

Challenges and Opportunities in Delft Island

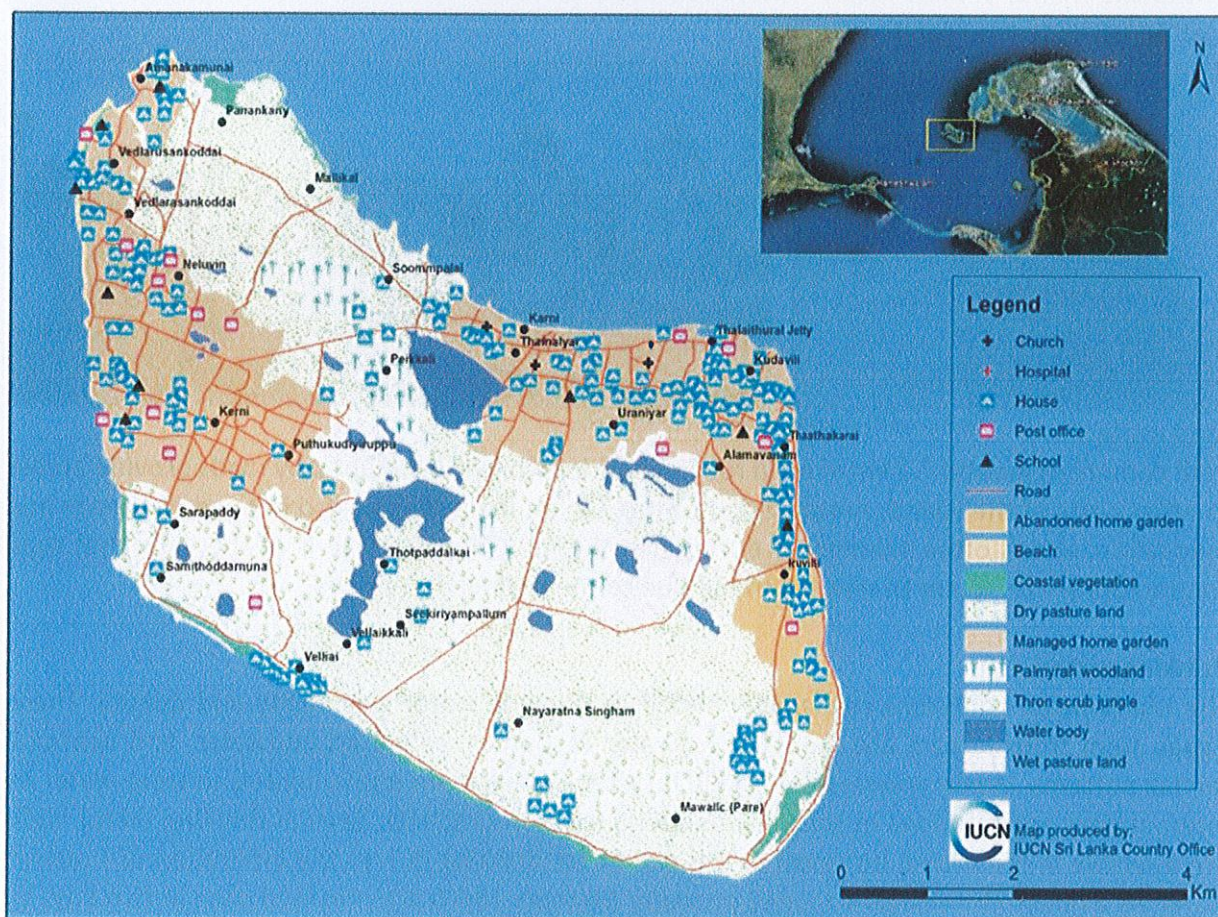
A Field Visit by A-PAD Sri Lanka

April 11, 2025

Introduction

Delft Island or Neduntheevu is the largest island in the Jaffna Peninsula extending into an area of approximately 50 km². The name of the island is of Dutch origin - believed to have been inspired by a town in the Netherlands due to similar physical characteristics. 1,408 families (4,159 individuals) inhabit the island across 6 Grama Niladari (GN) divisions and are serviced by one hospital, 8 schools, a police station, Sri Lanka Navy and the Divisional Secretariat (DS) Office. The schools are attended by a total of 574 students, while the main island livelihood is fishing. In addition to fishing, rearing livestock and seasonal paddy cultivation are other sources of income generation. The population converse almost completely in Tamil language.

