

Preferences, Perception and Demographic Characteristics of Specialized Visitors to Use Up-Country Tea Plantations as Sites of Nature Tourism

W.M.C.S. WEERAKOON¹, K.G.M.C.P.B. GAJANAYAKE¹ and U. K. JAYASINGHE- MUDALIGE²

¹Department of Plantation Management, ²Department of Agribusiness Management, Faculty of Agriculture and Plantation Management, Wayamba University of Sri Lanka, Makandura, Gonawila (N.W.P).

ABSTRACT

Nature tourism have become a viable non crop diversification mechanism that some up-country tea estates used to increase the profitability, while providing a positive output to the society and to the environment and keeping negative repercussion to a minimum. Concurrently both local and foreign visitors who were earlier used to visit traditional tourism sites visit up country tea estates as sites for nature tourism predominantly.

The study was carried out to investigate on the preferences, perception and demographic characteristics of "Specialized Visitors" who already visit up country tea plantations as nature tourism sites. Semi-structured questionnaire were conducted with 120 respondents at seven selected, entry points, to the sites. Both qualitative and quantitative techniques were used to analyze the outcomes. The results indicate in general, young people (*i.e.* 56% of sample within 20-29 years); with higher income level (*i.e.* 43% of sample above the Rs.50, 000 per month) and possess a degree or equivalent (60%) decided to enjoy the nature. In terms of preference for their visit, about 63 percent of visitors indicated aesthetic/scenic beauty followed by bird watching (52%). About 45 percent of the visitors proposed that existing infrastructure should be improved. The results highlight that government agencies, Non Government Organizations, policy makers, should collaborate with regional plantation companies to promote up-country tea plantations as nature tourism sites to cater to the preferred segment of the tourism market while developing both tea and tourism industries.

KEYWORDS: Nature tourism, Non-crop diversification, Preference, Up-country tea estates

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is currently one of the fastest growing industries and has become a strong contributor to the Sri Lankan economy. In year 2005 gross foreign exchange earnings from this sector was US \$ 329 million and provided both 52,085 direct and 72,919 indirect employment opportunities (Anon, 2005). According to Vereczi (2002), tourism activities can be divided into two levels as "Ecotourism" and "Nature-based tourism" where the nature tourism is much broader than "ecotourism". Ecotourism comes as a portion of nature tourism and define as visiting a natural site such as a coral reef, rainforest, wetland, or savanna to enjoy the natural beauty (Steele *et al*, 1998). Whereas nature base tourism is a form in which the main motivation of the tourist is the observation and appreciation of nature.

Nature tourism is commonly practiced in few places in Sri Lanka *viz*, national parks (Yala, Udawalawe, Wilpatthu, *etc*), adjacent mangroves areas (Muthurajawela, Madu Ganga, *etc*) and Horton plain (Steele *et al*, 1998). Though there are some sites that have greater potential for realizing the benefits of nature tourism than other sites with low visitation, the potential is not usually clear (Drumm and Moore, 2002).

During the last decade, some attractive natural places in up country tea estates adjacent to the natural forests, water falls and water sources were developed into sites of nature tourism for the recreation of estate managers and executive staff. Now, these sites have been introduced for the external visitors because of satisfactory demand over those places and better potential to increase estate income as a viable non-

crop diversification mechanism. Edgall and Harbaugh (1993) have indicated that rural areas consisting unique characteristics that can attract nature tourists because of distinct culture, ethnic, environment and geographical characteristics. Since agriculture based systems are mostly affected by low commodity prices, and rising input costs, agriculture producers worldwide are looking for new opportunities to diversify and add revenue streams to their businesses (Bernardo *et al*, 2004). Similarly the tea industry, being an export oriented industry, has subjected to high price fluctuation, prices decline and struggling to overcome high cost of production due to escalating energy prices and labor cost among various other bottle necks. With this background the profitability of the tea estates are not encouraging for private sector investments and plantations are planning to diversify their income sources which will enable them to increase their revenue sources while engage in tea production. Asian Development Bank (ADB) also has highlighted the necessity of conducting a broad assessment of the suitability of plantation sector for the development of ecotourism in Sri Lankan tea plantations, in terms of diversity of ecosystem, terrain, environmental preservation policies, flora and fauna. Galagoda *et al* (2005) have identified that there is a potential to develop up country tea estates as sites of nature tourism, *via* one of the viable alternative revenue sources.

