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Strategic myopia of tourism development in Sri Lanka; A critique

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Abstract

This paper critically evaluates the contemporary tourism development of Sri Lanka. Review of literature was the approach used to build up the core view of strategic myopia on Sri Lankan tourism development. Sri Lanka being an island country with a rich cultural heritage, diverse landscapes, and a significant number of wildlife reserves, increasing tourist activities are perceived as a means to bring in much needed foreign exchange to improve the quality of life of local people. Absence of strategic direction as to how the Sri Lanka tourism sector needs to develop for future in a vigorous and sustainable manner is a myopia. A comprehensive, collaborative and nation-wide driven, focused development plan is a timely need. The positioning of Sri Lanka in the international arena, regaining its glory and combating diaspora against the nation are of utmost importance parallel to the product development. Hence, strongly rooted and established tourism information system driven by broad socio-economic stimuli of Sri Lanka is a primary need to position Sri Lankan tourism development in a strategic direction. A harmonized approach through development agencies (both public and private), universities, research institutes, tourism sector organizations, NGOs and so forth is imperative for the above. Achieving sustainable tourism is a continuous process which requires constant monitoring of impacts, introducing the necessary preventive and/or corrective measures whenever necessary.

Keywords: Tourism Development, Sustainability, Strategic, Sri Lanka

1. Introduction

Sri Lanka is an island situated in the Indian Ocean, 65,610 sqkm with a population of 21.8 million. Due to islands strategic location it has always been a tourist destination, attracting many merchants and explorers right throughout the history. Sri Lanka has had a reputation for being a traveler's paradise. There are records of ancient travelers having set foot on the island way back into the history and being overwhelmed by what they saw. The Sri Lankan people themselves have had a reputation for hospitality and warmth, where even a stranger is often welcomed into their homes, treated them with food and lodging expecting nothing in return.

"This country is an oasis, prosperous and happy; its people are well-to-do; they all have received the faith, and find their amusement in religious music. – Fa Hien (414A.D)

"This, for its actual size, is better circumstanced than any other island in the world. the island produces more beautiful and valuable rubies than found in any other place in the world... In this island there is a very high mountain where the tomb of Adam, our first parent, is supposed to be found." – Marco Polo (1293 A.D)

Tourism industry in Sri Lanka dates back to 1960's and has grown slowly yet steadily over the years. At present it is one of the major foreign exchange generating industries in Sri Lanka and nearly 275,000 (SLTDA, 2013) people directly or indirectly depend on the industry as their livelihood. Sri Lanka initially focused on beach tourism, however, later on tourism sector managed to diversify its products to capitalize on Sri Lanka's rich nature and culture. Tourism was recognized as an important industry in the early 1960s, and it was formalized through the Ceylon Tourist Board Act No. 10 of 1966, which was set up to promote and develop tourism in Sri Lanka, subsequently augmented by the Tourist Development Act No of 1968. Since then, tourism has become a very important sector in the economy. Successive governments have given tourism reasonable focus and emphasis and

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often it has been called the “thrust industry” of the economy. However, due to the serious security problems that Sri Lanka has faced (1983 to 2009) and due to its internal terrorism for the past 26 years, tourism has certainly had rough periods with significant drawbacks (Mathews, 2000). This is very clear when the arrivals are compared with some of the other destinations in the region. This situation has been further worsened by the 2004 December Tsunami which devastated nearly 2/3rd of the coastal area and many of the tourist hotels located along the coastal belt. Further, the global economic slowdowns and global terrorism also had a major impact on the industry. Conversely, the tourism industry in Sri Lanka has shown much resilience amidst all these adversities displaying promising future in the years to come.

2. Sri Lanka as a Tourism Product

Sri Lanka comprised of one large teardrop-shaped island and several smaller islands in the Indian Ocean, boasting a coastline of 1585 km. The southern half of the island is dominated by rugged hill country, while the northern half is a large plain. Sri Lanka is a tropical country with distinct dry and wet seasons. The island has two monsoon seasons: the southwest monsoon lasts from late May to late September and the northeast monsoon affects the northeast coasts from December to March. In the lowlands, the climate is generally humid with an average temperature of 27°C. At a higher altitude, however, the central hill country enjoys a mild and pleasant climate with a temperature ranging from 10-16°C which is essential to support Sri Lanka’s renowned tea plantations. The nation, formerly known as Ceylon, was colonized by the Portuguese, Dutch and British, before achieving full independence as a dominion within the British Commonwealth in 1948. Today, colonial remnants can still be found in cities such as Kandy, Trincomalee and Galle. The population of Sri Lanka is over 21 million, with a Sinhalese (74%) majority. The balance of the population is made up of Sri Lankan Tamils (12.6%), Indian Tamils (5.5%), and Moors, Malays, and others (7.9%). Although Sri Lanka has a diverse ethnic and religious mix (Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Christian Burgher), the country’s architecture, sculpture, and painting are predominately influenced by Buddhism. Sri Lanka is mainly an agricultural country with rice as the major staple crop. In addition, the country produces various plantation crops, including tea, rubber, coconut, cocoa and spices, for export markets. It is also a major exporter of precious and semiprecious gems. The GDP of Sri Lanka is over \$63 billion (CBSL, 2013) of which 21% is from the agricultural sector, 19% is from the industrial sector, and 60% is from the service sector.

