

Ocean Country Partnership Programme



Protected Area Management Effectiveness Assessments and Workshops- January 2025

Summary Report

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Contents

1.	Introduction	1
2.	Overview of Workshops.....	2
2.1	Stakeholder Workshop Dates and Locations	2
2.2	List of Stakeholders	2
2.3	Assessment Questionnaire	4
3.	Hikkaduwa National Park	5
3.1	MPA Overview	5
3.2	Threats and Management Issues	5
3.3	Stakeholder Response Summary	6
3.4	Key Management Successes	7
3.5	Key Management Challenges	7
4.	Wedithalathive Nature Reserve	8
4.1	MPA Overview	8
4.2	Threats and Management Issues	8
4.3	Stakeholder Response Summary	9
4.4	Key Management Successes	9
4.5	Key Management Challenges	9
5.	Vankalai Sanctuary.....	10
5.1	MPA Overview	10
5.2	Threats and Management Issues	10
5.3	Stakeholder Response Summary	10
5.4	Key Management Successes	11
5.5	Key Management Challenges	11
6.	Mirissa Whale Sanctuary (Proposed)	12
6.1	MPA Overview	12
6.2	Threats and Management Issues	12
6.2	Stakeholder Response Summary	12
6.2.1	Legal Status and Management Planning	12
6.2.2	Key Ecological Data for Management.....	13
6.2.3	Staff and Department of Wildlife Conservation Resources.....	13
6.2.4	Surveillance and Enforcement.....	13
6.2.5	Research and Management	13
6.2.6	Education and Awareness	13
6.3	Key Issues	13
7.	Conclusions and Recommendations	15
8.	References.....	17

1. Introduction

Blue Resources Trust was funded by the Ocean Country Partnership Programme (OCP) to conduct Protected Area Management Effectiveness (PAME) assessments for several of Sri Lanka's Marine Protected Areas (MPAs). These assessments support identification of the current status of management and conservation efforts within a protected area. They can be used to identify key successes and issues facing the protected area and create a list of actions to be implemented by the relevant authorities.

Best practice for undertaking PAME assessments is to take into account available literature and stakeholder views, including those involved in management of the protected area and local stakeholders who may be impacted by decisions on the protected area, when completing the assessment.

The OCP is a UK government funded programme providing technical support to partner countries focusing on three key themes; marine biodiversity, marine pollution and sustainable seafood.

The OCP has been supporting the Sri Lankan government and wider stakeholders to ensure their existing MPAs have access to the information and tools required to implement effective, well-managed MPAs. On behalf of the Department of Wildlife Conservation, as the protected area management authority, the OCP have conducted and funded PAME assessments to be completed at eight of their MPAs in 2024 and 2025, to provide an understanding of the current status of management and conservation.

This report has been written to provide an overview of the work completed in 2025 to complete PAME assessments at up to four protected areas: Wedithalathive Nature Reserve, Vankalai Sanctuary, Hikkaduwa National Park and the proposed Mirissa Whale Sanctuary. At the point of conducting the workshops and assessments, the proposed Mirissa Whale Sanctuary had not been formally designated, and it was concluded that it was not appropriate to conduct a PAME assessment for this proposed protected area.

The relevant workshop series was organised by Blue Resources Trust, with funding and overall supervision provided by the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) through the UK's Blue Planet Fund under the OCP.

The report summarises the approach to the workshops, existing management effectiveness of the protected areas, and identifies gaps and opportunities based on shared evidence and information provided by stakeholders. It discusses potential actions and strategies that could enhance management through informed decision-making.

This report covers the following key areas:

- Overview of the workshops
- Overview of MPAs
- Threats and Management Issues
- Stakeholder Response Summary
- Key Management Successes
- Key Management Challenges for each MPA

2. Overview of Workshops

2.1 Stakeholder Workshop Dates and Locations

Table 1 summarises the data and the location of the PAME workshops and which MPA the workshop was focused on.

Table 1: Summary of workshops held.

