

MAYAKADUWA, Udani Thatthasrani, MANUKA GIMHAN, Balasooriyage and CHANDANA, W. S. Neurotropic and biophysics effects. *Pedagogy and Psychology of Sport*. 2025;23:61713. eISSN 2450-6605.

<https://doi.org/10.12775/PPS.2025.23.61713>

<https://apcz.umk.pl/PPS/article/view/61713>

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

Received: 30.05.2025. Revised: 29.09.2025. Accepted: 05.10.2025. Published: 12.10.2025.

Influence of Sports Facilities and Tourist Attractions on the Economy in Sri Lanka (Down South)

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Abstract

In recent years, the development of sports facilities and tourist attractions has played a pivotal role in driving economic growth and fostering sustainable tourism in the region. Sri Lanka's economy is projected to see moderate growth of 2.2% in 2024, showing signs of stabilization, following the severe economic downturn of 2022 with tourism contributing approximately

5.3% to the national economy. Sports tourism has emerged as a significant contributor to the Sri Lankan economy, attracting a growing number of international visitors each year. This study analyzes the economic implications of sports tourism based on empirical data from the past decade. Key findings reveal that the number of international tourists visiting Sri Lanka primarily for sports-related activities has steadily increased by an average of 8% annually. Financially, sports tourism generates substantial revenue, with an estimated contribution of over \$150 million annually to the Sri Lankan economy. This revenue encompasses spending on accommodation, dining, transportation, and sports-related expenditures. Moreover, sports events and tournaments hosted in Sri Lanka significantly boost local businesses and employment in the tourism sector. Data were collected from 87 tourists using a random sampling technique, by a questionnaire to interpret qualitative data, identifying key trends and insights from respondents' feedback, and a Likert scale was utilized to measure visitors' satisfaction with various sports facilities and tourist attractions. Findings reveal a diverse demographic of visitors with varying preferences in activities and attractions. Popular sports facilities included surfing spots (53.8%), diving centers (40%), and yachting facilities, which received generally positive ratings on the Likert scale. The findings indicate a substantial and growing contribution from sports tourism to the Sri Lankan economy, highlighting its potential as a key driver of economic prosperity and cultural exchange on a global scale.

Keywords

Foreign Reserves, Inflation, Political influence, Investments

Introduction

Tourism has long been recognized as a key driver of economic development in Sri Lanka, contributing significantly to employment generation, foreign exchange earnings, and regional development. Among the various forms of tourism, sports tourism which involves travel to engage in or watch sports activities has shown notable growth in the past decade. This trend is especially visible in the southern coastal belt of Sri Lanka, often referred to as "Down South," where cities like Galle, Matara, Tangalle, and Hambantota have become hotspots for both domestic and international tourists seeking a blend of leisure, culture, and sports experiences (Ministry of Tourism, 2023).

Sri Lanka's strategic location in the Indian Ocean, along with its tropical climate and scenic landscapes, provides an ideal backdrop for various sporting activities such as surfing, cricket, beach volleyball, hiking, diving, and adventure racing. As a result, the down south region has witnessed increased investments in sports infrastructure, including international cricket stadiums (e.g., Galle International Stadium), surf camps in Weligama and Hikkaduwa, and improved road connectivity that facilitates tourism flows (Fernando, 2022). The development of such facilities not only enhances the tourist experience but also creates a ripple effect on the local economy by stimulating small businesses, hotels, restaurants, and transport services (Higham & Hinch, 2009). In the wake of Sri Lanka's economic crisis in 2022, the tourism sector emerged as a critical area for economic revival, contributing about **5.3%** of the national GDP and employing thousands directly and indirectly (World Bank, 2024). Recent forecasts suggest a modest economic recovery of 2.2% growth in 2024, driven partly by improved tourism performance. Within this context, sports tourism has emerged as a resilient and sustainable sub-sector, demonstrating a consistent 8% annual increase in international tourist arrivals for sports purposes, with an estimated annual revenue contribution exceeding USD 150 million (Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority [SLTDA], 2023).

