

Potentials, Challenges and Opportunities for Tourism Development in the Eastern Province Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The eastern province consists of diverse resources that make it especially suited for developing tourism to take maximum advantage of it. Following 2009, tourism in the eastern province shows a promising growth and some star hotels have been constructed along the coastal area. Therefore, the main objectives of this research are to identify and examine the potentiality of tourism development and the challenges and opportunities of tourism development in the eastern province in Sri Lanka. The primary data collected from 100 local and foreign tourists in the study area. Random sampling was used to select respondent. The result of the study indicates that lack of infrastructure, health and safety of tourists, skilled and trained workforce, accommodation, internet and mobile network and the image of the area are challenges of Eastern province tourism industry. This can be overcome through forming tourist police task force, improving health facilities at tourist destination, improved infrastructure, developing tourist circuits and providing training. On the other hand, Eastern province has potential of promoting tourism both locally and internationally because of its geographical location, unique natural environment, rich biodiversity, cultural heritage, historical places, coastal areas and increased tourist flow for last few years. Tourism is a major contributor for economic development is also a potential for tourism development in the eastern province. Several plans have been introduced for tackling these issues by the government under "Tourism Development Strategy". However, Government departments, private sector and community at large should take part in tourism for sustainable development and maintenance of the tourism sector in Eastern Province.

Keywords: Tourism; Ecotourism; Potentialities; Opportunities; Development

Introduction

Tourism is one of the fast growing industries and elected as a tool for economic development and employment generation. Rapid growth of tourism causes adverse impacts on environment and biodiversity. Worldwide, global tourism rebounded strongly, with the growth of international tourist arrivals by 3.9 per cent in 2016 to a total of 1,235 million, from 1,189 million in 2015. The highest growth of all regions with 8.4 per cent was recorded from Asia and Pacific in 2016 [1]. Newly emerging tourist destination gained prominence with traditional market reaching maturity. In Sri Lanka, the contribution of tourism to total foreign exchange earnings in 2016 was 14.2%, which was 18% higher than the previous year. Tourism is promising as an important strategy for services exports worldwide. The total amount of international tourist arrival was 1,235 million in 2016 which is 3.9% higher than the 2015. Since global financial crisis in 2009, 2016 showed a sustained growth in tourist arrivals. Asia and Pacific region attracted more international tourist (8%) in 2016. Africa with (8%) was in the 2nd place to attract international tourist while getting America (4%) and Europe (2%) 3rd and 4th place respectively (Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority 2016). Tourism industry, as a service sector, is playing a crucial role in improving the image of the country as well as facilitating the economic growth and development of the nation [2]. Therefore the government of Sri Lanka has to pay special attention on tourism sector.

Over view of tourism in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is popular for its tropical beach resort, water sport, deep-sea fishing, and underwater photography, scuba diving at shipwrecks, coral reefs and whale watching. Further, ancient heritage sites and forest wildlife sanctuaries attracts more tourists. Sri Lanka's tourism industry shows a significant improvement and growth after civil war came to end in 2009. Ethnic conflict adversely affected Sri Lanka's

tourism since 1980s and shows a fluctuation trends in tourist arrivals. Tourist arrivals gradually declined from 407,230 in 1982 to 302,000 in 1996 and again it steadily increased up to 2004 to reach 566,200. Since 2005, Tsunami and resumption of ethnic conflict caused substantial decline in tourist arrivals and employment opportunities. Europe, Canada and USA relaxed their advisory against travel to Sri Lanka since 2010. International tourist arrivals to Sri Lanka were 654,476 visitors in 2010 and it sharply rose to 2,050,832 in 2016. Domestic tourism also indicated a positive growth [1].

Sri Lanka's tourism reached a new milestone of over 2 million visitors in 2016 which is an increase of 14% over the last year. The growing trend of Sri Lanka's tourism continues in 2017 as well [1]. Tourism is one of the important sources of foreign exchange earner for Sri Lanka. Tourism contributed 2980.6 million US\$ of foreign exchange earnings in 2015 and gradually increased to 3518.5 million US\$ in 2016. Both direct and indirect employment generated in tourism sector was 319,436 in 2015 and increased to 335,659 in 2016 [1].

Sri Lanka receives tourist from different regions. According to Tourism development Authority, Sri Lanka received highest number of tourist (643,333) from Western Europe in 2016. South Asia was the 2nd major source of tourists' arrival. Further, Australia is in the last position with 83851 tourists' arrival [1].

