

# Visitors' On-site Wildlife Viewing Experience and Becoming Africa in Asia: Empirical Evidence from Yala National Park, Sri Lanka

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2024.808081>

Received: 17 July 2024; Accepted: 24 July 2024; Published: 31 August 2024

## ABSTRACT

Sri Lanka has recognized wildlife tourism as an industry that may be utilized to deviate from conventional tourism offerings. The country possesses all the necessary attributes to emerge as Asia's next prominent wildlife destination, owing to its abundant natural resources. The key to achieving success in this endeavor is to offer a distinctive and quality wildlife experience for foreign visitors in the country's national parks. The flagship of this expedition, according to numerous wildlife and tourism specialists, is Yala National Park. Nevertheless, it is apparent that Yala National Park, the most frequented and highly regarded national park in Sri Lanka, is grappling with several significant challenges that adversely impact its global standing. It's still unknown if these problems affect how visitors view the wildlife in national parks. Thus, this study explores the main obstacles Yala National Park in Sri Lanka has faced from stakeholders' perspectives, how they affect park visitors' on-site wildlife viewing experiences, and the nation's efforts to become the world's top wildlife tourism destination. This study is conducted as a qualitative study and employs a single-case design. Data was gathered through in-depth interviews with 18 participants from nine stakeholder categories. These participants were in Tissamaharama, the nearest town to Yala National Park. Participants identified eight distinct categories of significant issues faced by Yala National Park. The study findings disclosed that these crucial concerns have had a detrimental impact on the overall quality of on-site wildlife viewing for foreign tourists, undermining the country's aspirations to be recognized as a premier global wildlife destination. The government and stakeholders of Yala National Park must comprehend this predicament swiftly. Resolving these vital concerns promptly is of utmost importance to enhance the on-site wildlife viewing experience for foreign visitors in Yala and position Sri Lanka as the Africa of Asia.

**Keywords:** Visitors' Wildlife Experience, Wildlife Tourism, On-site Viewing Experience, Wildlife-Experiencescape, Yala National Park, Sri Lanka

## INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka's National Parks have drawn people worldwide because of their picturesque landscapes and diverse wildlife. Both locals and foreign visitors have departed national parks with memorable experiences

and cherished memories. According to Pilapitiya (2023), wildlife tourism has the potential to be the main factor contributing to the expansion of tourism in Sri Lanka. Observing wildlife is a crucial aspect of Sri Lanka's tourism sector, with revenue from national parks primarily generated by international visitors (Prakash et al., 2018). Moreover, Pilapitiya (2023) stated that Sri Lanka is the top Asian country in the category of very easy-to-see (observability) wildlife and ranks first in wildlife tourist potential due to its unique resources. He emphasized Sri Lanka's potential to emerge as the second most sought-after global destination among wildlife enthusiasts outside of Africa. Yala National Park (YNP) is the leading safari destination in Sri Lanka. YNP was named sixth among the top national parks in the world (National Geographic and Yogerst, 2019). Angie Scott, an acclaimed photographer from Big Cat Diary, said, "If God created a patch of land for leopards on Earth, then it must be Yala". It is the oldest and second-largest national park in Sri Lanka and is extensively frequented by visitors. Boasting a diverse landscape and sheltering 44 mammals and 215 species of birds, it claims the highest leopard population density globally (Margherita, 2019). YNP attracted the highest number of foreign visitors in 2023, receiving 214,572. In 2023, the YNP contributed significantly to the country's tourism economy by generating over 1.7 billion rupees in foreign money, marking an 852% increase from 2020.

Nevertheless, due to developing issues, the park has faced scrutiny from residents and foreign visitors. As a result, the Sri Lankan tourism industry, which relies significantly on wildlife attractions, is at risk. YNP, which all stakeholders annually value at over Rs. 8 billion (Miththapala, 2017), is particularly vulnerable to the risk of losing its status as a preeminent wildlife travel destination on a global scale. Dr Pilapitiya, an environmental activist in Sri Lanka, stated that the remedial efforts outlined in a 2017 Action Plan were unsuccessful due to only partial implementation (Hettiarachchi, 2023). This Action Plan is being reexamined as the "Re-awakening Yala Program" per President Ranil Wickremesinghe's directive, with an updated implementation schedule extending from January 1, 2023, to December 31, 2028 (Hettiarachchi, 2023).

Previous research has examined the challenges in Yala, but it remains unclear whether these issues impact tourists' wildlife experience in national parks. Additionally, it is imperative to maintain updated knowledge regarding visitors' on-site wildlife viewing experience in YNP and how it affects the positioning and branding of a country as a top wildlife destination compared to other competitive destinations. Consequently, the primary objectives of this research are threefold: firstly, to identify the critical obstacles encountered by the YNP; secondly, to examine the consequential effects of these obstacles on park visitors' wildlife viewing experience while on-site; and finally, to investigate the extent to which the current wildlife experiences of visitors in Yala hinders the country's ambition to become one of the world's foremost wildlife attractions. Furthermore, this study also provides an initial data analysis to establish the foundation for an ongoing research project.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism is a sector that heavily relies on providing unique experiences to its customers, as it is essentially a business that markets and sells experiences (Binkhorst and Dekker, 2009; Ooi, 2005). The term "customer" in the travel and tourism industry is commonly used to refer to a visitor, tourist, or guest. According to Godovykh and Tasci (2020), customer experience in tourism is defined as "the totality of cognitive, affective, sensory, and conative responses on a spectrum of negative to positive, evoked by all stimuli encountered in pre, during, and post-phases of consumption affected by situational and brand-related factors filtered through personal differences of consumers, eventually resulting in differential outcomes related to consumers and brands" (p. 5). Ensuring a top-notch tourist experience is crucial for maintaining the travel and tourism sector (Miller et al. 2019). The tourist sector recognizes the importance of comprehending visitors' experience (Kurniasari, 2019). Le et al. (2019) propose tourism as a pioneering illustration of the experience economy, while Chang (2018) characterizes tourism as a phenomenon within the experience

