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A Cultural Diplomacy-Led Policy Reform Framework for Heritage Tourism in Sri Lanka

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Abstract: *Drawing on the concept of “Balinization,” which is the progressive reconfiguration of local cultural heritage to fit globalized tourism imaginaries, this study examines how Sri Lanka’s heritage tourism governance enables structural vulnerabilities to cultural commodification and unequal cultural representation. It critically analyses the Tourism Act No. 38 of 2005, the Antiquities Ordinance of 1940, and the absence of a Cultural Impact Assessment framework, arguing that these gaps collectively weaken protections for living cultural traditions and expose them to market-driven distortion. The study calls for urgent policy reform grounded in cultural diplomacy, positioning heritage as a form of national soft power requiring active state involvement, and recommends coordinated action across the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Employment and Tourism; the Ministry of Buddhasasana, Religious and Cultural Affairs; the Central Cultural Fund; and Parliament to ensure more ethical, transparent, and sustainable heritage tourism governance.*

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List of Abbreviations

CCF	Central Cultural Fund
CIA	Cultural Impact Assessment
ICOMOS	International Council on Monuments and Sites
MoFAFET	Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Employment, and Tourism
MoBRCA	Ministry of Budhdhasasana, Religious and Cultural Affairs
SLTDA	Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNWTO	United Nations World Tourism Organization
WHS	World Heritage Site

1.0 Introduction

Sri Lanka's heritage tourism sector has expanded vastly in the post-crisis period. The country recorded 2,053,465 international arrivals in 2024, representing a 38.07 per cent increase over 2023, with tourism receipts of USD 3.2 billion (Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority [SLTDA], 2024). The first half of 2025 registered further growth of 15.62 per cent year-on-year, reaching 1.168 million arrivals (SLTDA, 2025). The government declared 2025 the "Year of Tourism Revival" and set a medium-term target of three million annual arrivals (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Employment and Tourism [MoFAFET], 2024). Heritage and cultural sites constitute a primary draw for the European market, which accounted for 51.9 per cent of total arrivals in 2024, and for the growing Indian market, which recorded 241,994 arrivals in the first half of 2025, a 31 per cent increase driven in notable part by religious and heritage tourism motivations (SLTDA, 2025).

This expansion is proceeding without equivalent strengthening of the legislative and institutional frameworks governing the cultural dimensions of heritage tourism. The foundational statute, the Antiquities Ordinance of 1940, predates independence and reflects colonial-era administrative priorities. The primary tourism legislation, the Tourism Act No. 38 of 2005, contains no cultural protection mandate and vests the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority with no powers in relation to heritage impact or community rights. No Cultural Impact Assessment mechanism exists for tourism development in designated heritage zones. The draft Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Bill has remained unenacted since 2018 (Ministry of Buddhasasana, Religious and Cultural Affairs [MoBRCA], 2018). These reflect structural deficiencies rather than administrative oversights and leave Sri Lanka's living heritage, sacred sites, and community-based cultural practices exposed to the commodifying pressures documented in the comparative heritage tourism literature under the concept of "Balinization."

Heritage tourism is not solely an economic sector. It is a domain in which the state exercises stewardship over national cultural identity, fulfils obligations under binding international conventions, and determines the terms on which local communities participate in the economic and representational dimensions of their own heritage. The governance failures identified in this brief carry consequences across all three of these dimensions. This policy brief argues that a cultural diplomacy framework one that treats heritage as a form of national soft power requiring active state stewardship rather than passive market exposure provides the most coherent strategic basis for reform. It sets out targeted legislative and institutional recommendations directed at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Employment and Tourism, the Ministry of Buddhasasana, Religious and Cultural Affairs, the Central Cultural Fund (CCF), and Parliament.

2.0 Conceptual Framework: "Balinization", Cultural Diplomacy, and Cultural Capital

The term "Balinization" was introduced in the anthropological literature by Michael Picard (1996, 1997) to describe a process rooted in Dutch colonial cultural policy, whereby the deliberate preservation and promotion of Balinese culture for external appreciation paradoxically initiated the commodification it sought to prevent. In Picard's analysis, Indonesian state tourism policy positioned Bali as a "living museum" of Hindu culture, generating a recursive dynamic in which Balinese communities came to understand and perform their own traditions through the lens of tourist expectations. Culture did not merely survive exposure to tourism but was progressively recomposed in response to it. As employed

in the comparative heritage tourism literature, the concept functions as analytical shorthand for a broader postcolonial pattern: the imposition of external imaginaries of what a “tropical island paradise” ought to resemble upon communities whose lived cultural practices diverge vitally from those representations.

