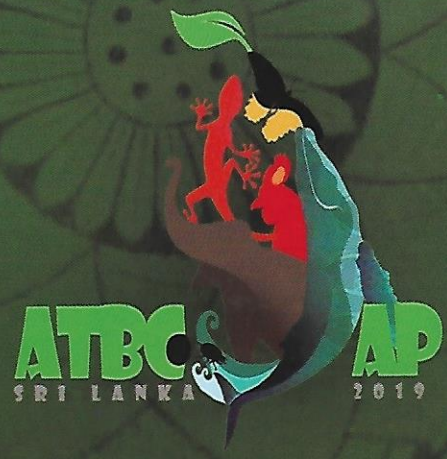

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Ecotouristically sound biological resources survey of the Maskeliya Basin

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Maskeliya Basin in Sri Lanka possesses a very high potential for high end ecotourism due to its scenic beauty and unique biodiversity, unique topography, salubrious climate, special anthropogenic features including man-made reservoirs, tea gardens and forest plantations. The Peak Wilderness Nature Reserve, A UNESCO World Heritage Site, encompassing pristine montane cloud forests is reported to possess an exceptionally high endemicity of fauna and flora. However, only a few attempts have been made to promote tourism in this region. Present tourism activities lead towards destruction than conservation of this highly sensitive natural habitat. The present survey was conducted giving priority to identify the features and characters such as diversity and compactness of ecotouristically sound biological resources in Maskeliya. Using gridded satellite images of the location, ecologically important features potentially useful in ecotourism were identified and selected grid areas were visited at different times of the day, at fortnightly intervals, at least thrice within the study period along predetermined transects. The survey identified ten different mini ecosystems, 293 plant species belonging to 64 families and 183 genera, including 72 wild orchid species with a new *Podochilus* species and a vast variety of *Exacum* types (31 different color-form types) with a few potentially new records. In addition, 40 mammal species (8 endemic), 69 birds species (12 endemic), 18 reptiles species with nine tetrapod species and nine serpentoid species (6 endemic), 15 amphibian species (12 endemic) and 23 lepidoptera species including Sri Lanka's largest, the Atlas moth (*Attacus atlas*), and Sri Lankan moon moth (*Actias selene taprobanis*) were recorded. The present study confirms that Maskeliya region of Sri Lanka is a highly diverse and compact area possessing an ecotouristically sound biodiversity. Therefore, any further developments in the region needs to be based on conservation oriented tourism activities such as ecotourism, rather than destructive mass tourism concepts.