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Over-Visitation and Human-Elephant Conflict in Block 01 of Yala National Park, Sri Lanka (2020-2024)

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Abstract: ***In Sri Lanka, the relationship between humans, elephants, and national parks has evolved into a complex dynamic, particularly in Block-01 of Yala National Park. Since 2020, a dramatic increase in tourist footfall and an overload of safari vehicles have led to severe management challenges, particularly in balancing ecological preservation with tourism. This paper explores over-visitation as a central factor contributing to Human-Elephant Conflict (HEC) in and around YB-01. Data were gathered using participant observation, in-depth interviews, and purposive sampling, and were analysed through content analysis, and Microsoft Excel. It is evident that excessive human presence causes stress among elephants, prompting their migration into nearby villages, where they face increased risks and provoke conflict. In my view, this suggests an urgent need for sustainable tourism policies and decentralized visitation strategies to safeguard both wildlife and community interests.***

Keywords: Human-Elephant Conflict, Yala National Park, Over-visitation, Safari Tourism, Wildlife Conservation

1. Introduction

Human-Elephant Conflict (HEC) is one of the serious social, economic and environmental issues in Sri Lanka (Gunawansa et al. 2023; Prakash et al. 2020) [8], [16]. The conflict between humans and elephants in Sri Lanka is considered one of the critical issues faced by environmental conservationists and policymakers (Prakash et al. 2020; Treves et al. 2006) [16], [21]. In Sri Lanka, the HEC is not a new issue; it has existed for more than 40 years with various conservation and management measures. Sri Lankan elephants (*Elephas maximus maximus*) and people encounter each other on various occasions, involving a range of emotional contexts including religious, cultural, spiritual, educational, political, entertainment, conflict-related and conservation-related situations. HEC in Sri Lanka is an uncomfortable encounter situation and struggle amongst villagers and farming communities with wild elephants in and around the elephant habitats, especially in the dry zone of Sri Lanka (Isthikar 2018 b) [11]. Human encroachment into national parks, coupled with excessive visitation, disruption of migration routes, and elephant incursions into agricultural fields, villages, and human settlements, has intensified competition for space and resources—factors widely recognized as major drivers of human-elephant conflict HEC. In one hand, farmers face economic losses due to damage to crops, stored food in ware houses, and property destruction, as well as over 50 human deaths annually; On the other hand, injuries and the deaths of over 250 elephants resulting from poisoning, gunfire, traps, electrocution from unsafe and illegal fencing, and the use of 'hakkapattas' (explosive devices concealed in food), represent major consequences of this conflict in the country (Prakash et al., 2020; Isthikar, 2018 a) [16], [10]. The 'Southern Wildlife Region', in particular 'Yala National Park', is not only very popular for its' biodiversity, specifically endemic species, leopards and elephants' but also unfortunately very famous for HEC in and around the park. The conflict is more serious with habitat conversion in the Southern Wildlife Region (SWR) in the recent past. In the SWR, the Yala National Park (YNP) has been divided into five blocks. YB-01 is one of the main habitats for elephants and is open to tourists year-round (DWC, 2011) [3]. Tourism in different dimensions is one of the main sources of revenue for the Sri Lankan economy; the government encourages tourism in diverse ways. Wildlife tourism and eco-tourism are providing a considerable amount of income for the National Parks in Sri Lanka (Gnanapala, Bunltjens, and Rathnayake, 2017) [7]. Out of 26 National Parks, Yala, Udawalawe, Minneriya, Kaudulla, Horton Plain, and Wilpathu National Parks are popular among local and foreign tourists. Yala National Park, especially YB-01, is recognised as one of the highest tourist destinations within the Protected Areas in Sri Lanka (Ushantha et al. 2024) [22]. However, over-visitation is becoming a major challenge for the biodiversity of the park, including elephants, management of the park and tourism in a sustainable manner. It is crucial to assess the extent of human pressure, especially excessive visitation, on the elephants within the park, as well as the elephants' encroachment into villages. These may be among the primary factors contributing to HEC in and around YB-01, and addressing them is essential for a practical long-term solution to HEC. The objective of the study is to analyse over-visitation as one of the driving forces behind HEC in and around Yala National Park, Block 01, since 2020. This study is significant as it highlights a growing ecological and socio-economic concern in Protected Areas, offering insights that could inform sustainable tourism policies, conflict mitigation strategies, and wildlife management practices in similar biodiversity hotspots.