In the Sri Lankan context, “Balinization” denotes the systematic packaging of religious rituals, traditional art forms, archaeological heritage, and post-conflict narratives to align with the globalized aesthetic expectations of the international tourism market. This dynamic has been extensively documented in Asian heritage tourism contexts by McKercher and du Cros (2002, 2024), who demonstrate how sites of living cultural significance are progressively transformed into “tourist products”, stripped of contextual meaning, standardized for visitor legibility, and detached from the community ownership and intergenerational transmission that underpin their cultural integrity.

The concept of cultural diplomacy, as developed by Cummings (2003) and further elaborated by Gienow-Hecht and Donfried (2010), refers to the strategic deployment of cultural assets, including heritage, arts, and ideas, to advance foreign policy objectives and build international legitimacy. Nye’s (2004) formulation of soft power provides the theoretical foundation for this approach: cultural assets, including heritage sites, performing traditions, and architectural patrimony, function as sources of attraction that generate international influence, but only insofar as their integrity and authenticity are preserved. Cultural heritage that is excessively commodified to satisfy external tourism imaginaries risks losing the distinctiveness that underpins its soft power value.

Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of cultural capital provides a critical framework for understanding the persistence of governance failures in this domain. Cultural capital is conceptualized as a form of symbolic power, embodied in socially recognized competencies, institutionalized through systems of validation, and convertible into economic and social advantage. Within the heritage tourism sector, institutional actors such as tour operators, licensed guides, heritage officials, and the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) possess greater authority to define and represent cultural meaning than the local communities who serve as the primary custodians of these traditions. This asymmetry contributes to the privileging of standardized, globally legible representations of Sri Lankan heritage over locally grounded cultural practices. As demonstrated by Eck et al. (2023), heritage sites that fail to preserve embedded symbolic and social meanings risk losing the interpretive depth necessary to sustain authentic visitor engagement and long-term destination quality.

3.0 Sri Lanka’s Heritage Tourism Sector: Scale, Significance, and Structural Vulnerability

Sri Lanka’s six UNESCO World Heritage Sites the Sacred City of Anuradhapura, the Ancient City of Polonnaruwa, the Ancient City of Sigiriya, the Old Town of Galle and its Fortifications, the Sacred City of Kandy, and the Central Highlands of Sri Lanka constitute the core of the country’s heritage tourism product and collectively anchor its international identity as a destination of civilizational significance. The Cultural Triangle, encompassing Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, and Kandy, attracts a disproportionate share of European and East Asian heritage visitors. Leisure and vacation travel accounted for 52 per cent of total arrivals in 2024, with heritage and cultural motivations representing a primary driver within that category (SLTDA, 2024).

Tourism's direct contribution to GDP stood at approximately 2.5 per cent in 2023, recovering from a pandemic low of 0.8 per cent in 2020, though still below the pre-crisis figure of 5.9 per cent recorded in 2019 (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2024; CEIC Data, 2024; SLTDA, 2020). Tourism receipts of USD 3.2 billion in 2024 positioned tourism as a principal foreign exchange earner alongside apparel exports and workers' remittances, and the World Bank (2025) identifies sustained tourism revenue growth as a key factor supporting Sri Lanka's current account surplus for the second consecutive year in 2024.

The government's reliance on tourism as a pillar of post-crisis recovery thus creates strong structural pressure to maximize visitor volumes and receipts, potentially at the expense of the cultural integrity of the sites and communities upon which the sector's long-term attractiveness depends.

The SLTDA Tourism Development Strategy 2023–2027 sets targets for high-value tourism, community-based tourism, and diversification into wellness and eco-tourism segments. However, the strategy's cultural heritage governance component remains underdeveloped. It contains no binding standards for cultural impact assessment, no minimum requirements for community benefit-sharing in heritage zones, and no regulatory provisions governing the commercial use of intangible cultural heritage. The Cabinet-approved National Policy on Tourism (MoFAFET, 2024) acknowledges the need to restructure tourism zones based on capacity assessments and to upgrade regulations at culturally sensitive sites, but it does not establish the legislative or institutional mechanisms required to operationalize these objectives.

