

Original Paper

Reasons behind the Passivity of Sri Lankan Youth on Eco-Consciousness

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Abstract

This paper explores the reasons behind the passivity of Sri Lankan youth on Eco Consciousness. Even though there are enough debates, researches and discussions about being conscious towards nature in Sri Lanka, the youth between 18-25 of age could be identified as apathetic or are as environmentally not savvy. Due to current Covid-19 pandemic situations they are more engrossed in internet since internet has overpowered the youth. With the emergence of new social media such as Instagram, Facebook etc., the Sri Lankan youth has totally neglected being close to nature and being sensitive towards environmental issues and crimes. Eco-consciousness among most Sri Lankans are visible only when certain environmental crisis comes into a discussion platform or forum. The actual eco-conscious population is either politically silenced or is totally fed up due to the lethargic responses from the responsible parties. Therefore, Eco criticism could be used in order to enhance their eco consciousness.

Keywords

eco consciousness, passivity, ecocriticism

1. Introduction

Ecological consciousness is understood as a reflection of the psyche of a variety of man's relationship with nature, which mediate its behavior in the "natural world", and express axiological position of the subject of consciousness in relation to the natural world (Panov, 2013). Studies show that environmental consciousness is a complex mental education, which includes cognitive, regulatory, emotional, ethical, and other aspects.

"The environmental consciousness initially explicated or as given of individual consciousness (the

product of the individual), or in the form of consciousness, as it should be in accordance with ecological concepts. And then, depending on the preferences of a copyright examination and diagnosis of environmental consciousness are the some of the functions of consciousness (reflectivity, regulatory, reflective, productive), or its components, or the ratio of the conscious and the unconscious etc.” (Dearayabo et al., 1996).

Eco criticism is one of the youngest revisionist movements which could change the minds and attitudes of people (Kumar, 2016). The term eco criticism was first coined by William Rheckert in his critical writing *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* in 1978.

The initial step to integrating ecological thinking into application involves understanding the fundamentals of ecology and eco systems. Ecology demonstrates how eco-systems are not just a collection of species, but are also relational systems that connect humans, as organic systems, with animals and plants. (He’s and Du Plessis, 2014).

It is clear that eco consciousness requires a broad identity in how humans see themselves in relationship to the world around them. He’s and Du Plessis explain “as one’s identity expands, so does one’s view of the world. With these changed perceptions also come a change in values, behaviors and possible leverage points” (He’s et al., 2014, p. 04)

Ecocriticism emphasizes on eco-consciousness and removes ego consciousness. Even though most of the other countries cater to the need of educating the youth on ecological issues through study courses in their higher education, in Sri Lanka it is not visible in practice according to the knowledge of the researcher. Therefore, this study attempts to enhance the eco consciousness of the Sri Lankan youth in higher education sector.

1.1 Introduction to the Problem

1.1.1 Environmental Degradation in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is a third world country and is now industrially becoming a developing country since the 1980s. (UNCTAD, 2017) Most of the people about three-fourths of its population depends directly for their livelihood on activities based on natural resource and the remainder of the population relies on these resources directly for food, fuel, industrial output, and recreation (Raven et al., 1998). Most of the natural resources including the environment in Sri Lanka are in a serious state of degradation. Environmental degradation is a very serious problem worldwide which covers a variety of issues including pollution, biodiversity loss, animal extinction, deforestation and desertification, global warming and a lot more (Brown et al., 1987; Tian et al., 2004). The environmental degradation is deterioration of the environment through depletion of resources which includes all the biotic and abiotic elements that form our surrounding such as air, water, soil, plant, animals, and all other living and non-living element of the planet of earth (Bourque et al., 2005; Malcolm & Pitelka, 2000). The use of agriculture fertilizer is a major factor for the degradation of soil quality, soil erosion, salinity and general loss of fertility of agricultural land as well as the loss of the production of the quality crop.

Similarly, groundwater aquifers are overexploited in many arid and semi-arid areas while surface water sources are highly polluted, and consequently, water for drinking and irrigation is increasingly getting scarce and polluted. Fishery yields are declining, and air quality is deteriorating. Increasing levels of air, water, and land pollution pose a serious threat to human health and longevity (Malik et al., 2014, 2018; Yadav et al., 2019).