According to the World Tourism Organization, Sri Lanka has the advantage of having 49 sites classified as unique attractions, 91 as rare attractions, and 8 UNESCO classified world heritage sites, and 6 of the 300 ancient monuments in the world (de Silva, 2000). Tourism Development in Sri Lanka is endowed with an abundance of tourism resources of considerable diversity, including beaches along its 1585 km coastline, natural/ecological and wildlife attractions, indigenous culture, Buddhist heritage, and remnants left by Arabs, Portuguese, Dutch and British seafarers.

Beaches: Endowed with a unique mixture of golden beaches, abundant wildlife, and rich cultural heritage, Sri Lanka is one of the most popular tourist destinations in the region. Nonetheless, except the well-established beach destinations along the south-western coast, tourism resources in Sri Lanka are relatively under exploited. Sri Lanka is known to most tourists for its tropical beach resorts which offer various attractions year round. The southwestern coast is best from November to April and the east coast is best from April to September.

National Parks and Wildlife Reserves: Despite its relatively small size, Sri Lanka possesses a high level of biodiversity due to its wide range of topographic and climatic variation. Sri Lanka is known as one of the 25 biodiversity hotspots in the world as identified by Conservation International. The country has abundant bird life with 251 species resident and no less than 21 endemic to the island (Mathews, 2000). To preserve displaced young elephants, an elephant orphanage has been set up by the Department of National Zoological Gardens at Pinnawela, with over 60 elephants in captivity, this elephant orphanage is reported the largest captive herd in the world. Since the late 1930s, various areas approximately 4660 km² have been designated as National Parks (7% of the island) and an additional 3270 km² as sanctuaries, reserves, and protected areas (5% of the island). Many of the National Parks and wildlife reserves are now popular tourist attractions.

Cultural Triangle: (Heritage Tourism): Sri Lanka has inherited numerous magnificent, century-old monuments and cultural relics in a number of ancient cities. Kandy, Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa are known as the points of the “Cultural Triangle” of Sri Lanka, where five of Sri Lanka’s seven world heritage sites are located. (The seven World Heritage Sites in Sri Lanka are; 6 Cultural and 2 natural: the ancient cities of Anuradapura, Dambulla, Sigiriya, Polonnaruwa and Kandy; the walled, colonial city of Galle; and the Sinharaja Primeval Rain Forest and Central highlands). Within the triangle, Sigiriya is known as the cultural tourism base in this area. The most important archaeological and cultural site in Sigiriya is the spectacular rock fortress built in the 5th century AD.

Hill Country: Kandy, known as Sri Lanka’s hill capital, is the second most visited place in Sri Lanka (next to Colombo). The focal point of the town is the golden roofed Dalada Maligawa (Temple of the Tooth), a temple which houses Sri Lanka’s most important religious relic, the sacred tooth of Buddha. The Esala Perahera celebrations are a yearly highlight when a replica of the shrine is carried in a procession accompanied by thousands of dancers, drummers, and over 100 splendidly clothed and decorated elephants. Another popular tourist destination is Nuwara Eliya, a small town set in the heart of the tea country. Known as “Little England”, Nuwara Eliya was developed by the British, and is famous for beautiful parks, well-kept lawns with hedges, Queen Anne and Georgian architecture, an Anglican Church, and a golf course.

