

An Agenda for Heritage Tourism Research in Sri Lanka: Current Knowledge and Future Directions

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Abstract

Heritage tourism continues to grow year after year across the globe. This segment of tourism has enabled developing countries to use their cultural assets to develop their tourism industries and maximize the industry's economic benefits. Sri Lanka is a significant heritage destination, but the phenomenon has not been well studied there the way it has in many other countries. This study reviews the current heritage tourism literature that is specific to Sri Lanka and identifies research gaps relating to the practice of sustainable heritage tourism. In a systematic review of studies published between 2010 and 2022 in English and Sinhala, this paper identifies the key areas of heritage that have so far been a focus of tourism research in the country. It highlights some crucial concepts and provides specific recommendations that researchers need to consider for Sri Lanka's tourism industry to move forward in sustainable ways. The paper proposes a research framework that focuses on four key areas: education, stakeholders, planning and management, and physical and social impacts. The paper suggests a research agenda based on the proposed framework.

Keywords: Heritage tourism, research agenda, future of tourism, Sri Lanka

Introduction

Visits to ancient cities and historic sites around the world have grown in popularity (Timothy, 2021a) in large part due to an increase in the number of UNESCO World Heritage Sites (WHSs), with visitor numbers rising by an average of 6% per annum in recent years (Su & Lin, 2014), although visitation growth is not tied to WHS listing in every case. In 1972, UNESCO established a

framework for identifying and defining cultural and natural heritage sites with universal value. This led to the identification and listing of World Heritage Sites (WHSs) throughout the world, including South Asia, with Sri Lanka being home to eight WHSs at the time of writing, playing an important role in the country's tourism asset base.

A country's heritage includes all tangible and intangible resources that are inherited from the past, valued and utilized in the present, and which a society hopes to pass on to future generations (Timothy, 2021a). Heritage tourism is the use of these tangible and intangible pasts and centers mainly on historical places, monuments, examples of architecture, and people and their living cultures (Garrod et al., 2012; Langlois et al., 1999; Palmer 1999; Peleggi 1996; Prideaux & Kininmont 1999; Seale 1996; Suntikul et al., 2016). Most developing countries, including those in South Asia, currently use tourism as an economic development tool, involving both cultural and natural heritage resources (Aramberri, 2001; Timothy, 2021b). Yet, heritage is a sensitive asset that can be irreparably damaged by over-visitation and lack of good management. Most of the time, heritage sites combine both tangible and intangible cultural assets (Li, Lau & Su, 2020; UN Tourism, 2011), so it is beneficial to have a better understanding of heritage tourism to manage these sites more effectively (Porcia et al., 2001).

Heritage tourism attracts visitors to rural areas, agricultural landscapes, artworks, cultural celebrations, museums and buildings that are of historical and archaeological significance, but these assets are always at risk because they are resources that cannot be rebuilt if damaged by tourists' overuse or natural events. Because of these risks, sustainable practices must be followed in managing heritage places, protecting cultural assets, and improving heritage tourism. This is particularly the case in countries of the Global South, which face many additional challenges to heritage protection and promotion than conditions in the developed parts of the world (Timothy & Nyaupane, 2009). Thus, the heritage tourism sector needs an agenda, particularly for developing countries (Balcar & Pearce, 1996), so that their heritage tourism can be managed appropriately in sustainable ways (Almeida de Oliveira et al., 2024; Labadi, 2022; Megeirhi et al., 2020; Mrđa & Carić, 2019).

Accordingly, this study investigates the current state of academic knowledge about heritage tourism in one particular developing country in South Asia – Sri Lanka – to better understand the practice of sustainable heritage tourism there and to contribute to a more sustainable future direction in the country's heritage tourism sector. The paper aims to develop a research agenda for sustainable heritage tourism by identifying research gaps related specifically to the sustainability of heritage tourism and the development priorities of the local tourism industry in Sri Lanka.

Heritage Tourism Issues in Sri Lanka

Heritage tourism is one of the most pervasive and rapidly growing types of tourism across the world and, as defined previously, it is multidimensional and inclusive of the tangible and intangible elements of culture within a region or country (Timothy, 2021a). Heritage tourism uniquely portrays the past from the perspective of contemporary society (Yan, 2017). Heritage visitors are motivated by many different factors, including the pull of a locality's historic attributes and site characteristics (Palmer, 1999; Poria et al., 2001; Sharpley, 1993), people's interests in learning, and opportunities to socialize.

Heritage is also a unique branding mechanism, particularly when labeled with the UNESCO "brand" or national heritage labels. The WHS designation is an increasingly popular brand in the tourism sector, and many countries actively utilize it as a means to attract more tourists and promote heritage site visits (Ma & Bin Mohame, 2023; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021; Timothy, 2018, 2025; Timothy & Boyd, 2006). As a result, historical assets have become a significant tourist attraction. Hundreds of millions of people travel every year to experience heritage places. Almost 20 years ago, UN Tourism (2006) suggested that demand for heritage places and experiences was responsible for approximately half of all international trips every year. That number still holds today (Trenchard, 2020), as the sector continues to grow. Besides economic growth, heritage tourism can enable people to understand the value of sharing their heritage assets with others (Timothy, 2021a).

Heritage tourism has always existed but has grown tremendously since 1972, when UNESCO began identifying and branding WHSs around the world. The UNESCO WHS program has provided a great deal of publicity about heritage sites and highlighted the need to conserve and manage cultural sites for the future (Giraud & Porter, 2010; Panzera, 2022; Timothy, 2021a). The UNESCO brand has become a default symbol of authenticity, noteworthiness, and global appeal, which has drawn increasing numbers of tourists in certain cases (Vargas-Sanchez, 2018), but not in every case (Adie, 2017; Adie et al., 2018; Timothy, 2025).