Accordingly those up country tea estates are worthwhile as sites of nature tourism with few activities *viz* cabanas, fishing, hiking, bird watching, *etc* and it has not expanded widely. Moreover, in depth studies have not yet been undertaken to

determine the perception, preference and demographic characteristics of visitors' to those tea estates as sites of nature tourism, because it is important to identify perceptual categories of specialized visitors to their recreation experience. So at the end of the day those information on visitor perceptions may also be valuable when setting maintenance and management priorities for allocating scarce funds and resources (Dorward *et al*, 2006).

Outcomes of specialized visitors, which will provide a good database for policy makers to develop strategies to promote tourism sector by the means of providing better service while expanding nature tourism concept furthermore in up country tea estates. Hence in this study an attempt was made to identify the demographic characteristic, preference, motivating factors (positive incentives, benefits, *etc*) and de-motivating factors (negative incentives) of specialized visitors. As well study focused on the visitors Willingness-To-Pay (WTP) on current recreation benefits.

METHODOLOGY

This section explains the methods used to collect and analyze data.

Data Collection and Analysis

A survey was conducted using a pre tested semi-structured questionnaire with the sample of 120 randomly selected "specialized visitors" (*i.e.* those who visit an up-country tea plantation for the first time based on the information they received from an external source and those who repeated), at entry points of the purposively selected seven up country tea estates, and who currently practice nature tourism (owned by three RPCs *viz* Agalawattha Plantation Limited, Bogawantalawa Tea Estate Limited and Maskeliya Plantation Limited) from April to July 2006. The respondents were firstly divided in to two categories as "Local visitors" and "Foreign visitors" and their information were coded separately.

Descriptive statistics were taken for three key areas as (1) Demographic Characteristic about Visitors (2) Visitors Recreational Behaviors (3) Visitors Attitude towards Payment; separately for local and foreign visitors using SPSS tools.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results showed that the impression towards the image of nature tourists was a mixture of deference perceptions and preferences.

Descriptive Statistics

1. Demographic Characteristic of Visitors

According to the results, it was observed that 60 percent of responded were males while rest (40%); were females. Nevertheless, in this study around 55 percent of respondents belonged to 20-29 age group. More than half (60%) of the respondents had a university education, while there was a wide range of

education levels. There were no illiterate visitors among the observant (Table 1).

Sixty percent of respondent were married and the rest (40%) were single and the average household size was three to four members (84%). Approximately half of the respondents (44%) belong to higher income level category (Rs: 50,000 to 100,000 or more than 100,000 per month) and the monthly family income of 25 percent of visitors was in the Rs: 30,000 – 50,000 category. Majority of them were employed at private sector enterprises as middle to top-level managers.

Table 1 - Descriptive Characteristic of Sample Respondents:

General Information		As a Whole (%)
Gender:	Male	60
	Female	40
Marital Status:	Single	41
	Married	59
Age (Years)	15 – 19	5
	20 – 29	55
	30 – 39	16
	40 - <	24
Education:	None	0
	Primary	6
	Secondary	25
	University	59
	Other	10
Household Size:	One Member	0
	Two Members	8
	Three Members	44
	Four Members	40
	More than four	8
Monthly average Family Income (Rs):	Up to-10,000	0
	10,000-20,000	13
	20,000-30,000	14
	30,000-50,000	25
	50,000-100,000	44
Occupation:	Government Sector	10
	Private Sector	68
	Unemployed	23

It revealed that most of the time these nature tourism sites in up country tea estates are currently used by specific group of people only; which is due to higher charge for accommodation, food and lack of information on those sites.

2. Visitors Recreational Behaviours

2.1. Number of times visited

According to Table 2, more than half (56%) of the respondents had visited these sites for the first time. Among them 91 percents were foreign visitors. Rest nine percent of foreign visitors have been visited