2. Literature Review

Asian elephants are classified into three main subspecies: the Sumatran (*Elephas maximus sumatranus*), the Indian (*Elephas maximus indicus*), and the Sri Lankan (*Elephas maximus maximus)* (Animalia, 2025) [2]. Asian elephants (*Elephas maximus)* are listed in the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red Data Book as an endangered species (Gunawansa et al. 2023; IUCN, 2020)

[8],[12]. According to the 2011 elephant census, Sri Lanka has approximately 5,787 elephants, comprising 1,107 calves and 122 tuskers (World Wildlife Fund, 2020) [24]. However, the Department of Wildlife states that the wild elephant population in Sri Lanka has increased up to 7,000 (Ministry of Agriculture, 2023) [15]. Exceeding the carrying capacity of the elephant population in the country is also one of the main factors for the continuation of the HEC in the country. Elephants are indirectly forced to the dry zone lowlands, Northern, Eastern, North Western, North Central, Southern, and part of Uva Provinces (Gunawansa et al. 2023) [8]. Numerous human needs, including land utilization, have increased in response to the rapid growth of the human population, have often expanded and encroached on elephant habitats (Fernando et al. 2021) [5]. HEC occurrences are common in Sri Lanka, and over 59.9% of Sri Lanka's elephants are restricted to the lowland dry zone (Fernando et al. 2021) [5]. Particularly, around 69.4% of the elephant's range in Sri Lanka is in areas where people live, a problem expected to worsen in the future (Fernando et al. 2021) [5]. Therefore, the conflict between humans and elephants is a challenge to the Sri Lankan government for policymaking and planning (Prakash et al. 2020) [8]. Sri Lanka has recorded the highest annual elephant deaths and the second-highest human deaths in the world, while India holds the first rank (Ranawana, 2020) [17]. Elephants mainly inhabit Sri Lanka's major National Parks, including Yala, Udawalawe, Lunugamvehera, Wasgamuwa, Kaudulla, Wilpattu, and Minneriya (Fernando et al. 2011) [6]. At the same time, National Parks are a very popular destination among tourists within the Protected Area network system in Sri Lanka. The majority of wildlife tourism is targeted at reaching the country's Protected Areas (Gnanapala, Bunltjens, and Rathnayake, 2017) [7]. It is assessed that 30% of foreign tourists visit a National Park during their stay in the country (Gnanapala, Bunltjens, and Rathnayake, 2017) [7]. The Department of Wildlife Conservation and the private sectors provide various facilities to the tourists in and around the parks, respectively. These facilities include accommodation, refreshments, tour operations, guidance and transportation (Kariyawasam, and Sooriyagoda, 2017) [13]. The rapid growth in tourism since 2009 targeting wildlife destinations is likely to exacerbate difficulty for the DWC (Gnanapala, Bunltjens, and Rathnayake, 2017) [7]. YNP in the SWR is the country's second-largest and most visited national park, and has witnessed a substantial increase in tourism (Abeyanayake, and Perera, 2025; Vijethilaka, et al. 2025) [1], [23]. However, this increasing trend disturbs the wildlife, including large-bodied, highly roaming animals and the management measures of the park. At present, there are negative environmental impacts occurring as a result of over-visitation to the YNP (Gnanapala, Bunltjens, and Rathnayake, 2017) [7]. By 2023, the number of tourist arrivals had escalated to 466,437, marking an equivalent distribution of tourists, with 54% being locals and 46% being foreigners (Abeyanayake, and Perera, 2025) [1]. Most tourists are given priority to enter YB-01, and this block alone accommodates 80% of the safari jeeps jam-packed within the park, causing a significant concentration of tourism pressure in YB-01 (Abeyanayake and Perera 2025) [1]. As a result of this over visitation, biodiversity, including animals, especially elephants, is under pressure. The severity of those impacts varies according to the intensity of use and seasons (Mallikage et al. 2021) [14]. In YB-01, the pressure from continuations of over visitations pushes the elephants out of the block.