The alignment of sustainable development and tourism has been adopted by many international organizations and is evident in agreements such as Agenda 21, the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism, and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). These agreements and policy decisions were introduced to balance and meet the mission of the heritage sector and to meet sustainability criteria for the tourism industry. Ultimately, just as with other tourism sectors, including ecotourism and nature-based tourism, for heritage tourism to attain sustainability standards, it needs to meet certain requirements, such as stakeholder involvement, awareness building, minimizing negative impacts, and other ways of improving balance, harmony and equity in tourism destinations. With regard to stakeholder empowerment, Jimura (2019) argues for the involvement of local communities, local businesses and tourists, not just government officials and elites. Community participation in preserving and

promoting cultural heritage assets is a vital part of tourism governance (Almuhzzi & Al-Azri, 2019; Timothy, 2024; UNWTO, 2020).

Studies have shown how heritage tourism specifically (often one of the clearest manifestations of mass tourism) results in overcrowding, cultural appropriation, cultural theft, vandalism and looting, wear and tear, pollution, and litter (Chen & Chen, 2010; Fyall & Garrod, 1998; Loureiro et al., 2022). Conversely, however, cultural heritage-based tourism can also provide additional employment opportunities, a means of preserving elements of culture that could otherwise disappear, and create a sense of solidarity, identity, and empowerment within destination communities (Adie & Falk, 2021; Li & Hunter, 2015; Novoa, 2023). To support the principles of sustainability, destination and site managers need to devise ways to maximize tourism's positive impacts while minimizing its negative impacts.

Also playing an important role in sustainable heritage tourism is the use of interpretation to tell the heritage story and to educate the public about the need to protect and preserve the human past (Alderson & Low, 1996). Interpretation is a tool for highlighting the uniqueness and value of a cultural site and through its educational role can help build respect and awareness, and even raise site revenue to further managers' efforts to protect and to share (Timothy, 2021a). Unfortunately, there is relatively little research in the tourism literature on the sustainability implications of interpretation, or the effectiveness of certain interpretive methods and the added value of interpretation at historic sites and other heritage contexts.

The Case Study Context

Sri Lanka is famous for both its natural and cultural heritage, and tourism is an extremely important part of the country's economic and social development. In 2019, Sri Lanka received 1,913,702 international arrivals, despite the Easter bomb attack at the end of April 2019. The country earned US\$3.6 billion through international tourism that year.

The Department of Archaeology is Sri Lanka's main agency responsible for heritage research, conservation, interpretation and development, and it promotes work with the Central Cultural Fund (CCF). It oversees most heritage sites in the country. Sri Lanka is home to six UNESCO World Heritage Sites. With the exception of the old town of Galle, all the WHSs are part of the 'cultural triangle' (Figure 1). In addition to its world-class natural and cultural sites, museums are another important heritage attraction in Sri Lanka (Figure 2). Museums and other historical sites also attract considerable domestic and international tourist attention (Figure 3 a&b) and generally underlay the essence of heritage tourism in Sri Lanka.

The CCF was established in 1980 and implemented by UNESCO under the Sri Lanka Cultural Triangle Program. This program involves 26 heritage sites including the best-known cultural sites in the country. Sri Lanka's tangible heritage is also protected by the Sri Lanka Archaeological Act and Antiquities

Ordinance. According to the Sri Lanka Antiquities Ordinance, all monuments constructed prior to 2 March 1815 are ancient monuments, and antiquities (e.g., statues, sculptures, gems and jewelry) are defined in the same way.

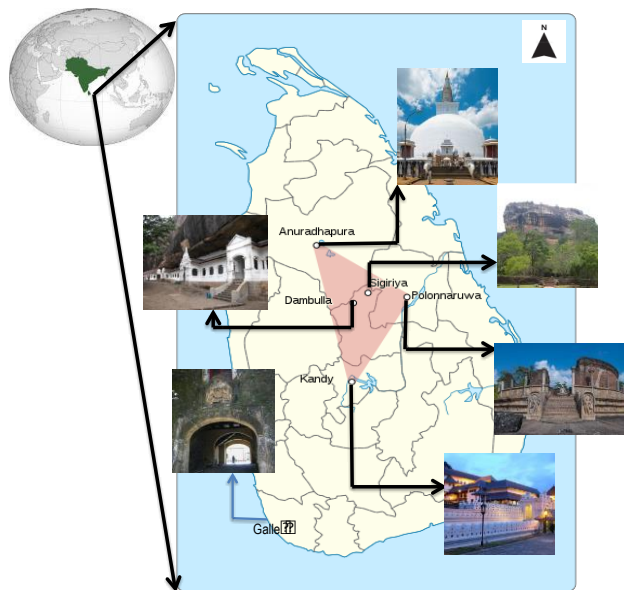
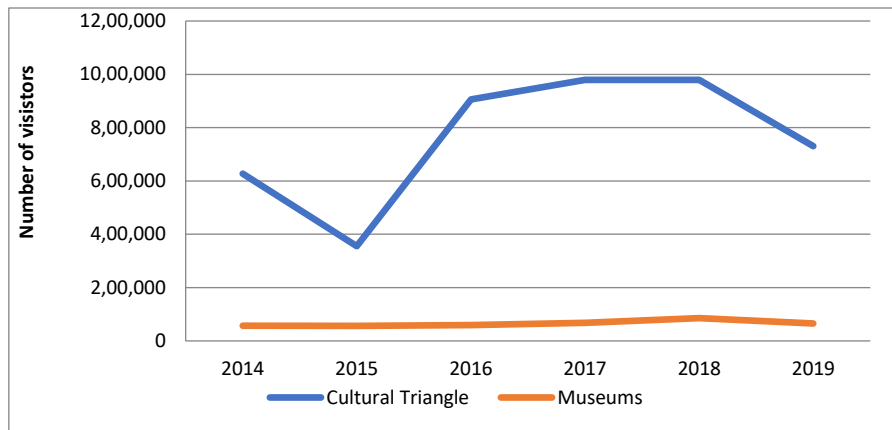


Figure 1. Key heritage attractions in Sri Lanka.