Date	Workshop & Location
20 th January 2025	Wedithalathive Nature Reserve & Vankalai Sanctuary (Government Stakeholders) - <i>Ahash Hotel, Mannar</i>
21 st January 2025	Wedithalathive Nature Reserve & Vankalai Sanctuary (Community & Civil Society Stakeholders) - <i>Ahash Hotel, Mannar</i>
23 rd January 2025	Hikkaduwa National Park - <i>Hikka Tranz Hotel, Hikkaduwa</i>
24 th January 2025	Mirissa Whale Sanctuary (Proposed) - <i>Mandhara Resort, Mirissa</i>

2.2 List of Stakeholders

Table 2 provides a summary of stakeholders that attended each of the workshops, including which sector they represented.

Table 2: Summary of stakeholder attendance at each of the workshops.

Marine Protected Area	Organisation	Sector
Wedithalathivu Nature Reserve & Vankalai Sanctuary	Department of Wildlife Conservation	Government
	Department of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources	Government
	Marine Environment Protection Authority	Government
	National Aquatic Resources Research and Development Agency	Government
	National Aquaculture Development Authority	Government
	Department of Coast Conservation & Coastal Resource Management	Government
	Sri Lankan Navy	Government/Military
	Mannar District Secretariat	Government

Marine Protected Area	Organisation	Sector
Wedithalathivu Nature Reserve & Vankalai Sanctuary	Fisheries Cooperative Societies (Pappamoddai, etc.)	Community/Fisher Group
	Rural Fisheries Organizations (multiple)	Community/Fisher Group
	Community leaders, environmental activists	Civil Society
	Pelagikos Pvt. Ltd.	Research/NGO
Hikkaduwa Marine National Park	Department of Wildlife Conservation	Government
	Sri Lanka Navy	Government/Military
	Ceylon Fisheries Harbours Corporation	State Corporation
	Marine Environmental Protection Authority	Government
	Hikkaduwa Urban Development Authority	Government
	Dept. of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources	Government
	Glass Bottom Boat Tour Operators	Community/Tourism
	Hikkaduwa Hoteliers Association	Private Sector (consulted)
Mirissa Proposed Marine Sanctuary	Department of Wildlife Conservation	Government
	Department of Coast Conservation & Coastal Resource Management	Government
	National Aquatic Resources Research and Development Agency	Government
	District Secretariat	
	Sri Lanka Coast Guard	Government/Military
	Whale Watching Boat Owners Assoc.	Private/Community Sector
	Mirissa Hoteliers/Tourism Association	Private Sector
	Multiday Boat Owners Association	Community/Private Sector
	Oceanswell	Research/NGO
	Dept. of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources	Government

2.3 Assessment Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed to cover different overarching aspects, including assessing stakeholders' knowledge of the protected area, management practices, effectiveness of legislation implementation, stakeholder involvement in management, and local stakeholders' perspectives on the current condition of the protected area. Each subtopic included several questions, each providing distinct discussion guidelines. Therefore, the interviewer could guide stakeholder responses in a semi-structured manner.

The first section (knowledge of the protected area) was explored through six framework questions. These questions covered stakeholders' awareness of the protected area (PA), its importance, and the threats it faces. Furthermore, the questionnaire assessed stakeholders' understanding of PA boundaries and agreed management objectives, along with gathering their ideas for improving existing policies and management structures toward a more feasible direction.

The second section explored the availability of a robust foundation for management, including research-based findings, monitoring data, maps, species records, and ecological data. It also examined budget and funding availability, staff capacity, equipment, resource accessibility, and existing management mechanisms. Subsequently, key stakeholder perspectives were explored regarding the effectiveness, viability, and robustness of management mechanisms in achieving management targets, incorporating grassroots-level suggestions.

The third section consisted of one question that examined how effectively management is being enforced at the ground level and identified avenues for improving implementation.

The fourth section focused on stakeholder involvement in management, assessing their current participation and influence. It further evaluated the availability of facilities and infrastructure related to the PA and how these could be improved to benefit the PA ecologically and uplift local stakeholder livelihoods socio-economically.