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Sri Lanka receives tourists from different countries such as India (17.39%), China (13.24%), UK (9.17%) and Germany (6.5%). Sri Lanka attracts more tourists from India than of its proximity to India. Sri Lanka has taken many promotional efforts to attract more tourists from North America, Asia-Pacific and Western Europe. Island's Beaches, Ancient heritage sites, central highland, wildlife sanctuaries are some of the major tourist attractions in Sri Lanka.

Tourism in Sri Lanka since 2009

End of the war in May 2009 led to begin a new chapter in Sri Lanka in general and tourism in particular [3]. Sri Lanka tourism faced difficulties because of nearly three decades of civil war, but it has shown a strong comeback since 2009 to 2016 [4,5]. After 2009, Sri Lankan tourism industry recorded a remarkable recovery and became one of the fast growing industries in the country. It was recognized that tourism can play important role in post war development in Sri Lanka. Sri Lankan government launched a five years (2011-2016) "Tourism Development Strategy" to promote tourism and attract large number of international tourists which has number of targets such as increasing tourism arrival, creating more direct and indirect employment opportunities, increasing foreign exchange earnings and promoting Sri Lanka as the world's promising island for tourism. The efforts taken by the government shows its enthusiasm to promote tourism throughout the island. Sri Lankan Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) initiated marketing campaign under branding slogan "Sri Lanka-The Wonder of Asia". Because of this, Sri Lanka tourism reached a new high recorded over 2 million arrivals in 2016. This is considered very important to compete with other Asian countries which attract more international tourists. Within the short period of post war, the growth of Sri Lanka tourism contributed largely in terms of foreign exchange earnings, employment generation, attracting foreign direct investment [6,7].

Current tourism policies and strategy

Sri Lanka tourism is steadily moving towards coming decades with ambitious targets. It aimed to attract 3.038 million tourists by 2020. Accordingly, foreign exchange earnings are expected to increase to around 4020 million US\$. It is expected that set target will bring significant economic benefits to Sri Lanka, especially North and Eastern provinces through employment generation. The present tourist arrival as recorded in 2016 is slightly higher (832 persons) than the expected. Therefore, achieving a target of 3.038 million arrivals by 2020 would not be a challenging task. The present peaceful environment will make it possible if proper strategy is undertaken. From this background, it is obvious that Sri Lanka has effective and comprehensive policies for tourism development and implementation [1].

A national level plan for tourism development is much more needed in order to implement initiatives in a careful and integrated manner. Last tourism development master plan for 10 years has been prepared in 1992, but there is a need for another master plan. No master plan exists right now [5]. However, initiatives have been taken to prepare a national level master plan for tourism development for the period of 2011-2020. A national level plan for tourism development is much more needed in order to implement initiatives in a careful and integrated manner. Last tourism development master plan for 10 years has been prepared in 1992, but there is a need for another master plan. However, However, The Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) has been supported by World Tourism Organization (WTO) to prepare a national level master plan for tourism development for the period of 2011-2020 [8].

A short-term plan (the National strategy for tourism) prepared for the period 2009-2012 and recommended a set of activities to promote tourism. The main focus is given on private sector participation in tourism development. Notably tourism Act No 38 of 2005 came into operation in 2007 which enabled bringing together public and private sector to work closely. This is a good sign for future tourism development in Sri Lanka. According to the Act, the following four agencies will play an effective role in tourism development in Sri Lanka such as Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, (ii) Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau, (iii) Sri Lanka Institute of Tourism and Hotel Management, and (iv) Sri Lanka Conventions Bureau.

Tourism in eastern province

Several steps have been taken by Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) to promote tourism and make the eastern province as a tourism hub. Many star hotels have been constructed along the coastal area of the Eastern province since the end of war in 2009. Eastern provincial council is also dedicated to work toward tourism development in the region. Tourism infrastructure developed in the past has been destroyed during the internal conflict. What ever happened in the past, Eastern province is still with full of potential to develop and promote tourism. Several locations have been identify as having potential to develop tourism such as Nilaveli in Trincomalee, Passikudah in Batticaloa and Arugam bay in Ampara. Eastern province consists of number of sanctuaries such as Lakugala, Kumana, Gal Oya, Sagamam, Kudumbigala to promote nature based tourism. Pigeon Island in Trincomalee is one of the unique ecosystems with high bio diversity. Current Sri Lanka's tourism industry shows promising growth and both local and foreign tourist visit the beaches and natural reserve located in eastern province, but facilities to cater them are insufficient. However, for the past few years, numbers of hotels are in operation in the coastal area of the eastern province and offering tourism services in a decent manner. Therefore the main objectives of this research are to identify and examine the potentiality of tourism development and the challenges and opportunities of tourism development in the eastern province in Sri Lanka.

