

## **The Role of Spice Gardens in Agro-tourism: A Case Study in Mathale District of Sri Lanka**

M.P.S Thilakarathna<sup>1</sup>

Agro-tourism has been defined as a process which is attracting visitors and travellers to cultivated areas with educational and recreational aims. As a type of eco-tourism, agro-tourism is one of the fastest growing industry and focus on environmental conservation and community development. Since the ancient times, Sri Lankan social context has been dominated by the agriculture related practices. Spice gardens or herbal gardens can be identified as an agro-forestry method practiced near Kandyan home gardens. At present, spice gardens have been established for commercial purposes especially to attract tourists. Therefore, this study was conducted in areas under the Naula and Mathale Divisional Secretariats of Mathale District. The objectives of this paper were to find out the environmental friendly methods followed by the spice gardens, to examine the tourist satisfaction on spice gardens and to identify the barriers for the development of spice gardens. Primary data was collected from survey method as well as observations and interviews conducted in Nalanda, Madawala Ulpatha and Palapathwala. The total sample was 75 respondents including 15 spice garden owners, 25 spice garden workers and 35 foreign tourists. Collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics in SPSS. Study results revealed that better soil conservation strategy, use of organic fertilizer, better waste management system, protection of threatened plants species, using the reuse concept, provide habitat to birds, variety of crop plantations and land use management and protection of biodiversity are major environmental conservation methods of spice gardens. Spice garden owners and workers attempts to maintain the garden in a sustainable manner for environmental conservation as well as tourist satisfaction. In the spice gardens, the tour guides explains to the tourists about the spice and herbal plants, indigenous and Ayurvedic medicine, Buddhist values, traditional agricultural equipment and Sri Lankan food culture. According to the study results, spice gardens are more popular among American (17.1%), Chinese (14.3%) and Russian tourists (14.3%). From the surveyed tourists, majority of them (42.9%) had come to visit spice gardens because of the interest to eco-tourism. Most of the tourists (60%) were satisfied about the services provided by the gardens. Lack of institutional support, high maintenance cost, difficulty to find out skilled human resource and no clear appreciation method from the government are major barriers for the development of spice gardens. Therefore, it is recommended to strengthen the relationship between relevant institutions and spice garden owners for the betterment of the industry.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Environmental Management, Rajarata University of Sri Lanka  
samadhimp93@gmail.com