3. Methodology

The Methodology for this research was designed as justification of the study site, data collection methods and analysis methods. YB-01 has been selected as the study area for this study, where over-visitation of tourists and HEC are correlated in different aspects.

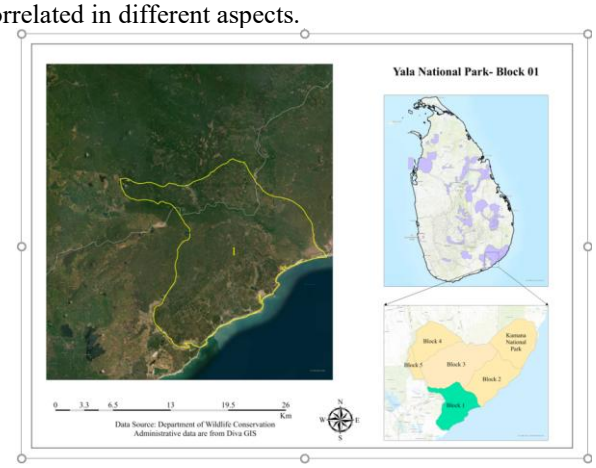


Figure 1: YB-01, located in the Southern Wildlife Region of Sri Lanka.
Source: Researcher, 2025

Data were collected through participant observations, interviews, and semi-structured in-depth interviews, which were assumed to gather primary data. Participatory observation allowed for the confirmation of the reliability of the information obtained through interviews. In April and December 2024, the author managed to collect data at the Palathupana entrance and YB-01 for 3 and 4 days, respectively.

This study employed purposive sampling to select participants from different levels within the Plathupana office of YB-01, alongside jeep drivers, farmers, and local villagers. A total of 45 participants were selected for the primary data collection. Selection was based on specific criteria, focusing on participants' direct experience and knowledge of over-visitation and HEC in and around YB-01. The purposive sampling method was chosen to ensure the inclusion of individuals who can provide detailed insights into the effects of over-visitation on elephant behaviour and human-elephant interactions. Park officials provided most of the information through four (04) interviews, besides three (03) interviews were conducted with jeep drivers. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with the farmers and villagers in five 05 different occasions adjacent to the main entrance of YB-01. However, selection bias is a potential limitation of this study due to the use of purposive sampling, which focused on individuals directly involved in or affected by HEC in and around YB-01. As a result, the perspectives of other relevant stakeholders, such as visitors or policymakers, may not be fully represented. To minimize this bias, the study incorporated semi-structured in-depth interviews to encourage a broader range of responses and explanations. In addition to this, secondary data were collected from the Palathupana front office. The data collected from the farmers and villagers were story-type qualitative data. The collected

data were analysed using content analysis methods and Microsoft Excel. Qualitative information, such as experiences, narratives, and opinions, was primarily examined through content analysis. The analysed qualitative findings were organised by main themes and subthemes.

4. Results and Discussions

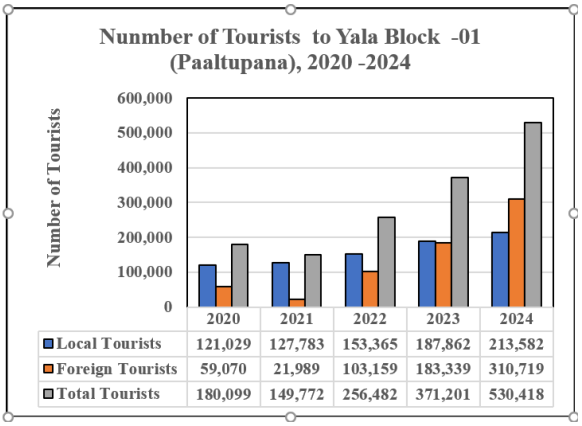
According to the results of the analysis, over visitation has been recognized as one of the major driving forces for the HEC in and around YB-01, with other forces such as various human activities in the park, changes in resource availability, as well as a lack of seasonal carrying capacity[1] in the park and attraction of crops, ripened vegetables and fruits outside the park are recognised as main factors for the raid of elephants to farmlands and villages. However, the dangerous elephant-chasing practices of farmers and villagers are also considerable forces for the conflict. Among the various factors, it was recognised that elephants are forced to come out of the park as a result of the human burdens inside the park (Isthikar, 2021) [9]. Despite highly concentrated and continuous tourist visits in the YB-01, elephants have been pocketed[2] as the last option for the administrators. Nevertheless, the main reasons for the HEC in Sri Lanka are different, according to spatial variations, seasonal climatic patterns, and human practices in and around the parks.