3. Present Tourism Development

In the 1990s, the government of Sri Lanka took initiatives to revive the tourism sector, including the introduction of the Tourism Master Plan. Attractive incentives were provided for foreign investors in tourism sector development. Since then, tourist arrivals have been on the rise. The Sri Lankan government has identified tourism as one of the five priority economic sectors and granted a range of concessions and incentives for development and promotion of tourism (Mathews, 2000). Sri Lanka Tourism comprises four bodies (Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority SLTDA, Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau SLTPB, Sri Lanka Convention Bureau SLCB and Sri Lanka Institute of Tourism and Hotel Management SLITHM) under the Ministry of Economic Development, is the statutory body responsible for tourism in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka Tourism is responsible for the implementation of the ministry's policies on destination marketing and promotion, product development, research, planning, and the setting of trade standards and human resource development (Mathews, 2000). At the local level, provincial councils are responsible for presenting tourism plans and budgets to the central government. In addition, a number of non-governmental conservation organizations and research institutes, such as the Sri Lanka Wildlife Conservation Society, WWF, IUCN, Young Biologists' Association, and the recently formed Ecotourism Society of Sri Lanka, are actively involved with the development, protection, and management of tourism resources in Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka being an island country with a rich cultural heritage, diverse landscapes, and a significant number of wildlife reserves, increasing tourist activities are perceived as a means to bring in much needed foreign exchange to improve the quality of life of local people. After decades of decline due to ethnic unrest, tourist activities in Sri Lanka have shown promising signs of recovery. Today, tourism is the sixth largest foreign exchange earner in Sri Lanka and contributes significantly to the economic growth and development of this island country. Sri Lanka's diverse landscapes and rich cultural heritage present a wide range of tourism opportunities, ranging from "sun and beach" holidays, wildlife excursions, and cultural tours. Generally, Sri Lanka's tourism resources are relatively under exploited. Although "sun and beach tourism" remains the main attraction for most foreign visitors, alternative tourism (i.e. ecotourism, nature tourism, and cultural/heritage tourism) on a smaller scale has been promoted as a sustainable alternative to avoid the negative social, economic, and environmental impacts often associated with mass tourism development. Presently, due to diverse attraction this "Small Miracle" offers leisure and business travelers a spectrum of attractions. The sandy white beaches and attractive underwater life that surrounds the Island give visitors a chance to unwind and relax in a warm and comfortable setting. The beautiful rain forests, mountain ranges, wildlife sanctuaries and scenic plantations can be visited within a few hours. During the period of war and 2004 Tsunami North and East provinces have been critically damaged leaving the area in to trash. Thirty years of stressful situation has damaged North and East provinces transportation, roads, accommodation,

communication, electricity, water...etc. Before the civil war North and East provinces were one of the most popular destinations among local as well as foreign visitors. Mannar, Jaffna, Nilaveli, Kuchchuweli, Trincomalee, Kalkudha, Pasikudha, Batticaloa, Arugambay to name few. With the dawn of peace these areas are emerging as tourist destinations. Tourism infrastructure is a basic component of tourist product. It decides the amount and the structure of tourist movement. In order to bring these provinces back to its normal condition and to promote the area as a tourism destination, it is a must to facilitate these affected areas with proper infrastructure which the government is striving with its numerous pumping of investment in these regions.

Late September 2014, Sri Lanka welcomed the arrival of its millionth tourist for 2014 at Bandarankaike International Airport in the capital, Colombo. The event set the islands target of achieving 1.5 million arrivals this year and on solid ground to meet its 2016 target of 2.5 million arrivals. Tourism is playing a key role in Sri Lanka's economic revival following nearly three decades of civil war that ended in 2009 and has been showcased by the government as a post-war success. According to the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA), tourism contributed \$1bn to the economy in 2012, the most recent annual statistics on record. From the popular beach town of Negombo on the west coast, to the World Heritage-listed archaeological sites on the northern plains, visitors from the Middle East, Russia, China, India and other emerging markets are driving demand for services hitherto monopolized by Australians and Europeans. Even in the city of Jaffna in the country's far north, which as the ground zero of the minority Tamil rebellion was extensively damaged, the air of optimism is palpable as \$4bn of government infrastructure projects are set to be completed. The present government is investing heavily in basic infrastructure, electricity, roads, high ways, rail and new airports. All the big foreign hotel chains - Hyatt, Sheraton, and Shangri-La - are investing in large new hotel projects and local investors are building boutique properties all around the country, (SLTDA, 2014).

Eastern province which was under terrorist's control over last decades has been the key focus for tourism development and investment. Arugambay the best rated surfing destination, Passikkudah, Trincomalee, Kuchchuweli and magnificent development examples form the fast growing Eastern province. From 2009 more than 1000 hotels rooms appeared by 2014 only at Passikkudah beach (0.8km long beach in the Eastern Coast). Prior to 1983 Passikkudah was a popular resort among tourists both foreign and local. It was located by the bay on a land 150 acres in extent. The resort at the time was planned to accommodate 500 rooms in several stages and by 1983 there were 171 rooms in operation in three hotels and necessary infrastructure facilities were in place. Water was supplied from Valachchanai Paper Mills sources which are about 10 km from the resort. Operation of the resort came to a grinding halt after the riots in 1983.