PREFERENCES, PERCEPTION AND DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF SPECIALIZED VISITORS

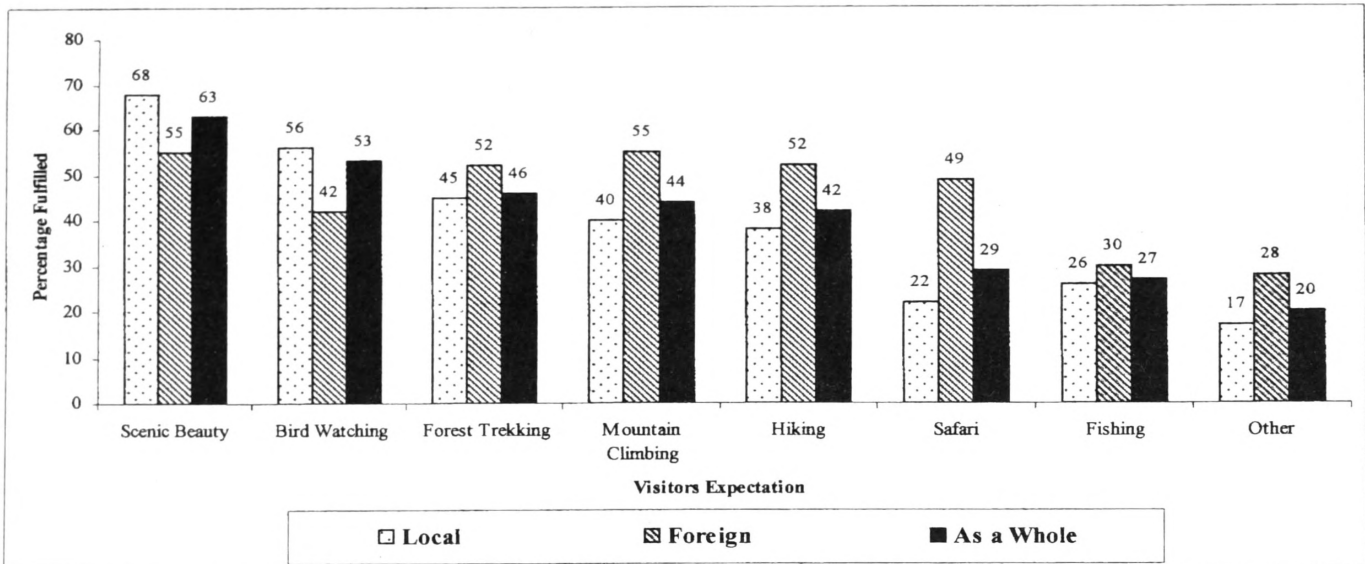


Figure 1 - Expectation to Visit Nature Tourism Sites

those sites for more than three times, they are working in Sri Lanka.

When considering the local visitors, 43 percent were visited the sites for the first time and more than one-fourth of them (29%) had visited two times during last three years.

Table 2 - Number of Times of Visit:

Number	Respondents		
	Local (%)	Foreign (%)	As a Whole (%)
1 st Time	43	91	56
2 nd Time	29	0	21
3 rd Time	17	3	13
4 th Time	3	0	3
More than 5	8	6	7

2.2. Reasons for visiting

Almost all the visitors who visited nature tourism sites, which are located in up-country tea plantations, were reported combination of reasons. Among them, majority (68%) of local visitors as well as most (55%) of the foreign visitors indicated aesthetic/scenic beauty, as previously described by Bernardo *et al*, (2004), was their expectation to visit up-country tea plantations as nature tourism sites. Figure 1 indicates more than half (56%) of local visitors prefer to bird watching followed by forest trekking (45%), mount climbing (40%), hiking (38%), fishing (26%) and safari (22%). Although 55 percent of foreign visitors be fond of mount climbing parallel to scenic beauty; followed by hiking and forest trekking (52%); safari (49%); bird watching (42%) and fishing (30%). Rest of the respondents indicated other activities such as local festival, cycling, camping, boating, *etc* as their preferred activities.

2.3. Satisfaction with existing recreational benefits

Out of the total respondents 68 percent of the respondents were satisfied with the existing

recreational facilities on those sites (Figure 2). When foreign visitors' are concerned, the majority (91%) of them were satisfied whereas only about 60 percent of local visitors responded that they are satisfied with existing recreational benefits.

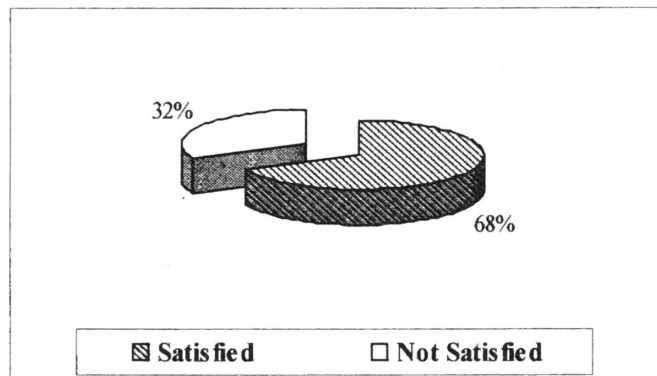


Figure 2 - Visitors Satisfaction

Study found that most of the locals were from urban and suburban areas where this benefit is deficient as well they are employed on executive grades and business with considerable mental stress; they like to stay on these sites solely to obtain mental pleasure.