The Ministry of Buddhist Affairs, Religious and Cultural Affairs (MoBRCA, 2026) has most recently initiated a public consultation on the draft National Heritage Policy of Sri Lanka, with the submission deadline of 20 April 2026. In March 2026, MoBRCA declared the National Namal Uyana in Anuradhapura District a National Heritage site of Sri Lanka, demonstrating active institutional engagement with heritage designation (MoBRCA, 2026). Nevertheless, the existing legislative framework within which these institutional actions occur remains structurally inadequate to address tourism's impacts on living heritage.

4.0 Mechanisms of Cultural Commodification in Sri Lanka

4.1 Commercialization of Sacred and Religious Sites

The majority of Sri Lanka's most-visited heritage sites are active places of Buddhist, Hindu, or multi-religious practice. The Dalada Maligawa in Kandy, which houses the Relic of the Tooth of the Buddha and is the centrepiece of the Esala Perahera procession, receives over three million visitors annually (CCF, 2022). Sumanapala, Timothy, and Wolf (2024), in their heritage tourism research agenda for Sri Lanka, identify uncontrolled visitor influx as a primary threat to the management integrity of sites including Sigiriya and the Temple of the Tooth. They document how the absence of comprehensive management frameworks, encompassing zoning, time-based restrictions, and activity limits, has allowed commercial encroachment into site buffer zones and the displacement of ritual spatial logics by tourist circulation requirements. At present, entry fee structures, tour operator access arrangements, and commercial licensing in heritage site precincts are managed through ad hoc administrative procedures rather than coherent cultural protection frameworks grounded in statutory authority.

Perera (2016) documents in an ethnographic study of Sri Lankan heritage tourism how state-driven heritage narratives systematically favour hegemonic and commercially legible framings over the multivocal, community-grounded accounts of sacred landscape that sustain the

devotional importance of these sites for resident communities. This framing tendency is not incidental but reflects the institutional priorities of tourism promotion bodies whose mandates are defined by visitor numbers and revenue rather than cultural integrity. Eck, Zhang, and An (2023) confirm through systematic review that when heritage environments lose their perceived cultural authenticity, visitor engagement progressively shifts from reflective cultural encounter to passive aesthetic consumption, undermining the long-term quality of the destination.

4.2 Displacement of Heritage Communities

In areas of intensive heritage tourism development, rising property values and the conversion of residential premises to tourist accommodation have contributed to the displacement of historically rooted communities whose presence is constitutive of the living heritage character of those areas. The Old Town of Galle and its Fortifications provides the most thoroughly documented Sri Lankan case. Ranasinghe (2017) documents how post-tsunami reconstruction after 2004 accelerated the conversion of the Fort's historic residential fabric into boutique hotels and vacation rental properties, pricing out the Sinhalese and Muslim communities whose generations of habitation produced the distinctive socio-cultural character of the site. The displacement of these communities eroded the social heterogeneity and intergenerational community life that constitute the Fort's outstanding universal value as a living colonial-era townscape.

Wijesooriya (2020), examining the Cultural Triangle, and Sumanapala, Timothy, and Wolf (2024) both emphasize that sustainable heritage tourism outcomes require stakeholder involvement and equitable benefit distribution as central conditions, not optional enhancements. When tourism incentives systematically favour external capital and standardized commercial enterprises over traditional vendors and community-based economic actors, the result is the extraction of tourism value from communities rather than its redistribution within them. The UNESCO World Heritage and Sustainable Tourism Programme (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2013) articulates this as a governance principle: heritage tourism must be developed through the balanced participation of all stakeholders, with conservation integrated at the destination planning level rather than treated as a constraint on tourism development.

4.3 Erosion of Intangible Cultural Heritage

Sri Lanka ratified the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2008, assuming obligations to identify, document, protect, and promote intangible heritage elements including oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, and traditional craftsmanship. The MoBRCA maintains a National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage covering traditions such as the Kolam masked drama, the Kandyan drum and dance traditions, and the Dumbara weaving craft. However, the absence of enabling legislation means the List-keeping function has not been operationalized as a protection instrument.