Globally, sports tourism is recognized for its potential to drive regional development, attract foreign investment, and enhance the global image of a destination (Gibson, 1998). In Sri Lanka's southern region, sports events such as international cricket matches, marathon races, surf competitions, and beach games act as major crowd-pullers, often accompanied by media coverage that promotes the destination internationally. Furthermore, these events generate significant economic multipliers by increasing demand for accommodation, food and beverage services, retail trade, and local

handicrafts (UNWTO, 2021). Additionally, the integration of sports into tourism aligns with global trends of sustainable and experiential travel, where tourists seek meaningful and active participation in the local culture and environment. This fusion also supports community-based tourism models, in which local residents are engaged as service providers, guides, or entrepreneurs, ensuring that the economic benefits are equitably distributed (Chalip & Costa, 2005). Therefore, understanding the economic impact of sports facilities and tourist attractions in the southern region is critical for policy makers, investors, and tourism planners. This study aims to explore how these elements influence economic development in Down South Sri Lanka by examining trends in sports tourist arrivals, income generation, employment, and local business growth. Through both quantitative data and qualitative insights, the research seeks to provide actionable recommendations for leveraging sports and tourism as dual engines of regional economic resilience and growth.

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research design, supplemented with qualitative insights, to assess the influence of sports facilities and tourist attractions on the regional economy of southern Sri Lanka. A descriptive survey method was used to gather data from international and domestic tourists visiting the Down South region. The approach allowed for identifying patterns, satisfaction levels, and the perceived economic value of tourism and sports facilities through structured data collection. The research was conducted in key tourist destinations in the southern region of Sri Lanka, specifically targeting Galle, Mirissa, Hikkaduwa. These locations were selected due to their popularity for sports tourism and high tourist traffic, as well as the presence of prominent sports infrastructure such as cricket stadiums, surfing zones, diving centers, and marinas. The target population included both international and domestic tourists who visited the southern region for leisure, sports, or adventure-related activities. A random sampling technique was employed to ensure representativeness. A total of 87 respondents were selected using simple random sampling during a four-week data collection period in early 2024. Tourists were approached in public areas such as beaches, stadiums, tourist sites, and hotels. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed based on existing literature and refined through a pilot test. The questionnaire consisted of three sections.

Demographic information, Tourism and sports activity preferences (types of sports, frequency of participation), Perceptions and satisfaction levels regarding sports facilities and local attractions. A 5-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = Very Unsatisfied to 5 = Very Satisfied) was used to measure satisfaction with specific aspects such as cleanliness, accessibility, affordability, safety, and facility

quality. Additionally, a few open-ended questions were included to capture qualitative feedback from respondents about their experiences, suggestions, and overall impressions of sports-related tourism in the region. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations to summarize tourist preferences, satisfaction levels, and economic behavior. Inferential statistics, particularly correlation analysis, were used to examine relationships between visitor satisfaction with sports facilities and their reported spending behavior. Qualitative data from open-ended responses were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes, such as infrastructure quality, cultural experiences, and economic perceptions of tourism in the region. To ensure validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by subject experts in sport science and tourism economics, and a pilot test was conducted with 10 tourists to refine wording and question structure. Reliability was tested using Cronbach's alpha, and items with an alpha value above 0.70 were considered internally consistent.

Results

The study revealed that most tourists engaged in sports tourism spent between \$101–\$200 per activity, with a significant number spending over \$200, indicating strong economic potential. Similarly, spending on other activities per visit was mostly within the \$101–\$500 range, while 14.6% spent more than \$500, identifying a high-value tourist segment. Accommodation spending showed a preference for premium lodging, as 36.6% spent more than \$200 per night, although 31.7% chose budget options under \$50. For travel arrangements, 45% spent between \$51–\$100, and 37.5% spent over \$100. In terms of participation, surfing and diving were the most popular beachside sports, while cricket and tennis led among ball games. Activities like cycling and running also attracted high participation, reflecting interest in fitness and adventure tourism. Additionally, cultural games such as chess and carrom saw notable involvement, highlighting the diverse recreational interests of tourists.