2.4. Suggested improvement by visitors

According to respondent's perception, their suggestions can be categorized in to two main groups namely "Improvement belongs to tourism activities" (Table - 3) and "Improvement belongs to tourism sites" (Table - 4).

2.4.1 Improvement belongs to tourism activities

Most of the respondents were satisfied with the existing tourism activities (around 65% expect aesthetic/scenic beauty). According to Table 3, nearly 40 percent of visitors propose further improvements with specific places to bird watching and along with

expert guide. Moreover 36 percent of local respondents and 36 percent of foreign visitors suggested that there should be some recommended equipment and properly trained mountaineer for safety mount climbing as well.

Table 3 - Suggested Improvement belongs to Tourism Activities:

Suggested Improvements	Respondents		
	Local (%)	Foreign (%)	As a Whole (%)
Bird watching	37	36	37
Mountain climbing	36	36	36
Tea Safari	23	36	26
Eco-Lodge	23	21	22
Forest trekking	22	24	23
Local festivals	13	30	18

2.4.2 Improvement belongs to tourism sites

Figure 3 illustrates visitor's perception towards quality enhancement of the nature tourism sites in up-country tea plantations.

As an average, majority of the respondents (59%) perceived the quality of benefit as "Good" (62% locals and 52% of foreign), 36 percent of foreign visitors recognize as "Excellent" compare to 7 percent of local visitors who believed it to be "Poor".

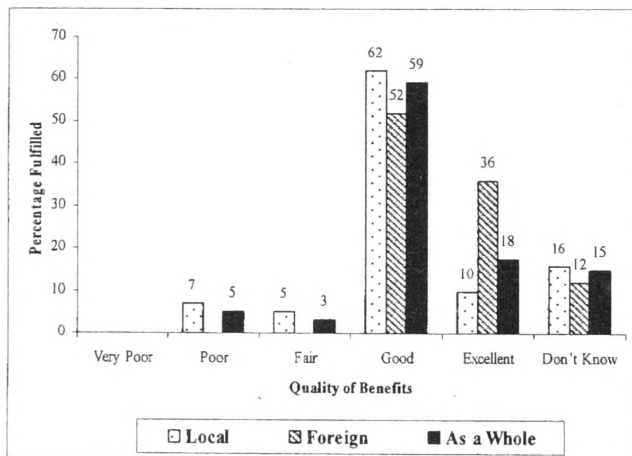


Figure 3 - Quality of Benefits

Table 4 highlights suggested improvement for the sites by the respondents. Accordingly 43 percent of the visitors (51% of local visitors and 21% of foreign visitors) suggested that the infrastructural to be improved specially with road facilities, as undeveloped slippery and flexure roads found them difficulties to travel by motor cars, van, bus, etc. Most of time, land vehicles were used presently for reach those sites (Table 5).

2.5. Reaction for restrictions

Responses to current state of affairs on those nature tourism sites in up-country tea plantations were studied and found that there was no such limitation for the visitors.

Table 4 - Suggested Improvement to the Tourism Sites:

Suggested Improvements	Respondents		
	Local (%)	Foreign (%)	As a Whole (%)
Infrastructure	51	21	43
Food Center	26	46	32
Internet Café	20	27	22
Map/ Guide	12	18	13
Telephone	13	6	11

Table 5 - Mode of Visit:

Type of Vehicle	Respondents		
	Local (%)	Foreign (%)	As a Whole (%)
Tour Bus	0	12	3
Mini Bus	35	0	25
Land Vehicle	47	76	55
Motorcycle	2	0	2
Other	1	6	3

However information was gathered from respondents on various possible restrictions (liquor, fishing, hunting, shouting, etc) and found that most locals (58%) and foreign (70%) visitors of the respondents do not bother about such restrictions. Because they were satisfied with the existing recreational facilities and lack of such restrictions would violate such a promising environment.

In contrast 29 percent of local visitors indicate their dissatisfaction to visit to a site with restricted "liquor" and "noise". Only 10 percent and 6 percent were not satisfied to visit those sites with restrictions like "Hunting", "Fishing" and "Bonfire" respectively.

