

Ecotourism in Sri Lanka Faces Serious Challenges

Sri Lanka has enjoyed a considerable interest of travelers since ancient times, because of its beauty, many natural attractions, and prime location along the globe's most travelled sea lanes. In fact, back in the 12th century, Marco Polo described it as the world finest island.

However, it wasn't until 1937 when the British government, who was ruling Sri Lanka at the time, established an official bureau of tourism. Initially it mainly promoted beaches, but has since spread throughout the island, with over 114 UNESCO World Heritage sites, national and biodiversity parks, and protected natural areas consisting of coral reefs, estuaries, lagoons, mangroves, and salt marshes.



In 2009, tourism was its 6th largest foreign exchange venue. The year 2012 proved to be Sri Lanka's best for tourism; for the first time, it greeted its 1 millionth visitor.

Ecotourism, a vacation based on sustaining the destination's natural environment while studying and learning about it, as well as benefiting the community economically and socially, has been a worldwide growing trend since the 1980s. Authors S.L.J. Fernando and Noresah Mohd Shariff have explored the challenges faced by Sri Lanka as it develops its ecotourism industry. Though these challenges are extensive, Sri Lanka remains an ideal country for ecotourism development, having many beautiful natural attractions.

These are the challenges faced by Sri Lanka's ecotourism industry:

Land degradation through clearing to build amenities for tourists such as hotels, roads, restaurants, and restroom facilities. Removal of vegetation leads to erosion, which in turn destroys the ocean and reef environments through sedimentation. Between 1992 and 2002, Sri Lanka has suffered a 30% loss of clean water, a 49% decrease of its mangroves, and a 40% decline of its marshes due to activities related to expanding human settlements. More tourists bring in more money, yet they also harm the environment the tourists come to visit.



Yet, it is important to provide adequate facilities for tourists. Otherwise, there is a considerable risk for increase in pollution due to inadequate facilities. Sewage could flow into the ocean, destroying ocean life. Measures must also exist to prevent increase in air and beach pollution, and garbage.

Biodiversity destruction and loss. Some original forests have been splintered into several factions, seriously disturbing the lives of animals that live there. Sri Lanka has lost 20% of its amphibians during the last century, and more than 50% of the remaining ones risk becoming extinct. The wetlands water bird population is declining as well. Tourist boats damage coral reefs as they sail above them, especially due to changing ocean levels, and the problem is further exacerbated by the water pH level increasing up to 8.2, and tourists who collect reef samples.

Visitor safety is a concern, though the civil war ended 4 years ago. Violence against tourists is rare, however it does happen. Visitors are protected through monitoring as they travel around the country; this must be done without them feeling their privacy is being violated.



Problems with infrastructure. The lack of investment capital makes developing the country's ecotourism industry a formidable task. The government has dealt with this by using the private sector to supply tourist amenities; however, this makes it difficult to centralize operations. Many beaches have laws against building and development, and most of the wetlands are in isolated areas with the water too alkaline for drinking; yet transporting tourists all over the island is costly and time-consuming. (Currently, ferry service is available from India to Sri Lanka, and so far this has worked well.) The privately owned companies have issues as well; the ecotourism season peaks only twice a year, during the months of July / August and November / December. The rest of the year, tourist-based businesses must use their savings, even credit, to remain open; many must close during the off season.

Natural disasters also present a challenge. The November / December tourist peak occurs during cyclone season; an especially strong one can be dangerous to visitors and residents. Also, a tsunami can strike anytime; being in the lowland part of the island can make evacuation to a higher place difficult.

Though these challenges are onerous, overcoming them is vital for the economic growth of Sri Lanka. Ecotourism, as one of the most important industries of its economy, has the potential to improve the lives of its citizens and sustain its rich environment, thus maintaining its position as a highly desirable location in South Asia.

Date: 2013-04-29

Article link:

<http://www.tourism-review.com/travel-tourism-magazine-challenges-of-ecotourism-in-sri-lanka-article-2113>