The fifth and final section investigated stakeholders' perspectives on the condition of the protected area, based on their experiences and expectations. It explored changes in reef conditions over the past ten years, shifts in indicator species within a given time period, and the PA's importance in climate mitigation and adaptation. It also examined community stakeholder perspectives on how the PA can be aligned with global and local issues to safeguard the protected area.

3. Hikkaduwa National Park

3.1 MPA Overview

Hikkaduwa National Park holds the distinction of being Sri Lanka's first officially declared MPA under the Fauna and Flora Protection Ordinance (FFPO). Its primary aim is the conservation of critical marine habitats and species. Its formal management was initiated as early as 1961 when the reef was designated a Fisheries Protected Area under the Fisheries Ordinance, to control harmful fishing practices. In 1979, it was declared a Marine Sanctuary under the FFPO, initially covering 44.5 hectares. Recognising the need for stronger protection, it was upgraded to a Nature Reserve in 1998, and its area expanded to 104 hectares. Further, in 2002, it achieved its current designation as a National Park. These progressive changes in legal status were intended to strengthen the framework for effective conservation and management. Despite these enhanced legal provisions, the Department of Wildlife Conservation has faced persistent challenges in effectively managing the park (Perera & De Vos 2007). Although the legal framework has grown progressively stronger, on-the-ground enforcement and sustainable management practices have remained limited.

Hikkaduwa National Park has been the focus of numerous coastal and marine management initiatives in Sri Lanka, serving as a testing ground for various marine protected area management approaches. In 1996 the MPA and surrounding area were declared as a Special Management Area by the Coast Conservation Department (CCD) and a comprehensive management plan was developed (CRMP 1996). The plan was updated in 2004 during the Coastal Resources Management Project (CRMP). This plan was created following extensive consultations with all relevant stakeholders and proposed key management interventions, including:

- Setting limits on the number of glass-bottomed boats.
- Establishing zonation within the MPA for different user groups.
- Creating an education center for awareness and outreach.

However, these recommendations were never fully implemented. At present, the number of glass-bottomed boats exceeds the recommended limits, and many of the buoys and signs established for zonation and education have either been damaged or lost completely.

A significant challenge facing the park has been the project-based model of intervention, which often introduces management actions without securing long-term financial sustainability or ensuring adequate management capacity.

Although Hikkaduwa National Park has a long history of research and monitoring efforts, there is currently no established long-term monitoring program. Additionally, research reports and collected data are not systematically collated or integrated into regular management practices, limiting their usefulness in guiding conservation efforts.

3.2 Threats and Management Issues

The coral reef and associated marine life in Hikkaduwa National Park have been significantly impacted by both natural events and human activities. A major blow to the reef occurred during the widespread coral bleaching event of 1998 (Rajasuriya 2002), after which the coral cover has never fully returned to pre-bleaching levels. Subsequent bleaching events in 2016 (Chandra et al 2020) and 2024 further stressed the coral ecosystems, hindering recovery

efforts. Several initiatives aimed at restoring the reef through coral transplantation have been implemented over the years. However, these efforts have had minimal success in improving overall coral cover and reef health.

Direct anthropogenic threats are a major cause of reef degradation in Hikkaduwa (CRMP 1994). Rising visitor numbers have led to direct physical damage to corals, particularly from individuals walking on the reef. Glass-bottomed boats powered by two-stroke kerosene engines contribute to pollution and cause additional physical damage to the reef structure.

Pollution from several canals flowing into the park has further degraded water quality, introducing solid waste, especially during heavy rains and periods of freshwater discharge. In recent years, Hikkaduwa National Park has also become a popular site for turtle watching. Unfortunately, the physical handling and feeding of turtles by tourists and local guides have raised concerns over potential long-term negative impacts on turtle behavior and health. Beyond the boundaries of the MPA, the development of turtle nesting beaches for tourism poses additional threats to turtle populations, raising concerns about the sustainability of these fragile ecosystems.

3.3 Stakeholder Response Summary

All respondents demonstrated an awareness of the legal status of Hikkaduwa National Park and the major prohibitions associated with it. Stakeholders recognised the MPA as an area of significant marine biodiversity and emphasised its importance for tourism and local livelihoods.