* Sri Lanka's cultural triangle includes: Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and Kandy.

Figure 2. Tourist arrivals to the cultural triangle and museums in Sri Lanka (SLTDA, 2019)

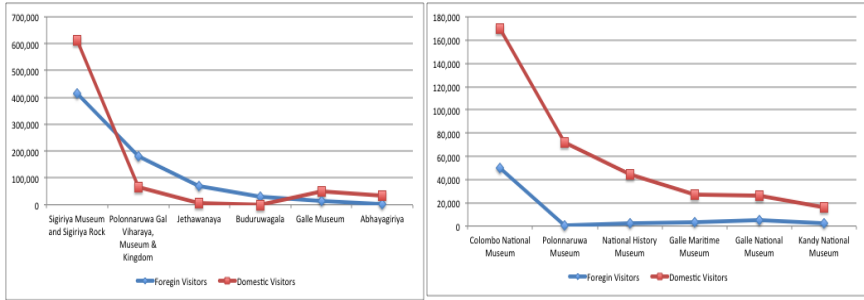


Figure 3. Local and international visitors at heritage sites (a) and museums (b) in Sri Lanka in 2019 (SLTDA, 2019)

Because of a growing interest in heritage tourism in Sri Lanka and its potential as an important growth node in the country’s tourism milieu, additional studies are needed to provide information that will help manage the country’s heritage-based tourism for a more sustainable future.

Methods

Literature syntheses identify extant knowledge and emerging trends, and help to guide future research in a given field of study. Many studies of hospitality and sustainable tourism have used this review method successfully to recognize patterns and trends, and to identify future needs (e.g., Olafsdottir & Terijanait, 2018; Sumanapala & Wolf, 2019, 2023). Although there have been limited reviews of heritage tourism in general, this is a good method for identifying current research trends and knowledge gaps in heritage tourism in Sri Lanka.

Our systematic literature review had four phases: (1) identification; (2) screening; (3) eligibility and (4) inclusion for analysis based upon the parameters of the study. For this paper, the search was carried out in online databases including Scopus, Web of Science Direct, and Google Scholar as the largest and most popular online databases and search engines (Cheng, 2016). In addition, due to tour concentration in Sri Lanka, we searched all accessible studies available about heritage tourism in the country. Key words used were “heritage tourism”, “heritage destination”, “Anuradhapura”, “culture and heritage”, “historical and archeological sites”, “monuments”, “tourists”, “Sigiriya”, “World Heritage Sites” together with “Sri Lanka”. To improve the search, we used the following key words in combination with the major key words: “heritage tourism”, “cultural and heritage”, “historical and archaeological sites”, “monuments”, “visitors”, “heritage sites”, “destination attributes”, “visitor management”, “satisfaction”, “visitor experience”, and “destination image” combined with “Sri Lanka”, “Anuradhapura”, “Pollonnaruwa”, “Galle”, “Sigiriya”, “Kandy” and “Sri Lanka cultural triangle” to be inclusive of most published articles in English and in Sinhala.

After searching the keywords, 64 studies were identified. After removing 13 duplicated works, 51 studies were selected for the next phase of screening

according to the study selection criteria. Studies that were not directly focused on heritage tourism or specific heritage sites in the country were not considered, so although some papers examined general heritage trends and intangible elements of the cultural past, only those with a focus on a particular locality were counted. Included in this exercise were traditional peer-reviewed journal articles, as well as other scholarly publications (e.g., reports, book chapters, theses, and conference proceedings) to cover the range of literature on heritage tourism in Sri Lanka. At this stage of the study, 20 studies were excluded because their full texts were unavailable, so that the specific year of publication and the location of the study site could not be determined. In the end, 24 studies were deemed eligible for inclusion. The content analysis identified the year of publication, the location of the study in Sri Lanka, the study's topical focus, the type of publication, and whether the study took a quantitative or qualitative approach.

Results

Despite the critical importance of heritage in Sri Lanka's tourism milieu, only 24 studies published in different formats (e.g., journal articles, theses, book chapters, and conference proceedings) during the thirteen-year period between 2010 and 2022 could be included because they dealt with specific heritage sites, rather than general heritage perspectives (Figure 4). The date of the first article was 2010. At least two articles related to heritage tourism were published in 2016, 2018 and 2019. However, the five years between 2015 and 2020 saw a significant surge in research, with the publication of 65% more articles than the first five years (2010–2014). Interestingly, several of the journals where studies were published are Sri Lankan journals, published domestically.