In the case of foreign visitors as same as local visitors; 21 percent were not happy to arrive a particular site with restrictions for liquor, followed by bonfire (15%), make noise (29%) hunting (6%) and fishing (6%).

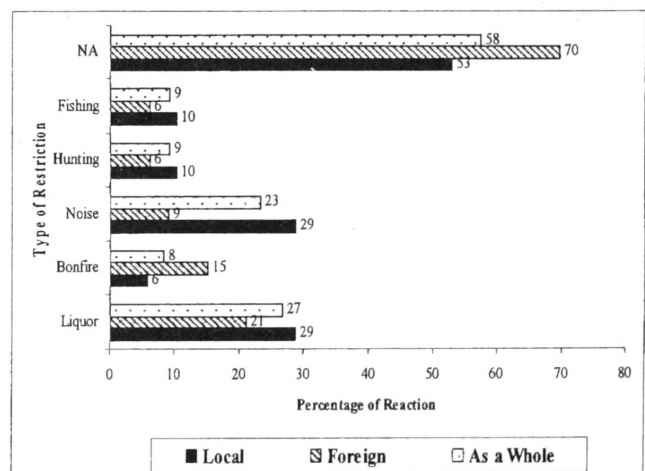


Figure 4 - Reaction for Restriction

3. Visitors Attitude towards Entrance and Other Fee

Visitors' preference towards the payments for the facilities offered by the sites were studied and

revealed that the majority of the respondents (65%) were in a position that they prefer to pay “as a full amount for all the facilities”. The rest indicate that they prefer to pay “small entrance fee with separate fee for each offering”.

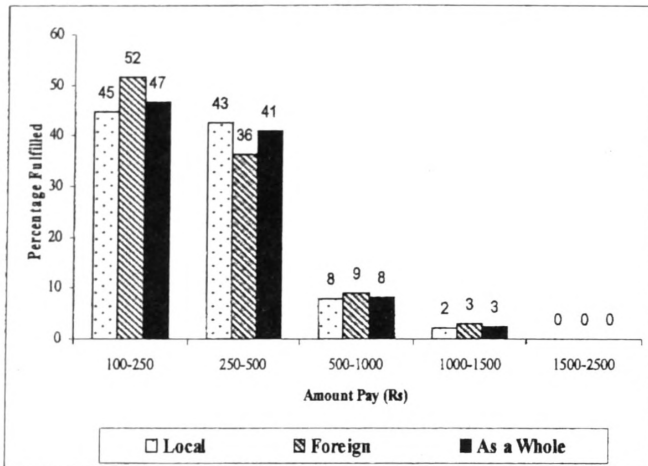


Figure 5 - Willingness to Entrance Fee

Study found that no entrance fee had charged at any of these selected sites. However, out of all respondents, 47 percent were willing to pay a amount of Rs.100 to 250 as “Entrance Fee” and 41 percent prefer to pay Rs. 500 – 1000 (Figure 5).

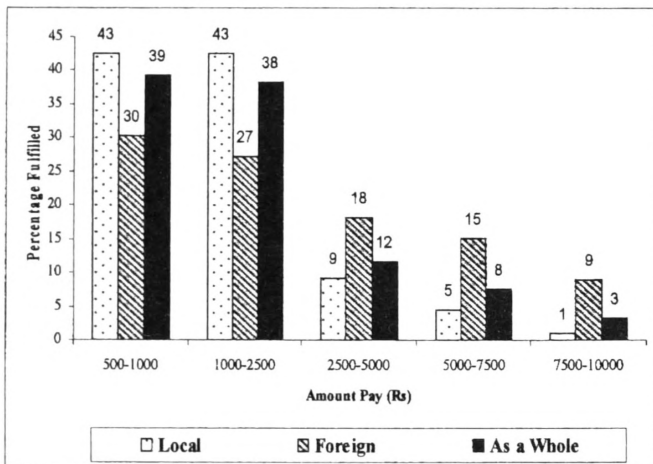


Figure 6 - Willingness to Accommodation Fee

On most of the sites approximately Rs; 1,000 was charged for accommodation per head per night (without food). In this study an attempt was made to figure out the visitors’ willingness to pay for accommodation (Figure 6). Accordingly majority of the respondents [i.e. 39% (43% local and 30% foreign)] of visitors were fall in to the group of Rs. 500 – 1,000.

