

## An Assessment of ecotourism potential of Yagirala forest reserve

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Prevalence of both ecological and socio-cultural attractions and constant interactions with the surrounding community including sharing the benefits with them are integral components of ecotourism. A study was undertaken to assess the ecotourism potential in Yagirala Forest Reserve situated in Wallawita Divisional Secretary Division in Matugama District in Western Province. The selection of the site was influenced by its ecological and socio-cultural wealth and its location surrounded by many villages. Assessment of the ecotourism potential in the site was carried out by way of focus groups discussions with key personnel, survey of randomly selected communities in 10 GN divisions surrounding the Reserve, survey of potential visitors both local and foreign and tour operators.

20 attractions belonging to biological, physical, hydrological and historic and cultural were identified both in the Reserve and its surroundings. Most of them were novel findings especially derived from direct observations and the community survey. The majority of villagers (74%) expressed their willingness to participate actively in ecotourism ventures in the area. The methods of participation ranked in the order sale of agricultural and non forest related produce > tour guides and other services > provision of lodging facilities. However, they were apprehensive of the possible ill effects of ecotourism on the village culture if not practiced properly. A statistically significant positive relationship was seen in the awareness on ecotourism and education level. Gender and income levels did not show a significant variation in willingness to participate in ecotourism.

74% of the foreign visitors and 95% of the local visitors preferred Yagirala Forest Reserve as an ecotourism site. However, while potential local visitors preferred climate and hydrological features of a site potential foreign visitors preferred both ecological and socio-cultural features. Those who had a previous experience in a rainforest preferred all the key factors of a site in connection with ecotourism. Bentara Ganga and Hadidemala Wanguwa ranked topmost among all the visitors. The many hydrological attractions such as Thotaha Ella, Ethawetunu Wala Fall and Kaluwala Falls were very popular among both visitors.

In general, Yagirala Forest Reserve ranks as a very important forest having potential for ecotourism favored by both foreign and local visitors. The willingness of the neighboring community to participate actively in ecotourism ventures and the willingness of tour operators to include the Reserve as a natural destination make the implementation plausible.