economy.

Visitors to national parks perceive the wildlife experience as an important motivation for their visit (Scholtz et al., 2013). The demand for wildlife tourism is primarily driven by the experience provided to visitors, which depends entirely on the natural resources present in the location. Meanwhile, Curtin (2005) states that wildlife tourism creates a partly artificial experience because of tourism infrastructure, observation platforms, boardwalks, and tour groups. In other words, the wildlife's environment is shaped by both natural and man-made factors. Some of these elements may be vital or peripheral components of and directly or indirectly impact the experiencescape on which visitors' wildlife viewing experience is entirely based. According to Pizam & Tasci (2018), "experiencescape" is the sensory, functional, social, natural, and cultural stimuli in a product or service environment, surmounted with a culture of hospitality, all of which accrue to an experience for consumers, employees, and other stakeholders and result in positive or negative cognitive, affective, and behavioral reactions toward products, services, brands, and firms. Currently, most of these challenges that YNP faces are associated with its wildlife-experiencescape. Thus, stakeholders in the tourism industry in Sri Lanka should comprehend the concerns of each of these settings, which eventually impact visitors' wildlife viewing experience and their post-experience behaviours, such as satisfaction, revisit intention, and word-of-mouth recommendations.

## METHODOLOGY

This study utilized the qualitative single-case design as the research design. The YNP in Sri Lanka was chosen as the case for this study due to its extreme nature (Yin, 2018), represented by its distinctive challenges, exceptional natural resources, ability to generate foreign currency, and economic significance to stakeholders. This study considers the nine types of YNP stakeholders as the unit of analysis. The research data was collected in Tissamaharama, a city near YNP, where most facilitators for Yala visitors are located. The data was gathered through an in-depth interview with 18 individuals from different stakeholder categories, including travel agents, hoteliers, safari drivers, animal trackers, park officials, academics, wildlife experts, local visitors and foreign visitors (See Appendix A). Purposive and snowballing sample procedures were employed, and interviews were conducted from October to November 2023. The interviews focused on a specific set of predetermined questions, including the critical issues faced by YNP, tourists' viewing experience in YNP, and Sri Lanka's endeavor to establish itself as one of the premier wildlife destinations globally. The research questions differed somewhat for local and foreign visitors compared to the other study participants. A thirty-minute-long, on average, in-depth interview was conducted. The evidence was recorded and transcribed in audio format, and research findings were obtained through content analysis.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Critical issues faced by YNP

#### High vehicular congestion within the park

One of the study's primary objectives was to ascertain the critical challenges encountered by YNP as perceived by various stakeholders. According to most interviewees, the primary concern was the heavy traffic caused by jeep drivers within the park, which respondents believed to worsen during peak hours and prime seasons. Meanwhile, some respondents specify the same issue as "overcrowding."

*Things were worse in Yala than in Colombo during rush hour. (pers. comm. foreign visitor 1).*

*Overcrowding at Yala National Park has been a big problem for a long time (pers. comm, wildlife expert 1).*

The congestion within the park has several detrimental consequences. The respondents have revealed that these issues adversely affect visitors' wildlife viewing experience and satisfaction.

*Four hundred jeeps were already there by 9:30 am. It's just that the park is too small. I smelled and saw more diesel vehicles than Sri Lankan wildlife* (pers. comm, local visitor 1).

*I felt pretty lucky to have seen a leopard, but the careless driving and too many people around the animal ruined the experience for me.* (pers. comm. local visitor 1).

*At the spot where we were going, we were shocked by how many jeeps were already there. It took us at least 30 minutes to get to the front of the queue and get the best spot.* (pers. comm. local visitor 2).

Additionally, interviewees explained that overcrowding negatively affects the habitats and behaviours of animals and the execution of park management duties.

*Constant traffic is one of the main reasons why tourists are unhappy and also damages the protection of wildlife* (pers. comm. animal tracker 1).

*Congestion is the main problem. It's so hot that we have to close the park every day from noon to two o'clock because the animals need to be able to find shelter or water without getting disturbed by vehicles and people* (pers. comm, safari driver 1).

*When there is more traffic in the YNP some animals specially the sloth bear and also the other rare animals like black panther or leopards you know hide and also there can be some danger to some flora and fauna as well* (pers. comm. travel agent 1).

