

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. The objectives of this research are to identify the existing challenges of tourism and examine the opportunities for tourism development in the Eastern Province, 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 are challenges for tourism industry in the Eastern Province. This can be overcome through forming tourist police task force, improving health facilities at tourist destination, improved infrastructure, developing tourist circuits and providing training. Conversely, the Eastern Province has opportunities and potential of promoting tourism both locally and internationally. Several plans have been introduced for tackling these issues by the government under "Tourism Development Strategy". However, Government departments, private sectors and community should take part in tourism for sustainable development and maintenance of the tourism sector in the Eastern Province.

Key words: Development, Ecotourism, Opportunities, Potentialities, Tourism

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 (Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority - SLTDA, 2016). Newly emerging tourist destination gained prominence with traditional market reaching maturity. Sri Lanka is popular for its tropical beach resort, water sport, deep-sea fishing, under-water photography, scuba diving at shipwrecks, coral reefs and whale watching. 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. 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 (Mckercher, 1995). Therefore, the government of Sri Lanka has to pay special attention on tourism sector. 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 (Figure 1). The growing trend of Sri Lanka's tourism continues in 2017 as well (SLTDA, 2016).

Several steps have been taken by 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. Whatever happened in the past, the Eastern Province is still with full of potential to develop and promote tourism. Current Sri Lanka's tourism industry shows promising growth and both local and foreign tourists visit the beaches and natural reserve located in the 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, this study might help to draw the attention of the provincial and local government authorities towards problems and prospects of tourism destination in the Eastern Province.

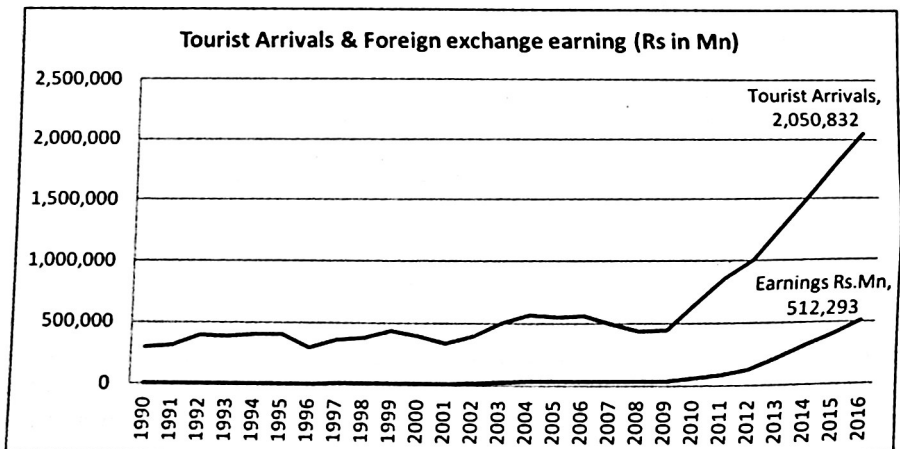


Figure 1: Tourist Arrivals & Foreign exchange earning

Objectives of the research

This study mainly focuses on identifying the existing challenges of tourism and examines the opportunities for tourism development in the Eastern Province, Sri Lanka.

Tourism in Sri Lanka since 2009

The end of the civil war in May 2009 led to begin a new chapter in Sri Lanka in general and tourism in particular (Fernando, Bandara & Smith, 2016). It was recognized that tourism can play an important role in the 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. Because of this, Sri Lanka tourism reached a new high record of over 2 million arrivals in 2016. Within the short period of post war, the growth of Sri Lanka tourism contributed largely in terms of foreign exchange earnings, employment generation and attracting foreign direct investment (Fernando, 2016, Fernando, 2017).

At 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. However, initiatives have been taken to prepare a national level master plan for tourism development for the period of 2011-2020. However, 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. A short-term plan (the National Strategy for Tourism) prepared for the period, 2009-2012. Notably, tourism Act No 38 of 2005 came into operation in 2007. According to the Act, the following four agencies will play an effective role in tourism development in Sri Lanka such as SLTDA, (ii) Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau, (iii) Sri Lanka Institute of Tourism and Hotel Management, and (iv) Sri Lanka Conventions Bureau.

