

Visitor entrance fees can pay for marine turtle conservation at the Rekawa sanctuary in Sri Lanka

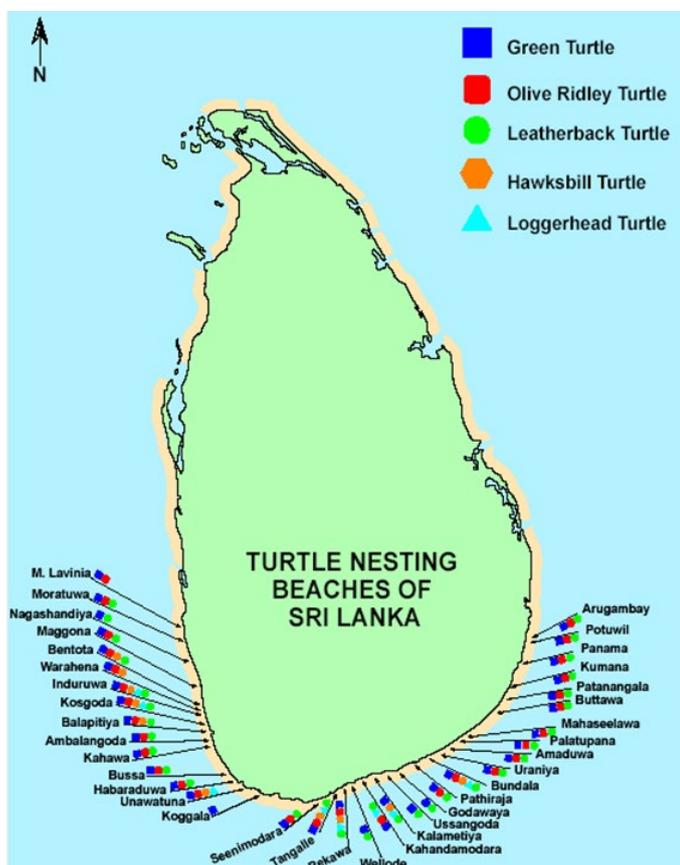
To protect endangered turtles that nest in one of the most important wildlife sanctuaries in Sri Lanka wildlife officials need to consider increasing the entrance fee charged for turtle watching. Research suggests that visitor fees can be increased from the current level of 0 to LKR 143 (USD 1) per visit for local visitors, and, from LKR 1000 to LKR 2470 (USD 8 to 19) for international tourists. Increasing the entry fees will result in additional annual revenues of LKR 70 million (USD 0.5 million) to sanctuary managers. These revenues can be used to fund turtle protection and to involve local households in turtle conservation. This approach is feasible because visitors to the sanctuary are willing to pay to conserve turtles, and, at the same time, locals want to play a role in this work.

Background

Sri Lanka is home to five species of magnificent sea turtles and has various laws that protect these endangered animals. Every year, thousands of turtles flock to the southern tip of Sri Lanka, to lay their eggs and hatch their young on the beaches of the Rekawa sanctuary. Annually, Rekawa also receives some 7000 tourists who often come specifically to watch turtles. While turtles are protected and turtle watching is popular, these animals are still under threat. They are killed for their meat and their eggs are collected. These illegal activities take place partly because it is difficult for local villagers to participate in and benefit from turtle conservation. This is particularly true for the very poor, some of who rely on turtles for their food and income.

In order to understand if there are ways to better finance turtle conservation activities, Wasantha Rathnayake, from Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka, estimated the entrance fee that visitors could be charged for turtle watching and related activities. He did this to assess whether revenues from such fees could be used to fund turtle conservation, compensate local fishermen and reduce illegal activities. Currently, foreigners pay LKR 1000 (USD 8) to enter the sanctuary, while there is no entrance fee for Sri Lankan visitors.

Turtle Nesting Sites in Sri Lanka



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Using non-market valuation techniques to demand for conservation

Nine hundred foreign and local visitors to the Rekawa sanctuary and Bundala and Yala National Parks were asked how much they would be willing to pay for turtle management activities. Specifically, they were asked about their willingness to pay a higher fee to enter the sanctuary if tourism facilities at the sanctuary (including clean toilets, visitor centers and a nature guide service) were improved and if additional conservation initiatives were undertaken to reduce poaching of eggs and turtles and to ensure that nests and hatchlings are protected by locals. The information was statistically analyzed using non-market valuation techniques.

Findings

A majority (63%) of visitors was willing to pay an entrance fee to support turtle conservation and improved visitor facilities at Rekawa sanctuary. In particular, local visitors were willing to pay LKR 143 (USD 1) to enter the sanctuary, while foreign visitors, on average, were willing to be charged USD 19 in fees. With this pricing strategy, even though visitor numbers would fall somewhat, annual revenues would increase by LKR 70 million (USD 0.5 million).

In order to improve tourism infrastructure and increase turtle protection, the government would have to incur additional investment and maintenance costs. An estimated LKR 15.5 million in capital expenditures plus annual recurrent expenditure of LKR 9 million is likely. These expenditures are low compared to the revenues that would be obtained through the new pricing structure. Thus, it is economically feasible to improve infrastructure and conservation activities at Rekawa.

Recommendations

The study recommends a re-designing of the entry fees for the Rekawa sanctuary. This will help increase revenues, which can be used to improve sanctuary facilities, promote and organize turtle watching and secure the cooperation of low-income fishermen in turtle conservation.

New incentive mechanisms can be put in place to enable local communities to get involved in turtle conservation. For example, local young people could be trained and employed as guides, interpreters and nest protectors. Furthermore, it would be useful to establish a village-level welfare fund to improve the infrastructure in nearby Rekawa village. By allocating a portion of the entry fee revenues to local development, the government could accomplish the twin objectives of providing local employment and ensuring the conservation of marine turtles.

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