

Polonnaruwa Heritage City: An Analysis of Sustainable Development and Stakeholder Satisfaction in Archaeological Tourism Management

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Introduction

The ancient city of Polonnaruwa, recognized as a prestigious UNESCO World Heritage site, stands as a monumental testament to the rich cultural, architectural and historical legacy of Sri Lanka. Serving as the second capital of the island nation, it encompasses a vast array of remarkably preserved archaeological ruins and heritage buildings, including majestic stupas, intricate image houses and sophisticated ancient irrigation systems. In the contemporary era, Polonnaruwa has transitioned from a historical royal capital into a primary destination for both international and domestic tourism, playing a pivotal role in the national economy and the global promotion of Sri Lankan heritage (Silva, 2018). However, this transformation has introduced complex challenges regarding heritage management and sustainable development. The core issue lies in striking an optimal balance between the rigorous physical conservation of fragile archaeological monuments and the provision of modern tourist infrastructure necessary to accommodate a growing influx of visitors (Bandaranayake, 2019). When the expectations of global tourists and the daily requirements of local stakeholders are not adequately met, it not only diminishes the overall visitor experience but also poses potential threats to the sanctity and physical integrity of the heritage site. Despite the extensive historical research conducted on the architectural significance of Polonnaruwa, there remains a critical gap in empirical literature concerning the on-ground realities of tourist satisfaction, the adequacy of supporting infrastructure (Perera & Rajapakshe, 2021), as well as the socio-economic perspectives of the local communities operating within the archaeological reserve (Fernando, 2020). This study seeks to address why do current heritage management practices fail to integrate the socio-economic need of local stakeholders and the requirements of diverse tourist demographics in to the site's sustainable development model?

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Objectives

The primary objective of this comprehensive research is to critically evaluate the current state of heritage management and sustainable development within the Polonnaruwa Archaeological Heritage City by analysing the satisfaction levels and experiences of diverse stakeholder groups. Specifically, the study aims to assess the adequacy and quality of physical infrastructure, including transportation networks, parking facilities and accessibility routes for individuals with special needs (Perera & Rajapakshe, 2021). Furthermore, the research intends to investigate the effectiveness of interpretive materials, particularly the information boards, in conveying the historical significance of the monuments to a diverse, multilingual audience. Another crucial objective is to examine the condition and modernization requirements of commercial amenities, such as cafeterias and service outlets, from the dual perspectives of the tourists who utilize them and the local shop owners who operate them (Fernando, 2020). Additionally, the study seeks to identify the most frequently visited and highly appreciated cultural and religious focal points within the archaeological reserve, thereby understanding the spatial distribution of tourist interest. By achieving these objectives, the research aspires to formulate evidence-based, practical recommendations for policy-makers and heritage managers to enhance the tourist experience, improve the livelihoods of local stakeholders and ensure the long-term sustainable conservation of the Polonnaruwa heritage site (Department of Archaeology, 2022).

Methodology

To achieve the aforementioned objectives, this research employed a robust mixed-methods research design, seamlessly integrating both quantitative and qualitative paradigms to provide a holistic and nuanced understanding of the heritage management landscape in Polonnaruwa. The primary data collection instrument was a carefully structured, comprehensive questionnaire deployed digitally via Google Forms, which allowed for efficient data gathering and real-time aggregation in a multilingual context. The survey was strategically administered in the field to a diverse stratified sample of stakeholders, categorizing respondents into four distinct groups: foreign tourists, domestic tourists, local shop owners operating within the heritage precinct and religious devotees participating in cultural activities. The questionnaire was meticulously designed to capture a wide array of variables, including demographic profiles, the primary purpose of the visit, modes of transportation utilized and specific satisfaction metrics regarding various facilities. Quantitative data was collected using Likert-scale questions to measure satisfaction levels concerning transport accessibility, parking adequacy, facilities for special needs individuals and the

clarity of information boards. Concurrently, qualitative data was gathered through open-ended questions that allowed respondents, particularly the shop owners and religious participants, to articulate their specific grievances, suggestions for modernization and personal experiences in their own words. The quantitative data was subjected to descriptive statistical analysis to identify prevailing trends and significant disparities between different demographic groups, while the qualitative responses were analyzed using thematic analysis to extract core narratives regarding infrastructural deficits and desired improvements. This dual analytical approach ensured that the statistical trends were deeply contextualized by the lived experiences and direct feedback of the individuals interacting with the heritage site daily.