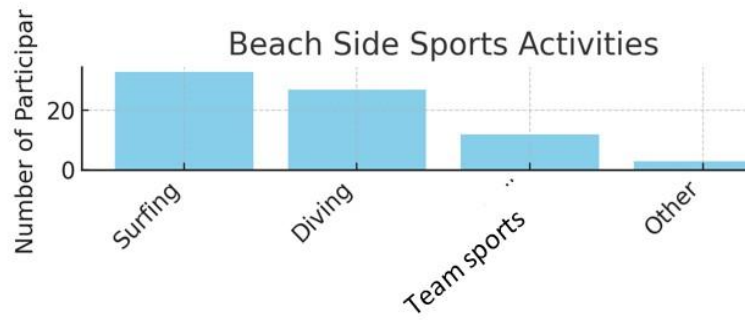


Figure 1: Ball sports data

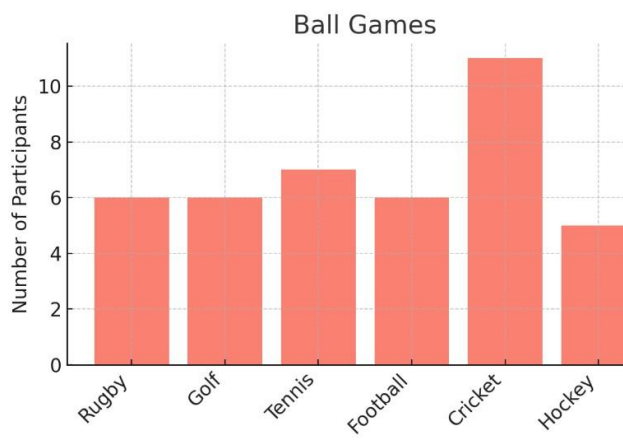


Figure 2: Beach sports data

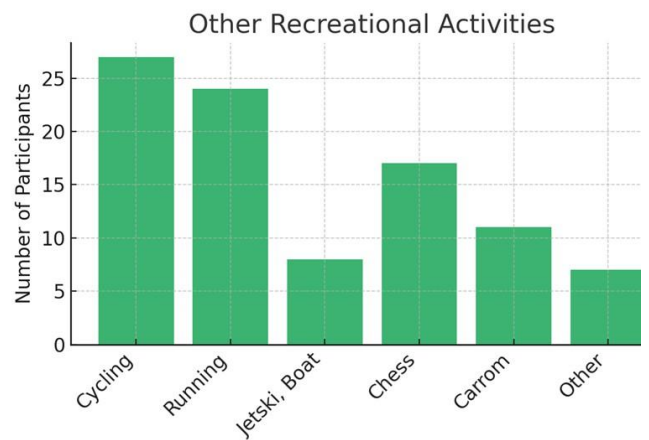


Figure 3: Other activates data

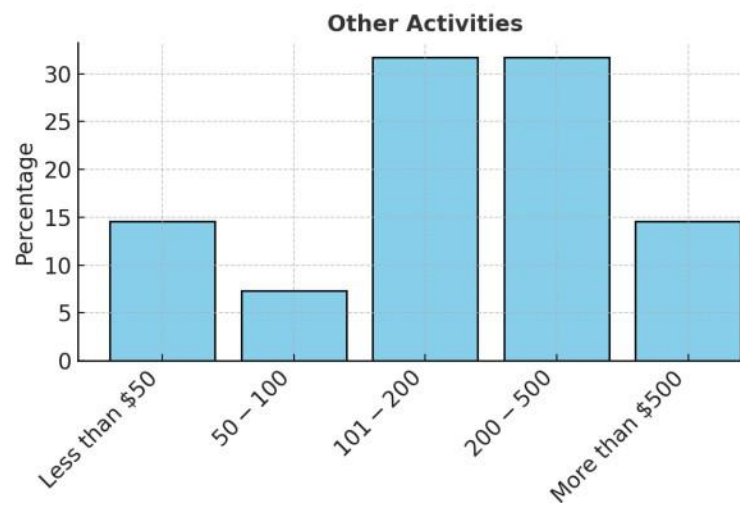


Figure 4: Other Activates for spending USD

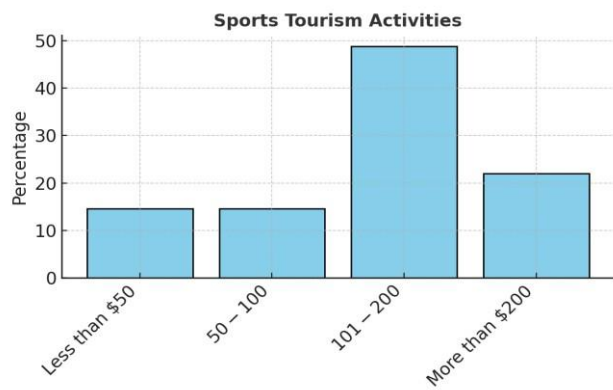


Figure 5: Sports Activates for spending USD

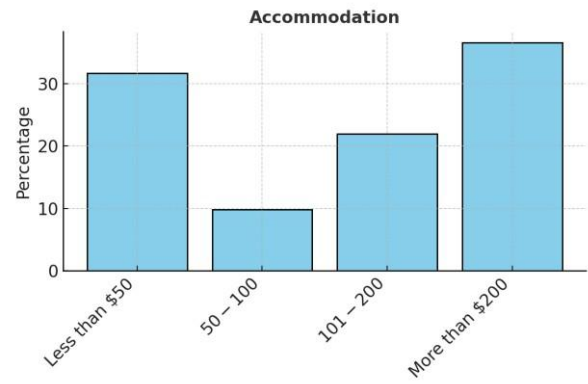


Figure 6: Accommodation for spending USD

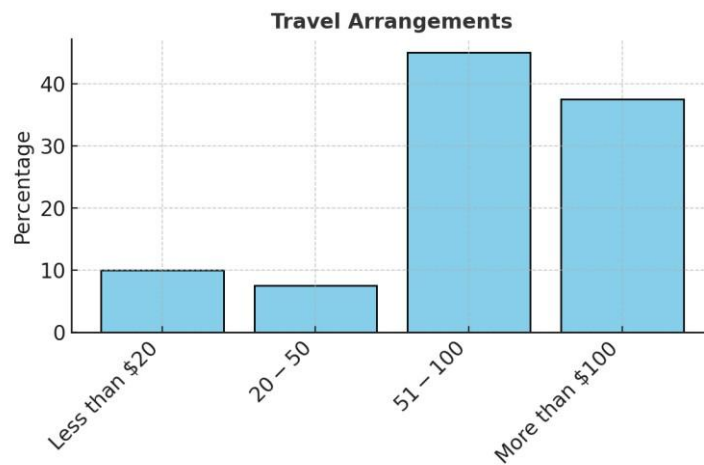


Figure 7: Traveling for spending USD

Discussion

Tourists participating in sports tourism in the Down South region of Sri Lanka exhibited notable spending behaviors. When examining spending on individual sport activities, the majority of tourists (48.8%) reported expenditures between \$101 and \$200 per activity, indicating a strong willingness to invest in premium sporting experiences. Additionally, a significant portion of tourists (22%) spent

more than \$200 per activity, highlighting the presence of a high-spending segment within the tourist population. In contrast, only 14.6% spent less than \$100, suggesting that low-budget participation in sports activities was relatively minimal. Regarding other tourism-related activities per visit, a balanced distribution was observed, with 31.7% of tourists spending between \$101–\$200 and another 31.7% spending between \$200–\$500. This reflects a consistent pattern of mid- to high-level spending, which supports the financial viability of diverse tourism services. Interestingly, 14.6% of tourists spent more than \$500 on other activities, further identifying a group of high-value tourists who contribute substantially to the local economy.

