

CROWDING OUT THE WILDLIFE: Controlling Visitation in Yala

In December 2016, a committee of relevant stakeholders, including representatives of safari jeep drivers, was appointed by the then Prime Minister to look into the problems caused by over-visitation of the Yala National Park; to try and reverse the poor international image that it had begun to receive and to prepare a plan of action to reverse this trend. Visitors to this island were beginning to specifically state that while wanting to experience the wildlife of Sri Lanka, they did not wish to visit Yala due to its 'Bad Press' from previous visitors. This was despite them having seen most of the wildlife of the Park, including the leopard, elusive in most other parts of the world but readily seen during the day in Yala. Thus, "*An Action Plan for Improving the Overall Wildlife Tourism Experience in Yala National Park*" was developed. This comprehensive document addressed the needs of all of the stakeholders while ensuring the protection and wellbeing of the ecology of the Park and its wild inhabitants. Yet, as with many other such progressive initiatives, nothing was done to act on it, and nothing probably will, especially as the country is now under different leadership. Despite the regime under which the Action Plan was developed, it has no politically motivated recommendations. It is in the interest of the current regime to improve the quality of the wildlife viewing experience in Sri Lanka's premier National Park so that the country can earn much needed foreign revenue not just today, but in the future too.

Back to the Bad Old Days...



As Tourism, and other related industries, reel under the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and are eagerly seeking to recommence their operations, it sadly seems that lessons have not been learned, with a return to an emphasis on quantity rather than quality. The 'Quantity' that we attract are neither high-spending nor likely to return, and no long-term plans seem to have been made or implemented, to attract and retain the 'Quality'. If example were needed, visitors to the Yala National Park could experience it firsthand. At special sightings, especially that of leopards, jeeps rush to the location in great number, and mayhem ensues as they jockey for position, at speed and with much noise. Over the New Year holidays, fear registered on the faces of several of the visitors caught within this vortex of human selfishness, especially as their drivers refused to hear their pleas for constraint. The leopards of Yala have become extremely tolerant of these noisy intruders into their natural lives, perhaps too accustomed, which could spell future disaster of a different kind. Yet, though the sightings were special, and many would have left with good photographs and videos of them, what was the quality of the experience, especially that of those from overseas? Rather than photograph the leopards, several of them were taking videos of



the bedlam unfolding before them. When these pictures are posted on social media, as they will, Sri Lanka will be the loser.

...Or move forward to something better?

This time of reduced visitation was an ideal time for the implementation of the recommendations made by the Special Committee. They were practical and feasible - for the short, medium and long-terms. The driving force behind it was not to put people out of business but to control it by bringing order and discipline to the behaviour of safari jeep drivers, to provide as much pleasure to the visitor without jeopardizing the wellbeing of the Park and its wildlife. Some of the strategies recommended included:

1. *Department of Wildlife Conservation (DWC) officials to be empowered to enforce regulations without political backlash. Strict penalties to be imposed on violations, with disincentives for habitual violators.*
2. *DWC guides to be trained to manage overcrowding at wildlife sightings without altering animal behaviour or scaring away the animals.*
3. *Develop a plan for a wilderness experience in Blocks 3 & 4 to encourage visitation until wildlife gets habituated and sightings improve.*
4. *All commercial safari vehicle drivers to attend a Nature Interpretation Training program (NIP) on park rules and driver behaviour, as well as animal behaviour to obtain a license designated as a Certified Safari Driver... A code of ethics for drivers has to be introduced during the training program.*
5. *Only certified Safari Drivers will be permitted to drive commercial safari jeeps inside the Yala National Park.*



6. *Work with the private sector to establish a Guide/Tracker Training School to reduce the shortage of Naturalists.*
7. *Tourism Industry to take action to reduce mass tourism in Yala Block 1 by marketing other national parks.*

Is there the will?

Point 1 of the list above is, perhaps, the most important. Nothing is possible without the political will to make it happen and there are too many with vested interests in doing nothing. As it was, over the New Year holidays, a prominent politician did what he wished much to the disgust of the onlookers. The overseas visitors who witnessed this would have left with justifiably prejudiced notions on the behaviour of Sri Lanka's politicians.

It is still not too late to do something if the DWC and SLT put their efforts into it. However, as per the introduction of the Committee Report, the following principle must be held as inviolable,

While wildlife tourism in Sri Lanka has tremendous economic potential, the purpose of establishing national parks is for the conservation and protection of wildlife. Therefore, wildlife tourism should not be promoted at the expense of conservation. Ensuring the sustainability of the wildlife tourism industry is paramount.

By Rohan Wijesinha, former Hon. General Secretary and Member of Human-Elephant Conflict Subcommittee of the Wildlife and Nature Protection Society

This article appeared in the Environmental Messenger on the 11th of January 2022