

Potential of School Children as Active Participants in Biodiversity Conservation; A Case Study from Bandarawela Education Zone

R.M.P.P.S. Deeptha*, E.P. Kudavidanage, and S.J. Perera

Department of Natural Resources, Faculty of Applied Sciences,
Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka, Belihuloya, Sri Lanka.

*palindapadmasri@gmail.com

Global biodiversity is in danger due to anthropogenic threats causing an accelerated loss of species. Conservation education plays a key role in combatting biodiversity loss, urging the need to engage communities including school children in biodiversity education and participatory conservation. Various stakeholders have already begun such initiatives, which have seldom been built into the school education system. Hence the present study intended to examine the knowledge on biodiversity and conservation of school children in the Bandarawela Education Zone. Our questionnaire survey involving eight schools representing both Sinhala and Tamil mediums of instructions (n=155; 85 Sinhala and 70 Tamil), revealed a low level of interest in biodiversity among children, especially on flora (6.5%). However, most of them have a particular species of interest (63.2%), but 27.1% represent interests in non-native species). A review of the current school curriculum for children aged 12-15 years in Sri Lanka revealed only less than 3% of contact hours on biodiversity and conservation education, whereas students of advanced level biology stream aged 16-18 years have 46.7% of the same. The only noteworthy extracurricular activity that involves biodiversity conservation was the “Environment Pioneers” program. Interviews on extracurricular conservation education/training opportunities provided by external stakeholders revealed a lack of attention on the study area, despite their long-term involvements elsewhere, especially around major cities. The ability to improve school children’s knowledge on biodiversity and conservation through a one-day tailor-made awareness program was evaluated with the comparison of means between pre- and post-test scores (Paired sample t-test). Pre-test results showed a poor (only 35%) biodiversity and conservation consciousness among school children, while the perceptions on biodiversity among Sinhala and Tamil medium students were different. The t-test revealed that a one-day training program is not capable of improving these conditions (with significant reduction of marks in post-test; $p=0.036$), suggesting the need for long-term actions to enhance their conservation literacy.

Keywords: Conservation Education, School Children, Education System, External Stakeholders, Environmental Consciousness, Conservation Literacy