

ECOTOURISM – SRI LANKA’S POTENTIAL

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INTRODUCTION: TRENDS IN GLOBAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

Overall Expansion:

Tourism has been one of the major economic and social phenomena of the twentieth century, the largest and fastest growing industry, a major source of foreign exchange earnings and employment for many developing countries. The number of international arrivals reached more than 664 million in 1999 (well over 10% of the world’s population), and international arrivals are expected to reach one billion by 2010.¹ This global growth is a great concern to environmentalists around the world, as the resources of our planet are fragile and finite.

Qualitative Development:

In addition to strong overall expansion, the development of tourism is characterized by continuing geographical spread. While in 1950 the top 15 tourist destinations, all in Western Europe and North America attracted 97% of the world’s total arrivals, by 1999 this figure has fallen by 35% to 62% with market shares increasing for developing countries, particularly in **South East Asia**, Central and Eastern Europe and Latin America. Some key qualitative development trends in tourism include: increased market segmentation; development of new forms of tourism, specially those related to **nature, wild life, rural areas and culture.**²

According to the aforementioned report nearly 35% of the international arrivals going by the 1999 figure of 664 million; over 230 million arrivals will be to South East Asia, Central & Eastern Europe, Latin America and looking for nature, wild life and cultural destinations, the **principal components of Ecotourism.**

WHAT IS ECOTOURISM?

In 1991 the Board of Directors of The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) based in the U.S. defined ecotourism as “Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well being of the local people.”

This is a succinct definition still used worldwide.

This definition could be expanded to incorporate the cultural parameter of Sri Lanka’s strong ecotourism resource base, cultural assets of antiquity.

Consequently, the Ecotourism Society of Sri Lanka (ESSL) uses the expanded definition:

“Responsible travel to **natural and cultural** areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well being of the local people”.

Ecotourism ranges from a casual walk through undisturbed forests to exploration and study of unique natural and cultural features in remote areas.

¹ Principles Practices & Policies for sustainability – Megan Epler Wood.

² WTO Contributions to the World Summit on Sustainable Development , Johannesburg , 2002

Ecotourism should be developed with **ecological** and **sociological** sensitivity in order to achieve the principles on which it is based contained in the aforementioned definition, namely:

1. Responsible travel to natural and cultural areas,
2. which conserves the environment and
3. sustains the well-being of the local people.

Thus ecotourism is **not** nature tourism or cultural tourism without embodying the elements of conservation and sustenance of the well-being of local people.

Ecotourism is both a **concept** under a set of principles and a **specific market segment**. General consensus among ecotourism professionals has provided the following components of ecotourism.

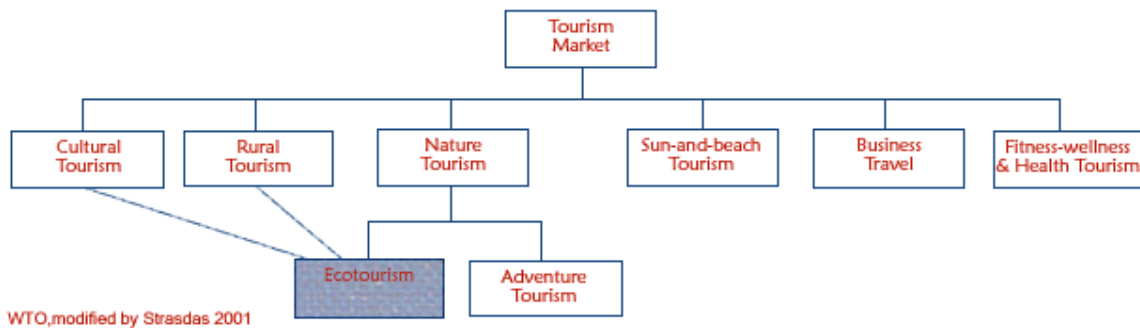
Ecotourism as a concept.