1.1.2 Air Pollution

The increase in air pollution is a major problem for human health in most developing countries. Impacts of air pollution are not being properly addressed in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka is rapidly urbanizing and by 2050, an estimated 34% of the population will be settling in the cities when compared to 17% in 1990. (MOE & NR, 2008.) The most prominent reason for air pollution can be considered the huge amount of gas and particulate matter emissions from the industries, thermal power plants and automobiles. In 1990 the total number of vehicles was 0.9 million and in 2007 it exceeded 3.1 million. Now it has reached 7.7 million according to the literature (https://www.dmt.gov.lk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article, 2018.)

1.1.3 Water Pollution

Pollution of water resources is another serious environmental problem in Sri Lanka. In Sri Lanka, water pollution mainly results from domestic activities, agriculture and industries. According to the recently conducted water quality examination of lakes in Kandy and Nuwara Eliya districts, the dissolved oxygen content of the lakes is very low to keep a considerable fish population (Ileperuma and Japanese Agency for International Cooperation, 1998.) The main reason for this pollution is the discharge of sewage, domestic and industrial waste directly into the streams. Mostly the domestic and industrial waste collected by municipal councils dumps them directly into rivers or garbage disposal areas near the water streams. Then, seepage from the garbage areas mix-up with streams and this discharge highly contains bacteria, organic content and heavy metals. In Sri Lanka most of the industries also discharge untreated wastage in to water bodies.

1.1.4 Deforestation

About 200 years back, Sri Lanka was almost entirely covered by forests, that was 90% of the total land surface. With the increasing industrialization, the rate of deforestation rapidly accelerated. Timber demand increased and forests were cleared for various types of economical plantations, such as tea, rubber, coconut etc. Chena cultivation spread more widely with devastating results on the forest cover. The government established ply-wood industries and other timber companies that mainly contribute to the deforestation, especially in the wet zone. Sri Lanka's natural forest cover has reduced from 80% to 16% over the last 100 years. According to the government, forest cover has shrunk back a further 5% over the 1990s. In the 21st century, threats to natural forest persist unabated and the national forest estate continues to be rapidly eroded (Ranatunga et al., GC. Chemistry in Sri Lanka, 1996).

Disposal of solid waste has also become one of the major environmental issues in Sri Lanka. Dumping of garbage on roadsides and sensitive areas such as wetlands, marshy lands, reservations is a common practice adopted by the public (Bandara, 2008).

The threat on mangrove wetlands is another major environmental hazard in Sri Lanka. Large areas of mangrove have been lost in the conversion to agriculture, while elsewhere intensification of fuelwood use—sometimes exacerbated by the settlement of refugees—has led to degradation or loss. These losses have led to decline in fish yields. Conversion of mangroves to shrimp ponds began in the 1980s, and these are now widespread in most estuaries and lagoons, with mangroves remaining only as a narrow fringe that is often affected by pollution from aquaculture wastewater. Losses of an estimated 3000 hectares of mangroves to aquaculture in the Puttalam district led to a 60% drop in fish catches per unit effort and loss of jobs for some two-thirds of the estimated 28,000 fishermen in that area.

The Human–Elephant Conflict (HEC) is another direct result of habitat loss and the consequent competition for natural resources in Sri Lanka. According to the administrative entity relevant to the elephant corridors the Department of Wildlife Conservation, the North Western Province and the Mahaweli Region have seen over 50 elephant deaths annually. It is worth noting that there is an increasing trend in the Southern Province and the Eastern Province as well (<http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/asiapacific/2021>).

As per these considerations, Sri Lanka is one of the countries that are most vulnerable to climate change. Among a number of adverse effects of climate change, the rise of sea levels, the change of rainfall pattern (inducing more frequent and severe floods, droughts and landslides), and the bleaching and death of coral reefs are of the most concern in Sri Lanka.

The responsible media in Sri Lanka report that a road is cut through the Sinha Raja World Heritage Site forest with the approval of the President, illegal trawling in Puttalam is destroying fish stocks, elephants die painful deaths eating garbage dumped across the country, the Anavilundawa wetland sanctuary is bulldozed overnight for prawn farming, 90 percent of Sri Lanka's corals are dead, sand is mined continuously for mega projects (www.thediplomat.com, 2020). The list just goes on and on as the country heads for environmental ruin. Since environmental issues have been a concern for many years in Sri Lanka, many indicators show that quality of the environment in the country has been deteriorating for the last few decades. The challenge now is to find sensible and simple solutions to the existing environmental issues. Careful consideration of above environmental hazards and crimes indicate that the citizens of Sri Lanka need to redefine their roles and responsibilities as responsible individuals.