Delft comprises of unique tourist attractions and lies disconnected from mainland Jaffna. It can only be reached by sea.



Map of Delft Island, © IUCN Sri Lanka, 2013

Challenges

The island communities grapple with numerous challenges daily, exposing critical gaps which call for immediate and targeted intervention.

Transport:

Sea route: The access to Delft involves a precarious, hour-long journey by ferry from mainland Jaffna, and is a free service provided by the government. Although ferries are available at frequent intervals per day, their conditions, safety standards and passenger comforts are very poor. Some of the passengers are public servants, commuting back and forth from Jaffna to Delft or vice versa, and the rough journey endured is a risk in terms of safety as well as mental focus to their performance at work. Life jackets are available, but are not sufficient for all passengers who consist of island residents, public servants and tourists, nor are they enforced as a mandatory requirement. However, there is a ferry service run by the Navy where life jackets are made mandatory, and conditions for traveling is better than the other service. Nonetheless, the Navy service also requires better professionalism and enhanced features for uninterrupted and smooth travel. Especially for first time tourists, the ferry ride can be a drawback, discouraging a second visit to the island. In such cases, visitors can use a privately operated ferry service, or a rented boat, to travel to the island.



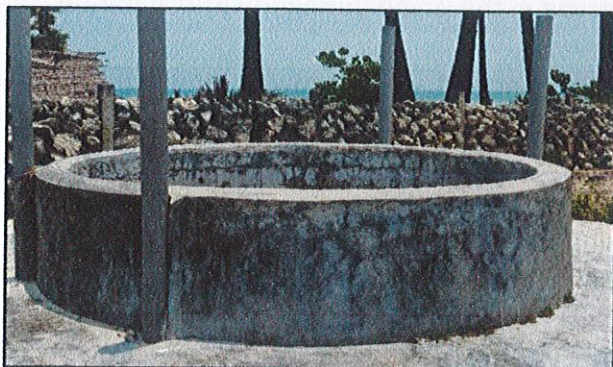
Land route: "Kumuthini" Ferry (L) and Jetty in Punkuduthivu (R)

Delft comprises around 7.2 km of main road networks, while ill developed by roads provide access to other parts of the island. Around 4 km of the 7.2 km main road is also in need of repairs and renovation, and is often submerged during heavy rains. The DS Office is of the view that road contractors are reluctant to visit the island due to the tedious ferry rides.

Drinking water:

The island faces significant challenges related to drinking water availability and quality. These issues stem from factors like limited freshwater resources, saline groundwater, and seasonal rainfall patterns. While reverse osmosis (RO) systems have been implemented to treat water by international organizations in schools, maintenance is impractical. Several drinking water wells are available in the island, but most of it is not fit for drinking due to the infiltration of brackish water. As a result, the villagers depend on water bowzers which are provided once in two days by the government at a cost based on quantity, which is not affordable to most. There is a need for equitable water access to all those who live in the island including school children, and at present,

the Navy provides drinking water to those least able to afford the resource through water collected from the available drinking water wells.



Drinking water well



Wasabha Navy camp

Hazards and risks:

The island is periodically hit by strong winds and floods, yet lacks designated emergency shelters apart from schools which are also at risk. The risks have been intensified due to the impacts of climate change, with dry periods becoming dryer and wet periods becoming wetter. High winds, storm surge, and saltwater intrusion pose as recurring hazards threatening livelihoods, agriculture, and drinking water sources. 10 community representatives act as disaster management coordinators for each of the 6 GN Divisions of the island. While they are linked with the Jaffna District Secretariat and receive early warning updates ahead of emergencies, they require skill development trainings to ensure professionalism in disaster risk management (DRM), which will help serve their communities more effectively during periods of adverse weather.