Study Area

The Eastern Province contains bulk of natural resources and a good climate which provide a strong foundation for tourism development. The total area of the Eastern Province is 9965 km² and it is 16% of the total land area of Sri Lanka. The maximum length of the Eastern Province lies in between Kumuna and Pulmoddai which is 286 km long. The maximum width is 89 km from Ulhitiya to Kirankulam. The 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 the Eastern Province. It is well-known for its golden beaches and the natural harbor. The province is surrounded by the Northern Province on the north, the Bay of Bengal on the east, the Southern Province on the south, and the Uva, Central and North Central provinces on the west. The province’s coast is dominated by lagoons, the largest being Batticaloa Lagoon, Kokkilai lagoon and Upaar Lagoon (Figure 2).

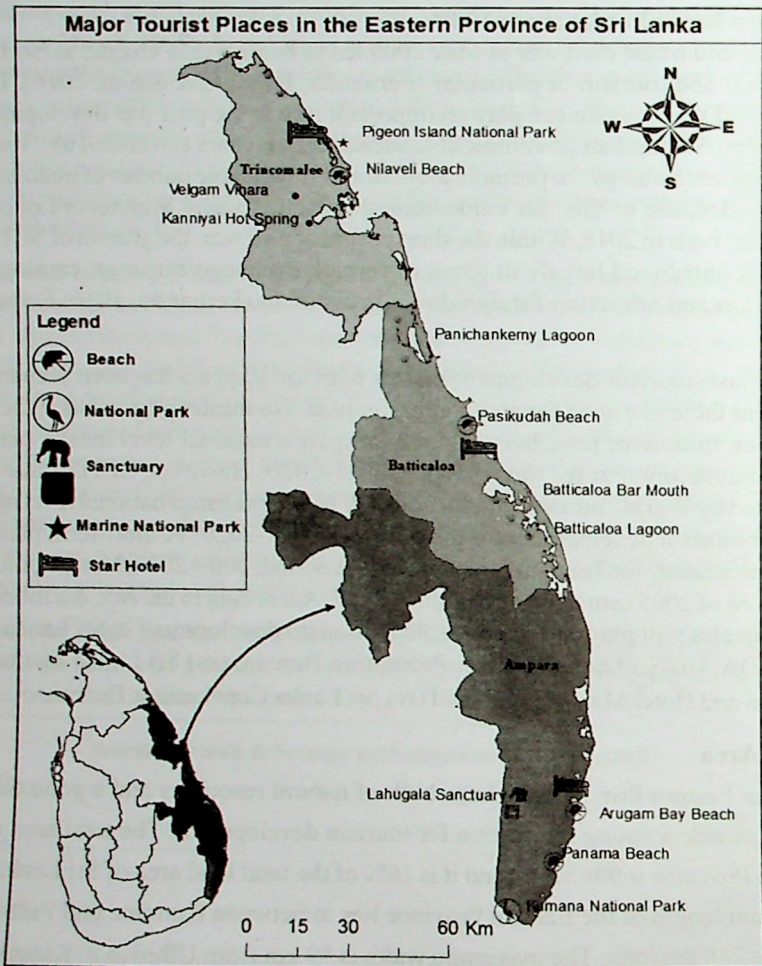


Figure 2: Location of the Study Area and its Major Tourist Spots

Methodology

Both Primary and secondary data have been used in this research. Secondary data were collected from various reports of the SLTDA and World Tourism Organization (WTO) and other tourism related departments. Interview guides and questionnaires were the instruments used for data collection. The interviews and questionnaire administration was made with both domestic and inbound tourists. In addition, institutions related to the Sri Lankan tourism industry were also contacted for requisite information and data. Random sampling technique was used to choose respondent (foreign and domestic tourists). 100 Questionnaires were distributed among tourists at different locations (20 respondents from Pigeon Island, 20 respondents from Nilaveli Beach, 25 respondents from Pasikuda Beach, 15 respondents from

Arugambay Beach) to collect information regarding profile of tourist, purpose of visiting, tourists' perception on available facilities, activities, attraction and tourists' expectation and satisfaction. In case of domestic tourists, Sri Lankan citizens at popular tourist destinations in the Eastern Province were targeted (5 respondents from Pigeon Island, 5 respondents from Nilaveli Beach, 5 respondents from Pasikuda Beach and 5 respondents from Arugambay Beach). Domestic tourism does not have peak season as soon as residents can visit places at various time of the year. With reference to tourism investors, eight tourism enterprises (private investors) in the Eastern Province were randomly selected for the study. The selection of the eight enterprises was based on their growing popularity among tourists in the Eastern province. The collected data analyzed through SPSS 16.0 computed aided software.

