discussed (Sharpley, 2002; Mahmud et al., 2022). The community undoubtedly recognizes that tourism has the potential to boost the local economy through the creation of jobs and income distribution, which also aligns with the survey results that have recognized that the development of infrastructure and services can be expected as a result of tourism, as suggested by Uslu et al. (2020) and Lenao (2014). However, there is an intense concern for the fair distribution of tourism-generated wealth, which depicts the need for an economic development model that ensures equality in distributing such benefits. The findings further emphasize that the people have no objections to rural development, but it should not come at the expense of cultural and environmental values.

Knowledge, awareness, and understanding emerge as three pillars in the community's perceptions of tourism (Falak et al., 2016). Current research findings also align with knowledge dimensions of rural tourism, where the community unconditionally



showcases increased consciousness about the distinct values of what they offer, like culture, environment, and heritage. Both the qualitative and survey data collectively highlight an educational exchange between hosts and guests in which cultures, global perspectives, and languages are shared. This shared exchange adopts a more comprehensive understanding among locals, contributing to a more active and robust community identity (Kastenholz et al., 2013). The conversation thus discloses a community stance that balances the scenarios of welcoming tourists and safeguarding against its likely adversative impacts. It is a sign that calls for a sustainable, equitable, and culturally responsive approach to rural tourism development. It underscores the vitality of cooperative discussion, where locals are not mere spectators but active and actual counterparts in shaping rural tourism, as many previous studies suggested (Sharpley, 2002; An and Alarcon, 2020; Demirović Bajrami et al., 2020).

In synthesizing the findings, the study contributes insight into the multifaceted association between rural communities and tourism. It further demonstrates a community willing to change, knows the good things that tourism can offer, and is also cautious not to lose what the village has unique. Positioning and maintaining the right balance are essential not just for the community's future but also for making sure that the tourism industry can thrive.

### Conclusion

The findings of this research highlight the multifaceted perceptions of locals for tourism. Locals admire the economic boost tourism can provide but are equally concerned about safeguarding their cultural values and natural environment from the risks of overdevelopment. In conclusion, this research has postulated the complicated relationship between rural communities and tourism (An and Alarcon, 2020). Theoretically, it explains how locals understand and respond to tourism development, contributing a unique context that improves our understanding of host-guest interaction in rural tourism. Theoretically, it confirms the teaching of the social exchange theory by showing the community's expectation for unbiased and mutual exchanges with tourists, confirming the need for a balance between economic benefits and social costs (Chuang, 2010; Maruyama et al., 2019).

This study recommends that tourism expansion include vigorous community involvement to ensure environmental and cultural integrity. Governments

need to stipulate and implement regulatory frameworks that mandate not only environmentally sustainable practices in rural tourism, such as effective waste management and controlled tourist numbers, but also promote equitable economic distribution by incentivizing local entrepreneurship, ensuring that the economic benefits of tourism are directly reinvested into the community. Awareness and training projects could enhance local skills and prepare locals for tourism assignments, nurturing a balance between economic benefits and cultural conservation.

The primary limitation of this research is its reliance on a single rural community's perspective, which may not be illustrative of other regions and areas. Additionally, the qualitative nature of the research might reflect subjective interpretations, necessitating further numerical analysis for inclusive insights. Future research should expand to numerous rural communities for a more diverse understanding of rural tourism perspectives. A longitudinal study design could offer an understanding of the long-term effects of host-guest interaction in rural tourism.

### References

- Ali-Knight J (2010). The role of niche tourism products in destination development. (Thesis).
- Almeida A, Machado LP (2021). Rural development and rural tourism: the impact of infrastructure investments. In: Rui Alexandre Castanho, Couto G, Santos R (eds) *Peripheral territories, tourism, and regional development*. IntechOpen, pp 1
- An W, Alarcon S (2020). How can rural tourism be sustainable? A systematic review. *Sustainability* 12: 7758
- Arintoko A, Ahmad AA, Gunawan DS, Supadi S (2020). Community-based tourism village development strategies: A case of Borobudur tourism village area, Indonesia. *Geo Journal of Tourism and Geosites* 29: 398-413
- Arthur IK, Yamoah FA (2019). Understanding the role of environmental quality