The presentation of traditional performing arts at hotel cultural shows and tourist venues occurs throughout Sri Lanka without any systematic assessment of whether such staging contributes to or undermines the living transmission of these traditions. The beeralu lace-making tradition of the Southern Province has been progressively displaced in the tourist souvenir market by machine-produced imitations (Sivanandamoorthy, 2022). Abeysinghe and Abeysinghe (2020), in their study of interpretation at Sri Lanka's UNESCO World Heritage Sites, identify inadequate interpretive infrastructure as a structural driver of shallow visitor engagement: without multilingual, narrative-rich interpretation situating sites within their living cultural and

community contexts, visitors engage with heritage as aesthetic spectacle rather than as meaningful cultural encounter. This finding confirms the theoretical prediction of Eck et al. (2023) that the loss of symbolic and social meaning from heritage settings progressively diminishes long-term tourism quality.

5.0 Cultural Diplomacy as a Governance Framework

Heritage tourism governance presents a challenge that is simultaneously domestic and international in character. Domestically, it requires the regulation of tourism activity at cultural sites, the protection of community rights, and the management of living traditions. Internationally, it implicates the projection of national cultural identity, the fulfilment of obligations under binding multilateral conventions, and the maintenance of the soft power assets that cultural heritage represents. A cultural diplomacy framework integrates both dimensions within a single governance logic.

Cultural diplomacy, as defined by Cummings (2003), encompasses the strategic exchange of ideas, cultural assets, and heritage representations among states to advance mutual understanding and national interests. Gienow-Hecht and Donfried (2010) extend this to encompass the active governance of how national cultural assets are defined, curated, and presented for international audiences. In the heritage tourism context, Sri Lanka currently lacks a coherent framework linking the international projection of its cultural identity, conducted through marketing campaigns, UNESCO engagement, and diplomatic cultural programming to the domestic governance and resource allocation decisions that determine whether that identity can be authentically sustained. Nye's formulation of soft power (2004) makes clear why this gap matters: cultural assets generate international influence only to the extent that their integrity and authenticity are maintained. Cultural heritage that has been commodified to satisfy external tourism imaginaries loses the distinctiveness that constitutes its soft power value.

A cultural diplomacy approach to heritage tourism governance rests on three inter-related commitments. First, it treats cultural heritage as a form of national soft power requiring active state stewardship rather than passive market exposure. Second, it positions Sri Lanka as an active participant in international heritage governance regimes including the 1972 World Heritage Convention, the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, and UNESCO's World Heritage and Sustainable Tourism Programme treating obligations under these instruments as binding constraints on domestic tourism policy rather than aspirational targets. Third, it establishes accountability structures linking the international projection of Sri Lanka's cultural identity to measurable domestic policy outcomes, including community benefit distribution, heritage site carrying capacity management, and the protection of intangible heritage from commercial exploitation.

The comparative evidence for the effectiveness of this approach is well established. Bhutan's "high value, low volume" tourism framework, grounded constitutionally in Gross National Happiness principles and operationalized through a daily visitor levy, has maintained cultural integrity while sustaining premium tourism receipts (Rinzin, Vermeulen and Glasbergen, 2007). Japan's Agency for Cultural Affairs integrates international heritage diplomacy commitments with legally binding domestic management standards, including the designation of "Living National Treasures" that extends state recognition and financial support to individual practitioners of intangible heritage. India's Heritage Impact Assessment procedure, developed by the Archaeological Survey of India in consultation with ICOMOS India,

establishes a precedent for mandatory heritage impact studies at protected sites that Sri Lanka's proposed CIA framework should draw upon (ASI, 2015).

6.0 Legislative Architecture: Gaps and Reform Imperatives

6.1 Tourism Act No. 38 of 2005

The Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority Act No. 38 of 2005 constitutes the principal legislative framework for tourism governance. It establishes the SLTDA as the regulatory authority, provides for the Tourism Development Fund, and creates a licensing and classification framework for tourism enterprises. The Act's statement of objects and functions is framed exclusively in terms of tourism promotion, development, and revenue generation. Cultural heritage protection is absent from the Act's mandate. The SLTDA is vested with no powers in relation to cultural impact assessment, the protection of heritage sites or communities from tourism-induced harm, the regulation of intangible heritage commercialization, or the rights of local communities in designated heritage zones. Amendments to the Act have addressed administrative and operational matters without engaging these structural omissions. The enactment of a Heritage Tourism Act, or a comprehensive revision of the 2005 Act to incorporate cultural protection provisions, is the most urgent legislative reform identified in this brief. Such legislation should at minimum: designate heritage zones requiring specific governance regimes; mandate Cultural Impact Assessment as a precondition for tourism development approvals in those zones; establish enforceable standards for the commercial use of cultural heritage; create binding community consultation and benefit-sharing requirements; and establish a Heritage Tourism Ombudsman with jurisdiction to receive and investigate complaints of cultural exploitation and ensure accountability in heritage tourism governance.

