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Connecting people to nature: A need of the hour for Sri Lanka

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By Kanchana Wickramasinghe

This year's World Environment Day – 5 June – is celebrated under the theme 'Connecting People to Nature'.

People are reliant on numerous benefits or ecosystem services offered by the nature. The ecosystem services range from provision of food for sustenance to provision of cultural services such as recreational experiences.

However, a long lasting connection between people and nature requires careful and responsible behaviour of humans in all activities that involve nature. The responsibility lies with all sects of the society, ranging from the individuals, corporates, civil society and the government.

There is enough evidence to show that lack of true connectivity between people and nature causes negative implications for development. A meaningful connectivity between people and nature leads to informed decisions regarding the human activities that involve nature. This avoids unsustainable activities that destroy nature, and contributes effectively towards sustainable development.

No or lack of connectivity

Nature-based tourism is one of the activities which indicate people's desire to experience the nature. On the other hand, tourism businesses are undeniably dependent on the recreational services offered by the ecosystems. Therefore, a vital role has to be played by the visitors to minimise their impacts on the nature.

As a concerned villager who serves as a local committee member in promoting nature-based tourism in a rural area in Kurunegala pointed out, "Managing the local tourists is the most challengeable thing for us. They leave polythene and bottles that destroys the beauty of the environment. They only think about their day of enjoyment." This has been the case for nature tourism sites in many parts of the country.

An IPS study (<http://www.dwc.gov.lk/documents/Wildlife2014.pdf>) based on the Bar Reef in Kalpitiya revealed the negative implications of the ongoing tourism activities on the ecosystem. The Bar Reef has become a polluted area due to irresponsible activities of tourists.

A tour operator who owns a small scale boat service noted: "It's our people who pollute the environment most, not the foreigners."

The real aesthetic value of the nature sites decreases due to pollution. Evidently, a substantial problem faced by the tourism industry in Sri Lanka is local visitors' responsibility to keep the natural environment intact.

Furthermore, people's connectivity with the environment is important in every aspect of tourism, not only in nature sites. Patrons of hotels can also contribute by being mindful of their water and energy consumption and using these resources responsibly. A recent IPS research (http://sandeeonline.org/publicationdetails_disp.php?pcid=1&pid=1098) highlighted that certain practices to increase the efficiency of water usage will work better if users extend their cooperation by conserving water.

The recent tragedy in the Meethotamulla garbage dump is an ideal example of the devastating consequences caused by negligent behaviour of people. Citizens are aware of the impacts of improper waste management but only a few households are making an effort to convert waste into environmentally-friendly compost.

While there can be certain constraints that limit such attempts by individuals, households can contribute towards waste segregation and responsible management of waste.

Environmental literacy

The issues posed by people's lack of connectivity to nature call for the promotion of environmental literacy in Sri Lanka. Knowledge about the natural environment and related issues only form a part of the concept of environmental literacy.

An environmentally literate person should be able to make decisions using this knowledge and be willing to contribute towards environmental sustainability. Thus, while environmental literacy begins with knowledge, it is completed only with behavioural aspects which are vital for environmental sustainability.

It is unlikely that many individuals are unaware of the environmental impact of certain activities. The problem occurs when it comes to responsible behaviour. Therefore, though environmental education and awareness have always been an important element in environmental policies, the ultimate policy goals are yet to be achieved.

The UN Sustainable Development Goals also recognises the importance of environmental awareness under Goal 12, which deals with sustainable consumption, and production, and under Goal 13 which deals with climate change. The Target 12.8 says "by 2030 ensure that people everywhere have the relevant information and awareness for sustainable development and lifestyles in harmony with nature". The Target 13.3 says "improve education, awareness raising and human and institutional capacity on climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction, and early warning".

OECD (2012) (<https://www.oecd.org/dac/50526354.pdf>) which highlights directives for policy makers in developing countries, considers the "shifting science, research, educational and training priorities to support the transition to a green economy" as one of the six enabling conditions for green growth in developing countries.

Important to consider

Promotion of environmental literacy among the various groups, ranging from individuals to corporates, and policy makers, is a crucial requirement in achieving connectivity to nature and sustainable development. Ad hoc awareness programmes help to get rid of certain issues in the short term. However, in order to bridge the connectivity gap between the people and nature, a far-sighted comprehensive programme should be in place.

Certain elements of environmental literacy are already embedded in the school curricula. The formal education system should not be limited to enhance awareness on environmental issues but also should effectively contribute to behavioural changes. The environmental literacy plans should be comprehensive and go in line with other sustainable development objectives to make them feasible in practical applications.

The most common cause for many environmental problems is considering negative environmental impacts as an after-thought. Improved environmental literacy can guide the policy makers and planners to make informed decisions considering nature as an integral part of sustainable development.

The latest developments in sustainable tourism aim to encourage the visitors to contribute towards conservation, without limiting themselves to simply minimising their impact on the natural environment. This is a critical element of ecotourism activities. Tourism itself can be used as a tool to nurture green thinking among the visitors, and make them actively contribute towards conservation and preservation of environment.

Enhancement of environmental literacy at all levels should be undertaken as a long term plan. Until environmental literacy delivers its intended benefits, it is important to have an effective law enforcement system to minimise the negative environmental impacts in the short run.

Effective enforcement of regulations can also lead to change the behaviour of citizens towards environmentally friendly approaches.

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