Yala has an area of around 130,000 hectares, consisting of a diverse combination of woodland, scrub jungle, grassland, tanks, and lagoons. YNP is organized into five blocks, and visitors are granted entry to Blocks 1 and 2. Respondents attributed the high number of visitors to Block 1 in Yala to the significant tourist influx for safaris, neglecting other blocks.

*Yala often faces overcrowding issues, especially during peak seasons which is December to April. This can lead to traffic congestion inside the park, long wait times at entrances, ticketing counters, and jeep queues inside the Block I* (per. comm, academic 1).

*Block 1 of Yala got too many visitors, while the animals in Blocks 3, 4, and 5 were not used to seeing vehicles* (pers. comm. wildlife expert 1).

Some responders mentioned the absence of rules and regulations restricting the daily number of vehicles allowed to enter the park and recommended that authorities promptly resolve the traffic issue.

*Some days, between 500 and 600 vehicles enter Yala. That's way too high; it should be no more than 150.* (per. comm. academic 2).

*A limit needs to be set so that animals are not disturbed. And rules must be made to stop some people (jeep drivers) from acting in dangerous ways* (pers. comm. foreign visitor 1).

### **Misbehavior of jeep drivers**

Respondents identified misbehavior by safari vehicle drivers as the second most significant issue faced by

YNP. They disclosed that this problem manifests in several forms and significantly impacts multiple parts. Respondents highlighted that the reckless driving behavior of jeep drivers is the most prominent issue related to their Misbehavior.

*Unfortunately, most of the safari drivers' disciplines in Yala are getting worse (pers. comm. travel agent 2).*

*Safari jeep drivers don't follow the rules when they see animals, going too fast and carelessly when they're trying to get to views, causing huge traffic jams, and disturbing wildlife during sighting (pers. comm. park official 2).*

*Some safari vehicles go over the speed limits on purpose, and the drivers don't care about the nature and animals in the park at all. (pers. comm. academic 1).*

*As he (jeep driver) drove us along the rough dirt road to the spot, we were on the edge of our seats. Aside from our own safety, what worried me was how easy it would be to hit an animal at that speed (pers. comm. local visitor 2).*

Multiple incidences were reported in Yala involving the killing of animals, including leopards, by a hit-and-run jeep.

*A speeding vehicle killed a young leopard after the park opened a few months ago. Every day at 6 pm, the park closes. Because of this, jeeps that get lost in the bush might speed their way out at closing time, which could cause accidents like this one (pers. comm. animal tracker 2).*

*A couple of years ago, a tour bus hit a group of deer on the road between Kirinda and Yala. The road is now a death trap for animals because the new carpeted roads let drivers go faster (pers. comm. park official 1).*

Some participants observed that some drivers used their phones while driving a vehicle. They mentioned that it usually occurred when one driver noticed a leopard and then informed the other drivers.

*Mobile phones play a big role in these Mad Max-like events in Yala because they're used to let people know when leopards have been seen (pers. comm. foreign visitors 1).*

*Suddenly, our driver started speeding up at a rate that I'm sure was faster than the 30 kph speed limit inside the park. While moving, our driver was on the phone with another ranger who was telling them about a leopard sighting (pers. comm. foreign visitor 2).*

*Another driver who had already seen a leopard called our driver. Our driver rushed the jeep to the scene. There is chaos because between twenty and thirty 4x4 safari jeeps were racing to catch a glimpse of the leopard before it disappears into the jungle (pers. comm. local visitor 2).*

*A lot of the time, drivers in Yala safari talk on the phone to other drivers after seeing a leopard. However, this could have both good and bad effects on tourists. Visitors will have a better chance of seeing the leopard if they can get to the spot as soon as possible, before other vehicle drivers show up. If they can't, it will be a waste of time (per. comm. tracker 2).*

Some interviewees noted that drivers are highly motivated by tips, but they said that most drivers do not display such behavior. This scenario is especially evident for international tourists.

*Some drivers are very interested in the tips they will get from foreign tourists. They act like they will give great customer service if the guest gives them money as tips, but they won't if they don't. It's a terrible*

*situation (pers. comm. hotelier 1)*

*In order to find that leopard that will earn them (drivers) extra tips, they will speed, and overtake other jeeps. (pers. comm. foreign visitor 2).*

Some interviewees mentioned that drivers use unethical ways to watch leopards. Although these methods are uncommon, there have been recorded incidents by the authorities.

*There were some situations where some drivers have used some traps such as dogs to get the sightings of the leopards (per. comm. park official 2)*

### **Inadequate qualifications and training for guides and drivers**

Respondents identified insufficient qualifications and training for guides (trackers) and drivers as a significant challenge encountered by YNP. Several respondents explained the numerous repercussions of this issue on other domains.

*Most of these jeep drivers are poorly educated and have not received proper training before they start their job (pers. comm. academic 1)*

*Right now, most of the drivers in Yala are learning how to be trackers by studying on their own or by going to one- or two-day workshops held by the Ruhuna Tourist Bureau Office. They should get a proper license from the Sri Lanka Tourist Board, but they don't have one (pers. comm. hotelier 2).*

*They (guides) don't have at least a small pocket guide about birds and other animals that lives in Yala. Only few have the ability to explain about animals and how they act in English. It is very important to explain what makes Yala National Park different from other national parks around the world for foreign visitors (pers. comm. hotelier 1).*

*They don't have enough qualifications and trainings to work as drivers and at least they should wear a proper dress and shoes (pers. comm. wildlife expert 2).*

Participants emphasized that the inadequate qualifications and training of wildlife guides (trackers) resulted in subpar interpretation and narrative construction performance.