Ecotourism is a sub – component of the field of sustainable tourism

COMPONENTS OF ECOTOURISM:

1. Contributes to conservation of bio-diversity.
2. Sustains the well-being of local people.
3. Includes an interpretation/learning experience.
4. Involves responsible action on the part of tourists and the tourism industry.
5. Is delivered to small groups by small scale businesses.
6. Requires lowest possible consumption of non-renewable resources.

Ecotourism as a Market Segment.



The above figure provides a reflection of how ecotourism fits into the larger tourism market place. Both adventure tourism and ecotourism are shown as sub components of nature tourism. However in ecotourism the primary motivation is **the observation and appreciation of nature and culture**, whereas in adventure tourism it is rather the **physical exercise** and challenging situations in natural environments.³

³ Ecotourism :Principles, Practices & Polices for sustainability

Resource Base for Ecotourism in Sri Lanka.

Nature Resource:

Sri Lanka is a country of great natural beauty with scenery varying from palm-fringed beaches, mist laden highlands of the interior and diverse natural environment with an equitable climate and altitudinal variation within short distances.

The nature base consists of a coast line extending over 1,585 km with warm blue coastal waters, coral reefs and sandy beaches, primeval forests full of wild life, wetlands and mountain ranges with gushing waterfalls. Sinharaja rain forest is a world heritage site. The bio-diversity in Sri Lanka is said to be greater per square kilometer of surface area than any other country in Asia. Sri Lanka is blessed with numerous natural eco systems. Further, Sri Lanka is one of the 25 bio-diversity hotspots in the world and has two Ramsar sites – Bundala and Anaivilundawa.⁴

Despite its relatively small size among its flora and fauna, 23% of the flowering plants and 16% of the mammals in the island are endemic. Of the 435 birds, 23 are endemic and within a short period birders will be able to see a large number of birds. According to researchers 1/3rd of ecotourists are birders. A U.S. National Survey on recreation and the environment showed that in 1994/1995, 54 million people took part in bird watching.⁵

Cultural base:

The man-made base consists of historic and cultural sites, some of which date back to over 2000 years. The kaleidoscope of these sites is fascinating. According to the World Tourism Organization, Sri Lanka has the advantage of having 49 sites classed as unique attractions, 91 as rare attractions and 6 World heritage sites.

⁴ Ramsar convention on wetlands (1971)

⁵ The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) (first quarter news letter)

Ecolodge

The term ecolodge is an industrial label used to identify a nature / culture dependant tourist lodge that meets the philosophy and principles of ecotourism.

*Traditional Lodges Vs Ecolodge*⁶

TRADITIONAL	ECOLOGDE
1. Luxury	Comfortable basic needs
2. Generic style	Unique character style
3. Relaxation focus	Activity / educational focus
4. Activities are facility based eg: Golf, Tennis, Swimming pools, Gymnasiums.	Activities are nature/recreation based eg: Hiking, Canoeing, Bird watching.
5. Enclave development	Integrated development with local environment
6. Group/ consortium ownership common	Individual ownership common
7. Profit maximization based on high guest capacity , services and prices	Profit maximization based on strategic design location , low guest capacity , services, price
8. High investment	Moderate/ low investment
9. Key attractions are facility and surroundings	Key attractions are surroundings and facility
10. Gourmet meals, service and presentation	Good hearty meals and service with ethnic flavour
11. Market with chain	Market (normally) independently
12. Guides and nature interpreters non existent	Guides and interpreters focus of operation

Architecture of an Ecotourist Facility:

In ecotourism sites, the site is the compelling reason for the existence of the facility and should be recognized as such by the designer. Ecotourism is building with nature – not overpowering it. Local building practices and materials should be used as much as possible subject to practical problems of operation. Local people – the village elders should be consulted and informed that the Ecolodge/ Hotel will enhance the natural beauty of the neighbourhood and also improve the economic life of the community.

Local builders and craftsmen can provide their wisdom about local building standards. This approach exemplifies a basic element of Ecotourism, viz. welfare of the local people.

Researchers in ecolodge construction believe that local building forms offer a springboard to a new architecture that integrates the latest technology with local materials and methods of construction into what can become a new synthesis of architectural expression. In contrast, the ‘big brother’ attitude of developers / investors and the lack of socio-economic understanding have made both, urban and rural communities near development sites, hostile.