However, most stakeholders were unclear about the specific management objectives and key performance indicators (KPIs) for the MPA. They broadly understood that the conservation of coral reefs was a key goal but were not familiar with detailed targets or strategies. While participants generally had a rough understanding of the park's boundaries, they noted a lack of access to precise boundary information and reported not possessing any official maps of the area.

Only a few stakeholders were aware of an existing management plan or of specific management activities being carried out in alignment with such a plan. Although they acknowledged the presence of the Department of Wildlife Conservation at the site and some basic management activities. They expressed concern over unregulated tourism, recognising it as a major ongoing issue. However, there was little clarity among stakeholders regarding what actions should be taken to address these problems. Local community members, in particular, highlighted pollution from nearby canals as a significant cause of reef degradation and noted its negative impact on tourism.

There was also limited understanding among stakeholders about the current health of the reef and the impacts of coral bleaching and other human-induced stresses. Some older community members recalled the state of the reef before the 1998 coral bleaching event, but most observations were based on limited and recent personal experiences, resulting in an incomplete understanding of whether the reef was improving or continuing to degrade.

The Department of Wildlife Conservation highlighted challenges related to enforcing regulations, largely due to limited staff capacity. Although some infrastructure and training had been provided in the past, financial constraints at the site level remains a major barrier to effective management. Many project-driven initiatives were not sustained beyond their initial implementation. While the Department of Wildlife Conservation identified key capacity-building needs, there was no existing plan to ensure long-term financial sustainability. Most discussions around management challenges focused on resource limitations rather than on

the need for structural reforms. Other government agencies such as the Coast Conservation Department (CCD), the Department of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (DFAR), and the Marine Environment Protection Authority (MEPA) were largely disengaged from current management efforts. The CCD noted that although it had previously led initiatives like the CRMP, it is no longer actively involved.

A breakdown in communication between the Department of Wildlife Conservation and local stakeholders was evident, contributing to mistrust between the parties. Several dive operators expressed frustration with the management process and chose not to participate in recent workshops despite Blue Resources Trust staff visiting them prior to the workshops. They cited a lack of tangible outcomes from previous engagements as a major reason for disengagement from management workshops and similar activities. Overall, there was a clear lack of confidence in the management process among local community stakeholders.

3.4 Key Management Successes

- Department of Wildlife Conservation office established, and staff allocated to the MPA.
- MPA functions as a “no-take” zone with healthy fish numbers and resident turtles.
- Some habitat management actions have been initiated.
- Processes to register and regulate tourism activities within the MPA are in place.

3.5 Key Management Challenges

- Pollution impacts originating outside the MPA.
- Inadequate coordination between government agencies and local councils.
- Poor communication from the Department of Wildlife Conservation and lack of management transparency.
- Absence of effective feedback mechanisms, reducing trust in management processes.
- Overburdened Department of Wildlife Conservation staff managing large areas beyond Hikkaduwa National Park, limiting site-specific effectiveness.
- Lack of a clear action plan and financial sustainability framework.
- Management actions not clearly linked to conservation outcomes.

4. Wedithalathive Nature Reserve

4.1 MPA Overview

The Wedithalathive Nature Reserve (VNR) comprises an area of 29,180 ha and was declared in 2016. It is a very large, protected area that contains extensive areas of seagrass meadows and mangroves. There are also some small coral habitats with a notable patch reef referred to as Maldiva Bank. It is one of the few MPAs in Sri Lanka to encompass such a variety of interconnected habitats comprising a large ecosystem complex. The VNR provides refuge for many globally threatened species such as marine turtles and dugongs that are known to feed in the seagrass meadows within the MPA. The Nature Reserve covers a large extent of ocean, protecting sea grass habitats that are crucial for dugongs, as well as some terrestrial areas which protect Sri Lanka's largest mangrove ecosystem. The VNR is also an important nursery ground for commercially important fish species including shellfish that constitute an important part of local livelihoods. It is also located within an area that support export-oriented fisheries for blue swimmer crabs.