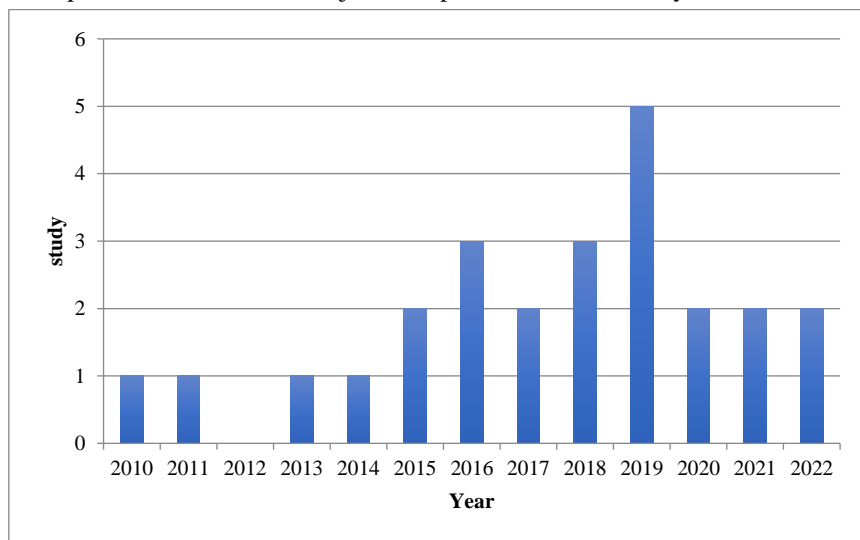


Figure 4. Number of heritage tourism studies published about Sri Lanka.

In terms of research locations, Anuradhapura is the most studied heritage locale in Sri Lanka (Figure 5), followed by Sigiriya and Kandy. However, according to 2020 SLTDA visitor statistics, Sigiriya received the highest number of visits (285,744), following by Anuradhapura (32,354) and Kandy (1,053). Non-WHSs studied include Godawaya, Batticaloa and the whole of the North Central Province. There was also a general study on Sri Lankan and Indian heritage tourism without a focus on a specific site.

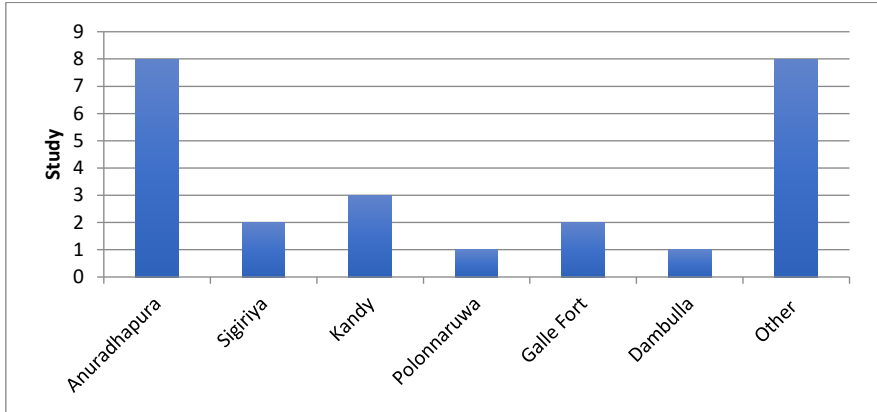


Figure 5. Number of heritage site based on published studies in heritage tourism.

Half of the studies (50%) were published in journals, followed by proceedings (37.5%) and theses (8.3%), with one (4.2%) being a book chapter (Table 1). Most of the primary authors were attached to the University of Rajarata, followed by the University of Sabaragamuwa and the University of Uva Wellassa. Authors from the University of Peradeniya and the University of Jaffna produced a small number of studies, and all authors are Sri Lankans themselves. Most studies focused on marketing heritage tourism, followed by perspectives on planning and management.

The study identified several key concepts and challenges, as well as areas of improvement in heritage tourism development in Sri Lanka (Table 2). Heritage sites in Anuradhapura have many proposals for developing heritage tourism further, covering topics such as stakeholders, visitor management, marketing, interpretation, and planning and development. These are the general themes of the various studies and have policy change implications. A common challenge in most areas is general awareness of the facilities at cultural sites. The need for infrastructure development at heritage sites was also a common recommendation. One study recommended that for the development of heritage tourism in the future, authorities need to focus on and improve museums and heritage organizations in the country.

Table 1. Summary of selected study (n=24) of heritage tourism studies published 2010–2024

Author/s	Source	Focus area
Abeysinghe & Abeysinghe, 2020	Academic journal	New potential
Bohingamuwa 2019	Academic journal	Conservation
Chandrapala, 2021	Academic journal	Marketing
Dissanayake & Arachchi, 2018	Conference paper/proceedings	Visitor experience
Fernando et al, 2019	Conference paper/proceedings	Marketing
Gamage, 2022	Academic journal	Marketing
Kumari & Udurawana, 2017	Conference paper/proceedings	Satisfaction
Karunanithy & Sivesan, 2013	Academic journal	Marketing
Kaldeen & Suranga Silva 2018	Book chapter	Planning & management
Perera & Chandra, 2010	Conference paper/proceedings	New potential
Rajapakse, 2011	Conference paper/proceedings	Conservation
Rajapakse, 2014	Conference paper/proceedings	Stakeholders
Sammani et al., 2020	Academic journal	Marketing
Samarasinghe et al., 2022	Academic journal	Marketing
Shammika, 2019	Academic journal	Marketing
Sandaruwani & Ganapala, 2016	Academic journal	Impacts
Sivesan, 2019	Academic journal	Challenges
Soysa, 2015	Doctoral dissertation	Issues of local residents
Udurawana, 2015	Conference paper/proceedings	Satisfaction
Udurawana, 2018	Conference paper/proceedings	Marketing
Udana, 2018	Undergraduate thesis	Marketing
Wimalaratana, 2016	Academic journal	Planning & management
Wickramasinghe & Kumara, 2021	Conference paper/proceedings	Marketing
Yohani, 2019	Academic journal	Planning & management