Poverty:

Poverty is a significant concern, due to limited opportunities and infrastructure. A fair portion of the population are recipients of the Aswesuma welfare benefits scheme, and even the purchase of drinking water for daily needs is an unaffordable cost to some families.

Opportunities

Delft Island was one of the areas affected by the civil war of 30 years which left lasting impacts on the northern and eastern provinces. 16 years later however, traces of war are minimal and communities are looking ahead, leaving behind scarring memories of the past.

Delft's history was especially influenced by Ceylon's relationships with Portuguese, Dutch and British colonists since the 16th century. Utilized as a ground for rearing cattle and horses, the island was first described as Ilha das Vacas (Portuguese) or Island of Cows and then as Ilha das Cavallos or Island of Horses. Even today, the island is famously known for its extraordinary population of wild horses, introduced by the Portuguese and continued by the Dutch and British.

Tourism:

The island offers unique tourist attractions, bearing proof of Sri Lanka's colonization history, while enroute to the ferry point which takes off to the island, rich birdlife can be observed including

migratory flamingos. Delft is notable for its distinctive Irish-style fences, with the unique twist of using coral instead of rock as building material. According to literature, these fences have been introduced by St. Nolan, an Irish lieutenant who served in the island during the British period.

Characterized by semi-arid tropical vegetation, Delft is dotted with palmyra palms and thorny shrubs. Though it receives only occasional visitors, the island draws interest for its scenic beaches, archaeological sites, and colonial heritage.

To fully capitalize on the offerings in Delft including job creation, it is mandatory that tourism infrastructure and quality of visitor experience is enhanced and maintained.

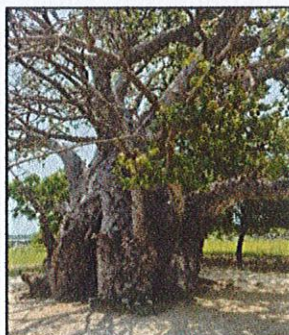
Places of interest for tourists visiting Delft Island

Name of Site	Description
Baobab tree (<i>Adisonia digitata</i>) with large hollow	A native tree to Africa, understood to be introduced to Sri Lanka by ancient Arabic sailors during 700 AD
Banyan tree	One of the largest <i>Ficus</i> trees on the island
Beaches	Scenic beaches with white sands; coral rock seashores
Pigeon holes	Pigeons were used to communicate between the islands and the nests were built using lime stone during the Dutch period
Growing rock	Dead coral stone, harboring islanders' belief that it continues to grow with divine intervention.
Queen's tower	One of the remaining lighthouses from the British period
Adam's foot	Coral depression that is in the shape of a large foot
Horse stable	Stable that was used for horses during the Dutch and British periods considered to be built by Irish lieutenant St. Nolan
Old church	Dutch church
British courts	Ruins of a British court built in 1905 with initials of then ruling King Edward VII
Ancient Buddhist stupas	Buddhist ruins belonging to the Anuradhapura period
King's tower	Basement of beacon of one of the lighthouses from the British period
Meekaman fort	Originally built by the Portuguese, and taken over by the Dutch
Freshwater wells	A common site near beaches
Dry pasture lands	Area occupied by wild horses; a hardy species unique to the island introduced during the colonization period
Thorn scrub jungle	

