

An Analysis of Ethical Tourism Practices and Community-Centered Recovery in Post-Conflict Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Tourism is widely promoted as a catalyst for economic recovery, social reconstruction and reconciliation in post-conflict societies. In Sri Lanka, following the end of nearly three decades of civil conflict in 2009, tourism has emerged as a key development strategy, particularly in the war-affected Northern and Eastern Provinces. However, the rapid expansion of tourism in post-conflict contexts has raised critical ethical concerns regarding equity, participation, cultural representation, and governance. This study analyses ethical tourism practices in post-conflict Sri Lanka by foregrounding community perspectives and examining tourism's contribution to community-centered recovery. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study draws on semistructured interviews and focus group discussions with residents, small-scale tourism entrepreneurs, cultural practitioners, community leaders and tourism officials, complemented by analysis of policy documents and ethical tourism frameworks. Thematic analysis was employed to identify key ethical challenges and community experiences related to tourism development. Findings reveal that while tourism has contributed to infrastructure development and livelihood opportunities, ethical tourism remains unevenly institutionalised. Communities expressed concerns regarding unequal benefit distribution, limited participation in decisionmaking, cultural commodification and the dominance of top-down development approaches. These ethical shortcomings constrain tourism's potential to foster long-term resilience and reconciliation. Nevertheless, the study highlights that community-led, ethically grounded tourism initiatives can strengthen social cohesion, restore cultural dignity, and support postconflict healing. The study concludes that embedding ethical principles, such as inclusive governance, fair benefit-sharing, and culturally sensitive representation, into tourism policy and practice is essential for sustainable post-conflict recovery. By aligning tourism development with community resilience and social justice, Sri Lanka can harness tourism as a meaningful instrument for peace building and inclusive development.

Keywords: Ethical tourism; Post-conflict recovery; Community resilience; Cultural tourism; Sri Lanka

Introduction

Tourism has been widely recognized as a strategic mechanism for economic revitalization, social reconstruction and cultural exchange in post-conflict societies. In contexts where prolonged conflict has disrupted livelihoods, weakened institutions and fractured social relations, tourism is often positioned as a pathway for rebuilding local economies and restoring international engagement Buultjens, Ratnayake, and Gnana-pala (2016). In Sri Lanka, the end of nearly

three decades of civil conflict in 2009 marked a significant turning point in national development, with tourism emerging as a priority sector in post-war recovery strategies Jayawardena (2013); World Bank (2018). National tourism policies and strategic plans have since emphasized tourism's potential to stimulate growth, generate employment and integrate war-affected regions into the national economy Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (2017, 2022). In particular, the Northern and Eastern Provinces have been increasingly promoted as emerg-



ing tourism destinations due to their rich cultural heritage, historical landscapes and post-war narratives of resilience and renewal Fernando (2016); Lokuhetty, Jayawardena, and Mudadeniya (2013). Community-based and cultural tourism initiatives in these regions have been encouraged as means of fostering reconciliation, revitalizing local economies and strengthening social cohesion Perera and Ranasinghe (2024); Sasitharan and Premaratna (2022). However, scholars caution that tourism development in post-conflict contexts is inherently complex and may reproduce pre-existing inequalities if ethical considerations are not adequately addressed Buultjens et al. (2016).

The rapid expansion of tourism in Sri Lanka's former conflict zones has raised critical ethical concerns related to land ownership, militarization of space, representation of conflict histories and the commodification of culture. Seoighe Seoighe (2016) argues that post-war development processes in the Northern Province have often reflected dominant political narratives, marginalizing local voices and shaping tourism landscapes in ways that may undermine reconciliation. Similarly, Fernando Fernando (2016) notes that tourism planning in post-war Sri Lanka has largely followed top-down approaches, limiting meaningful community participation and contributing to uneven benefit distribution.

Ethical tourism, grounded in principles of social justice, cultural respect, community participation and equitable benefit-sharing, is therefore particularly important in post-conflict societies Higgins-Desbiolles (2018); World Tourism Organization (1999). In Sri Lanka, civil society organizations have highlighted ethical challenges such as exploitation of local labor, cultural misrepresentation and exclusion of war-affected communities from decision-making processes Sri Lanka Campaign for Peace and Justice (2018). These issues raise concerns about whether tourism development genuinely contributes to community resilience or merely serves external economic interests. At the same time, empirical studies indicate that when tourism initiatives are ethically grounded and community-led, they can enhance resilience by supporting livelihoods, empowering marginalized groups and strengthening social networks Buultjens et al. (2016); Handaragama and Kusakabe (2021). Community-based tourism in

post-conflict areas such as Jaffna has demonstrated potential to foster reconciliation by enabling local communities to reclaim cultural narratives and participate actively in development processes Perera and Ranasinghe (2024).