*I thought we would be sitting next to a naturalist or a guide who could tell us about the park and the animals that live there. During the whole Yala jeep tour, we were only with the driver, though. He didn't speak English very well, which was a shame. He did pull over when he saw an animal, point in the right direction, name the animal, and let us take pictures. That was it (pers. comm. foreign visitor 2).*

*For example, there are places near lakes where tourists can have a great time, but only if the guides set the background. The guides should explain in a way that leaves out all the details of the environment so that the story and the moment are very clear to the tourists. If they don't, they might think that the driver is just sitting there for 15 or 20 minutes because he's lazy (pers. comm. wildlife expert 2)*

*During our tour yesterday, we had a driver whose job we thought it was to drive us around and describe us about the wildlife in Yala. But it was too bad that he was just driving and didn't tell us anything. He quickly stopped the jeep when he saw an animal and pointed his figure at it. This gave us a chance to take pictures, and then he drove off (pers. comm. local visitor 1).*

Participants stated that guides and drivers lacking sufficient qualifications and training have been compelled

to deliver inferior customer service to tourists.

*To be honest, some drivers don't know how to greet a customer when they see them for the first time (pers. comm. hotelier 1).*

*They should first study their guests, and it's important to know what they want and need from a wildlife trip because each one is different (pers. comm. travel agent 2).*

*In Yala, drivers also do the job of trackers. So, if they really want to be professional facilitators, they should get better at English language, enhance some scientific knowledge about flora and fauna, customer service, safety and some driving skills as well (pers. comm. wildlife expert 2).*

### **lack of sufficient physical and human resources in the park**

Almost all participants recognized the park's insufficient and substandard physical amenities as a significant obstacle. Participants' reactions to the issue covered various aspects. The respondents' comments highlighted the absence of an operational ticketing system and insufficient human capacity as important factors.

*There's a problem with giving guests tickets. Tourists have to wait in queue for longer. It gives tourists a terrible first impression (pers. comm. hotelier 2).*

*Our driver picked us up at 5 am from our hotel for our tour to Yala National Park. We got to the National Park's ticket office at 6 am. It was full already. A long wait of people made it take almost 40 minutes to get through (pers. comm. foreign visitor 1).*

*Actually, we need more staff. Especially for tickets issuing counters in peak hours and seasons (pers. comm. park official 2).*

*It's a mess getting tickets in Yala. The truth is that they should offer fast service, especially to foreign guests who pay high price for their tickets (pers. comm. travel agent 1).*

The respondents elaborate that a shortage of personnel is evident at the ticket-issuing counters and in multiple other areas within YNP.

*The park covers nearly 180,000 acres, and the staff that is there now is not enough to do the job. There are not enough workers at Yala National Park. This situation makes it hard to protect both wildlife and plants (pers. comm. wildlife expert 1).*

*There aren't enough wildlife guides working in YNP right now to meet the needs of the visitors. So, assigning a wildlife guide to each jeep is a problem (pers. comm. park official 1).*

*...we (wildlife officials) don't have enough staff or resources, like patrol vehicles, to keep tourists in check in the park. It's clear that there aren't enough wildlife guides, and it's not possible to get government approval for more recruitments (pers. comm. park official 2).*

The respondents emphasized many deficiencies in the park's physical infrastructure, including inadequate lavatory and dining facilities, poor road conditions, and other amenities.

*In one of my recent experiences in the park, they were nearly 25 tourists in the que for toilets. Suppose, if one visitor takes at least one minute for toilet, then most probably it will take more than 25 minutes for the last person to use the toilet. Besides toilets are not clean and wise than the public toilets in the country*

(pers. comm. safari driver 2).

*Toilets and bathrooms are important in a wildlife park for both the comfort of visitors and the protection of the environment. However, that has been a big problem in Yala Park because it hasn't built proper toilets and rest rooms for foreign tourists (pers. comm. academic 1).*

*In order to make the park better, there should be places to rest, bathrooms for tourists, gift shops or at least a kiosk, and proper dust bins (pers. comm. hotelier 1).*

*Even though the park is generating a lot of money from the foreign visitors especially, they do not maintain the roads. Most of the them are bumpy roads where visitors feel very uncomfortable to travel. They don't maintain drainages and lakes within the park and no underbrush treatments (pers. comm. hotelier 2).*

### **Excessive promotion of Yala as a place to see leopards**

Excessive marketing, the reputation of Yala as a destination for leopard sightings has been acknowledged by numerous participants. They elaborate on the fact that it occurs through personnel and non-personnel mechanisms.