Methodology

Both Primary and secondary data have been used in this research. Secondary data was collected from various reports of the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority and World tourism organization and other tourism related departments. Open and closed ended questionnaires and unstructured interviews used to collect primary data. Two sets of questionnaires prepared (One for foreign tourist and the other for domestic tourist) for primary data collection. Random sampling technique was used to choose respondent. Questionnaire distributed among 100 tourists (foreign and domestic tourists) to collect information regarding profile of tourist, purpose of visiting, tourists' perception on available facilities, activities, attraction and tourists' expectation and satisfaction. The collected date analyzed through SPSS computed aided software.

Study area

Eastern province contains bulk of natural resources and mineral deposits which provide a strong foundation for industrial development. The total area of Eastern Province is 9965 km² and it is 16% of the total land area of Sri Lanka. Maximum length of eastern province lies between kumuna and pulmoddai which is 286 km long. The maximum width is 89 km from Ulhitiya to Kirankulam. Eastern province has long coastal belt which is 420 km in length which is 26% of the total

coastal line of the country. There are three districts (Ampara-110 km, Batticaloa-100 km and Trincomalee 210 km) which are located in the coastal area. 94,565 hectare is covered by water bodies which is 9.44% of the total water body of the island. In addition, 32 river basins of the country flow through eastern province. There is few large and small scale industries in the eastern province and some micro business are there. The larger industries include multinational entities like Prima Flour, Prima Logistics, Mitsubishi/Tokyo Cement, Fuji cement, Bio Mass Power Plant and the Indian Oil Company. In the early stages of development, some villages in the province specialize in certain industries [9].

Result and Discussion

Fast growing tourism industry faces many challenges in Sri Lanka. Those challenges need to be address in order to achieve them. It is more complicated process analyzing tourism sector as it differs from many other economic activities [10]. Further, tourism industry makes use of facilities across other industrial sector [10]. Comprehensive and reliable statistics are essential to support tourism development. Data relating tourism need to be perfect, but there are number of shortcomings in the available data.

The question was arisen among the tourist to understand the need of skilled and trained employees in the tourism industry. 57% of the respondents stated that there is room for employing more trained and skilled workers in the tourism industry in Eastern province, but 40% of the participants satisfy with the available workers force. Only 3% of the respondents were silent.

Health care facilities are very important at tourist accommodation and destination. Based on this, tourists were asked about the availability of the healthcare facility at their visits areas. Lager part of respondents (75%) pointed out that most of the tourists sites in eastern province lacks with proper health care facilities. However, 15% of the participants mentioned that they got good healthcare facilities over there. Rest of the 10% respondents had no idea about health care facilities.

The tourists were asked about the available road facility to reach destinations. 57% of the respondents said that the road network is a problem to visit tourist destinations in eastern province. However, some participants (40%) mentioned that road network in eastern province is good enough to visit destination and the rest of the 3% were neutral. The convenience of road travel was also tested in this study. Majority of the respondents (75%) said that road infrastructure facilities in this region is not quite good to compare with other Asian countries like Singapore or Thailand but some participants (20%) sated that road infrastructure facility is quite up to the standard. Therefore, this study clarifies that poor road infrastructure makes difficulties on accessing tourist destination in eastern province.

The 55% of the respondents confirmed that available transport system (Train, buss, Airplane, ship) to reach tourist destination is insufficient while 40% of the participants agree that transportation systems to visit the destination are good. The remaining 5% of respondents was neutral about transportation. The above finding concludes that the transport systems to visit destination are not good. The respondents were asked about the alternative means of transportation to visit tourist destination. For that question, 60% of the participant confirmed that alternative means of transportation is not sufficient to reach destination but 40% among them agreed that there is enough alternative means of transportation. Responses to these two questions affirmed that existing alternative means of transportation in

eastern province is not as it is expected. Some of the other interviews were also confirmed that Sri Lanka's tourism does not have many alternatives to see tourist destination.