Against this backdrop, this study examines ethical tourism practices in post-conflict Sri Lanka by foregrounding community perspectives. It seeks to explore how local communities perceive tourism development, identify key ethical challenges they encounter, and assess the extent to which tourism contributes to community resilience and reconciliation. By centering ethical considerations and lived community experiences, the study aims to contribute to more inclusive, socially responsible tourism frameworks aligned with post-conflict recovery and long-term social harmony in Sri Lanka.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to capture the nuanced experiences and perceptions of communities living in post-conflict tourism destinations in Sri Lanka. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions involving local residents, small-scale tourism entrepreneurs, cultural practitioners, community leaders and representatives from local tourism authorities. These participants were selected to reflect diverse perspectives within communities directly affected by both conflict and tourism development. Secondary data were gathered from academic literature, government tourism policies, post-war development reports and ethical tourism guidelines. The qualitative data were analysed thematically, allowing the identification of recurring ethical concerns related to participation, cultural representation, economic inclusion, and governance. This methodological approach enables an in-depth understanding of community-level realities often overlooked in policy-driven tourism narratives.

Limitations

The study has certain limitations. The reliance on qualitative data and the limited number of case-study locations may limit the generalizability of the findings across all post-conflict regions in Sri

Table 1: Detailed Methodological Framework for Analysing Ethical Tourism in Post-Conflict Sri Lanka

No.	Methodological Phase	Component	Details / Indicators	Purpose of Analysis
1	Research Design	Overall approach	Qualitative, exploratory, community-centered research design	To capture lived experiences, ethical concerns and post-conflict realities
2	Study Area Selection	Geographic scope	Post-conflict tourism destinations in the Northern and Eastern Provinces of Sri Lanka	To ensure relevance to war-affected and recovering communities
3	Sampling Strategy	Sampling method	Purposive and stakeholder-based sampling	To include diverse voices affected by tourism and conflict
4	Primary Participants	Sample categories	Local residents; small-scale tourism entrepreneurs; cultural practitioners; community leaders; local tourism authority representatives	To represent multiple perspectives within tourism ecosystems
5	Sample Size	Interviews	25–35 semi-structured interviews	To obtain in-depth individual insights
6	Sample Size	Focus group discussions	4–6 FGDs with 6–8 participants per group	To capture collective perceptions and shared ethical concerns
7	Data Collection Tool 1	Semi-structured interviews	Open-ended questions on ethics, participation, benefits, cultural representation and governance	To explore sensitive and complex ethical issues
8	Data Collection Tool 2	Focus group discussions	Guided discussions on tourism impacts, community resilience and reconciliation	To identify common narratives and group dynamics
9	Secondary Data Sources	Documentary analysis	Academic literature; SLTDA tourism plans; national tourism policy; UNWTO ethical guidelines; post-war development reports	To contextualize community data within policy and institutional frameworks
10	Data Triangulation	Cross-verification	Comparison of interview data, FGDs and policy documents	To enhance validity and credibility of findings
11	Analytical Method	Thematic analysis	Coding, categorization and theme development	To systematically identify ethical tourism patterns
12	Key Analytical Themes	Core variables	Ethical practices; community participation; cultural representation; gender and equity; governance	To link ethics with resilience and post-conflict recovery
13	Ethical Considerations	Research ethics	Informed consent, anonymity and sensitivity to post-conflict trauma	To ensure ethical integrity of the research process
14	Analytical Output	Findings	Identification of ethical challenges and best practices	To inform ethical tourism frameworks
15	Research Outcome	Policy and practice implications	Community-informed recommendations for ethical tourism	To support resilience, reconciliation and sustainable tourism development

Lanka. Additionally, community perceptions may vary over time as tourism development evolves, making the findings a snapshot rather than a definitive assessment. Constraints related to access, language and sensitivity of post-conflict experiences also influenced the scope of data collection.