4.1 Over and Interminable Tourists' Visits:

Over and interminable tourists' visits, a high number of Safari jeeps and unauthorised human practices inside the park, especially in the YB-01, have turned out to challenge the perseverance of species, specifically elephants, their natural way of life and the management of the park. Over visits by tourists to the park have put high pressure on the elephants in the park. Besides, without considering the biodiversity of the park and the rules and regulations of the park, certain groups of villagers who live adjacent to the park, as well as outsiders, enter the park daily during both day and night. This type of human practice directly irritates the natural way of elephants' behaviour and pushes them out of the park.

In recent years, especially from 2020 onwards, the number of foreigners visiting natural destinations, including National Parks, has dramatically increased with suggestions and direction of tour guides, through social media and websites. A point to be noted is that the price of the tickets for entry to the National Parks is affordable for both locals and foreigners. According to the Palatupana office (2024), there are three categories of tickets. For locals, the entry ticket is Rs. 150 for adults and Rs. 100 for children. For foreigners from SARC countries, the entry ticket is US$20 for adults and US$10 for children, and at the same time, for foreigners from Western countries, the ticket charges are US$25 for adults and US$15 for children.

According to the front officers of the park and jeep drivers, a comparatively high number of foreigners visit the YB-01 from early November to late January. Among the locals, visiting natural areas and National Parks has become a trend. In the SWR, pilgrims on their way to Thissamaharama, Kataragama and Sithulpawa visit the YB-01. Especially, throughout the school holidays in April, August and December and also during the Katharagama season, which falls in July. It was found out that over visits to Yala B-1 is very high during December, especially due to the higher number of foreign visitors overlapping with local visitors.



	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Local Tourists	121,029	127,783	153,365	187,862	213,582
Foreign Tourists	59,070	21,989	103,159	183,339	310,719
Total Tourists	180,099	149,772	256,482	371,201	530,418

Figure 2: Number of tourists to YB-0, Palathupana entrance, 2020-2024
Source: Front office, YNP, YB-01, 2025

The number of local tourists at YB-01 has been on the rise from 2020 to 2024. In 2020, there were 121,029 local tourists, with that figure increasing to 213582 by 2024. In contrast, the number of foreign tourists was 59,070 in 2020, but dropped to 21,989 in 2021. However, from 2022 to 2024, this number surged dramatically to 310,719. The total number of tourists at YB-01 peaked in 2024, having grown from 180,099 in 2020 to 530,418 by 2024. According to Figure 1, it is obvious that both local and foreign tourists are attracted to YB-01 for an up-close view of wild animals, which results in increased pressure on these animals, causing them to become aggressive and pushing them out of the park, thus impacting the HEC in and around the area.

Most importantly, following the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and the related economic crisis, YB-01 has been experiencing overcrowding[3] due to increased visits from both local and foreign tourists. One-third of all visitors to national parks visit YB-01, causing traffic jams at the entrance of YB-01. This over-visit creates chaos, resulting in agony, attacks by elephants. According to various officers and jeep drivers, over-visits are said to be intensifying year by year.