Table 2. Summary of findings from selected papers based on the heritage site

Heritage site	Recent findings and recommendations
Anuradhapura	Visitors have mixed attitudes to heritage tourism and conservation.
	Need to promote heritage tourism without conventional promotion methods.
	Positive relationship between heritage site attributes and visitors.
	Most of the stakeholders are willing to participate in conservation activities in heritage tourism.
	Suggested using different strategic frameworks based on visitor behavior.
	Suggested upgrading infrastructure and education.
	Visitor loyalty relates to demographics.
	Quality transport positively affects visitor satisfaction.
Polonnaruwa	Visitors’ awareness of facilities needs to be improved
	Significant relationship between accommodation quality and the natural beauty of the destination.
Sigiriya	Need to develop conservation activities related to tourism.
Dambulla	Negative experiences with regard to refreshment and catering facilities, sanitary facilities, and signage.
	Visitors’ awareness of facilities needs to be improved.
Kandy	Visitors’ awareness of facilities needs to be improved.
	Improvements in the infrastructure for community-based tourism is needed.
Galle Fort	Need to implement a collaborative management plan to develop heritage sites.
Other sites	Tourism-related cultural heritage activities need to be developed.
	Museums and heritage organizations need to be enhanced.
	Improve strong positive tourist satisfaction.

Discussion of Findings

There are a number of considerations with heritage tourism that have significant sustainability implications, including conservation, interpretation, quality experiences, and impacts derived specifically from heritage visitors. Based upon the limited number of studies on heritage tourism in Sri Lanka, this study identifies research gaps based on a sustainable heritage tourism research framework and suggests new research areas to help Sri Lanka develop its heritage tourism in sustainable ways (Figure 6).

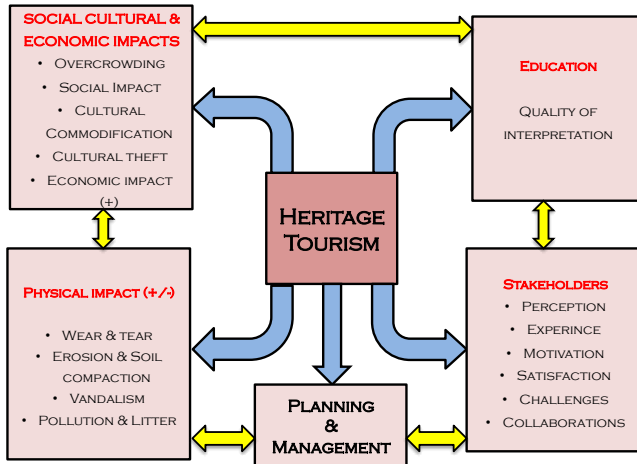


Figure 6. Research framework of heritage tourism in future studies

Education

Interpretation is a crucial management tool in heritage tourism. It creates a link between the destination and its visitors while improving their satisfaction and adding value to their onsite experience (Kalyoncu & Yüksek, 2020; Moscardo, 1996; Poria et al., 2006; Timothy & Boyd, 2003). Interpretation educates visitors, increases awareness of the importance of protecting the past, and enhances the interaction between visitors and their heritage destinations (Tilden, 1957; Timothy, 2021a; Weiler & Ham 2002). Interpretation is also frequently used to manage visitors' negative impacts, minimize overcrowding, and encourage visitors to change their behaviors (Kalyoncu & Yüksek, 2020).

Interpretive media include print and electronic publications, public lectures, on-site and off-site installations, educational programs, community activities, tour guides, and mobile phone apps. Onsite tour guides play a major role in connecting heritage sites to their visitors (Ap & Wong, 2001; Weng et al., 2020; Nowacki, 2021; Zhao & Timothy, 2017; Zhu et al., 2024). These tools and activities are important because they contribute to heritage sustainability (Kalyoncu & Yüksek, 2020) and improve visitors' satisfactory experiences (Poria et al., 2006).

Heritage managers have many tools at their disposal to educate visitors. As a developing country, Sri Lanka has yet to use much technology in heritage tourism settings (e.g., computer-based interpretation, GPS-based guides, and mobile phone apps). Accordingly, most heritage sites use conventional means, such as guidebooks, display boards, and tour guides. Additional tools include scale models, mostly seen in museums, such as Sigiriya and Polonnaruwa museums.

The main heritage attractions in Sri Lanka employ self-guided audio tours. Kalyoncu and Yükses (2020) note that the impact of interpretation varies from person to person, place to place and according to the purpose of the visit (Weiler & Ham, 2002). The future development of interpretation in Sri Lanka's heritage tourism sector needs deeper evaluation and continuous research on the effectiveness of the interpretive tools available. Additional research is needed on digital, internet-based, and artificial intelligence-based interpretation in the future, online tours, digital storytelling, AI tools, and virtual interpretation centres (Nowacki, 2021), if Sri Lanka wants to keep up with global trends in the field of heritage interpretation.

Information directly affects tourists' behaviours (Kudryavtse et al., 2012; Stewart et al., 1998). Therefore, future studies should examine the relationships between interpretation, motivations, and perceptions of a heritage site based on individual experience (Kim, 2014; Poria et al., 2009). The limited studies in Sri Lanka related to heritage tourism and interpretation identify various challenges that result from poorly standardized heritage interpretation. These challenges include tour guide misunderstandings and lack of knowledge and training, language barriers, and inappropriate tourist behaviour due to the absence of proper tour guiding (Ganapala & Sandruwani, 2016; Sumanapala et al., in press).

