

Reinforcing Conservation with Faith and Beliefs: The Potential of the Peak Wilderness Sanctuary in the Central Highlands of Sri Lanka World Heritage Site

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■ Abstract

The cultural, spiritual, and historical beliefs revolving around the Peak Wilderness Sanctuary, in the Central Highlands of Sri Lanka World Heritage Site, attracts millions of pilgrims. The symbolic footprint on the peak is worshiped, by various religions, as a sacred footprint of: Lord Buddha by the Buddhists, Adam by the Muslims (hence the name “Adam’s Peak”), St. Thomas by the Christians, and Lord Siva by the Hindus. The area is a designated sanctuary under the jurisdiction of the Department of Wildlife Conservation. It includes some of the least disturbed sub-montane and montane rain forests of Sri Lanka and is considered as a “super biodiversity hotspot” within the Western Ghats and Sri Lanka biodiversity hotspot. Although the sacredness of the peak, as held by three major religions, has afforded some degree of protection to the site, it is still threatened by multiple issues that hinder effective conservation management. The Peak Wilderness Sanctuary provides a great potential to understand the influence of religious beliefs and practices on biodiversity conservation as well as develop and implement a management approach that takes these influences into account.

KEY WORDS: Peak Wilderness, Biodiversity, Conservation, Religious faiths

■ 1. Introduction

1.1 Overview of the World Heritage Site

Located in the south-central part of the island, the Central Highlands of Sri Lanka’s landscape was inscribed as a World Heritage site in 2010, under criteria x and xi. The World Heritage Site, which is a serial property, includes the Peak Wilderness

Protected Area, the Horton Plains National Park,

and the Knuckles Conservation Forest, among other protected forest patches (UNESCO World Heritage Centre 2017). Out of all three components, the Peak Wilderness Sanctuary and the famous “Sri Pada” mountain (the peak of sacred footprint), which is the fourth highest mountain in Sri Lanka, attracts the highest worldwide attention due to its religious significance, as well as its unique biodiversity [Fig. 1]. According to Mahawanshaya, in the epic documentation of the historical record of Sri Lanka, which almost dates as far back as the Lord Buddha’s

full moon to the May full moon) to revere the footprint that lies on the top of the hill. Sri Pada is valued as a symbol of interfaith harmony among many religions existing in Sri Lanka and is known as the only mountain in the world considered sacred by the followers of four major faiths in the world (Jayathilake 2017). The symbolic footprint on the peak is worshiped as the footprint of: Lord Buddha by the Buddhists, Adam by the Muslims (hence the name "Adam's peak"), St. Thomas by the Christians, and Lord Siva by the Hindus (Wickramasinghe 2002). The Sri Pada pilgrimage is punctuated with tradition as the pilgrims practice a series of rituals during their journey to the peak. This religious significance has led to relatively minimum active destruction of the Sri Pada Mountain and its forest, but it is not adequate. Restraints to prevent environmental damage in the Peak Wilderness often springs from fear of gods and spirits believed to be inhabiting the mountain or fear of sinning. At the Peak Wilderness Sanctuary, it is observed that the older generations often are more responsible as custodians of their sacred places in comparison to many of the younger generations, who veer from such beliefs (Dudley et al. 2005). History marks that many distinguished persons, like Ibn Batuta, the Arab traveler, and Marco Polo, have climbed Sri Pada. It is described by Sinbad the Sailor in "One Thousand and One Arabian Nights" that "the island of Serendib lie under the equinoctial line bounded by a lofty mountain and a deep valley. The mountain is conspicuous from a distance of three days and it contains many rubies and other minerals, and spice trees of all sorts. I ascended that mountain and solaced myself with a view of its marvels which are indescribable" (Living Heritage Network 2017).

Sri Pada is also called Samanala Kanda (Butterfly Mountain) due to the mass movement / migrations of butterflies towards the mountain during the pilgrimage season, as it is in the pathway of the annual butterfly migration route. Further, the Peak Wilderness Sanctuary and the Horton Plains National Park are of great hydrological importance, as several major rivers of the island - The Kalu, Kelani, and Walawe rivers - are formed within these catchments. The upper catchment of these rivers spreads across the southern slopes of the mountains, inculcating a dissect landscape through dense drainage. Therefore, over a thousand years this acts as the central water catchment of the country which

feeds the major paddy agricultural zones in the north and north central part of Sri Lanka.

■ 3. Current management arrangements

In the early 1900s, all of the forest reserves of the country belonged to the Forest Department under the Forest ordinance (No.16 of 1907). On October 25, 1940 the Peak Wilderness was designated as a sanctuary (Gazette Notification No. 8,675) under the jurisdiction of Department of Wildlife Conservation. From 2001 to 2008, a comprehensive management plan, including a complete resource inventory, was developed for the sanctuary under the Sri Lanka Protected Area Management and Wildlife Conservation Project. Recognizing the sensitivity and the biodiversity value of the ecosystem, a part of the Peak Wilderness Sanctuary was re-designated as a nature reserve in 2007 (De Alwis et al. 2007).

