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THE LOCAL COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN DEVELOPING THE ECO-TOURISM: (SPECIAL REFERENCE TO MEEMURE TOURISM DESTINATION, SRI LANKA)

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Abstract: Meemure is a destination in the Central Hills of Sri Lanka popular among adventure tourists and day tourists looking for a nature-based rural experience. This study attempts to investigate the factors that may affect the sustainability of Meemure as a tourist destination. The main objective of the study is to examine the level of community participation in the tourism activities in Meemure which is a key step in ensuring that all other ecotourism principles are in practice. This study used both secondary and primary data, with primary data collected through semi-structured interviews and observations. A sample of 12 individuals of the host community was approached to collect primary data. Themes and patterns were then abstracted from these using NVivo thematic analysis. The implications of this research may indicate the necessity of proper involvement of the host community as the most important stakeholders of eco-tourism with respect to sustainable development in Meemure. The study further revealed that the host community in Meemure need to improve their skills and knowledge in a professional way to practice eco-tourism operations in order to attract both domestic and foreign tourists. However, due to a lack of skills and knowledge of the host community, the decline of eco-tourism in Meemure. The findings of this study further revealed that the host community should have a proper awareness regarding guests' hospitality. Furthermore, some limits for development were identified in terms of environmental degradation, cultural shifts, and fluctuations in seasonal tourism.

Keywords: Eco-Tourism, Sustainable Development, Host Community.