Sri Lanka currently has different levels of tour guide services. In addition, interpretation approaches and methods differ between heritage sites, but there is no nationwide standardization and no common evaluation system regarding how interpretation affects the visitor experience. Hence, Sri Lanka's heritage tourism sector needs more research on the delivery of knowledge to improve future heritage interpretation and guide training, as well as a national standard for training quality to better ensure the sustainable development of the country's heritage tourism sector.

The impacts of heritage tourism

Most heritage tourism resources are non-renewable; once they are gone, they are lost forever and may only live on in public memory, photographs, or written record. Such a tragedy is a loss for individual regions, countries, and the entire world (Timothy & Tahan, 2020). Tangible heritage assets are especially vulnerable to direct and indirect impacts from heritage tourism and other mass tourism across the globe. Therefore, it is vital to plan carefully to minimize humankind's impact on the historic environment (Timothy & Tahan, 2020).

Mass tourism brings about negative impacts on the physical environment, including in heritage environments. These impacts include graffiti, vandalism, excess rubbish, physical wear and tear, looting and illegal trade in artifacts, as well as erosion and soil compaction. Most of the physical impacts are associated with overtourism, which ensues because of increased demand for heritage visits with historic cities and archaeological sites being especially vulnerable to damage (Dodds & Butler, 2019). Excessive visitation and poor site management frequently lead to deterioration through increased humidity and body oils, tourists stepping on monuments, urinating on historic structures, and damaging ancient structures in other ways (Berg, 2018; Comer, 2012; Enseñat-Soberanis et al., 2019; Holmgaard et al., 2019; Mustafa & Tayeh, 2011; Tarawneh & Wray, 2017). These problems have been documented in many parts of the world where overtourism has exceeded destinations' capacity to manage human impacts.

Other localities have found success in mitigating the negative physical impacts of tourism by limiting access and visitor numbers through demarketing or establishing de-growth mechanisms (Li et al., 2017; Marcotte & Bourdeau, 2012), developing innovative technology (e.g., providing alternative "virtual" experiences), and dispersing visitors to less visited areas (De Luca et al., 2020).

Erosion and soil compaction are two additional impacts common in crowded tourist destinations that can affect built heritage environments (Sumanapala & Wolf, 2019). For instance, trails to archaeological sites and monuments, and the grounds around them, are particularly vulnerable to trampling and excessive wear (Rangel-Buitrago et al., 2019). Excess air pollution from tourist vehicles and litter can also cause irreparable harm (Timothy, 2021a). This often results from poor site management and improper visitor behavior (du Cros & McKercher, 2020). Looting and vandalism, such as graffiti, take place in heritage sites and destinations across the world with heritage properties being damaged or even destroyed (Bhati & Pearce, 2017; Vareiro et al., 2013; Vareiro & Mendes, 2015; Vella et al., 2015). Heritage sites are increasingly vulnerable to physical impacts in developing countries, as the notion of unmitigated visitation is erroneously seen as a straight path to economic development (Vella et al., 2015).

Few research studies have examined heritage tourism's impacts in Sri Lanka, but there have been reported incidents of damage done by heritage consumers, including green paint splashed on a Sigriya painting, sticky tape glued to a Sigriya painting, the theft of antiquities and excavations across Sri Lanka, and physical wear and tear at the Temple of the Tooth (Kamardeen, 2017). There is nascent evidence that Sri Lanka is experiencing the negative physical impacts of heritage tourism, but detailed studies have not yet been undertaken. This will be important in the future as the country becomes an increasingly popular heritage destination. Perhaps Sri Lanka as a whole has not yet reached the stage of tourist saturation, although certain localities within the country (e.g., Kandy) may experience overtourism during the busiest seasons of the year and experience tourism's detrimental effects. Given the beginnings of obvious negative

environmental effects, it is important to begin exploring the physical impacts of tourism on heritage sites and ways in which these occurrences may be mitigated.

Like physical impacts, sociocultural impacts are an important outcome of heritage tourism that must be addressed. Among these is diminishing social space (overcrowding), which is commonly and directly connected to the physical impacts discussed above. Other impacts include cultural change (e.g., decline of traditional values and the modification of cultural practices), cultural commodification (e.g., an increase in the appropriation of local cultures for tourist consumption), cultural theft and forced displacement (Borg et al., 1996; Cohen, 1988; Timothy & Boyd, 2003; Timothy & Nyaupane, 2009).

Not all social impacts are negative, however. Researchers also acknowledge several positive socioeconomic outcomes of heritage tourism, such as job creation and increased regional income (Chong & Balasingam, 2019). Heritage tourism-derived employment includes work in protecting, interpreting, maintaining and marketing heritage sites, as well as providing other hospitality services to heritage tourists (Hampton, 2005; Murzyn-Kupisz, 2012). According to Shankar (2015), heritage tourism is not only an economic driver but also an effective tool for poverty alleviation, especially in the Global South. Due to visitor demand and tourism development, local governments are willing to build infrastructure to develop heritage areas in Sri Lanka, just as has been done in other countries (Su & Wall, 2011). For the most part, studies tend to highlight the positive economic development effects of heritage tourism across the world.

In Sri Lanka, the rural communities that host heritage sites are beginning to engage and link with tourism, although some studies (e.g., Yohani, 2019) highlight the challenges of rural communities in meeting the requirements of tourism. Future studies should evaluate the positive social and economic impacts of heritage tourism in Sri Lanka, of which there are many but are not well researched.