*Before I left for Saffari, I always told them that if they were lucky, they might see a leopard in the park, and that there is a 50/50 chance that they would. This is what I say because I don't want to raise their expectations by making empty claims like most of other drivers (pers. comm. safari driver 1).*

*Some tourists don't really care if they see a leopard or not, but drivers are the ones who stress it a lot and have unrealistic hopes of seeing one (pers. comm. animal tracker 2).*

*YNP is being promoted as a spot to "sight leopards", it's become a status thing – everyone wants to put leopard shot on Facebook (pers. comm. academic 2).*

Respondents indicated they would not be disappointed if they could not spot a leopard in Yala, as they are familiar with the typical sightings in a natural environment such as a national park.

*There are so many other animals to see in the park that I wouldn't have been upset if I hadn't seen the leopard (pers. comm. foreign visitor 2).*

*YNP is home to more than 40 species of animals and 215 species of birds, including six endemic species. The landscapes, amphibians, and sloth bears are just a few of the other things that make it special. So why do we always market it as a place to see leopards? (pers. comm. wildlife expert 1).*

*As far as I know, Yala has more leopards per square kilometer than any other place in the world. But there are other things to see besides leopards (pers. comm. foreign visitor 2).*

### **Visitors' misconduct**

Interviews have recognized visitors' misbehavior as a critical challenge YNP encounters. They stated that the misbehavior of tourists with political sponsorship contributes to this issue.

*Last year, a group of people, including a son of a cabinet member, broke the rules when they went into YNP with luxury vehicles. This group did not follow what the wildlife officials told them to do and became a hot topic in the country (pers. comm. wildlife expert 2).*

*There are a lot of stories about VIP people's sons and their friends driving their own vehicles into YNP for*



*fun* (pers. comm. academic 2).

*Some Sri Lankan politicians' sons are treating Yala as their own private property. They think that they can do whatever they inside the park and park officials are helpless* (pers. comm. hotelier 2).

Respondents reported that the harassment of wildlife at sighting, feeding them, and altering their behaviours are other implications of this problem.

*Visitors' bad behavior has caused a lot of problems for the animals. Almost every day, we hear about guests who are acting badly and disturbing animals, sometimes even trying to feed them* (pers. comm. park official 2).

*There are some incidents reported where visitors have fed wild animals in the park. This could badly affect animals' behavior and it might make other visitors do the same* (pers. comm. park official 1).

*The wildlife officials recently caught two Italians in the park for catching endemic insects* (pers/ comm. academic 1).

### **Deforestation and illegal poaching**

Respondents reported that Deforestation and unlawful poaching are major concerns currently impacting YNP. Some areas of Yala mainly blocks 4,5 and 6, are vulnerable to illegal marijuana and chena cultivators, as they disclosed.

*Deforestation is going on in some parts of the buffer zone, which can hugely impact wildlife* (pers. comm. travel agent 1).

*Deforestation is one of the main problems the YNP has to deal with. People in the area are mostly taking down trees for farming, especially to grow cannabis and chena cultivations* (pers. comm. park official 1).

*Recently, we saw that almost a kilometer of land had been cleared in a certain spot near the YNP Buffer Zone. A lot of big trees were cut down and burned* (pers. comm. park official 2).

The other main concerns related to this issue are poachers and the bushmeat trade.

*As a side job, some cannabis growers also illegally kill animals for bushmeat* (pers. comm. park official 2).

### **Unnecessary political interventions**

Multiple interviewees noted that inappropriate political interventions occur frequently in YNP for various reasons. According to participants' points of view, unnecessary political interventions have manifested in numerous ways, including damaging parkland for cultivation and hotel construction, disrupting DWC administrative activities, exerting control over wildlife officers, and granting permission to friends, relatives, and children to engage in activities within the park premises.

*People who cut down trees sometimes use big machines to do the damage to the park. And some people with ties to powerful government officials damage the park so that hotels can be built there* (pers. comm. wildlife expert 1).

*Trees were cut down in the Yala buffer zone, and people in the area say that this would not have been possible without help from the government ministers* (pers. comm. animal tracker 1).

*The DWC doesn't have the freedom to control tourism in Yala. Unfair rules are being put in place because*

of political interference and favoritism (pers. comm. academic 2).

They (government) influence the wildlife department and also, they use the political powers to control the wildlife officers and sometimes you know because of their power wildlife officer can't even take some initiatives or actions against them (pers. comm. travel agent 1).

A lot of the time, we hear that VIP children and their friends sneak into Sri Lankan national parks in private vehicles to have fun. It is the same in Yala and we witnessed a couple incidents recently (pers. comm. academic 2).