Accommodation choices also varied, with a notable 36.6% of tourists spending more than \$200 per night. This demonstrates a clear preference among many visitors for high-end lodging facilities. However, the presence of a budget-conscious segment was also evident, as 31.7% reported spending less than \$50 per night. This diversity in accommodation spending highlights the need for a range of lodging options to cater to different types of tourists. Spending on travel arrangements revealed that 45% of tourists allocated between \$51 and \$100, while 37.5% spent more than \$100. This pattern underscores the importance of transportation services within the sports tourism experience. Only 17.5% of tourists spent less than \$50, reinforcing that travel is a considerable component of the overall tourism expenditure. Participation in sports tourism activities demonstrated a wide variety of interests. Among beachside sports, surfing emerged as the most popular activity, attracting 33 tourists, followed closely by diving, which engaged 27 participants. Other beach sports such as beach rugby, football, handball, and volleyball also garnered moderate interest, with 12 tourists participating in these combined activities. These findings underscore the strong draw of the coastal environment for adventure and leisure sports. In terms of ball games, cricket was the leading activity with 11 participants, aligning with Sri Lanka's national passion for the sport. Tennis followed with 7 tourists, while rugby, football, and golf each engaged 6 participants. This distribution highlights the continued relevance of traditional competitive sports within the tourism context.