Devastating examples of the environmental degradation throughout Sri Lanka have been powerfully documented by groups of young photographers and environmental activists. Some of the issues covered by them include the impact of dumping garbage and medical waste along the Batticaloa lagoon, the lives of villagers living on the edge of a forest, how dumping garbage affects the people of a Jaffna

village, the consequences of hydropower expansion on the Mahaweli river and the massive destruction of our habitat in the name of development (www.https://openjicareport.jica.go.jp/pdf/12080032.pdf, 2012).

There are many who expose the problem to the society but few are concerned as to how to minimize these crimes and attempt to bring about a positive change in the society.

2. Pilot Study and Findings

The researcher conducted a pilot study to identify the environmental issues that exist as well as to identify the reasons why the youth are especially passive towards these issues.

The sample selected for the pilot study was a group of youngsters studying for their tertiary-level qualification at SLIATE reading for their Higher National Diplomas and a group of academics who work closely with these youngsters. The total number of the sample was twelve.

The sampling technique that was used for the pilot study was a mixture of convenient sampling and voluntary response sampling as these individuals happened to be the most accessible to the researcher and some participants volunteered themselves responding to a survey inquiry done by the researcher on social media.

Six discussion topics were selected and an online discussion was held with them. The participants were asked why the youngsters were passive towards these environmental problems and why or what reasons could possibly be affecting them, their suggestions to minimize these issues, whether they were aware of rules and regulations on preservation of nature in Sri Lanka, if they were exposed to subjects or subject components on responding positively towards nature and to be sensitive to environment in their formal education, whether they were engaging in such practices of preservation of nature, if so what were they, whether they think that it is a timely need to expose tertiary level students for being eco-friendly and eco conscious, how can they do that and possible suggestions. Finally, they were asked if there were any other influences which made tertiary level students more ego conscious than eco conscious.

3. Discussion

Through the pilot study the researcher found out that major environmental crimes were happening in the country and that the participants agreed that they were part of it. Majority of the participants agreed and stated that this was due to their individual negligence and not being aware of how to preserve the nature. At the same time, they stated that they did not have a proper motivation and initiative as to how to react positively towards these crimes especially as their parents were also not environmentally educated though they were literate. They also stated that they were not properly motivated by their adults including the schools. Most of them were in the opinion that in their secondary level they were engaging in activities to preserve nature through clubs and organizations like Youth Explorers,

Hanthana Preservation Association and Youth Environment Group, but they were not motivated to actively involve in any such organization once they were in tertiary level and even the subject components on preservation of nature were taught only in their secondary-level text books. They suggested that in tertiary-level they needed a strong motivation and they suggested that campaigns on preservation of nature, strong publicity and motivation through social media as well as Higher Educational Institutional- level campaigns could be introduced to minimize the passivity of tertiary-level students. Hundred percent of them agreed to the fact that they were unaware of the rules and regulations regarding preservation of nature. They added that media becoming politicized and promoting the more negative than the positive, political influences made the tertiary- level students more lethargic in engaging in preservation of nature.

4. Conclusion

According to the data revealed at the pilot study, it was found out that the youngsters are in the view that they do not have a proper initiative to engage actively with nature and to act positive towards nature crimes, especially due to the lack of knowledge in themselves, of their parents and other adults on these issues.

According to Sri Lankan media as well as active environmentalists, people are silent towards acute environmental problems such as painful deaths of elephants eating garbage dumped across the country, when Anavilundawa wetland sanctuary is bulldozed overnight for prawn farming, the day- to-day irresponsible dumping of garbage, when sand is mined continuously for mega projects and when Sinha Raja World heritage forest is being deforested ([www.https://youtube/goAh5d79Hcs](https://youtube/goAh5d79Hcs), 2021).

Though the people are aware of these issues they continue to be silent. Therefore, it is evident that these youngsters as well as the society at large today are not environmentally savvy and are very passive especially towards the current environmental issues and crimes.

If timely intervention is not carried out to minimize and mitigate this profound crisis Sri Lanka, its peoples' lives will soon be jeopardized resulting in a massive crisis.

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