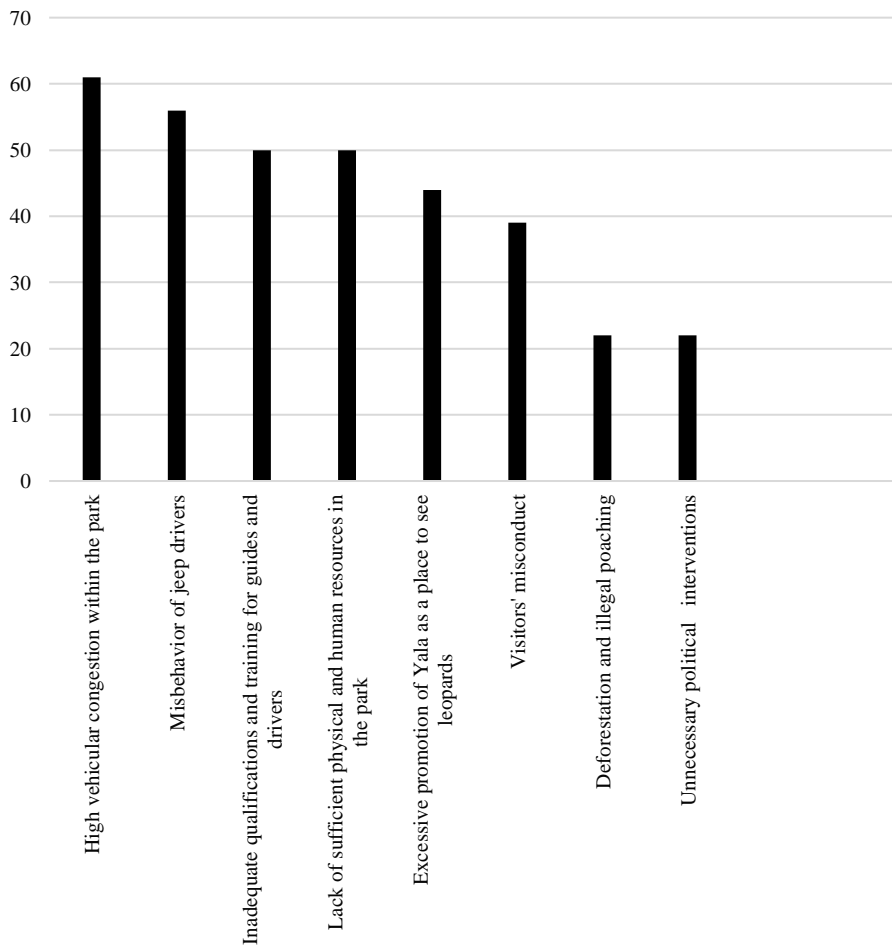


Figure 1. The critical issues encountered by YNP

Source: Author's Work

Note: Participants identified a total of 8 distinct categories of significant issues faced by YNP. Figure 1 presents the issues in a prioritized order, from left to right, based on the participants' perceived importance. Several primary issues have resulted in various secondary issues (See Appendix B). Some individuals with specialized knowledge provided a detailed explanation addressing specific issues instead of discussing all issues.

### How these issues impact foreign visitors' on-site wildlife viewing experience

The second aim of this study is to know whether critical issues encountered by YNP impact the on-site wildlife viewing experience of foreign visitors. Developing and providing distinctive customer experiences

is the crucial sustained competitive advantage for numerous firms, particularly in the tourist sector. Studying how these issues affect visitors' experience offers a comprehensive insight for all stakeholders in the wildlife tourism business.

Most participants stated that the significant challenges outlined above negatively impact the wildlife viewing experience of international visitors at YNP. They concluded that the on-site wildlife viewing experience YNP offers foreign visitors is average and of poor quality.

*Wildlife lovers are coming from all over the world to see this park, but nothing has been done to make it better and to give a memorable experience to them by the government (pers. comm. academic 1).*

*What tourists are having as an experience in YNP is not acceptable at the moment. Most of these problems have made their time in Yala less enjoyable, especially for foreign tourists (pers. comm. travel agent 2).*

*These tourists have been to other wildlife sites around the world and would compare their experience with ours, and they won't come back if we're not giving them the best experience (pers. comm. animal tracker 1).*

*There are problems like these that need to be fixed so that tourists have a better experience and the park and government can get more benefits (pers. comm. local visitor 1)*

Respondents further clarified that it significantly impacts visitors' post-experience behaviours, including satisfaction, intention to revisit, referrals, and word-of-mouth communication in the long term.

*The most dangerous thing is that YNP's reputation as a top place to see wildlife is hurt. People who might be coming may be skipped if the word gets around the world (pers. comm. travel agent 2).*

*We need quality experiences so that international tourists will keep coming back (pers. comm. wildlife expert 1).*

*Visitors' experiences at a national park can be greatly affected by inadequate infrastructure and bad services (pers. comm. academic 1).*

*A lot of people who visited the park said they wouldn't go back because, even though they saw some leopards, it wasn't worth it for them... making their overall experience less enjoyable will make people think badly of the park (pers. comm. wildlife expert 2).*

*How the contemporary wildlife experience in YNP influences Sri Lanka's effort to emergence as one of the world's premier wildlife destinations*

The Sri Lankan government acknowledges the need for the country's tourism industry to transition from traditional Sun, Sand, and Sea (3S's) tourism to specialist (niche) segments catering to a high-end clientele. In 2000, the Sri Lankan government recognized wildlife tourism as a priority. Providing a unique and high-quality wildlife experience for foreign tourists is a successful approach to marketing a country as a tourist hotspot globally and gaining a sustainable competitive edge. Thus, finally, the researcher aims to investigate how the current wildlife experience of foreign visitors in YNP impacts Sri Lanka's attempt to become a global leading destination.

Some participants, particularly foreign visitors, compared their wildlife experience in Yala with other wildlife destinations worldwide, while others compared it with other wildlife attractions within Sri Lanka. Both groups of respondents expressed concerns about the wildlife experience in Yala compared to their past experiences.