The declaration of VNR was done after the area was identified as needing protection by the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) of the Northern Province conducted in 2012 (CEA 2014). It is one of the few areas in Sri Lanka with sea fronting mangroves. Initial management of fisheries in adjacent water was undertaken as part of the Blue Swimmer Crab Fishery Improvement Project (BSCFIP). This initiative worked with local fisheries societies to improve fisheries management through agreed measures to reduce capture of undersized crabs and bycatch and set capture limits based on stock assessments. These measures have led to the fishery being certified as a sustainable fishery by Seafood Watch. A management plan for VNR has been developed by DWC in 2024 with support from Pelagikos Pvt Ltd. and funded by Oceans5, and several management actions have been initiated. However, there are significant shortfalls in current management in terms of assessment, planning and implementation, especially with regard to management of fisheries within the VNR. Illegal and destructive fishing such as the use of explosives is carried out regularly within the MPA boundaries. Currently, the Department of Wildlife Conservation has little to no capacity to enforce regulations in marine waters of VNR.

Current management initiatives undertaken by Department of Wildlife Conservation with support from Pelagikos Pvt Ltd. and Blue Resources Trust with funding from Oceans5 are aiming to develop greater collaboration between the Department of Wildlife Conservation and the DFAR to support better management of fisheries within the VNR. This includes a Department of Wildlife Conservation registration of vessels fishing within the MPA with specified gear restrictions for the MPA that supersede existing regulations under the Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Act (FARA).

4.2 Threats and Management Issues

Major issues facing the VNR include illegal and destructive fishing, illegal land grabbing, expansion of aquaculture, encroachment of livestock, and climate change. In 2017, the National Aquaculture Development Authority (NAQDA) made the request to de-gazette a section of the VNR by submitting a Cabinet paper that was co-sponsored by the then Minister of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources and Minister of Sustainable Development, Wildlife Conservation and Buddhasasana. An Environmental Assessment Study (EAS), and a subsequent assessment of the EAS reported by a Technical Expert Committee appointed by the Department of Wildlife Conservation in 2019, have found against the proposal on the grounds of the obvious ecological impact resulting from fragmentation of the ecosystem. Despite this, a section of the VNR was degazetted though this was subsequently overruled,

due to a legal petition being filed in the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka. However, NAQDA and the Ministry of Fisheries are still pursuing their case for de-gazetting the MPA.

4.3 Stakeholder Response Summary

A significant amount of stakeholder consultation has been undertaken as part of ongoing management efforts under the Oceans5 programme for VNR. This has led to increased trust between local communities and the Department of Wildlife Conservation and an increased awareness of MPA boundaries and regulations among local stakeholders. However, many community stakeholders expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of participation in management implementation.

Additionally, the gazetting of the area as a Nature Reserve has resulted in loss of access to traditional fishing grounds. Prior to declaration there were initiatives to promote community-based tourism that has now been prohibited. This has resulted in local communities feeling excluded along with a negative impact on livelihoods.

Like other MPAs there appears to be some disconnect between understanding the importance of the MPA and the reasons for its establishment. Despite most respondents stating that the MPA has specific objectives no mention was made of specific conservation targets or KPIs.

4.4 Key Management Successes

- The first MPA with a Management Plan developed by the Department of Wildlife Conservation.
- Department of Wildlife Conservation has undertaken long term habitat monitoring of coral reefs.
- Collaboration with DFAR to regulate and manage fisheries within the MPA.
- Habitat management initiatives undertaken.

4.5 Key Management Challenges

- Clear objectives for the MPA have not been defined.
- Link between research and monitoring, and management actions is not clear.
- Significant gaps in surveillance and enforcement, especially in marine areas.
- Inadequate stakeholder participation in management decision making and implementation.
- Lack of sustainable funding sources.

5. Vankalai Sanctuary

5.1 MPA Overview

The Vankalai Sanctuary, covering an area of 4,398.95 hectares, was declared a protected area in 2008, primarily to safeguard habitats for resident and migratory birds. In 2010, it was further recognized as Sri Lanka's fourth Ramsar Site under the International Convention on Wetlands of International Importance.