Regarding the visitors’ willing to pay for food, (Figure 7) study found that more than 50 percent of the local visitors (53%) and foreign visitors (55%) were willing to pay for food at a rate of Rs. 250 – 500 and Rs. 500 – 1,000 per meal.

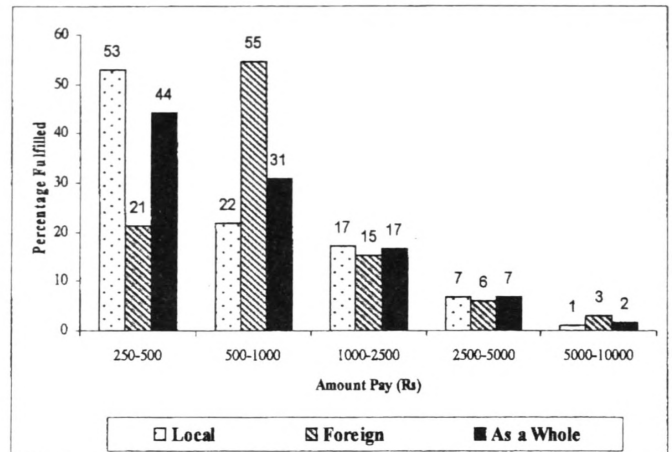


Figure 7 - Willingness to Food Fee

CONCLUSIONS

The study reveals that, a specific tourist segment with distinct demographic features visits those tea estate as sites for nature tourism. This segment consists of people with higher income and higher living stand. The potential to use tea estates as sites of nature tourism under exploited for middle and subordinate level of groups.

The reason for this is less popularity, due to lack of information about nature tourism sites. This aspect should be considered by policy makers in order to popularize nature tourism among potential visitors in tea estates through which plantation sector could receive additional revenue.

In order to maintain these nature tourism industry in tea plantations in sustainable manner, the government, RPCs, Non Government Organizations (NGOs) and policy makers must collaborate and focus on preference and perception of both potential and specialized visitors, while providing positive output to the society and environment with minimum negative repercussions.

Finally this study concludes that the nature tourism can be implemented successfully as a non-crop diversification mechanism, if the implementers consider the preferences and perceptions of those visitors who visit (specialized) and who may visit in future (potential) in order to maintain the sustainability of tea estates in future.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to extend their profound gratitude to the Wayamba University Research Grant Scheme for providing financial assistance to carryout this research. Authors further extend their gratitude to Management of the Plantation Companies of Agalawattha Plantations Limited, Bogawanthalawa Tea Estates Limited and Maskeliya Plantations Limited and staff members of the tea estates who helped enormously to make this study success.

REFERENCES

- Anon (2005). External Sector Developments and Policies. Central Bank of Sri Lanka Annual Report – 2005; pp 88 – 89.
- Bernardo, D., L. Valentin and J. Leatherman (2004). Agritourism: If We Build It, Will They Come? Department of Agricultural Economics, Kansas State University. Online. Available at: http://www.agmanager.info/events/risk_profit/2004/Bernardo.pdf.
- Dorward, D. E, Yu-Fai Leung., and R. Moore (2006). Managing Visitors' Perceptions. Online. Available at: <http://www.nrpa.org/content/default.aspx?documentId=916> (Retrieved August 22, 2006).
- Druz, A. and A. Moore (2002). An Introduction to Ecotourism Planning: A Manual for Conservation Planners and Managers Ecotourism Development. Volume 1: pp 3.
- Anon (2000). Technical assistance to Sri Lanka for preparing the plantation development project. Asian Development bank (ADB) Available at: <http://www.adb.org/Documents/TARs/SRI/R342-00pdf> (Retrieved August 22, 2006).
- Edgell, D., & Harbaugh, L. (1993). Tourism development: An economic stimulus in the heart of America. *Business America*, 114(24), 69-75.
- Galagoda, R.P.W.M.R.R.K.B., K.G.M.C.P.B. Gajanayake and D.A.C.S. Silva (2005). Economic Evaluation of Ecotourism Potential in Up-Country Tea Estates of Sri Lanka. Proceedings of 5th Agriculture Research Symposium part II 27-28th September 2005: pp 37-38.
- Steel, P., M. Sivakumar and H.M.B.C. Herath (1998). A Strategy for Nature Tourism Management in Sri Lanka. Institute of Policy Study, Colombo.pp
- Vereczi, G. (2002). Ecotourism Generating Market: Sustainable Development of Tourism, Preliminary Result of the WTO Research Program, World Tourism Organization: p. 2.