*Africa has better safaris than this one. If you've been to Africa, you know this.* (pers. comm. foreign visitor 2)

*In conclusion, I would say Yala is the worst national park I've ever been to, and I've been to the lot. Animals are treated better in Africa* (pers. comm. foreign visitor 1).

*You can at least see elephants if you go to Minneriya. Africa is definitely better if you want to go on a real safari experience* (pers. comm. foreign visitor 1).

*I'm not going to the Yala again, and I usually tell other people not to go there either. Stopping people from going there is the only way to make things change* (pers. comm. local visitor 1).

The respondents concluded that offering an average wildlife experience to international tourists in Yala will hinder Sri Lanka's goal of establishing itself as a top wildlife destination globally.

*From what tour operators say, many foreigners have decided to avoid Yala because of its bad image for traffic, parking, and bad behaviours* (pers. comm. travel agent 2).

*All of these things (issues) damage YNP's chances of becoming one of the best places to see wildlife and for tourists to visit in the future* (pers. comm. travel agent 1).

*If things keep going the way they are, more tourists will come, but they won't get to see real wildlife, and the park won't last long. Then how can we make Yala the best wildlife destination in the world?* (pers. comm. wildlife expert 2).

*Many things have made tourists not enjoy their time in Yala. If tourists are unhappy with their stay, they will leave a lot of negative feedback on social media. It is very hard to fix a negative picture that has already been made* (pers. comm. travel agent 1).

Respondents urged prompt action from appropriate authorities to address the existing challenges facing Yala and enhance the wildlife experience for its tourists.

*Can we make Yala the world's best place to see wildlife? I don't believe that. It is possible, but we all need to work very hard to make it happen* (pers. comm. wildlife expert 2).

*There are many things that need to be addressed if we want Yala to be the best place in the world for wildlife tourists* (pers. comm. hotelier 2).

## CONCLUSION

Wildlife tourism has the potential to become a significant source of foreign income for the tourism industry in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka possesses the necessary qualities to emerge as the premier wildlife tourism destination globally, following in the footsteps of Africa and surpassing all other Asian contenders. The primary goal of this endeavor is to provide a unique and unforgettable on-site wildlife viewing experience tailored to foreign visitors to guarantee its success. Visitor experience is a pivotal factor that will significantly impact all businesses in the tourism industry. Ensuring a high-quality visitor experience in a natural environment, such as wildlife tourism, presents a significant difficulty for its creators.

Yala, the most frequented national park in Sri Lanka, has the potential to generate significant revenue, which could assist in alleviating the ongoing economic crisis and serve as a lucrative source of income in the future. However, the park's allure and appeal are diminishing due to numerous pressing concerns. It is

vital to comprehend these challenges beforehand and their adverse impact on delivering visitors a high-quality, distinctive, and unforgettable wildlife experience. This understanding also plays a significant role in Sri Lanka's endeavor to establish itself as one of the top wildlife destinations globally.

The first research objective of this study is to identify the significant challenges faced by the YNP. Participants recognized a maximum of 8 discrete categories of critical challenges encountered by YNP. One of the biggest concerns within the park is the significant vehicular congestion, which encompasses other sub-issues, including overcrowding, the ease of becoming a safari driver, the negative impact on animals' habitats and behaviours, and the responsibilities of park administration. The second most crucial concern is the misconduct exhibited by jeep drivers. This issue encompasses drivers' reckless driving habits, using mobile phones while operating the vehicle, highly tip-driven drivers' behavior, and employing unethical tactics to observe leopards. The issue cited as the third most common is the lack of adequate qualifications and training for wildlife guides and drivers. This problem results in other related concerns, such as subpar performance in interpreting and constructing narratives and a lack of satisfactory customer service. The participants identified the park's insufficiency of physical and human resources as the fourth most prevalent issue. These issues are further related to other matters, such as the lack of a functioning ticketing system, insufficient human resources, inadequate lavatory and dining facilities, substandard road conditions, and other amenities. Excessive promotion of Yala as a place to see leopards has become the next issue encountered by YNP. This comprehensive campaign is carried out by personnel (drivers, wildlife trackers, hotel staff) and non-personnel, primarily through social media and print media.

Visitors' misconduct has emerged as the next pressing concern. Political backing has exacerbated the issue, resulting in more significant harassment of wildlife through activities such as sighting, feeding, and influencing their behaviours. The issues of Deforestation and illegal poaching have emerged as essential concerns in Yala. The cultivation of cannabis and chena has primarily led to Deforestation in the Yala region. Respondents disclosed that cannabis cultivators also engage in illicit hunting as a secondary occupation. The responders have emphasized the prevalence of inappropriate political interference. This encompasses a range of additional concerns, such as the detrimental impact on parkland to cultivate and build hotels, the disruption of administrative operations at the DWC, the exertion of influence over wildlife officials, and the authorization of friends, family, and children to partake in activities within the park grounds.

