

STAKEHOLDER KNOWLEDGE AND PERCEPTION ON INVASIVE PLANT SPECIES IN HORTON PLAINS AND UDAWALAWE NATIONAL PARKS, SRI LANKA

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Stakeholder knowledge related studies are useful to understand the impacts of Invasive Alien Species (IAS) on people and the environment, which helps park management, awareness creation and improved collaborations in managing high impact invasive species. Hence, this study intended to document the existing knowledge, perceptions and attitudes of different stakeholders on their awareness of invasive plant species and their management in Horton Plains National Park (HPNP) and Udawalawe National Park (UNP). The primary data were collected through a questionnaire survey from three different stakeholder groups interacting with national parks. The majority of the responded villagers in Udawalawe were of 20–40 years of age with formal education up to A/L examinations. Majority of villagers from Pattipola (closest village to HPNP) were between 40–60 years of age with education up to O/L examinations, while a considerable number of Pattipola villagers (25%) have not attended school. However, their knowledge regarding invasive plant species and their management was low in both villages. The knowledge level of villagers in Udawalawe showed no strong relationships with variables such as 'Gender', 'Education', 'Distance to the park' and 'Primary source of information', however, there was statistically significant evidence for a moderately strong relationship with 'Age category' (Chi-Squared test; $C = 0.447$, $P = 0.018$) among villagers in UNP. The work experience of the UNP staff members ranged between 1 to 40 years, whereas that in HPNP varies between 4 and 35 years. Their knowledge of invasive alien plants and management was moderate in both parks, and was not associated with any tested variable. Whereas, 'Source of Information' ($C = 0.542$, $P = 0.002$ for HPNP; $C = 0.557$, $P = 0.002$ for UNP), 'Frequency of visitation' ($C = 0.546$; $P = 0.013$ for HPNP; $C = 0.635$, $P = 0.000$ for UNP), 'Previous experience' ($C = 0.589$, $P = 0.000$ for HPNP; $C = 0.580$, $P = 0.000$ for UNP), 'Education level' ($C = 0.455$, $P = 0.051$ only for HPNP) and 'Nationality' ($C = 0.471$; $P = 0.000$ only for UNP) were statistically significant deciding factors for the knowledge level of visitors. The perception of villagers on environmental conservation aspects were similar in both villages, while the UNP staff flagged the lack of continuous funding for IAS management as an issue. The overall awareness and concern about invasive plants in both parks calls for more public participation in management.

Keywords: Awareness, Engagement, Invasive alien species, Perception, Stakeholder