It is very obvious that during the early morning of the day, YB-01 is mobbed by visitors daily and is on the rise on holidays. Therefore, the haven has turned into a living hell, which is unable to meet even basic needs such as food for these elephants (DWC, 2011) [3]. The main reason for over-

[1] Maximum number of species an environment can sustainably support without degrading nature and natural resources.
[2] These NPs are considered as habitat patches compared to elephants' size, its niche, other genetic needs as well as the size of their previous home ranges.
[3] The main reasons for over visits are the results of the end of civil war in 2009, whitewash of the COVID-19, web advertisements, wild destination, low coast for foreigners and easy access.

visits to the YB-01 is a narrow wildlife viewing preference,[4] especially of elephants and leopards.

According to the field survey, including interviews with jeep drivers and park officers in YB-01, it was recognised that from sunrise to sunset, the daily lives of elephants, feeding, roaming, resting, playing, and bathing, are continuously disrupted by the presence of visitors. Surrounded by clapping, camera flashes, waving, and shouting, the animals are exposed to constant stress. This excessive human activity causes them to feel trapped, anxious, and agitated. Seeking calmness and a chance to live naturally, they are often driven to leave YB-01 in search of quieter, more peaceful habitats. Unfortunately, such safe spaces are becoming increasingly scarce. Respondents also said that once the elephants cross park boundaries, they are drawn to the abundant and nutritious food available outside.

However, this benefit comes with a serious risk, as villagers frequently use harmful and aggressive methods to chase the elephants away, turning their search for peace into another source of danger. According to Santiapillai et al. (2010) [19] farmers are in the habit of using dangerous chasing methods. As a result, elephants develop problematic habits, invade human settlements, and cause damage to property, crops, and lives, known as problem elephants (Gunawansa et al. 2023) [8]. As a result, elephants have become vulnerable and driven to aggressive behaviour.

4.2 High Concentration of Safari Jeeps:

Safari jeeps are prevalent and the most suitable mode of transport on the gravel, uneven tracks of the parks. Their large wheels and elevated seats offer visitors safer views of elephants, both closely and from a distance. Additionally, the drivers and guides lead visitors to the park's hotspots to observe elephants and provide explanations about them. In the SWR, YB-01 is the visitors' hotspot, particularly for those who prefer narrow viewing among tourists. Consequently, YB-01 is very popular due to the high concentration of leopards and the strong possibility of a closer look at elephants and their herds.

According to the YB-01 Palathupana office (2024), there are a total of 556 registered safari jeeps and 130 non-registered ones. Toyota and Indian Motor jeeps, which accommodate 06 to 08 passengers, facilitate tourist safaris within YB-01. The Toyota jeeps charge Rs. 15,000 for a half day and Rs. 30,000 for a full-day safari, while the Indian Motor jeeps charge Rs. 13,000 for a half day and Rs. 26,000 for a full day, with a capacity of up to 10 passengers, including the driver and official guide. During peak seasons, between 150 and 200 safari jeeps enter YB-01 daily through the Palatupana entrance, whereas on normal days, the figure ranges from 40 to 50 jeeps. Tickets are issued from 5:00 am to 12:00 pm and from 2:00 pm to 4:00 pm, arranging separate queues for online ticket holders and on-site ticket holders, allowing jeeps to enter from 6:00 am onwards.

According to the analysis, between 6:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m., approximately 30 to 40 safari jeeps continuously pass by, filled with local and foreign visitors to the YB-01, as observed. In one stretch, around 10 to 15 jeeps enter the YB-01. According to a safari jeep driver and park officials, between 150 and 175 people engage in the safari on a routine basis each day. In the peak months, on most occasions, safari jeeps experience a traffic jam in YB-01. During November and December, the entrance of the YB-01 is filled with foreign tourists who have been waiting for hours in the queue for the safari. In addition to the Safari Jeeps, some use their vehicles to travel. According to the field survey, streams of safari jeeps that create lots of dust along the gravel tracks, their sudden speed ups and stops with the engine switch on noise, emissions and heat are unbearable and annoying for elephants and other species in YB-01. This stream line of jeeps that snake through the gravel road with cameras poking out from every window and from top of the roof makes elephants vulnerable. As a result, elephants get annoyed and push themselves out of the park. The irresponsible behaviour of some jeep drivers and their desire for money done to satisfy visitors and earn a lump sum money, causes threats to the wildlife in Block-01 of the park.