Sources: IUCN 2013, and A-PAD Field Visit 2025



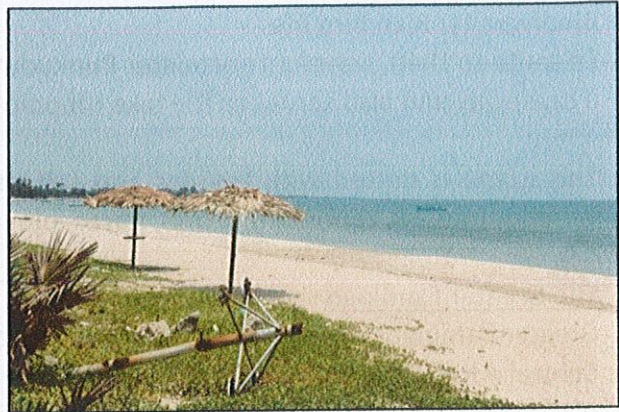
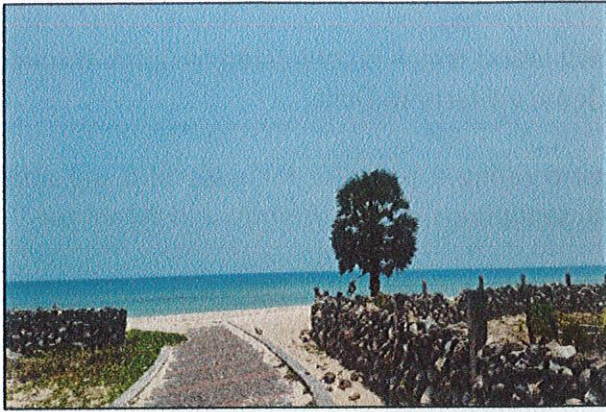
Pigeon holes