Internet and mobile network facilities were assessed among the tourist. Questionnaire survey revealed that 80% of the respondents brought up that internet and mobile network are available at the destination wherever they visited, however some of the tourists (15%) negatively expressed their view in this regards. Based on the above result, conclusion can be given that internet and mobile network facilities are available at the entire tourist destination. However, some interviews revealed that mobile network facilities are available all over Sri Lanka, but internet facilities are lacking in some remote destinations.

Accommodation is very important in the tourism industry and should be maintained with international standard. 51% of the participants mentioned that they got good hotel accommodation in the eastern province whereas 49% respondents disagreed on good hotel accommodation. Further, availability of good accommodation in visiting area was also asked among the tourist. 55% of the tourists stated that there are good accommodations at visiting destination in the eastern province, but 45% respondent disagreed. It can be concluded that tourist get good hotels accommodation in both eastern province and visiting destination. In addition to this, tour operators and hotels owners mentioned that almost all tourists are satisfied with available hotel accommodation in Eastern province. There are some star hotels in the eastern province which satisfy tourist's expectation. Further, the enough facilities are given to tourists to reserve as they demand. According to Sri Lanka tourism development authority annual statistical report 2016, hotels in east coast had 1121 rooms to accommodate tourists.

According to the questionnaire survey 82% of the respondents (foreign and domestic) confirmed that there are no security issues in the eastern province and visiting destination right now. 15% of the tourists stated that there is still security problem in Eastern province. Only few people (3%) had neutral stand in this regard. The above analysis shows that there is no security issue for tourists in the eastern province. Some tourism operators said that there were security issues before 2009 but now it come to normal and no threat at all on tourist and tourism industry.

The image of the destination is an important factor to attract tourist. Tourist perception on Sri Lanka's tourism was questioned. Majority of the tourists (75%) had positive view on Sri Lanka's tourism. However, certain amount of tourists (14%) had short of negative view on it. The remaining 11% of the respondents stated nothing about it. Perception regarding image of Sri Lanka's tourism was also asked in the interviews. Some informants expressed that tourists have a good image about tourism in Sri Lanka and that perception level goes up after travelling across the country and it promises to comeback for the second time. The image of Sri Lanka in the international arena went down during the conflict (2005 to 2009). However, since 2010 this negative perception disappeared and image of Sri Lank's tourism boomed up among the international tourists and Sri Lanka received over 2 million tourists in 2016.

In this study, about 60% of the respondent said that Sri Lanka tourism development Authority provides detail information about tourist destination while 39% of the respondents motioned that promotion and publicity is insufficient and the other 1% had no response on this matter. It is clear from this analyze that the Sri Lankan government and responsible body for tourism development have been

working on a right way and there is still room for doing things to promote tourism in the eastern province Sri Lanka.

51% of the respondents mentioned that other Asian countries like India, Thailand, Indonesia, and Maldives are better in tourism promotion than Sri Lanka. Whereas, 43% of the respondents were opposed to this view and said that Sri Lanka's tourism have better promotional way compared to other Asian countries. The rest of the 6% said nothing in this regard. This result shows that Sri Lanka's tourism is quite better in promotional advertising.

Based on questionnaire survey, 58% of the respondents pointed out that they experienced here what it already promoted. On the other hand, 42% of the participants said that actual status of the destination and what is was in the promotion is quite different. The tour and travel companies mentioned that Sri Lanka's tourism made enough steps to promote tourism in the eastern province but there is a gap to promote tourism among domestic visitors. It is expressed in some interviews that there were some shortcomings in the tourism promotional activity in the past but now shorted it out.

Sri Lanka tourism industry is booming and government has introduced "Tourism Development Strategy" to get economic growth. Number of challenges has been identified in terms of developing tourism in the eastern province Sri Lanka. It is clear that existing accommodation facilities in the eastern province is not adequate to accommodate the expected tourist arrivals. Therefore, high quality hotels are to be built in the respective region. Number of hotels development project has been approved by the government to meet the challenge in the eastern province for instance Passikkudah Resort, Kuchchaveli Beach Resort [1].

Transportation facilities need to be improved to cope with anticipated high number of tourist arrivals. Massive infrastructure development has been taken place in Sri Lanka in recent years but eastern province got less development compare to western province. However, it is not sufficient to compete with other Asian tourism destination like Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia. Eastern province tourism industry requires a large number of trained workforces. Presently available tourism and hospitality related education and training program is not adequate to train such a large quantity.

