

## **Current Status of Aqua-based Tourism Activities in the Southern Coastal Regions of Sri Lanka**

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Aqua-based tourism is one of the trendiest sectors that contribute to increasing the income of the total tourism industry in a country. Although many aqua-based recreational tourism activities are being implemented within Sri Lanka, systematic awareness and advancements within the scope are still absent. Thus, the study was designed to identify and categorize aqua based recreational tourism activities on the Southern coast of Sri Lanka and to assess their impacts on the environment. Data were collected by a questionnaire-based survey from foreign and local tourists, activity operators, trainers, tour guides, and other relevant stakeholders as per the stratified random sampling method and by secondary data sources. Results revealed that, thirty-five aqua-based recreational tourism activities that belong to twenty major tourist destinations are occurring remarkably along the Southern coast. All of them could be categorized into five categories as “Water sports”, “Traditional fishing activities”, “Marine wildlife tourism”, “Underwater activities”, and “Beach tourism”. Among those categories, Water sport (33.4%) has been identified as the most popular category according to tourist’s insight. More than 50 percent of tourist attractions have been aggregated to Unawatuna, Hikkaduwa, and Mirissa destinations, even though the boat riding in Bentota was identified as the most attractive sole activity. Moreover, disqualified tourist activity operators, lack of facilities and inadequate government support were identified as the factors that negatively affected the development of the industry and tourist’s despondency. The tourists’ perception revealed that sport fishing, deep-sea fishing, and whale watching are the most destructive activities that adversely affect the respective ecosystems. Therefore, proper awareness of those activities among tourists and implementing effective management techniques are recommended to be adopted for the sustainable development of the industry.

**Keywords:** *Beach Tourism, Marine Wildlife Tourism, Traditional Fishing Activities, Underwater Activities, Water Sports*