Baobab tree with large hollow



Meekaman fort built with corals



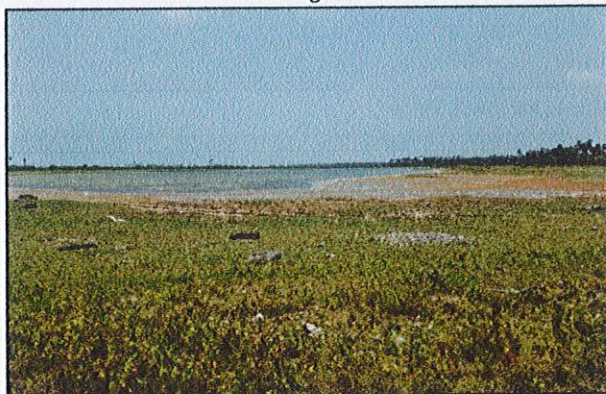
Beaches



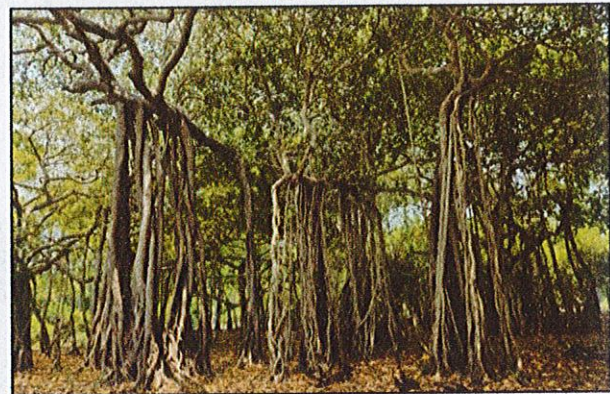
Growing stone



Wild horses, © Internet



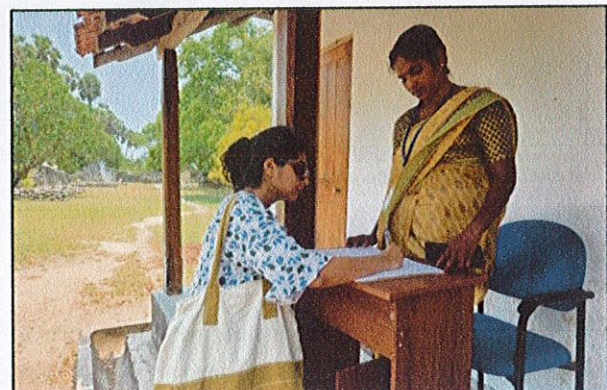
Dry pasture lands



Banyan tree



Irish style fences made of coral



A-PAD leaving a note at the court complex ruins

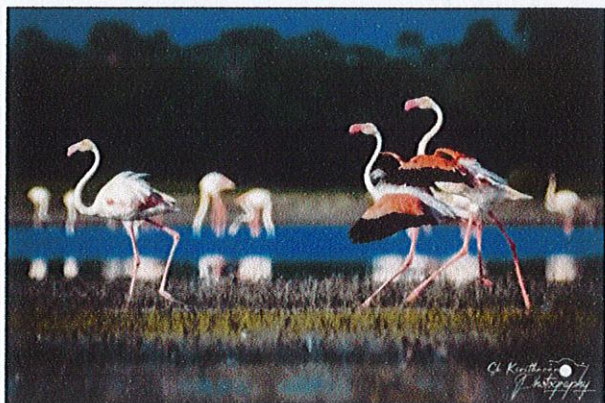
Biodiversity: Rich bird life

En route to Delft, travelers encounter Punkuduthivu island which is connected to Jaffna through a causeway and also serves as the take off point (jetty) via ferry to Delft.

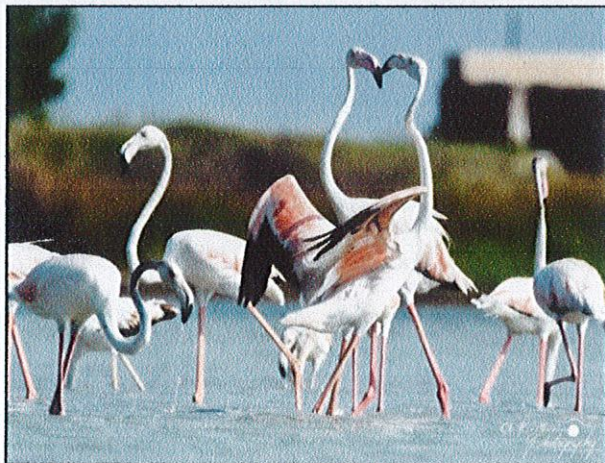
This island is dotted with lagoons and salt pans, creating a paradise for waterbird including varieties of duck, spoonbills, storks, ibises, plovers, sandpipers, egrets, herons, and flamingos.

The Greater Flamingo

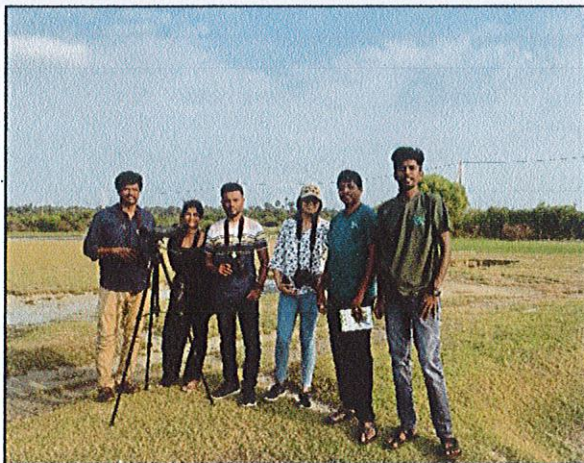
Greater flamingos are migratory birds that visit Sri Lanka as part of their annual journey along the Central Asian Highway. The habitats offered in Jaffna peninsula and Mannar are cherished sites of the visiting flamingos and are a great attraction to birdwatchers. The species reside in Sri Lanka during the months of November – March/April, and receive their pink shade from a diet made up of tiny aquatic creatures such as crustaceans and microorganisms.



© Kiritharan, Nature Appreciation Club (NAC), Jaffna



© Kiritharan, Nature Appreciation Club (NAC), Jaffna



A-PAD SL with members of Nature Appreciation Club, Jaffna

Recommendations

Delft Island contains significant development potential, provided that the right areas are identified and effectively leveraged. A-PAD Sri Lanka suggests the following recommendations for the sustainable advancement of Delft Island.