The Sri Lanka Institute of Tourism and Hospitality Management established by the Sri Lankan government in 1964 to train labor force for tourism industry. Some government departments provide short course to educate employees in tourism sector. Sri Lanka tourism industry moves away from low cots destination to high end tourist destination [11]. The accommodation cost is not competitive and is over paid for its quality s compared with other Asian destinations like Thailand, Vietnam and Indonesia. Sri Lankan government has introduced comprehensive policy framework for tourism development in the eastern province Sri Lanka in order to attract tourists more and more (for instance, setting up an Aquaculture park in Batticaloa). It is obvious that tourism industry in the eastern province will be a sustainable sector within the next few years. It is very important to implement marketing and management strategy to rebuild the image of eastern province tourism sector as an attractive, safe destination in South Asia.

Potential for tourism development in eastern province

Tourism is identified as a fast growing sector which has potential for bringing economic development to the nation. Eastern Province has certain uniqueness that makes it especially suited for developing

tourism to take maximum advantage of it. Unique natural environment, rich biodiversity, cultural heritage, historical places, and coastal areas of Easter Province attract world tourist more. In addition, the geographical location is also favorable to Easter Province that makes this island standout distinctly from the rest of the country. Therefore, Eastern province has excellent potential for being developed as one of the best tourist destination of the entire Sri Lanka.

The eastern province consists of diverse resources to promote tourism such as long beaches, lakes, wildlife, sanctuaries and cultural and heritage sites. Tourism attractions are the positive sign to promote tourism. The following areas are identified as tourism potential sites in the eastern province.

- Trincomalee district: Coastal road from Pulmoddai to Passikudah, Most of the beach resorts in Trincomalee, Kinniya Hot wells, Velgam Vihara.
- Batticaloa district: Coastal road from batticaloa city to panama, Passikkudah beach, Palameenmadu Natural reserve, Batticaloa lagoon Bar mouth, Mantheevu, Kudumbi gala, Paduvankarai, Pottuvil Lagoon.
- Ampara district: Pottuvil Lagoon, Crocodile point, Lahugal National park, Kumana Nationa park and Birds sanctuary, Ullai Beach.

The strength of the eastern province is the abundance of scenic costal area and beaches. Many beaches are found along the coastal area from Trincomalee to Ampara. The larger area of beaches along the coastal area is better for tourism development. There is sufficient empty land suitable for investment in terms of supporting tourism faculties and infrastructure. Some of the beaches are home for traditional fishing activities. There are two national parks (Lahugal National park, Kumana Nationa park and Birds sanctuary) which are home of variety of fauna and flora. Sand beaches along the east coast can access easily from any part of eastern province and Sri Lanka. Tourist spots in eastern coast have preserved its pristine beauty. The beaches are endowed with natural and scenic qualities that attract more people. Tourist can enjoy fishing, trekking and deep sea diving. Therefore it has great potential as tourist destination.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Sri Lanka tourism industry has become one of the fast growing economic sectors. Tourism in eastern province would contribute to generate employment opportunities and economic development of the area. Eastern province has potential of promoting tourism both locally and internationally because of its beauty, uniqueness, rich culture, marine biodiversity and coastal shoreline. Increased tourist flow to the eastern province for last few years contribute to local and national economy. Policy and regulatory support from the Sri Lankan government shapes the tourism sector in the eastern province and in Sri Lanka. However, eastern province tourism sector faces challenges such as lack of infrastructure, concerns on health and safety of tourists, lack of skilled and trained workforce but several plans have been introduced for tackling these issues. Successful implementation of tourism projects would be crucial to speed up the growth. Consolidated efforts by Government and private sectors and community at large are critical for sustainable development and maintenance of tourism in eastern province Sri Lanka.

Tourist police task force should be formed to ensure safety and security for tourist, which will create eastern province' image as safe

and secure tourist destination. First aid and health care facilities need to be established in and around the tourists' destination. Private sector investment must be encouraged for infrastructure development and it should consist of both tourism and civil infrastructure development. Overall transportation facilities of the country should be enhanced in the form of quality road, rail network, airport and so on. It is very important to develop tourism circuits across the eastern province Sri Lanka. Customized packages with discount for repeat traveler to provide enrich experience on each visit. Providing vocational training could be arranged for rural youth to provide them employment opportunities in the tourism sector. It is essential to spread educational and awareness on the importance of tourism in the eastern province to increase stakeholders' participation and involvement.

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