The sanctuary comprises of mainland areas, coastal islands, shorelines, and marine habitats. It is bounded by Vankalai to the south, Puliyantivu Island to the west, and Tiruketiswaram to the north and east, including the causeway that connects the mainland to Mannar Island. The site hosts a rich mosaic of ecosystems, including arid-zone thorn scrublands, pastures, maritime grasslands, sand dunes, mangroves, salt marshes, waterholes, lagoons, tidal flats, and seagrass beds.

During the migratory season, the Gulf of Mannar attracts a wide range of waterbirds, with the sanctuary serving as an important feeding ground. Its marine habitats also provide critical refuge for species of global conservation concern, including the Green Turtle (*Chelonia mydas*), Olive Ridley Turtle (*Lepidochelys olivacea*), and Dugong (*Dugong dugon*).

Several initiatives have been undertaken to improve site management. A key effort was the Community-Based Management Model for the Vankalai Wetland Ecosystem undertaken from 2014 to 2016, funded through IUCN's *Mangroves for the Future* initiative and implemented by the Green Movement of Sri Lanka (IUCN 2016). This project supported local communities by promoting ecotourism, developing alternative livelihoods for fisher groups, and creating a community-based wildlife crime reporting network to strengthen surveillance.

More recently, the Department of Wildlife Conservation has undertaken several management actions in collaborations with Pelagikos Pvt. Ltd. and supported by Oceans5. These include assisting fishing communities in adopting sustainable practices, reducing bycatch, installing signage, demarcating boundaries, and removing invasive plants. The initiative has also strengthened fisheries management in partnership with the DFAR.

5.2 Threats and Management Issues

The Vankalai Sanctuary faces several threats, including the expansion of aquaculture, cattle grazing within sanctuary boundaries, illegal logging for timber, destructive fishing practices, and pollution. While aquaculture activities do not take place within the sanctuary itself, there are concerns that its expansion in surrounding areas could lead to negative consequences such as water quality degradation, introduction of invasive species, and the spread of diseases. Marine habitats are impacted by overfishing and the use of destructive fishing methods that have depleted fish stocks, degraded marine habitats and resulted in the by-catch of threatened species such as turtles and dugongs.

5.3 Stakeholder Response Summary

Community stakeholders felt excluded from the management process stating limited opportunities for participation in management and decision-making. Many expressed a willingness to support management actions but were unaware as to how they could participate. There was also concern about potential aquaculture expansion in the area following efforts to do the same in Wedithalathivu.

The limited financial and human resources of the Department of Wildlife Conservation severely impacted surveillance, monitoring, and enforcement, and local communities stated that many destructive activities are carried out with little to no enforcement.

Many locals expressed a sense of pride in the MPA being an important birding area and the visitation by international tourists for bird watching. However, they expressed that tourism infrastructure and support for local community-based tourism is inadequate. There was a strong desire for greater participation of local youth in community-based tourism as a means of livelihood and several participants felt that increasing such values will lead to greater appreciation of the MPA.

Among government stakeholders, there was some confusion on roles and responsibilities of individual agencies. Local government officials expressed frustration with the restrictions on development imposed by both the Vankalai and Wedithalathivu MPAs that border the Mannar town, stating that the rigid legal framework created difficulties in executing development activities in the area.

5.4 Key Management Successes

- Collaboration with DFAR to regulate and manage fisheries within the MPA.
- Implementation of habitat restoration and management activities.

5.5 Key Management Challenges

- Absence of clear management objectives and measurable targets.
- Significant gaps in surveillance and enforcement, particularly in marine areas.
- Insufficient stakeholder participation in decision-making and implementation.
- Lack of transparency in decision-making processes.
- Poor coordination among government agencies, leading to inefficiency and conflict.
- Inadequate tourism infrastructure and visitor management despite increasing visitation.