6.2 Antiquities Ordinance of 1940 and the Central Cultural Fund Act No. 57 of 1980

The Antiquities Ordinance of 1940, enacted under British colonial administration, remains the foundational instrument for the legal protection of archaeological monuments. It establishes categories of "protected monuments" and "protected antiquities," restricts excavation and export, and vests management authority in the Director General of Archaeology. The Ordinance reflects colonial-era heritage governance priorities: the physical preservation of monumental sites for scholarly and administrative purposes, with no provisions for community participation, intangible heritage, or the regulation of commercial activity in site vicinities. The CCF Act No. 57 of 1980, which created the CCF as the body responsible for the Cultural Triangle sites, similarly focuses on physical conservation and development rather than on the governance of tourism activity. Critically, neither instrument confers on the CCF or the Department of Archaeology any authority to impose cultural protection conditions on decisions made by the SLTDA or private tourism enterprises.

The Antiquities Ordinance requires amendment to incorporate intangible heritage within its definitional scope, consistent with Sri Lanka's obligations under the 2003 UNESCO Convention; to establish mandatory community consultation requirements for site management decisions; and to create mechanisms for coordinated decision-making between the Department of Archaeology, the CCF, and the SLTDA. The CCF Act should be amended to confer on the CCF explicit authority to impose enforceable cultural protection conditions on tourism development within Cultural Triangle buffer zones.

6.3 National Environmental Act: The Cultural Impact Assessment Gap

The National Environmental Act No. 47 of 1980, as amended by Act No. 56 of 1988, establishes the Environmental Impact Assessment requirement for specified development categories. The EIA regulations nominally include impacts on “historical, cultural or archaeological sites” as a matter to be addressed in EIA documentation. In practice, this requirement is interpreted narrowly to encompass physical impacts on listed monuments rather than the broader cultural impacts of tourism development on living heritage, intangible traditions, and heritage community livelihoods. No standalone Cultural Impact Assessment mechanism exists.

The most efficient reform pathway is to amend the National Environmental Act to require Cultural Impact Assessments as a distinct and mandatory component of the development approval process for projects in or adjacent to designated heritage zones, with the CCF and the MoBRCA designated as statutory consultees whose recommendations carry binding weight in the approval determination. India’s Heritage Impact Assessment procedure offers a directly transferable model (ASI, 2015), and ICOMOS’s Guidance on Heritage Impact Assessments for Cultural World Heritage Properties (2011) provides the applicable international methodological standard.

6.4 Intangible Heritage Framework: Ratification without Implementation

Sri Lanka’s ratification of the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2008 imposed obligations under Article 13 to adopt a general policy promoting the function of intangible heritage in society; to designate a competent body for safeguarding; and to promote scientific and artistic research methodologies aimed at effective protection. The MoBRCA maintains a National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage, fulfilling the inventory obligation in formal terms. However, no domestic legislation translates the Convention’s protection obligations into enforceable rights and duties. There is consequently no legal basis for challenging tourism activities that damage intangible heritage, no institutional mandate for addressing tourism’s systemic impacts on living traditions, and no mechanism through which community practitioners can assert legal claims over the commercial exploitation of their cultural heritage.

A draft Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Bill was prepared by the MoBRCA and has been in circulation since 2018 (MoBRCA, 2018). Enactment of this Bill, incorporating provisions specifically addressing tourism’s impacts on intangible heritage, is an immediate legislative priority. The Bill should establish legal standing for community practitioners to challenge commercial exploitation of their traditions and create a framework for “cultural heritage use agreements” under which communities can negotiate the terms on which their heritage is incorporated into tourism products.