Safari jeeps are now an integral feature of YB-01. One can hardly talk about YB-01 without mentioning them. However, the constant pressure from these jeeps is driving elephants out of YB-01 and pushing them beyond the park's boundaries. Youth employment around YB-01 largely depends on the safari tourism industry, with many working as jeep drivers. A reduction in jeep numbers, while possibly beneficial for wildlife, raises serious economic concerns. Lacking alternative employment opportunities, displaced drivers, whose detailed knowledge of the park's geography provides a strategic advantage, may engage in poaching, driven by persistent demand in illegal wildlife markets. This poses a significant conservation threat. Moreover, findings indicate that the overcrowding of safari jeeps may be one of the key drivers forcing elephants out of YB-01, thereby intensifying HEC in nearby areas.

4.3 Certain Visitors' Unpleasant Behaviour against Elephants:

As observed, discussed and interviewed with park officers and jeep drivers, visitors, when they happen to have a closer look at a lonely elephant or a herd, have a habit of waving their hands or signalling objects. They take this opportunity to click photos with flashlights. Additionally, it was also observed that some visitors feed elephants[5], while some have a habit of making noise towards elephants. According to an officer, in YB-01, some visitors have a habit of throwing and littering objects directed to the elephants. These practices are illegal and banned activities under conservation laws. Nevertheless, Safari jeep drivers avoid such actions happening within their vehicles. When visitors replicate these inappropriate practices, elephants are driven out of YB-01 unpredictably. Elephants in Yala have a habit of roaming

[4]Most of the visitors come to the parks targeting to view closely at selected animals especially elephants, leopards; therefore, those visitors concentrate on selected identified spots of the park with support of the Safari Jeep drivers.

[5]People feed bananas, sandwiches, pineapples, wood apples and what they have in their bags, some people purposely take something with them to feed elephants although they are aware that feeding elephants is illegal.

from May to August, due to drought and human pressure in the park. However, elephants raid outside the YB-01 during November, December and April again, due to over-visitation by tourists and over-concentration of safari jeeps in the park. In addition, the aroma and sight of crops, harvested sugar cane and other grains in the warehouses as well as fruits, vegetables, nuts and yams in boutiques outside the YB-01 contribute to attracting elephants outside the park.

5. Conclusion

YB-01 is popular and offers a great opportunity to observe elephants and leopards up close. In recent years, particularly from 2020 onwards, YB-01 has become one of the most visited destinations by both local and foreign tourists. Foreign visitors flocked to YB-01 from early November to late January, while locals visited during school holidays in April, August, and December, as well as during the Katharagama season in July. Local visitor numbers have steadily increased from 121,029 in 2020 to 213,582 in 2024. Although foreign tourist numbers dipped to 21,989 in 2021 from 59,070 in 2020, they rebounded sharply, reaching 310,719 by 2024. Overall, total tourist arrivals peaked at 530,418 in 2024, up from 180,099 in 2020. Almost 700 safari jeeps are registered to transport tourists into the park. During peak seasons, between 150 and 200 safari jeeps enter YB-01 daily through the Palatupana entrance, whereas on regular days, the number ranges from 40 to 50 jeeps. The close human presence, along with flashing cameras and loud noises, causes stress and agitation among elephants. In search of peace, many leave the park, only to encounter new dangers in nearby villages, where they are often chased away aggressively. Although drawn by the plentiful food outside the park, the risk of harm increases, leaving elephants both vulnerable and more prone to aggressive behaviour, contributing to HEC in and around YB-01. YB-01 is one of the most visited wildlife destinations in Sri Lanka, and it is increasing in popularity year by year. This over-visitation exerts high pressure on elephants and encroaches on surrounding areas outside the park. To mitigate these impacts, it is imperative to implement visitor redistribution strategies by promoting lesser-known yet similarly equipped wildlife destinations. Such efforts should be supported through coordinated policy interventions, proactive guidance from wildlife management authorities, and targeted outreach via digital platforms.

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