Results and Discussion

Fast growing tourism industry faces many challenges in Sri Lanka. Those challenges need to be addressed in order to achieve them. It is more complicated process analyzing tourism sector as it differs from many other economic activities. Further, tourism industry makes use of facilities across other industrial sector (Fernando, Bandara, Smith, & Pham, 2015). Comprehensive and reliable statistics are essential to support tourism development. Data relating to tourism need to be perfect, but there are number of shortcomings in the available data.

The question was arisen among the tourists 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 the Eastern Province, but 40% of the participants satisfied with the available workers force. Only 3% of the respondents was 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 visit areas. Larger part of respondents (75%) pointed out that most of the tourists sites in the Eastern Province lack of 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 the Eastern Province. However, some participants (40%) mentioned that road network in the 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 are not quite good to compare with other Asian countries like Singapore or Thailand but some participants (20%) stated 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 the Eastern Province.

The 55% of the respondents confirmed that available transport system (Train, bus, Airplane and 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 are enough alternative means of transportation. Responses to these two questions affirmed that existing alternative means of transportation in the Eastern Province are not as it is expected. Some of the other interviews also confirmed that Sri Lanka's tourism does not have many alternatives to reach tourist destination.

Internet and mobile network facilities were assessed among the tourists. 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 regard. 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. Around 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 tourists. 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 the Eastern Province. There are some star hotels in the Eastern Province which satisfy tourists' expectation. Further, enough facilities are given to tourists to reserve as they demand. According to Sri Lanka the Tourism Development Authority (Annual Statistical Report, 2016) hotels in the east coast had 1121 rooms to accommodate tourists.

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 the 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 has come to normal and no threat at all on tourists and tourism industry.

The image of the destination is an important factor to attract tourists. 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 a negative view on it. The remaining 11% of the respondents stated nothing about it. Perception regarding image of Sri Lanka's tourism was also questioned 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 the image of Sri Lanka's tourism boomed up among the international tourists and Sri Lanka received over 2 million tourists in 2016.

Tourists were asked as to tourism promotion and publicity in the Eastern Province. About 60% of the respondent said that Sri Lanka tourism development Authority provides detail information about tourist destination while 39% of the respondents mentioned 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 a questionnaire survey, 58% of the respondents pointed out that they experienced here what it had already promoted. On the other hand, 42% of the participants said that actual status of the destination and what it was in the promotion are 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 sorted it out.

Sri Lanka tourism industry is booming and the government has introduced "Tourism Development Strategy" to get economic growth. A 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. A number of hotels development project has been approved by the government to meet the challenges in the Eastern Province for instance Passikkudah Resort, Kuchchaveli Beach Resort (SLTDA, 2016).

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 the Eastern Province got less development compared to the Western Province. However, it is not sufficient to compete with other Asian tourism destination like Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia. The 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 courses to educate employees in tourism sector. Sri Lanka tourism industry moves away from low cost destination to high end tourist destination (Ministry of Economic Development, 2011). The accommodation cost is not competitive and is over paid for its quality is 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. \

Opportunities for tourism development in the Eastern Province

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 the Eastern Province attract world tourist more. In addition, the geographical location is also favorable to the Eastern Province that makes this island stand out distinctly from the rest of the country. Therefore, the 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 Kinniya, Most of the beach resorts in Trincomalee, Kanniya Hot wells, Velgam Vihara
- Batticaloa district: Coastal road from Batticaloa city to Kallaru, Passikkudah Beach in Kalkudah, Palameenmadu Natural Reserve, Batticaloa Lagoon Bar mouth, Mantheevu, Kudumbigala, Paduvankarai.

Ampara district: Pottuvil Lagoon, Crocodile Point, Lahugala National Park, Kumana National Park and Birds Sanctuary, Ullai Beach

The strength of the Eastern Province is the abundance of scenic coastal areas 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 facilities and infrastructure. Some of the beaches are home for traditional fishing activities. There are two national parks (Lahugal National park and Kumana National Park) and bird sanctuary which are the home of variety of fauna and flora. Sand beaches along the east coast can access easily from any part of the 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 the Eastern Province would contribute to generate employment opportunities and economic development of the area. The 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, the 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 the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka.

A tourist police task force should be formed to ensure safety and security of tourists that creates 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 enriching 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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