4. Tourism Impacts on Livelihoods

The most important yet, little focused and little known factor regarding tourism is the impact it has on the livelihoods of common people. Although the industry has only nearly

85000 directly employed staff, there is large indirect work force engaged in the informal sector. This includes; Suppliers of vegetables, fish, meat, and dry food, etc. Suppliers of chemicals and additives for pools and laundry equipment, Suppliers of stationary, Suppliers of miscellaneous food and beverage and kitchen consumables, Suppliers of maintenance, equipment, and spare parts, etc. Bands, entertainers, and magic shows, etc. Suppliers of tourism souvenirs, such as wood crafts, silverware, and batiks, etc. Beach vendors and beach operators, Transport providers including hire of busses, cars, vans, and three wheelers, operators of small shops for tourist services such as communications, WIFI etc. It is estimated that this informal sector could be as much as three times the formal sector. Thus, it can be safely concluded that nearly some 300,000 people are directly and indirectly involved with the tourism industry. If one were to assume four persons to a family, the number of dependents on tourism would then be over 1 Mn person which is nearly 5% of the population. Hence tourism could be of significant contributor to the local livelihood if it is properly planned and managed to involve with local people. It is evident; therefore, that tourism in Sri Lanka has a profound effect on the large informal sector. It is pertinent to note that this indirect sector will flourish and thrive, only when the direct sector (large hotels) successfully attracts larger number of tourists.

4. The Challenges

Sri Lanka has a long standing reputation as a popular “sun, sand, and sea” holiday destination. Tourism development activities in the coastal areas, such as Hikkaduwa, Negombo and Rekawa Lagoon, have contributed to increasing degradation of valuable coastal habitats and natural settings (Saleem, 1996). The influx of visitors and uncontrolled growth accompanied by mass tourism development has also generated a number of negative economic, social and environmental effects on the host communities. From an economic perspective, mass tourism tends to grow at the expense of, or the total replacement of, traditional economic activities such as fishing and farming. Local communities therefore become dependent on capricious tourist dollars. Development of mass tourism and luxury tourism also have common ramifications such as social polarization, inflation of property prices, increased cost of living, and even “de-culturation.” Furthermore, increasing tourism activities causes congested traffic, increased environmental pollution, and unsightly development. Sri Lanka is in need of alternative development options to foster a sustainable tourism industry.

Integrated with conservation planning and management, ecotourism and other special interest tourism can be highly profitable niche markets that prevent leakage of economic benefits while enhancing the quality of life of the local people with minimal negative social and environmental impacts. With its extensive nature reserve networks and diverse culture heritage, Sri Lanka has great potential to create new value added tourist products that cater to up-market eco-tourists. However, ecotourism is not a panacea. Common pitfalls of ecotourism, such as over exploitation of wilderness areas and “green-washing,” need to be avoided to

prevent uncontrolled ecotourism turning into mass tourism. Careful planning and managing are particularly essential in promoting tourism development in cultural/archaeological sites and ecologically sensitive areas. To foster a sustainable tourism industry, Sri Lanka is faced with numerous challenges. The following highlights some of the impending tasks required to strengthen Sri Lanka’s tourism industry; Formulate comprehensive policies and criteria for tourism development in and adjacent to coastal areas, heritage sites, ecologically sensitive areas, and National Parks, Specify tourism objectives and alternative strategies — the current mass-tourism oriented marketing strategy needs to be revamped to attract eco-tourists who prefer specialized services and gain a life-enriching experience, improve the existing transportation system for dispersing tourism activities to a greater geographical region, improve the existing level of accommodation, health and safety network, and on-site facilities, educate foreign tourists to be sensitive and respect local customs; and encourage community involvement in planning and managing tourism development, as small-scale, single ownership local operators are probably best suited for ecotourism provided they are adequately trained and understand the demand of eco-tourists.