6. Mirissa Whale Sanctuary (Proposed)

6.1 MPA Overview

The proposed Mirissa Whale Sanctuary is currently under development by the Department of Wildlife Conservation. Mirissa has long been known for good whale and dolphin sightings, in particular regular sightings of blue whales (*Balaenoptera musculus*) and sperm whales (*Physeter macrocephalus*). Whale watching has been a major tourist attraction since the early 2000s with significant growth in the last two decades. In order to regulate whale watching, the Department of Wildlife Conservation enacted the Sea Mammals (Observation, Regulation and Control) Regulations, No. 1 of 2012 under the Fauna and Flora Protection Ordinance. In addition, a Department of Wildlife Conservation office was established in Mirissa harbour, and whale watching conservation fees were imposed on tourists undertaking whale watching. More recently, the Department of Wildlife Conservation has proposed the declaration of a whale sanctuary encompassing the main whale watching areas in the offshore waters around Mirissa. However, at the time of writing the sanctuary remains a proposal with no formal gazetting.

6.2 Threats and Management Issues

Large whales and other cetaceans are impacted by a variety of threats. By-catch in fisheries is a major cause of mortality for small cetaceans (Anderson et al 2020; Ilangakoon 2012) while collisions with commercial shipping vessels have also been highlighted as a significant threat, especially for large whales (Nanayakkara & Herath 2017; De Vos 2015). Ilangakoon (2012) also highlights occasional targeting of dolphins for meat by some fishers. The growth of whale watching tourism has also resulted in harassment of whales, with many operators complaining of overcrowding, boat collisions and chasing of whales with disruptions to normal behaviour and resultant avoidance behaviour being displayed by many whales. The unregulated and illegal whale snorkeling industry has also posed problems with many operators dropping snorkelers on whales resulting in stress to the animals.

Although regulations exist, enforcement at sea remains poor. Many operators frequently violate regulations and the high competition among them has also resulted in conflicts between operators. Currently, the Department of Wildlife Conservation is mainly engaged in vessel registration and checks at Mirissa Harbour together with the Coast Guard, as well as maintaining a ticketing office in Mirissa. At sea enforcement is weak with Department of Wildlife Conservation highlighting the lack of resources such as boats and staff to conduct surveillance, monitoring and enforcement.

6.2 Stakeholder Response Summary

Responses from stakeholders participating in the workshop are summarised below under key sections.

6.2.1 Legal Status and Management Planning

The MPA has not been declared and its boundaries, objectives and regulations have not been communicated with stakeholders. Department of Wildlife Conservation officers present at the workshop were unable to provide the information. Preparation of management actions beyond enforcement of existing regulations has not been undertaken yet. There is currently no specific workplan with relation to MPA management at ground level.

6.2.2 Key Ecological Data for Management

There is data on key species, feeding and movement patterns and other ecological data available with national research agencies, universities, private organisations, and individual researchers. Oceanswell conducts regular monitoring and research on cetaceans in Mirissa. Data on fisheries is available with the DFAR.

6.2.3 Staff and Department of Wildlife Conservation Resources

There is currently a Department of Wildlife Conservation office in Mirissa with allocated staff and an operating budget. However, this is inadequate for existing and potential future management needs. There is also severe need to increase technical capacity of Department of Wildlife Conservation staff through training and capacity building. As the MPA has not been declared and no management plan is in place, there is no budget currently allocated for MPA management.

6.2.4 Surveillance and Enforcement

Currently the Department of Wildlife Conservation has very little capacity for surveillance and enforcement, especially at sea. A collaborative approach together with the Coast Guard and Sri Lanka Navy was suggested to increase enforcement capacity. In addition, placing on board observers, both Department of Wildlife Conservation staff and volunteers as compliance observers was proposed. Although not expressed during the workshop, observation of interactions and conversations with individuals indicated that Department of Wildlife Conservation officers were concerned about personal safety when enforcing regulations, due to potential threats from the local community. As such providing greater support and engaging the Coast Guard and Sri Lanka Navy is encouraged.

6.2.5 Research and Management

Currently there is no specific research plan for the proposed MPA. However, several organisations conduct regular research in the area and can be engaged in research and monitoring. There is currently no management plan for habitats or species in the area. Management is focused on whale watching tourism and does not address other threats to cetaceans such as fisheries by-catch and vessel strikes or impacts to the habitats and species they rely on.