7.0 Institutional Fragmentation and Governance Failure

Heritage tourism in Sri Lanka is governed across a set of institutions whose mandates overlap without establishing clear lines of authority or accountability for cultural outcomes. The SLTDA, under the MoFAFET, holds the tourism development and regulatory mandate. The CCF, the Department of Archaeology, and the Department of Cultural Affairs, under the MoBRCA, hold partial responsibilities for heritage site management, cultural property protection, and intangible heritage. The Central Environmental Authority, under the Ministry of Environment, administers the EIA process that nominally covers heritage impacts. None of

these bodies commands sufficient authority to impose binding cultural protection conditions on decisions made by the others.

Singh and Tiwari (2016), in their analysis of India's heritage governance architecture, demonstrate that inter-institutional coordination without hierarchical authority tends to produce outcomes in which commercial and development pressures systematically prevail over cultural protection objectives, because the economic interests at stake in tourism development decisions are concentrated and immediate while the cultural interests are diffuse and long-term. The same dynamic is observable in Sri Lanka: the SLTDA's performance metrics are defined by visitor volumes and tourism receipts; no equivalent performance framework exists for cultural heritage outcomes.

Community participation in heritage site management is structurally absent from the existing framework. The CCF has conducted community engagement programmes at selected Cultural Triangle sites, but these are discretionary and project-based rather than embedded in statutory governance structures. Communities historically associated with heritage sites have no formal standing in the management decisions that determine how those sites are used, how revenues are allocated, and how cultural meanings are presented to visitors. Sumanapala et al. (2024) identify this structural exclusion as a primary obstacle to sustainable heritage tourism in the Sri Lankan context, consistent with the UNESCO World Heritage and Sustainable Tourism Programme's requirement that communities be central participants in heritage governance rather than passive recipients of development decisions.

The current public consultation on the draft National Heritage Policy of Sri Lanka (MoBRCA, 2026) provides a crucial opportunity to address these governance failures. The policy development process should explicitly address the allocation of authority between the MoBRCA, the CCF, the SLTDA, and the Central Environmental Authority in heritage tourism governance; establish mandatory inter-institutional coordination mechanisms with clear decision-making hierarchies; and create statutory community co-management arrangements for designated heritage sites.

8.0 Policy Recommendations

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Employment and Tourism and the SLTDA should:

1. Initiate the Enactment of a Heritage Tourism Act

To consolidate tourism development powers under an integrated legislative framework that imposes binding cultural protection obligations on the SLTDA. The Act should designate heritage zones, mandate Cultural Impact Assessment as a precondition for development approvals within those zones, establish enforceable community consultation requirements, create minimum community benefit-sharing standards, recommended at not less than 20 per cent of heritage site entry fee and tourism levy revenues directed to community-managed cultural preservation funds, and establish a Heritage Tourism Ombudsman.

2. Integrate Binding Cultural Sustainability Benchmarks

Into the SLTDA Tourism Development Strategy 2023–2027, including measurable targets for heritage site carrying capacity management, commercial activity regulation in site buffer zones, and community benefit distribution. Progress against these benchmarks

should be reported annually in the SLTDA Annual Statistical Report and subject to independent audit.

3. Develop a National Cultural Diplomacy Strategy for Heritage Tourism

In coordination with the MoBRCA, articulating how Sri Lanka's obligations under the 1972 World Heritage Convention, the 2003 UNESCO Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage, and the UNESCO World Heritage and Sustainable Tourism Programme will be operationalized domestically. The strategy should establish measurable cultural sustainability targets alongside existing tourism economic targets, and commission periodic independent assessments of cultural heritage outcomes across the sector.

4. Engage UNESCO and ICOMOS

To conduct formal Heritage Impact Assessments at each of Sri Lanka's six UNESCO World Heritage Sites, establishing baseline data on tourism-related cultural impacts and site carrying capacities. The results should inform the National Heritage Policy development process and the proposed CIA framework.

The Ministry of Buddhasasana, Religious and Cultural Affairs and the Central Cultural Fund Should:

1. Expedite the enactment of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Bill

Which has been held in abeyance since 2018, incorporating provisions that establish legal standing for community practitioners to challenge commercial exploitation of listed intangible heritage elements; create a framework for "cultural heritage use agreements" governing the incorporation of community traditions into tourism products; and designate the MoBRCA as the competent authority with enforcement powers over tourism-related intangible heritage violations.

2. Develop a National Living Heritage Register

Through community-led documentation processes aligned with UNESCO's community-based inventory guidance. The Register should serve as the mandatory cultural baseline reference for all Cultural Impact Assessments and should be updated on a five-year cycle with community participation.