- attributes in food-related rural enterprise competitiveness. *Journal of Environmental Management* 247: 152-160
- Barbieri C (2013). Assessing the sustainability of agritourism in the US: A comparison between agritourism and other farm entrepreneurial ventures. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 21: 252-270
- Blackstock K (2005). A critical look at community based tourism. *Community development journal* 40: 39-49
- Central Bank SL (2021). Annual Report. Central Bank of Sri Lanka, Colombo
- Chuang S-T (2010). Rural tourism: Perspectives from social exchange theory. *Social Behavior & Personality: an international journal* 38: 1313-1322
- Dalgic T (2006). Handbook of niche marketing: principles and practice. Psychology Press
- Dassanayake D (2021). Why do Indians Select Sri Lanka for Vacations? Motives and Consumption Values. *Journal of Management and Tourism Research* 4: 1-12
- Demirović Bajrami D, Radosavac A, Cimbalević M, Tretiakova TN, Syromiatnikova YA (2020). Determinants of residents' support for sustainable tourism development: Implications for rural communities. *Sustainability* 12: 9438
- Falak S, Chiun LM, Wee AY (2016). Sustainable rural tourism: An indigenous community perspective on positioning rural tourism. *Tourism: An International Interdisciplinary Journal* 64: 311-327
- Gartner WC (2005). A perspective on rural tourism development. *Journal of Regional Analysis and Policy* 35: 33-42
- Gascón J (2015). Pro-Poor Tourism as a Strategy to Fight Rural Poverty: A Critique. *Journal of Agrarian Change* 15: 499-518 doi <https://doi.org/10.1111/joac.12087>
- Giampiccoli A, Mtapuri O (2021). From conventional to alternative tourism: Rebalancing tourism towards a community-based tourism approach in Hanoi, Vietnam. *Social Sciences* 10: 176
- Hwang D, Stewart WP, Ko D-w (2012). Community behavior and sustainable rural tourism development. *Journal of Travel research* 51: 328-341
- Iannucci G, Martellozzo F, Randelli F (2022). Sustainable development of rural areas: a dynamic model in between tourism exploitation and landscape decline. *Journal of Evolutionary Economics* 32: 991-1016
- Kastenholz E, Carneiro MJ, Eusébio C, Figueiredo E (2013). Host-guest relationships in rural tourism: evidence from two Portuguese villages. *Anatolia* 24: 367-380 doi 10.1080/13032917.2013.769016
- Kelliher F, Reinl L, Johnson TG, Joppe M (2018). The role of trust in building rural tourism micro firm network engagement: A multi-case study. *Tourism Management* 68: 1-12 doi <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2018.02.014>
- Kim H, Sefcik JS, Bradway C (2017). Characteristics of qualitative descriptive studies: A systematic review. *Research in nursing & health* 40: 23-42
- Kumara H (2016). Challenges of biopiracy: implementing community based

- ecotourism (CBET) in the Sri Lankan context. *Journal of Tropical Forestry and Environment* 6: 36-49
- Lane B (2009). *Rural tourism: An overview*. The Sage Handbook of Tourism Studies (ITazim Jamal, Mike Robinson, ed.). Sage Publications Ltd
- Lenao M (2014). Rural tourism development and economic diversification for local communities in Botswana: The case of Lekhubu Island. *Nordia Geographical Publications* 43: 53
- Li X, Wang Z-H, Xia B, Chen S-C, Chen S (2019). Testing the associations between quality-based factors and their impacts on historic village tourism. *Tourism Management Perspectives* 32: 100573
- Lindström KN, Larson M (2016). Community-based tourism in practice: evidence from three coastal communities in Bohuslän, Sweden. *Bulletin of Geography Socio-economic Series*: 71-78
- Mahmud A, Rahmawati E, Susilowati N, Aeni IN (2022). Development of Tourism Village Through Community-Based Tourism (CBT) Concept Approach in Branjang Village. *Indonesian Journal of Devotion and Empowerment* 4: 1-6
- Maruyama NU, Keith SJ, Woosnam KM (2019). Incorporating emotion into social exchange: considering distinct resident groups' attitudes towards ethnic neighborhood tourism in Osaka, Japan. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 27: 1125-1141 doi 10.1080/09669582.2019.1593992
- Marzo-Navarro M, Pedraja-Iglesias M, Vinzón L (2020). Sustainability indicators of rural tourism from the perspective of the residents. In: Saarinen J (ed) *Tourism and Sustainable Development Goals*. Routledge, London, pp 148-164
- McGehee NG, Knollenberg W, Komorowski A (2018). The central role of leadership in rural tourism development: A theoretical framework and case studies. In: Lane B, Kastenholtz E (eds) *Rural Tourism*. Routledge, pp 145-165
- Muresan IC, Oroian CF, Harun R, Arion FH, Porutiu A, Chiciudean GO, Todea A, Lile R (2016). Local residents' attitude toward sustainable rural tourism development. *Sustainability* 8: 100
- Naradda Gamage SK, Hewa Kurupuge R, Haq Iu (2017). Energy consumption, tourism development, and environmental degradation in Sri Lanka. *Energy Sources, Part B: Economics, Planning, and Policy* 12: 910-916
- Nicolaides A (2015). Tourism Stakeholder Theory in practice: instrumental business grounds, fundamental normative demands or a descriptive application? *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure* 4: 1-26
- Okazaki E (2008). A community-based tourism model: Its conception and use. *Journal of sustainable tourism* 16: 511-529
- Oppermann M (2000). Triangulation — a methodological discussion. *International Journal of Tourism Research* 2: 141-145 doi [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(SICI\)1522-1970\(200003/04\)2:2<141::AID-JTR217>3.0.CO;2-U](https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1522-1970(200003/04)2:2<141::AID-JTR217>3.0.CO;2-U)
- Pattiyagedara S, Fernando P (2020). Rural tourism niche-market as a development strategy on rural community: reference to Hiriwadunna village track, Meemure and Heeloya Knuckles Valley tourism village, Sri Lanka. *Sri Lanka Journal of Management Studies*, 2: 87-103
- Piartrini PS (2018). The relationship among community based tourism application, community attitude, community empowerment, and community life