Tourism development in these fragile areas must be strictly based on the principles of sustainable development.

⁶ The ecolodge source book for planners and developers

Mainstream (mass) Tourism and evolution of Ecotourism

Deeply rooted in the conservation movement and two contemporary ideologies – Modern consumerism and exploitation of the third world's land base and host societies as **pleasure colonies** led to the growth of what was referred as alternative forms of tourism (Cohen 1987) described as soft path, people to people, integrated tourism and green tourism among others. Alternate tourism is a rejection of this exploitation and attempts to develop a type of tourism more responsive to host society's needs. Ecotourism became the most accepted term for alternative tourism worldwide.

As pleasure travel is still one of the primary reasons for mass tourism it has a large **play component**, whereas ecotourism is based on small groups with high level of education, focused on **acquiring knowledge**.

Mainstream tourism requires a high level of investment to supply luxurious hotels, whereas ecolodges need less investment. Ecotourists generally accept conditions different from home than other types of tourists. In many cases, ecotourists do not expect accommodation, food or nightlife that meets the standards of comfort or luxury held by other groups of tourists.

For ecotourists, living with the local conditions, customs and food will **'enrich'** their vacation experience.

For these reasons ecotourism will result in fewer leakages than mainstream tourism, with its reliance on businesses owned and managed by members of the developed world, modeled to retain profits in the tourist generating country. WTO estimates that as much as **50%** of the tourism revenue that enters the developing world ultimately **"leaks"** back in the form of profits earned by foreign owned businesses.

However, though ecotourists are less demanding in terms of accommodation and food etc., they are more demanding in seeking information about their destinations. They want to read material and learn from professional guides about the flora, fauna and culture of the area.

Interpretation is central to an ecotourism experience. Interpreters should be well experienced naturalists or graduates in biological and social sciences who have to be trained in interpretation. This is a skilled human resource lacking in the country which will **open employment opportunities to university graduates**.

Promotion:

Any visitor to Sri Lanka can discover his or her own little paradise. Be it sunny beaches, cascading waterfalls, mountains, exotic flora and fauna, ancient ruins depicting an illustrious culture and heritage – contemporary to that of the Greeks and the Romans.

The above vividly demonstrates that Sri Lanka has an ecotourist resource base, both nature and culture second to none in the world.

Further, the smallness of the island (65,610 sq. km) affords easy accessibility to diverse attractions. **Thus Sri Lanka has great potential for ecotourism.**

The word 'ecotourism' has become a buzz word and a marketing **tool for spurious products** referred to as **"green washing"** in ecotourism literature. Attention should be focused on developing **authentic** ecotourism products and infrastructure facilities and re-focusing Sri Lanka's marketing strategy to promote it as an ecotourism destination.

At the national level, there are two ways in which Sri Lanka can encourage ecotourism. The first is to begin a campaign to lure tourists to the country specially for ecotourism. This is a long term strategy with promotion to the niche market.

The second strategy, which is the short-term, is to promote as an “add-on” to the tourists who are already visiting the country. For example, tourists who primarily want a ‘sun and surf’ vacation may extend their visits for two to three days for ecotourism. Business travelers may also be willing to add days to their trips for a unique vacation. Of the 500,000 tourists visiting the country at least 5% could be interested in depth in nature and culture. These do not include the tourists who go on the round tour which is a photo journey **without seeking knowledge**.

Conclusion:

The declaration of the year 2002 as the International Year of Ecotourism by the United Nations is the testimony of the growing importance of ecotourism. Since ecotourism to protected natural and cultural areas tends to occur in peripheral and non industrialized regions, it could stimulate economic activity and growth in such isolated rural areas.

Around the world, ecotourism has been hailed as a panacea, a way to fund conservation and scientific research, protect fragile and pristine ecosystems, benefit rural communities, and promote development in poor countries which makes ecotourism the most sustainable form of tourism.

Ecotourism is much more than a buzzword: it is a movement having **profound effects on the future of the environment and of travel**.

19th April 2004.