Other activities such as cycling and running showed substantial participation, with 27 and 24 tourists involved respectively. These numbers suggest a growing interest in endurance and fitness-related tourism. Additionally, cultural and indoor games such as chess (17 participants) and carrom (11 participants) also attracted attention, indicating that tourists are not only seeking physical activity but also cultural and recreational engagement during their visits. The analysis of tourist spending patterns reveals that sports tourism contributes significantly to the economy of Down South Sri Lanka. A large proportion of tourists demonstrated a willingness to spend between \$101 and \$200 or more on

individual sports activities, accommodations, and travel arrangements. This high level of expenditure illustrates the potential of sports tourism to generate substantial revenue for local businesses and service providers. Particularly noteworthy is that 36.6% of tourists opted for accommodations exceeding \$200 per night, signifying a strong demand for luxury lodging options. Similarly, the fact that 37.5% of visitors spent over \$100 on travel arrangements suggests opportunities for expansion and improvement in regional transport infrastructure.

The participation data reveals a clear preference for coastal and endurance sports, with surfing and diving standing out as the most favored beachside activities. These sports align with the natural resources of the Down South coastal region, where the ocean and beach environment provide ideal conditions. The popularity of these activities highlights opportunities for the development of ancillary services such as surf schools, diving centers, and rental shops. Furthermore, sports like cricket and tennis, which reflect the country's sporting culture, also drew considerable interest. These findings suggest potential for organizing themed tournaments, sports festivals, or celebrity events to attract even greater numbers of sports tourists. The increasing engagement in activities like cycling and running reflects the global trend toward health, wellness, and experiential tourism. These activities are not only accessible to a wide range of tourists but also encourage longer stays and repeat visits. In addition, the appeal of cultural games such as chess and carrom shows that tourists are also seeking culturally enriching experiences. These indoor games offer the opportunity to promote local heritage and social interaction in a relaxed environment. The wide variety of activities enjoyed by tourists points to the importance of diversified and well-maintained sports infrastructure. Investing in multi-sport facilities that cater to both recreational and competitive use could enhance the region's appeal and capacity to host international or regional sporting events. Beach areas, stadiums, courts, and specialized centers for water sports need to be developed or upgraded to meet the growing demand. Moreover, integrating sports with natural attractions such as trails for cycling and running, or scenic spots for yoga and wellness can further enrich the sports tourism offering. To capitalize on the growing sports tourism market, several strategic measures are recommended. Firstly, investment in infrastructure is essential. This includes improving road access, transportation services, and public amenities around key sports hubs. Secondly, a targeted marketing and branding campaign should be launched to position Down South Sri Lanka as a premier destination for sports tourism. This could focus on highlighting signature activities such as surfing, cycling, and cultural games, all of which align with the region's natural and cultural strengths. Furthermore, local communities should be empowered through training and employment opportunities in areas such as sports instruction, hospitality, and event management. By building a skilled local workforce, the region can ensure sustainable tourism development. Lastly, all tourism expansion efforts should be guided by

environmental sustainability principles. Particularly in delicate ecosystems such as marine environments used for diving and jetskig, careful planning and regulation are essential to preserve natural resources for future generations.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated the growing importance and economic impact of sports tourism in the southern region of Sri Lanka. The empirical data highlight that international and domestic tourists increasingly engage in a wide variety of sports and recreational activities, particularly surfing, diving, cricket, and fitness-based tourism. The consistent annual growth in tourist arrivals for sports-related purposes and their relatively high spending patterns underscore the potential of sports tourism as a catalyst for regional economic development. Tourist satisfaction levels with sports facilities and local attractions were generally positive, with key factors such as cleanliness, safety, and accessibility receiving favorable ratings. Moreover, the demographic diversity and wide range of activity preferences suggest that Sri Lanka holds a competitive advantage as a multi-faceted sports tourism destination. The study also revealed that high-value tourists, who spend significantly on accommodation and sports activities, can be attracted through the provision of quality infrastructure and services. Sports tourism in southern Sri Lanka contributes significantly to the national and regional economy by stimulating local businesses, generating employment, and enhancing the international image of the country as a vibrant, safe, and welcoming destination for adventure and recreational tourism.

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