In addition, the responsibility for stewardship is shared among several government agencies, including the Central Environmental Authority and several distinguished individuals. These include the Chief Monk of the Sri Pada temple, as well as residents whose livelihoods depend on the tea plantations (small holders or working under the plantation companies). Altogether, approximately fifteen sub-communities live around the area.

■ 4. Current State of Conservation and Challenges for Continuity

At present, the Department of Wildlife is upgrading the existing management plan for the sanctuary, with establishment of an information center at the entrance point as one of the priority activities. Awareness-raising and publicity is also conducted as a better management tool. Additionally, the religious beliefs related to the Peak Wilderness hold a great potential to understand, develop, and implement people centered conservation approaches (Taylor 2013). Religious faiths protect land through multiple reasons which are often different from the ordinary reasons for protected area management. Awareness development, therefore, is useful to convince the people who visit this heritage site for spiritual reasons of the meaningfulness of this place and the benefits it could bring, thus securing their active participation in the protection process.

The peak is worshiped by many, attracting 2 to 3.5 million people annually, following the three recognized trails towards the peak. Most of these pilgrims consist of locals; however, China, India, Western Europe, Germany, and Australia remain as

the top five regions/countries that send tourists to the site (Annual Regional Statistical Reports 2016). The place is often subjected to over-visitation and its side effects. The accumulation of polythene and plastic waste [Fig. 2] is a major dilemma which has



Figure 2: Volunteers cleaning up the Adams peak trail (Photograph by Harindra Fonseka, Gudppl 2017)



Figure 3: Yellow eared bulbuls (a highland endemic bird of Sri Lanka) picking on a pile of garbage captured during the Hatton trail of Adams peak May 2016 (Photograph by Sajith Madushan Abeygunawardana).

been recognized as one of the unforeseen impacts and hinders the effective conservation of the place. Noise pollution, generated by the congested human force along the peak trail, has disturbed this tender ecosystem, which is unique and rich in its endemism. Plucking trees and flowers of sometimes endemic or rare flora species is also another issue faced due to visitors who lack awareness of the place.

The management engages in numerous activities during the peak pilgrimage period to facilitate the pilgrims. These include: building temporary infrastructures to accommodate people, managing transportation, managing temporary commercial structures, and maintaining visitor facilities (resting, first aid, sanitary). Since over the years it has been proven that participatory approaches are the best way to manage the accumulated waste, in 2012 a collaborative project was launched between the Central Environmental Authority and various volunteering parties [Fig. 3], such as private sector organizations, people from environmental NGOs, local community groups, youth parties, and university students, to clean the trails. Annually, these teams of volunteers successfully remove one to two tons of polythene and other waste items from the World Heritage Site (Daily Mirror 2014). Partly, the polythene and the plastic collected are handed over to recyclers while the rest is sent to the Puttalam Cement Corporation to use as fuel for the incineration process.

■ 5. Recommendations

5.1 Identifying the potential of using the sacredness of the land as a tool of conservation.

Sacred natural sites are almost certainly the world's oldest form of habitat protection (Dudley et al. 2009). The sacredness has given the Peak Wilderness Sanctuary an additional degree of protection through restrictions springing from beliefs. According to Dudley et al. (2009) religious faiths can influence biodiversity conservation in protected areas, sometimes beyond what regulations can achieve. First, biodiversity conservation is influenced through the direct, and often effective, protection afforded to wild species in sacred natural sites and in semi-natural habitats around religious buildings. Second, religious faiths have a profound impact on attitudes

regarding the protection of the natural world through their philosophy, teachings, investment choices, approaches to land they control, and religious-based management systems. The Peak Wilderness fulfils both requirements by being a historical place of belief and a declared sanctuary under the fauna and flora protection ordinance of Sri Lanka, which is one of the strongest fauna and flora protection legislations existing to date within Asia. However, considering the rich biodiversity of the location and the immense pressure from pilgrims, it is necessary to intensify the conservation measures by systematically combining the advantages of faith and regulations. Biodiversity conservation has been part of Sri Lankan culture since ancient times, but the uniqueness of Sri Pada as a symbol of inter-faith harmony can be developed into a perfect conservation model with more effort. One major difficulty encountered by conservation practitioners is convincing people to conserve habitats based on scientific arguments regarding their biodiversity value. Linking cultural values with land use and conservation values (Ontario Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport 2017) as well as incorporating these links into policy frameworks is one method that can be proposed. However, presenting conservation goals in the context of religious beliefs offers the potential to be clearly understood by a wide range of people and could be used as the ideal soil on which seeds of protection could be cultivated. The influence and the potential held by Sri Pada is demonstrated in the establishment of similar types of shrines with a historic footprint symbol in south-east Asian region (Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia) after the thirteenth century. This place is the only one of its kind, which unites different traditions and belongs to four main religions for reverence purposes. This is a set example that exhibits the potential of faith to facilitate religious tolerance and the exceptional synergy of different cultural groups (UNESCO World Heritage Centre 2018).