Planning and management

Planning is an important aspect of maintaining sustainable tourism, and it involves multisectoral cooperation in the private and public sectors, and should be community-based and participatory. Planning for sustainable development has to mitigate negative impacts and enhance the positive aspects of a tourism destination, particularly its heritage assets (Timothy & Tosun, 2003). Planning involves physical site planning (e.g., ticket counters, entrance gates, souvenir shops, toilets and car parks), which is important zoning considerations in areas of heritage importance (Timothy, 2021a).

Compared to beach resorts, there seems to be less demand for museums, archaeological sites, and other historical buildings among visitors in Sri Lanka. The reason is likely the poor connectedness between tourism and ongoing archaeological digs in the country. Sri Lanka has a lot of untapped potential to develop archaeology-based heritage tourism.

Research is required to measure the carrying capacities of at least the high demand heritage sites in Sri Lanka and to set up future site management plans to sustain heritage tourism throughout the country (Ganapala & Sandaruwani, 2016; Udurawana, 2018). There is a need to develop new tourism areas and develop cultural places to promote heritage tourism, thereby distributing more equitably the economic advantages that heritage tourism brings to Sri Lanka. This redefining of Sri Lanka's heritage assets should consider the importance and appeal of living cultural heritage such as ceremonies/rituals and culinary traditions, as well as sites non-UNESCO like Batticalo, Ritigala and Tantirimale (Perera & Chandra, 2010; Wimalaratane, 2016). Heritage sites should also introduce new technologies such as e-tickets, online information, and 3D technology to meet modern demand for today's tech-savvy tourists (Bourgeois et al., in press; Sammani et al., 2020).

Most of Sri Lanka's heritage sites and destinations are controlled and managed by the Department of Archaeology and the Central Cultural Fund, a situation which so far has not been very conducive to community participation and collaborative planning for heritage tourism. There are very few studies on planning and managing heritage tourism sustainably. Though not part of our systematic methods used in this study, from a cursory look at TripAdvisor's user feedback on Sri Lanka's heritage sites, it is easy to see several planning and management concerns that have not been established yet in the research literature, such as the high cost of entrance tickets and the lack of value for money. A main criticism is that entrance fees are not a good value compared to heritage sites in other countries. Thus, a broader economic analysis is warranted with the help of Sri Lankan environmental economics experts.

With regard to planning and management, our study also found that research on infrastructure and services is sorely needed for sustainable heritage tourism development, along with expanding the other research areas listed in Figure 6. Planning and management should always be linked to other areas of heritage tourism in Sri Lanka such as impact management, interpretation and analysis of the stakeholders in the system. Therefore, there is a need for input from a range of experts (e.g., archaeologists, planners, policy makers, tourism experts and economists) in advancing the country's heritage tourism sector in sustainable ways.

Stakeholder empowerment

Stakeholders are defined as any individuals or groups who might be affected by the objectives of an organization (Freeman, 1984). Therefore, all the parties actively involved in facilitating or consuming heritage tourism can be considered key stakeholders. Among these stakeholders, local communities play a major role in heritage tourism, especially in developing countries (Khan et al., 2020; Timothy, 1999). Growing numbers of heritage visitors create challenges for stakeholders such as the local community, especially when the locale is a World Heritage Site (Seyfi et al., 2019). Some studies we evaluated found challenges in

developing heritage tourism with the collaboration of local communities. Therefore, heritage tourism decision-makers need to identify who the stakeholders are for preservation, conservation and heritage planning efforts and involve each of them to better ensure the sustainability of heritage tourism (Ashworth & Page, 2011; Patiwaël et al., 2019). This is particularly true in light of Rajapakse's (2014, 2011) findings that residents' attitudes towards heritage tourism are mixed, although there is more concern about economic gain than conservation. It is important to identify the barriers and challenges in resident perceptions, and it is critical for future studies to consider residents' attitudes with regard to the development and conservation of heritage (Lee et al., [2010](#); Zhong et al., 2020). Empowered stakeholders will be able to decide what elements of their heritage should be commercialized for tourism and which parts should remain hidden from the tourist gaze. Research on stakeholder empowerment is urgently needed in Sri Lanka.

Heritage consumers (in most cases tourists) are another crucial stakeholder. Research is needed to understand visitors' perceptions, motivations and satisfaction levels. This knowledge is an important part of sustainable heritage tourism, as all these factors can determine visitors' behaviour and appreciation of heritage (Poria et al., 2004, 2006). Visitor motivations and intentions to visit certain cultural locales may depend on different factors, including site development and services offered (Ashworth & Page, 2011). However, some studies have focused on visitor behaviour in the context of heritage tourism, including their willingness to learn (e.g., Poria et al., 2006), but these motives vary from site to site and for many other reasons (Josiam et al., 2004; Murray & Graham, 1997). Poria and his colleagues (2001) found that people visit a cultural site to satisfy different personal and interpersonal needs (push factors), as well as the attributes of the site (pull factors) and their perceptions of it. Nevertheless, Sri Lankan research reveals that visitor satisfaction depends on the availability of service facilities and the level of infrastructure, tourists' awareness of site uniqueness, management and conservation activities, accessibility, and future conservation efforts (Karunanithy & Sivesan, 2013; Udurawana, 2015). Nonetheless, Wickramasinghe and Kumara (2021) note a weak relationship between the attributes of a heritage site and visitor satisfaction. Accessibility and developed infrastructure are key elements of heritage sites for people with disabilities, yet this has not been well addressed in Sri Lanka's heritage tourism landscape. More work is needed to understand and provide recommendations on easier access for people with disabilities and for older age groups, not just to ensure their satisfaction, but also to ensure that international standards for people with disabilities are met (Sumanapala & Wolf, 2023).