Secondly, the study aims to investigate the subsequent impact of these issues on the on-site wildlife observation experience of park visitors. Presently, the on-site wildlife viewing experience YNP provides foreign visitors is mediocre. Visitors' post-experience behaviours, such as satisfaction, intention to return, referrals, and word-of-mouth communication, are adversely affected by it. Lastly, this study aims to assess the degree to which the present wildlife experiences of visitors impede Yala's aspiration to become one of the leading wildlife destinations globally. Wildlife tourism has been recognized as a promising industry that can replace traditional Sri Lankan tourism. However, due to the inability to provide an excellent and quality wildlife viewing experience for international tourists, especially YNP, which is renowned for its wildlife encounters, Sri Lanka is missing out on the opportunity to establish itself as the next wildlife destination after Africa.

Travel websites and social media platforms are becoming increasingly popular for travelers to share their experiences, and these online evaluations serve as trustworthy and unbiased sources of information (Prakash et al., 2018). If an increasing number of tourists share their negative experiences in Yala on social media platforms and travel websites, the reputation of Yala as a wildlife destination would be compromised. However, if Yala, as the primary national park for wildlife tourism in Sri Lanka, can rapidly address its current urgent concerns, the situation may not be as dire.

Creating visitor experiences is a highly intricate process that requires the collaboration of multiple

experience creators from various sectors within the travel and tourism industry. Designing an unforgettable and distinctive tourist experience is significantly more challenging, particularly in a wildlife tourism context. Wildlife visitors' expertise is mainly shaped by the 'wildlife-experiencescape', which is predominantly composed of natural components that are mostly beyond the control of its experience creators. It is imperative to promptly resolve any issues national parks face that may lead to detrimental impacts on the 'wildlife-experiencescape'. Additionally, in order to enhance the industry, it is imperative to investigate the wildlife-experiencescape and visitors' experiences in the wildlife setting. This would create an atmosphere where visitors would be offered a memorable and quality on-site wildlife viewing experience. Ultimately, this positively impacts the country's quest to become the premier wildlife destination in the world.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I wish to extend my sincere appreciation to my core PhD supervisor, Dr Nawal Hanim Bin Abdullah, as well as my two co-supervisors, Associate Prof. Siti Suriawati Isa and Dr. Evelyn Lim Ai Lin, for their essential patience and constructive criticism. I especially appreciate all the international visitors and other stakeholders who participated in this endeavor and provided valuable evidences contributing to its success. Finally, two of the researcher's university colleagues from Tissamaharama helped the researcher by facilitating meetings with most stakeholders in Yala.

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## APPENDIX

### APPENDIX A – The critical issues encountered by YNP

No of stakeholder category	Stakeholder's type	Types of critical issues encountered by YNP								
		High vehicular congestion within the park	Misbehavior of jeep drivers	Inadequate qualifications and training for guides and drivers	Lack of sufficient physical and human resources in the park	Excessive promotion of Yala as a place to see leopards	Visitors' misconduct	Deforestation and illegal poaching	Unnecessary political interventions	
1	Travel Agent 1	✓		✓	✓			✓	✓	
	Travel Agent 2		✓	✓		✓				
2	Hotelier 1	✓	✓	✓	✓					
	Hotelier 2	✓		✓	✓		✓			
3	Safari Driver 1	✓				✓				
	Safari Driver 2				✓					
4	Animal Tracker 1	✓							✓	
	Animal Tracker 2		✓			✓				
5	Park Official 1		✓		✓		✓	✓		
	Park Official 2		✓		✓		✓	✓		
6	Academic 1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
	Academic 2		✓			✓	✓		✓	
7	Local Visitor 1	✓	✓	✓						
	Local Visitor 2	✓								
8	Foreign Visitor 1	✓	✓		✓					
	Foreign Visitor 2		✓	✓		✓	✓			
9	Wildlife Expert 1	✓		✓	✓	✓			✓	
	Wildlife Expert 2	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓		

**APPENDIX B – Primary issues and ancillary issues faced by the YNP**

	Primary issues faced by the YNP	Ancillary issues faced by the YNP
1.	High vehicular congestion within the park	Overcrowding Easy access to becoming a safari driver Adverse effect on animals' habitats and behaviours and park admin duties
2.	Misbehavior of Jeep drivers	Reckless driving behaviour of Jeep drivers Using mobile phones while driving Extremely tip-driven drivers' behavior Using unethical methods to observe leopards
3.	Inadequate qualifications and training for guides and drivers	Poor performance of interpretation and narrative construction Lack of quality customer service
4.	Lack of sufficient physical and human resources in the park	The absence of an operational ticketing system and insufficient human capacity Inadequate lavatory, dining facilities, and other amenities (e.g., Sovurnior shops) Poor road conditions
5.	Excessive promotion of Yala as a place to sight leopards	Personnel communication (Jeep drivers, animal trackers, hoteliers etc.) Non-personnel communication (Social media, travel websites, print media etc.)
6.	Visitors' misconduct	a. Joyriding b. Harassment for wildlife at sighting and feeding animals c. Altering animals' behaviours d. Littering
7.	Deforestation and illegal poaching	a. Damaging buffer zone b. Cannabis and chena cultivations c. Bushmeat trade



8.	Unnecessary political interventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. Damaging parkland for cultivation and hotel construction</li><li>b. Disrupting DWC administrative activities</li><li>c. Exerting control over wildlife officers</li><li>d. Granting permission to friends, relatives, and children to engage in activities within the park premises.</li></ul>
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