Results and Discussions

Ethical Dimensions of Tourism in Post-Conflict Sri Lanka

The findings indicate that ethical tourism in post-conflict Sri Lanka remains an unevenly realized ideal rather than an institutionalized practice. While tourism development has contributed to infrastructure expansion, destination visibility and

employment creation, community narratives reveal persistent concerns regarding fairness, transparency and respect for local socio-cultural values. These concerns reflect broader critiques of post-conflict tourism, where market-driven recovery often overshadows ethical and justice-oriented considerations (Buultjens et al., 2016, p. 360).

In war-affected regions, ethical challenges are intensified by entrenched power asymmetries between state institutions, private investors and local communities. Respondents frequently emphasized that tourism policies prioritize economic indicators such as visitor numbers and foreign exchange earnings over social justice, cultural dignity, and post-war healing. Similar patterns have been observed in other post-conflict destinations, where rapid tourism growth risks reproducing pre-existing inequalities if ethical safeguards are absent.

Community Perspectives on Economic Benefits

Unequal distribution of economic benefits emerged as one of the most prominent ethical issues. Although tourism generates employment, respondents noted that large-scale investments are dominated by external corporations and urban-based entrepreneurs, relegating local communities to low-wage, seasonal or informal employment. This pattern mirrors findings from earlier studies on post-war tourism in Sri Lanka, which highlight the concentration of profits among external actors (Lokuhetty et al., 2013, p. 489).

The limited integration of local enterprises into tourism value chains undermines tourism's potential to enhance long-term community resilience. Participants stressed that ethical tourism must extend beyond job creation to include meaningful economic participation, local entrepreneurship support and capacity-building opportunities. Without these measures, tourism risks reinforcing dependency rather than fostering empowerment.

Cultural Representation and Commodification

Cultural commodification was identified as a critical ethical concern, particularly in relation to how

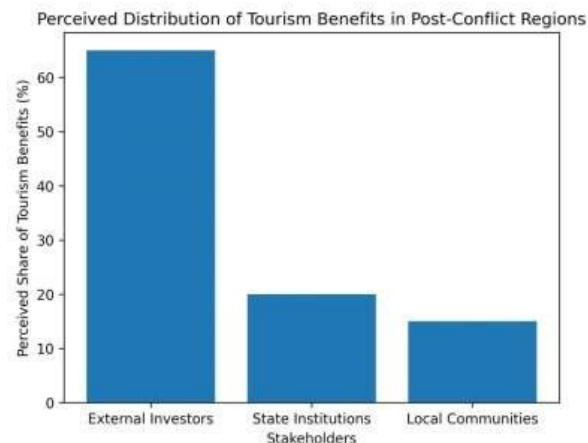


Figure 1: Community perspectives and ethical dimensions of post-conflict tourism

post-war identities and histories are presented to tourists. Respondents expressed discomfort with the selective portrayal of cultural practices and the sanitization of conflict-related narratives to suit visitor expectations. Such practices risk erasing painful histories and marginalizing community voices, a concern widely noted in post-conflict tourism literature (Seoighe, 2016, p. 455).

The commercialisation of sacred spaces and ritual practices was frequently deemed ethically problematic. Community members emphasised that tourism narratives often prioritise visual appeal over cultural meaning, leading to misrepresentation and the loss of authenticity. Ethical tourism, therefore, requires culturally sensitive storytelling that acknowledges difficult heritage while respecting community consent and interpretive authority.

Participation and Governance in Tourism Development

Limited community participation in tourism planning and governance was consistently identified as a major ethical shortcoming. Many tourism initiatives are implemented through top-down policy frameworks with minimal grassroots consultation, reinforcing feelings of exclusion among local populations. Such governance models contradict ethical tourism principles that emphasize inclusivity, empowerment and shared decision-making (World Tourism Organization, 1999, p. 4).