- satisfaction. *E-Journal of Tourism* 5: 130-143
- Poruțiu A, Tirpe OP, Oroian C, Mihai VC, Chiciudean GO, Chiciudean DI, Poruțiu C (2021). Analysis on tourists' preferences for rural tourism destinations in Romania. *Societies* 11: 92
- Rahmawati R, Prayitno G, Firdausiyah N, Dinanti D, Hayat A, Efendi A, Roskrugue M (2023). Harnessing social capital for fostering non-tourism actor involvement in sustainable tourism: A case study of an Indonesian village. *Journal of Urban Development and Management* 2: 69-83
- Richards G, Hall DR (2003). *Tourism and sustainable community development*. Psychology Press
- Rid W, Ezeuduji IO, Pröbstl-Haider U (2014). Segmentation by motivation for rural tourism activities in The Gambia. *Tourism management* 40: 102-116
- Sharpley R (2002). Rural tourism and the challenge of tourism diversification: the case of Cyprus. *Tourism management* 23: 233-244
- Shi W, Luo M, Jin M, Cheng SK, Li KX (2020). Urban-rural income disparity and inbound tourism: Spatial evidence from China. *Tourism Economics* 26: 1231-1247 doi 10.1177/1354816619872035
- Takaendengan ME, Avenzora R, Darusman D, Kusmana C (2022). Similiarity Check: Socio-Cultural Factors on the Establishment and Development of Communal Homestay in Eco-Rural Tourism. *Jurnal Manajemen Hutan Tropika* 28: 91-100 doi 10.7226/jtfm.28.2.91
- Thilakarathne S, Dassanayake D (2020). Community perspective of rural tourism: A thematic analysis 3rd National Research Symposium on Management. Rajarata University of Sri Lanka - Faculty of Management Studies., Rajarata University of Sri Lanka
- Uslu A, Alagöz G, Güneş E (2020). Socio-cultural, economic, and environmental effects of tourism from the point of view of the local community. *Journal of Tourism and Services* 11: 1-21
- Vidickienė D, Vilkė R, Gedminaitė-Raudonė Ž (2020). Transformative tourism as an innovative tool for rural development. *European Countryside* 12: 277-291
- Wang Y, Pfister RE (2008). Residents' attitudes toward tourism and perceived personal benefits in a rural community. *Journal of Travel Research* 47: 84-93
- Wijaya AAM, Basir MA, Lawelai H (2022). Community Based Tourism in The Development of Sustainable Tourism in Baubau City. *APLIKATIF: Journal of Research Trends in Social Sciences and Humanities* 1: 28-38
- Zhou B (2021). Study on the influence of knowledge transfer on the ability of community residents in the development of rural tourism E3S Web of Conferences. *EDP Sciences*, pp 02004