3. Amend the Antiquities Ordinance of 1940 and the Central Cultural Fund Act No. 57 of 1980

To incorporate intangible heritage within their definitional scope; to establish mandatory community consultation requirements for site management decisions; and to confer on the CCF explicit authority to impose enforceable cultural protection conditions on tourism development within Cultural Triangle buffer zones.

4. Introduce Statutory Community Co-Management Arrangements

For Sri Lanka's six UNESCO World Heritage Sites, providing legally recognized roles for local community representatives in site governance, visitor management planning, revenue allocation, and interpretation development. Co-management models should draw on applicable regional precedents, adapted to the Sri Lankan legal and institutional context.

5. Invest in Multilingual, Narrative-Rich Interpretive Infrastructure

At major heritage sites, incorporating Sinhala and Tamil-language materials alongside English, and grounded in the scholarly documentation conducted under the National Living Heritage Register. Interpretation should be treated as a cultural protection instrument and a public education function, not solely as a visitor experience enhancement.

The Parliament of Sri Lanka Should:

1. Enact the Heritage Tourism Act

As the primary instrument consolidating cultural protection obligations across the tourism, archaeology, and cultural affairs legislative frameworks. The Act should define heritage zones, establish the CIA requirement, mandate community co-management, create the Heritage Tourism Ombudsman, and confer on the CCF and MoBRCA binding authority over tourism development decisions in heritage zones.

2. Enact the Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Bill

As a matter of priority, fulfilling Sri Lanka's outstanding obligations under the 2003 UNESCO Convention ratified in 2008, and providing the legal foundation for community-based protection of living cultural traditions from commercial exploitation by the tourism sector.

3. Amend the National Environmental Act No. 47 of 1980

To require standalone Cultural Impact Assessments as a mandatory component of the development approval process for all projects in or adjacent to designated heritage zones, with the CCF and MoBRCA designated as statutory consultees whose recommendations carry binding weight in approval determinations.

4. Ratify the UNWTO Framework Convention on Tourism Ethics

Incorporate its provisions on community cultural rights, equitable benefit distribution, and heritage site protection into the revised domestic tourism legislative framework.

9.0 Conclusion

The governance of heritage tourism in Sri Lanka presents a challenge that is simultaneously economic, cultural, and diplomatic. The sector's rapid recovery from 1.49 million arrivals in 2023 to 2.05 million in 2024, with USD 3.2 billion in receipts, demonstrates its economic centrality to the post-crisis recovery programme. However, this expansion is occurring within a legislative and institutional framework that was not designed to protect the cultural dimensions of heritage and that structurally disadvantages the communities whose living practices constitute the authentic heritage resource upon which the sector's long-term attractiveness depends.

The concept of "Balinization", as externally oriented (1996, 1997) and extended in the comparative heritage tourism literature (McKercher and du Cros, 2002, 2024; Sumanapala et al., 2024), identifies the specific mechanism of risk: the progressive replacement of living cultural meaning by commodified, externally-oriented representation, driven not by deliberate policy but by the unregulated operation of market forces upon inadequately protected heritage assets. Sri Lanka's legislative architecture, rooted in a 1940 colonial ordinance and a 2005

economic promotion statute, does not provide the regulatory capacity necessary to resist these pressures at current and projected scales of tourism development.

Heritage tourism governance must be reconceived not as the management of a commercial sector with incidental cultural dimensions, but as the exercise of public stewardship over national cultural identity. This reframing carries direct policy implications. It requires legislative reform that places cultural impact assessment on the same statutory footing as environmental impact assessment. It requires institutional reform that gives heritage protection bodies binding authority over tourism development decisions. And it requires Sri Lanka to treat its obligations under the 1972 World Heritage Convention and the 2003 Intangible Heritage Convention as operational constraints on domestic policy rather than declaratory commitments.

The reforms proposed in this brief, a Heritage Tourism Act, a mandatory Cultural Impact Assessment framework, statutory community co-management at UNESCO World Heritage Sites, and the enactment of the long-pending Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Bill, are achievable within the current parliamentary and policy cycle. The MoBRCA's ongoing public consultation on the draft National Heritage Policy of Sri Lanka provides an immediate entry point. The policy and legislative decisions taken in this period will determine whether Sri Lanka's cultural heritage is preserved as a living national asset or progressively converted into a consumed spectacle.

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