Tourism stakeholders are essential partners in developing and planning heritage tourism. Stakeholder collaboration in heritage tourism development is increasingly regarded as a critical part of sustainable development initiatives in the areas of public-private-people partnerships (4Ps) for heritage management and development (Bonioti, 2023; Vaupot, 2020). These types of initiatives so far

are not found in Sri Lanka owing to the many disagreements among different parties and potential stakeholders there. Sri Lankan heritage sites have also experienced many challenges, such as unauthorized construction and modification. These problems have had an impact on the value of heritage sites in the country (Ganapala & Sandaruwani, 2016) and have arisen from a lack of stakeholder participation and poor planning. Without proper planning, heritage managers and planners have not recognized the wants and needs of both heritage sites and their stakeholders.

Studies have not examined other heritage tourism stakeholders in Sri Lanka, such as employees, service providers, and public agencies. Therefore, future studies should focus on the perceptions and attitudes of various local stakeholders, in particular with the aim of providing an understanding of the challenges they perceive and their ideas for developing heritage tourism sites throughout the country. Future research also needs to be expanded to address the four main research areas listed in Figure 6, such as sociocultural impacts, physical impacts, education, and stakeholders involved heritage tourism and should also cover other topics including planning and management, and the social and physical impacts in relation to stakeholders in sustainable heritage tourism in Sri Lanka.

Future research directions

In summary, based on the gaps we identified in the Sri Lankan literature, we recognize four main themes that need more attention in future research to achieve the goals of sustainability in heritage tourism in Sri Lanka (Table 3). These themes are education, stakeholders, impacts, and planning and management.

Table 3. Future research agenda for sustainable heritage tourism

Study theme	Future research aims
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• To examine whether the current interpretation process meets visitors' needs and wants in each market segment at heritage sites.• To analyze the effectiveness of existing interpretation media such as sign boards, posters and videos.• To examine visitors' understanding of the heritage site pre- and post-visit.• To identify the potential for, and visitors' perceptions of, the introduction of information communication technology such as virtual reality tours.• To examine visitors' satisfaction with site interpretation by nationality, area and tour guide effectiveness.
Stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• To identify key stakeholders and their varying interests in the heritage tourism sector of Sri Lanka.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To examine the needs and wants of stakeholders in heritage tourism. • To identify the challenges and opportunities in the sustainable development of heritage tourism at both local and national levels.
Physical/social impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To analyze perceptions of the physical/social impact of tourism from the perspective of visitors and the host community. • To monitor the short- and long-term impacts of wear and tear, erosion and micro-environmental changes due to tourism activities. • To study the direct and indirect economic impact of tourism both locally and regionally. • To explore the future impacts of visitor behavior. • To identify the negative socioeconomic impacts of heritage tourism in Sri Lanka and find solutions.
Planning and management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To identify the challenges for planning heritage tourism at local and national levels. • To analyze stakeholders' perceptions of planning and managing heritage tourism at different cultural sites. • To study the effectiveness of current heritage site management strategies in Sri Lanka. • To study the host community's contribution to the planning and management of heritage sites. • To identify key areas for future planning and management with regard to heritage and tourism practices. • To identify marketing and development strategies for existing heritage venues such as museums, and new products, new places, or less visited sites among local and international visitors.

Conclusion

This study creates a platform for studying cultural heritage-based tourism by reviewing existing research about Sri Lanka. Our study identifies the gaps in knowledge and highlights key areas that need to be investigated to develop heritage tourism more sustainably, using the content of literature on heritage tourism inside Sri Lanka, supported by the concepts espoused by academic work in other parts of the world.

The study reveals that research on heritage tourism in Sri Lanka is limited in size and scope although, given the importance of cultural heritage in the country's tourism milieu, much more research is warranted. Most existing work is relegated to the themes of visitor satisfaction, marketing, and communicating with visitors. Therefore, future studies in Sri Lanka should be expanded to be

more encompassing, using the models and examples that have been employed in other parts of the Global South. Only then can managing tourism development achieve greater balance and harmony, and underscore other key principles of sustainable tourism (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2023; Teo & Yeoh, 1997), which is particularly needful in cultural heritage-based tourism.

There is a real lack of research on heritage tourism in Sri Lanka, commensurate with the value of the country's heritage tourism, and more work is sorely needed to help manage and promote this sector in sustainable ways. In particular, there has been relatively little research on sustainable heritage tourism in the country, especially in international academic journals. Likewise, this review also finds that most heritage tourism studies in Sri Lanka have adopted qualitative research or general conceptualizations, leaving a gap that should be filled in the future with additional quantitative and experimental studies at as wide a range of heritage sites as possible throughout the country. Such studies will be instrumental in developing successful management approaches in areas of visitor management, interpretation, quality control, stakeholder empowerment, and other measures of success.

The limitations of this study include the fact that it only reviewed studies available in full online in English and Sinhala. It therefore did not include studies that were not accessible online, such as some graduate theses and public-sector documents, as well as works in other languages.

Based on an analysis of past research, this study identifies several actions that should be considered in future scholarly research and industry investigations for the betterment of the country's cultural heritage-based tourism. Sri Lanka is a country with deep cultural roots. It has remarkable built, tangible heritage sites, as well as abundant intangible culture—all of which have significant potential to draw and keep tourists in the country longer. As a developing country whose heritage tourism product is only now reaching a level of maturation, it is crucial for Sri Lanka to consider all of its planning and management options as it seeks to capitalize on its rich heritage in sustainable ways.

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