6.2.6 Education and Awareness

Some education and awareness programmes have been carried out by independent organisations such as Oceanswell. However, there is no regular awareness programme in place.

6.3 Key Issues

- The purpose and regulations of the proposed MPA and its impact on local stakeholders remain unknown to local stakeholders.
- There is very little communication, and local stakeholders have not been adequately consulted regarding the proposed MPA, leading to significant distrust.

- There is strong community opposition to the proposed MPA with fears of negative impacts on livelihoods with little to no improvement in regulating whale watching and other activities
- Lack of action on existing illegal whale snorkeling.
- Whale watching operators attributed reduced whale sightings to illegal whale snorkeling and also stated there was increased competition among operators due to lower sightings.
- Poor coordination among government agencies, leading to inefficiency and conflict.
- Inadequate tourism infrastructure at Mirissa Harbour despite high numbers of visitors for whale watching.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall, management of MPAs in Sri Lanka are constrained by several factors, with several common factors being highlighted in stakeholder consultations across all MPAs undertaken during the PAME workshops.

A top-down, single-agency management approach, with little to no community participation in management decision making and implementation, was widely recognised as a significant obstacle to effective MPA management.

Table 3 provides a summary of the key challenges identified across the workshops and recommendations as to how to tackle these.

Table 3: Main challenges identified during the PAME workshops and recommendations to tackle the challenges.

Major Challenges	Recommendations
Lack of Clear Conservation Objectives All declared MPAs currently lack well-defined conservation objectives and management indicators. This results in output-based management (tracking actions taken) rather than outcome-based management (measuring real conservation impacts).	Set Clear Objectives and Indicators Define conservation objectives, management targets, and performance indicators for each MPA, and ensure management plans include clear actions, rules, responsibilities, and enforcement mechanisms.
Weak Monitoring and Research Integration Research focused on ecological, biophysical, and sociological aspects is very limited. Where research does exist, it is not adequately applied to management decision-making. As a result, management is not sufficiently guided by the best available science.	Strengthen Research and Monitoring Identify key ecological and social monitoring criteria in consultation with experts. Develop partnerships with universities, research institutes, and independent researchers to strengthen data collection and application, and ensure research findings are systematically fed into management decisions.
Insufficient Funding Mechanisms Funding for MPAs is dependent almost entirely on Department of Wildlife Conservation allocations. These funds are often insufficient, fluctuate annually, and rarely cover essential activities such as monitoring, outreach, and community engagement. Barriers also exist to accessing additional funding for site-level activities.	Diversify and Secure Funding Develop a financial strategy that covers all management needs and identify actions that could be directly funded by donors or the private sector. Build long-term partnerships with private organisations to support recurring management needs.

Major Challenges	Recommendations
<p>Limited Stakeholder Participation Local communities and scientific experts face barriers to participating in management and research. Community involvement in enforcement, reporting, or stewardship is minimal, which undermines long-term sustainability of the MPAs.</p>	<p>Enhance Community Involvement Strengthen links with local communities by increasing transparency and communicating management actions regularly. Encourage community participation through mechanisms such as a formal incident reporting system with feedback loops. Ensure MPAs provide direct and indirect benefits (livelihoods, social upliftment) to secure community buy-in and support.</p>
<p>Poor Inter-Agency Collaboration Weak coordination between government agencies responsible for different sectors affecting MPAs leads to confusion, conflict, and inefficiencies.</p>	<p>Establish Regular Management Reviews Conduct management reviews on defined cycles with full stakeholder participation and adapt management actions based on review outcomes and research data, ensuring adaptive and evidence-based management.</p>
<p>Weak Implementation of Management Plans Even where management plans exist, they are poorly implemented. Plans lack clarity in terms of actions, roles, responsibilities, and enforcement mechanisms.</p>	<p>Improve Cross-Sector Collaboration Establish coordination mechanisms between agencies managing fisheries, tourism, coastal development, and conservation. Clearly define mandates and responsibilities to reduce overlap and conflict.</p>

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