Ultimately, carrying capacity is the key element of sustainable tourism development. Uncontrolled growth in tourism can lead to diminishing social and economic returns and threaten the ecosystems and cultural assets upon which they depend. Seeking a delicate balance between cultural/nature preservation and tourism development remains a major challenge in promoting ecotourism for sustainable development in Sri Lanka. Four tourism research and policy platforms that described different approaches to analyzing and planning tourism are found in literature Jafari (1990). The first was the Advocacy platform, referring to the presentation of tourism as an effective economic development strategy providing employment and income. The second was the Cautionary platform, which highlighted the negative impacts of tourism, arguing against tourism because of its potential as a destroyer of societies and environments. The third was the Adaptancy platform, which argued that it was possible to have the economic benefits without the social and environmental costs if alternative or adapted forms of tourism could be implemented. Jafari (1990) used the platforms as a guide for the development of tourism education and research programs arguing that each of the first three platforms was limited and that tourism academics need to take a more scientific or Knowledge Based platform. Although these four platforms emerged sequentially over time, all continue to exist and it is in the interplay between the first three platforms that we can see the beginning of concerns about tourism and sustainability. Indeed Macbeth in 2005 argued that tourism and sustainability could be seen as a fifth platform given the considerable attention that tourism academics have paid to this relationship since the early 1990s which must be the focus for the intensive tourism developments in Sri Lanka.

5. Harnessing Sustainability with Tourism Development

For the past years, a majority of Sri Lanka’s tourism development plans have been targeted primarily at luxury

tourism and beach holiday attractions. Some areas in the coastal regions have already exceeded their social and physical carrying capacity (Saleem, 1996). Increasingly, ecotourism and other special interest tourism in Sri Lanka are considered as niche travel products yet to reach their growth potential. Promotion of natural tourism and cultural tourism in the interior is perceived as a sustainable alternative for economic development, especially in poor rural communities. Meanwhile, ecotourism, the fastest growing segment in the tourism sector, has been promoted as a means to divert tourists from the sun and beach holiday attractions to other natural/cultural attractions.

A National Ecotourism Policy Plan is being formulated to promote Sri Lanka as a unique ecotourism destination. In addition, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), a research agency, has presented a comprehensive plan for promotion and management of nature tourism in Sri Lanka (Mathews, 2000). The 13th Pacific Asia Travel Association Ecotourism Conference and Travel Mart was held in Colombo in February 2001 and provided the country tremendous exposure as an ecotourism destination. In addition to ecotourism, the Sri Lankan tourism industry is keen to promote other special interest tourism, such as Ayurveda health packages (i.e. courses of traditional herbal massage therapy designed to rejuvenate and detoxify bodies), exotic weddings, and adventure activities (e.g. trekking, paragliding, bird watching and archaeological tours).

Sustainable tourism could be defined as "Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities". Sustainable tourism development guidelines and management practices are applicable to all forms of tourism in all types of destinations, including mass tourism and the various niche tourism segments. Sustainability principles refer to the environmental, economic, and socio-cultural aspects of tourism development, and a suitable balance must be established between these three dimensions to guarantee its long-term sustainability. Thus, sustainable tourism should: (i). Make optimal use of environmental resources that constitute a key element in tourism development, maintaining essential ecological processes and helping to conserve natural heritage and biodiversity of the destination; (ii). Respect the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities, conserve their built and living cultural heritage and traditional values, and contribute to inter-cultural understanding and tolerance; (iii). Ensure viable, long-term economic operations, providing socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders that are fairly distributed, including stable employment and income-earning opportunities and social services to host communities, and contributing to poverty alleviation.

Sustainable tourism development requires the informed participation of all relevant stakeholders, as well as strong political leadership to ensure wide participation and consensus building. Achieving sustainable tourism is a continuous process and it requires constant monitoring of impacts, introducing the necessary preventive and/or corrective measures whenever necessary. Sustainable tourism should also maintain a high level of tourist

satisfaction and ensure a meaningful experience to the tourists, raising their awareness about sustainability issues and promoting sustainable tourism practices amongst them.

6. Conclusion

Sri Lanka has had and still has a compacted touristic potential supported by all its possessions. As indicated earlier, there is no strategic direction as to how the Sri Lanka tourism sector needs to develop for future in a vigorous and sustainable manner. Place oriented or organizational oriented isolated developments are plenty around the country. A comprehensive, collaborative and nation-wide driven, focused development plan is a timely need. The positioning of Sri Lanka in the international arena, regaining its glory and combating diaspora against the nation are of utmost importance parallel to the product development. Interpretation and application of statistical data and trends, supported by good research is vital for planning as against 'knee jerk' responses. It was Lord Kelvin, the British mathematical physicist and engineer, who said "if you can't measure it, you can't improve it". Without reliable information and data, backed by good research and strategic thinking, Sri Lanka Tourism will continue to meander along in the 'Backwoods of Asia', content to be another 'also ran'. Hence, strongly rooted and established tourism information system driven by broad socio-economic stimuli of Sri Lanka is a primary need to position Sri Lankan tourism development in a strategic direction. A harmonized approach through development agencies (both public and private), universities, research institutes, tourism sector organizations, NGOs and so forth is imperative for the above.

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