5.2 Incorporating lessons learnt from managing the Peak Wilderness in to the big picture

According to Verschuuren et al. (2007), the 1994 IUCN protected area categories should be reviewed to ensure the existing protected area systems, accurate designation, and their objective setting. The conservation needs and resource allocations

for management planning, zoning, and training of managers must be prioritized, with attention paid to the full spectrum of material, cultural, and spiritual values of the existing protected areas, especially at the local level. Clear specification of the identity values and existence value of the site, which define the people's willingness to pay and their bond to the place through myth, legend, or history, is crucial when defining a management plan for a site with such values (Harmon and Putney 2003). This coincides with the suggestions for better management and conservation proposed by the Department Wildlife Conservation officers of the Peak Wilderness Sanctuary during discussion sessions. Further, they highlight the need to restrict off-season visitations. In a nutshell, lessons learnt from the conservation management of the Peak Wilderness site could be incorporated into the management of other protected areas, through the recognition of their cultural and spiritual values. Visitor management to reduce their impact on biodiversity, management of trails and walking paths, public engagement in pollution control, creating avenues of income generation for local communities are some of the examples of steps to be taken.

Conservation has always been a "people's function." Combining the regulations of a country with the beliefs of the people, that reach out to the core of them, can create a successful model to safeguard nature for the generations to come (Berkes 2007).

5.3 Converting the practitioners and the academics from knowledge accumulators to knowledge disseminators.

Effective management of any resource requires addressing the knowledge gaps and research needs. Limited community awareness about heritage often leads to misinterpretation and destruction. A well-informed community develops motivation for active engagement in the conservation process. Also, defining the nature of the relationship between individual stakeholders and Sri Pada enables the development of more effective strategies, through which each party can benefit from the Peak Wilderness Sanctuary. Often there is a knowledge and application gap between academics, practitioners, and communities at the grassroots level. Discussed below are a few recommendations to engage academic and practitioners to act as



Figure 4: Top view: Peak Wilderness Sanctuary and Adams Peak (Source: <http://all.lk/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/adams-peak>; Copyright © 2017 all.lk)

mediators between the different interested parties and to enhance the effectiveness of the management process. The Peak Wilderness provides an ideal setup for bridging this gap as it draws people from different social strata, varied interest, and different levels of understanding from all over the country. If well planned, people would depart from the Peak Wilderness, not just with renewed faith, but with refreshed knowledge as well.

A great technique for extracting accurate information on a system or a process is to conduct questionnaires and discussions with the ground level people who interact with the property in their everyday life (MoMD&E 2016). This group of people includes, for example, the surrounding community, local governmental bodies, local conservation bodies, NGOs and youth groups, and religious personnel, if any. This will reveal the timely issues or unforeseen pressures and threats on the heritage while also revealing the practical solutions that were not accounted for in strategic documents or management plans.

Another approach is to add the essence of the practitioner's knowledge and calibrate the information extracted from the field. This could be done with existing literature and available information or by consulting experts. This can be considered the brainstorming session, which would eventually lead to the development of the sustainable means of effective management of a heritage place while securing the religious rights of the people. The participatory waste management project at the Peak Wilderness site is a result of this approach.

The use of modern technology can also enhance the conservation and sustainable utilization of these sacred grounds. The use of automated cameras for monitoring, such as the Spatial Monitoring and Reporting Tool (SMART) to patrol this sacred place to minimize the negative impacts on the biodiversity is just one example. Identifying collaborators, administrators, and resource persons with potential to provide financial and technical support can be another crucial step. This can be achieved through developing a strong stakeholder network. According to the Aichi targets Section E, of the Convention on Biological Diversity (2010), once access and benefit-sharing are identified,

the acquired resources can be directed to address knowledge gaps and preservation of traditional knowledge (Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity 2011).

5.4 Conclusion

The Peak Wilderness Sanctuary is a unique component of the Central Highlands of Sri Lanka World Heritage Site. It combines historical, cultural, environmental, and interfaith values in a single location, attracting thousands of people every year. Although faith plays a considerable role in conserving this location and its values, there are still some threats at large. While recognizing the beneficial actions and positive impacts of people's religious faith on the site, it is necessary to make the best use of the nature culture linkages through recognition, engagement, awareness development, and systematic planning. With more effort, the Peak Wilderness Sanctuary could be an ideal model to share with the global community, showing how faith and nature conservation could go hand in hand.

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