Improved transport and infrastructure: The Northern Peninsula has emerged as a focal point for development, attracting interest from a wide range of stakeholders—including investors and international organizations—and often features in high-level discussions in Colombo. Delft Island, with its unique attributes, has the potential to contribute meaningfully to these prospects. However, to unlock the island's full value, urgent improvements to its transportation infrastructure are essential. This begins with upgrading the jetty services that connect Delft to the mainland, including safety standards and passenger comforts in ferries, alongside enhancing the internal road network on the island. Introducing a fare for sea transport, rather than continuing the current free service, could help facilitate these improvements. To ensure affordability for locals, daily commuters and villagers could be offered subsidized season tickets. Additionally, the government should prioritize consistent road maintenance and explore partnerships with private sector and interested investors, who could also gain from such collaborations and enhanced access to the island.

Revised tourism strategy: The number of tourists would undoubtedly increase if the island's tourism strategy were revised, including introduction of recreational activities such as snorkeling and wind surfing. The visitor experience will enhance with improved tourism infrastructure such as small scale hotels and quality services which will create much needed jobs for locals. Professionalism in tourism is vital for the deliverance of better services, and this could be introduced through a number of ways, including equipping locals with skills to act as resourceful tour guides. Encouraging these strategies through private sector intervention will be essential.

Promoting local goods and products: Offering handcrafts and souvenirs made from local products such as palmyra could enrich visitor experience, add cultural value, and generate employment opportunities for the local community.

Resolving drinking water challenges: The lack of adequate drinking water of suitable quality is currently tackled by providing drinking water bowsers at a cost. However, the cost is unaffordable to some families, and a multi-actor transparent funding collaboration between diaspora communities, philanthropists, international organizations, NGO's, private sector and government could serve as a solution towards purchasing water for communities as an initial step. Tapping and storing seasonal rainwater in schools could also provide relief to the otherwise brackish water challenges.

Improving accessibility during the rainy season: To facilitate accessibility to key areas of the island, especially during periods of heavy rainfall, it is essential to construct proper drainage systems that follow the natural gullies and water flow patterns. This will help prevent flooding and waterlogging, which often hinder mobility. Additionally, measures should be taken to enhance groundwater recharge by effectively capturing and utilizing rainwater through sustainable rainwater harvesting techniques.

Fueling disaster resilience and climate adaptability: The island is periodically affected by hazards such as floods and strong winds, and the local disaster management volunteer group require education on climate adaptability as well as capacity building trainings to be better prepared

ahead of emergencies. In addition to this, risk free emergency shelters are required in case of crises. A-PAD Sri Lanka can support these endeavors by providing professionalism in DRM, and can introduce safety standards including search and rescue techniques to local disaster management coordinators.

Environmental awareness and sensitivity: Environmental education and awareness programs should be implemented to sensitize local communities to current environmental challenges and future development plans, while also highlighting their critical role in ensuring long-term sustainability. It is equally important to raise awareness on the unique birdlife and marine ecosystems surrounding Delft Island, emphasizing their ecological value and the need for their conservation and careful management. Such initiatives should engage not only local residents but also tourists and potential development partners, underlining their shared responsibility in protecting and sustaining these fragile ecosystems.

Development sans disturbance to existing equilibrium: While understanding that Delft has potential for development, and the scope to attract investors, the island's capacity, unique ecology and local culture should be taken into utmost consideration before commencement of any novel project.

Conclusion

The field visit to Delft Island proved to be a significant eyeopener in terms of understanding the unique heritage of the island and surroundings, challenges and hardships endured by islanders, as well as windows of opportunities for development.

The island is an untapped treasure that could add substantial value to the broader tourism agenda of the northern province, subject to sustainable and effective development strategies and practices.

A-PAD Sri Lanka would like to extend its sincere appreciation to the Delft District Secretariat for sharing valuable information on the island's profile, and will carry forward the learnings in leveraging private sector and government support towards the advancement of the island.



Meeting with GN officers at Delft District Secretariat

A-PAD would also like to recognize the Jaffna Nature Appreciation Club (NAC) for sharing wonderful insights and stunning photographs of the Greater Flamingo, as well as for guiding the team to flamingo and waterbird habitats in Punkuduthivu island enroute to Delft.

References

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Just another day in Delft