

**SITE SUITABILITY EVALUATION OF CULTURAL PLACES FOR ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN JAFFNA DISTRICT, SRI LANKA**

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Jaffna District is rich in cultural diversity and hence it may be regarded as a cultural hub in Sri Lanka. Buildings with archeological and historical value, religious places and monuments are the key cultural resources for the promotion of ecotourism. The objective of the present study was to identify and prioritize the potential cultural sites for the promotion of ecotourism using a Geographic Information System (GIS). GIS, together with Multi Criteria Decision Method and Criteria Ranking Method, were used for analysis. Five criteria *viz.* facilities base, tourist preferences, proximity to residential areas, proximity to accommodation, and distance from roads were used to evaluate the suitability of cultural sites in the Jaffna District. Those factors were selected according to expert opinion. The methodology used in this study helps in the identification of best cultural sites based on their current condition by using multi criteria. Among the declared 72 archeological monuments in the District, a total of 34 very popular cultural sites were selected for suitability analysis. The study revealed that among the 34 sites, 15 places represented high potential status, 17 sites were of moderate potential, and two sites were of low potential. The potential sites were derived based on the five criteria. Basic facilities for all cultural places have not been developed. Intangible cultural aspects such as life style, arts and music, festivals and events, livelihood system, traditional foods, products, traditional houses, household items and traditional villages are major culture-based potentials in the Jaffna District. The study also revealed that these sites have lack of basic infrastructure facilities and lack of promotion which have impacted on the promotion of ecotourism. Based on the analysis, potential status of cultural sites was identified; however, these areas have not yet been promoted from an ecotourism point of view. Hence these sites, with their associated local communities, offer good opportunities for ecotourism and local economic development. Local government bodies, Archeology and Cultural departments should give more attention on promotion of culture-based ecotourism for sustainable community development.

**Keywords:** Culture-based ecotourism, Intangible culture, Jaffna District, Multi criteria, Religious places