The absence of participatory mechanisms restricts community ownership and weakens

Table 2: Ethical Dimensions of Tourism in Post-Conflict Sri Lanka – Community Perspectives and Structural Implications

Ethical Dimension	Observed Practices in Post-Conflict Tourism	Community Perceptions	Structural / Ethical Implications	Scholarly Link
Fairness & Equity	Tourism benefits concentrated among large-scale investors and external operators	Perceived economic marginalization and exclusion from meaningful gains	Reinforces post-conflict inequalities and weakens social trust	Buultjens et al. (2016, p. 360)
Transparency	Limited disclosure in tourism planning, land use and investment decisions	Lack of clarity regarding decision-making processes	Undermines accountability and community confidence in governance	Lokuhetty et al. (2013, p. 489)
Cultural Respect	Selective representation of culture aligned with tourist demand	Feelings of cultural dilution and misrepresentation	Erosion of cultural dignity and authenticity	Seoighe (2016, p. 455)
Social Justice Orientation	Emphasis on economic growth indicators (arrivals, revenue)	Neglect of social healing and historical grievances	Tourism development detached from reconciliation goals	Higgins-Desbiolles (2018, p. 12)
Community Agency	Top-down tourism development models	Limited voice in planning and implementation	Weak community ownership and sustainability risks	UNWTO (1999, p. 4)
Post-War Sensitivity	Inadequate acknowledgment of conflict legacies in tourism narratives	Emotional discomfort and narrative silencing	Missed opportunity for ethical storytelling and healing	Soini & Birke-land (2014, p. 219)

tourism's capacity to contribute to reconciliation and social cohesion. Respondents argued that ethical tourism governance must institutionalize community representation in planning bodies, destination management committees and monitoring processes. Evidence from community-based tourism initiatives in Sri Lanka suggests that participatory governance enhances accountability and social trust.

Tourism, Resilience and Reconciliation

Despite ethical challenges, the findings demonstrate that tourism can positively contribute to post-conflict recovery when grounded in ethical principles. Community-led tourism initiatives were found to strengthen social networks, revive traditional knowledge and create platforms for intercultural dialogue. These initiatives foster resilience by enhancing collective identity, dignity and economic stability, key components of sustainable post-conflict recovery (Buultjens et al., 2016, p. 368).

Ethically guided tourism also plays a reconciliatory role by encouraging interaction across ethnic, religious and regional divides. When tourism narratives acknowledge historical realities and promote mutual understanding, tourism transcends its economic function and becomes a tool for

peace building.

Conclusion

This study illuminates the complex and often contested ethical landscape shaping tourism development in post-conflict Sri Lanka. While tourism has emerged as a key strategy for economic recovery, destination rebranding and cultural revitalization, the findings demonstrate that its transformative potential remains constrained by ethical shortcomings related to participation, equity, governance and cultural representation. Community perspectives reveal that tourism development, when driven primarily by market-oriented and top-down approaches, risks reproducing structural inequalities and exacerbating post-conflict vulnerabilities rather than alleviating them. The analysis underscores that ethical tourism cannot be treated as an auxiliary or symbolic component of post-conflict development but must be embedded as a foundational principle guiding policy, planning and practice. Community narratives highlight that inclusive governance, fair benefit-sharing, and culturally sensitive representation are not merely normative ideals but essential conditions for building trust, legitimacy and long-term sustainability in post-

conflict settings. Without these ethical commitments, tourism risks functioning as an extractive industry that commodifies culture and marginalizes local voices, thereby undermining social cohesion and reconciliation. Importantly, the study demonstrates that when tourism initiatives are community-centered and ethically grounded, they can contribute meaningfully to post-conflict recovery. Community-led and participatory tourism models were shown to strengthen local resilience by fostering economic security, restoring cultural dignity and enabling intercultural dialogue. In this sense, ethical tourism holds the potential to transcend its conventional economic role and operate as a mechanism for peacebuilding, social healing and reconciliation in societies emerging from conflict. The study concludes by emphasizing the need for a paradigm shift in tourism governance in postconflict Sri Lanka from growth-centric models toward justice-oriented and resilience-focused frameworks. Policymakers, practitioners and stakeholders must prioritize ethical accountability, institutionalize community participation and develop context-specific ethical tourism indicators that reflect post-conflict realities. Future research should adopt longitudinal and mixed-method approaches to examine the long-term social, cultural and psychological impacts of tourism on waraffected communities and to refine ethical benchmarks applicable to post-conflict destinations globally. Overall, this study contributes to the broader discourse on ethical tourism and post-conflict recovery by foregrounding community voices and demonstrating that sustainable tourism development is inseparable from social justice, cultural respect and inclusive peacebuilding.

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