Results

The empirical data collected from the extensive field survey yielded profound and multifaceted insights into the existing strengths and critical vulnerabilities of the Polonnaruwa heritage site's management framework. Regarding transportation and accessibility, the findings revealed a heavy reliance on private vehicles and organized tour buses among both foreign and domestic tourists, with the general accessibility to the city being rated as relatively easy or average. However, a significant dichotomy emerged regarding parking facilities and most alarmingly, the infrastructure designated for individuals with special needs. The vast majority of respondents, particularly those accompanying elderly or disabled family members, rated the facilities for special needs as highly inadequate, highlighting a severe lack of wheelchair-accessible pathways, specialized restrooms and assisted mobility options within the sprawling archaeological park. The evaluation of interpretive information boards presented another critical area of concern. A substantial proportion of foreign tourists and educational visitors expressed profound dissatisfaction with the existing signage, frequently citing that the descriptions were unclear, outdated, linguistically limited or entirely insufficient for understanding the complex historical context of the monuments. In terms of commercial amenities, the feedback regarding cafeterias and service outlets was mixed but leaned towards a pressing need for modernization. While some tourists found the basic availability of food acceptable, many noted issues with hygiene and comfort. Crucially, the qualitative feedback from the local shop owners illuminated the root of these service deficits; vendors expressed a strong desire for infrastructural upgrades, specifically citing the pervasive issue of dust affecting food quality, the lack of refrigeration facilities for beverages and the urgent need for clean, enclosed or semi-enclosed dining spaces that protect both the vendors and the tourists from the harsh environmental elements. Despite these infrastructural challenges, the survey successfully identified the core cultural assets that continue to draw immense reverence and admiration. The Gal Vihara,

the Vatadage, the Rankot Vehera and the Tooth Relic House emerged consistently as the most frequently visited and highly appreciated sites, indicating that while the supporting infrastructure requires urgent attention, the primary archaeological assets retain their powerful ability to captivate and inspire visitors from across the globe. Ultimately the empirical data reveals that current heritage management practices fail to integrate these diverse needs because they remain trapped in a monument centric conservation paradigm. this paradigm prioritizes the physical preservation of “stone and bricks” while treating tourist infrastructure, inclusive accessibility and local vendor ecosystem as secondary, peripheral concerns rather than integral, co-equal components of the heritage site’s sustainable development model. The data proves without a paradigm shift towards stakeholder inclusive, node specific, and universal designed management, that site risks degrading both its world class reputation and the livelihoods of the community that sustain it.

Conclusion

The findings of this study confirm that the current monument centric management modal is no longer sufficient to sustain a site of Polonnaruwa’s global stature. To bridge the gap between rigorous physical conservation and modern visitor expectations, a strategic realignment of heritage management is required. Specially, the widespread dissatisfaction with existing signage represents a significant missed opportunity for educational tourism. Heritage authorities must transition from static, linguistically limited boards to dynamic, digital interpretation methods such as implementation of QR codes that link to comprehensive, multi-lingual audio-visual guides. Furthermore, the glaring deficit in accessibility directly contradicts global principles of sustainable tourism. Integrating universal design into the site’s master plan is imperative to ensure the ancient city is navigable and welcoming to all visitors, regardless of physical ability. Equally critical is the socio economics dimensions of the site, local vendors are integral stakeholders, not physical entities. Upgrading their facilities with dust-proof structures, refrigeration and improved waste management will elevate both tourist experience and local economic viability, provided these interventions are designed to harmonize seamlessly with the archaeological aesthetic. Ultimately actualizing this necessary evolution in heritage management demands targeted, evidence based policy interventions (Department of Archaeology, 2022). By addressing critical infrastructural deficits, modernizing interpretive services and actively nurturing local economic ecosystem, authorities can ensure that the magnificent legacy of Polonnaruwa is not merely preserved as a static relic, but thrives as a dynamic, inclusive and deeply enriching destination for future generations.

Keywords - Polonnaruwa, Heritage Management, Sustainable Tourism, Stakeholder Satisfaction, Archaeological Conservation

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