

ECOTOURISM AND WILDLIFE CONSERVATION IN SRI LANKA: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A WORKING COVENANT

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ABSTRACT

Despite the potential to capitalize on the expanding and popular ecotourist industry, Sri Lanka has failed to do so. Development of this low-impact, high-quality component of the tourist industry will, however, provide a good economic reason to advance the cause for conservation of Sri Lanka's wildlife and wildlands, and for maintaining the extensive protected areas system. The tourist industry and the conservation community should cooperate to develop a viable, innovative ecotourism program, complete with facilities and infrastructure, which is sustainable over the long term. Such a cooperative effort can be fostered through an umbrella organization 'an ecotourism society' which can promote responsible tourism practices and provide a forum for dialogue between the tourist industry and the conservation community.

INTRODUCTION

The conservation community worldwide has begun to accept ecotourism practices in protected areas (Robinson and Redford, 1991; Gianecchini, 1993; Panayotou and Ashton, 1992; Dixon and Sherman, 1990). This is reflected by the inclusion of ecotourism programs and facilities in conservation management plans for protected areas. The reason is clear; with an increasing demand for land to accommodate the needs of a rapidly growing human population, some human benefit must be derived from these protected areas to justify their existence in the future. Thus, human use of wildlife and wildlands will place an economic value on these resources, providing an economic argument for their long term conservation, or they will be lost to alternate land use practices less compatible with conservation (Redford and Robinson, 1991). This does not, however, imply that wildlife and natural forest lands be valued solely in terms of monetary worth, but merely that an economy based incentive would make a more persuasive and substantive argument for their conservation.

Sri Lanka's natural resources, which include diverse ecosystems with high biological diversity and an extensive system of protected areas, are threatened by a burgeoning human population. If current rates of deforestation continue, within the next decade Sri Lanka will have little or no natural forest lands remaining outside of protected areas (Dinerstein and Wikramanayake, 1993). Thus the threats to these protected

forests will increase substantially in the future. Urgent measures are therefore necessary to ensure that some economic justification can be presented for maintaining the protected areas system for conservation.

Ecotourism can provide such an economic justification. This would be an incentive to policy makers of the central and local governments, and to the resident people in and around the protected areas. Long term promotion of implemented and managed ecotourism would be the land use practice most compatible with conservation.

However, to ensure long term sustainability, ecotourism development in protected areas must take place within the framework of conservation management plans for protected areas. Thus, to tread the fine line between sustainability and over-exploitation, a close working relationship has to be forged between the tourist industry and the conservation community in Sri Lanka. Such a partnership will eventually serve to fulfil the goals and ideals of both camps, but more importantly, it will also provide the best chance for long term conservation of Sri Lanka's fauna and flora.

This paper examines the potential for ecotourism in Sri Lanka, and makes some recommendations on how the tourist industry and the conservation community can forge a mutually beneficial covenant.

ECOTOURISM AND ECOTOURISTS

Ecotourism is rapidly gaining popularity worldwide. A World Wildlife Fund poll conducted in Latin American international airports indicated that 47% of travellers interviewed considered nature and natural attractions as important factors in planning vacations and destinations (Brooke, 1991).

Several definitions of ecotourism exist, of which the most comprehensive is as follows:

Ecotourism: a form of tourism inspired primarily by the natural history of an area, including its indigenous cultures. The ecotourist visits relatively undeveloped areas in the spirit of appreciation, participation and sensitivity. The ecotourist practices a non-consumptive use of wildlife and natural resources and contributes to the visited area through labour or financial means aimed at directly benefiting the conservation of the site and the economic well-being of the local residents. The visit should strengthen the ecotourist's appreciation and dedication to conservation issues in general, and to the specific needs of the locale. Ecotourism also implies a managed approach by the host country or region which commits itself to establishing and maintaining the sites with the participation of local residents, marketing them appropriately, enforcing regulation, and using the proceeds of the enterprise to

fund the areas land management as well as community development" (Ziffer 1989).

A broader, less restrictive definition of ecotourism is:

travel with a concern for the environment, and with an appreciation of the natural attraction being the prime purpose of the trip (IRG 1992).

This more appropriately describes many visitors to Sri Lanka whose travel plans include some interest in nature and natural resources. However, Ziffer's requirement for financial benefits to conservation of sites and to the local communities should apply, and the onus of responsibility to implement practices which will realize these benefits should rest with tour operators.

Some of the potential ecotourists that can be attracted to Sri Lanka would include:

- visitors whose interests are focused on a particular group of animals or plants e.g. bird-watching and butterfly interest groups; a particular activity such as nature photography, rafting, canoeing, scuba-diving, etc; professional interests such as scientific tourism.
- tourists whose interests are more diverse, and include an array of outdoor activities such as trekking and hiking to bird-watching, etc. These will be the visitors "who want to just get out to enjoy and experience nature"
- others who may want to visit a national park or reserve as part of a general tour.

ECOTOURISM, WILDLIFE AND WILDLANDS

Among the fauna of interest to ecotourists are Sri Lanka's mammals, birds, reptiles, and butterflies. Several "charismatic megavertebrates", such as the Asian elephant, leopard, several species of deer, water buffalo, and bear occur in Sri Lanka. There are a few endemic mammal species in Sri Lanka, but these are small to mid-sized species; not the kinds of animals which are easily seen, nor charismatic enough to attract visitors. There are, however, several species of birds and butterflies which are endemic to Sri Lanka. These species have the potential to attract bird and butterfly enthusiasts, who are more dedicated to their quest of compiling "lifetime species lists".

Sri Lanka also has other natural attractions. An extensive system of protected areas comprising national parks, sanctuaries, wildlife and forest reserves administered by the Department of Wildlife Conservation and the Forest Department contain several habitat types and ecosystems within them. These range from lowland and montane rainforests to dry-zone monsoon forests and grasslands. Marine sanctuaries with coral reefs still remain in several localities. These diverse habitats are easily accessible, and several can be visited during a short trip to Sri Lanka.

However, the ecosystems and wildlife by themselves are insufficient to attract ecotourists. Sri Lanka has to develop innovative and imaginative ways for visitors to view the wildlife and other natural attractions. Interpretive services must be developed to provide relevant information to educate the visitors. These services should include trained tour guides, literature, audio-visual aids, etc. Accommodation must be provided, either on-site or close to the sites of interest. Some strategies for infrastructure development, including sites for scientific tourism, has been suggested in Wikramanayake (1992).

These facilities are essential because Sri Lanka shares most of its fauna and flora with other South and Southeast Asian countries, and must therefore compete with them for tourists. Several of these countries already have better ecotourism programs and promotional campaigns. India, Nepal, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia have developed well organized trekking programs, elephant-back tours, and boat rides in their national parks and other protected areas. They also have good interpretive programs, well prepared guide books, and trained tour guides, etc. All Sri Lanka has to offer now is, literally, a jeep ride in Yala National Park or a short walk in Sinharaja Forest. Instead, nature-tours which include several habitats - from coral reefs, to rainforest to wetlands, to dry zone forest - and a mix of trekking, elephant rides, rafting trips and other means of innovative yet environmentally friendly means of transport can be organized. Tours can consist of different sites and durations to accommodate the different interests and time schedules of visitors.

Promotional campaigns are necessary to advertise the ecotourism programs. Relative to the other larger countries which promote ecosystems, Sri Lanka's fauna is not as diverse and the ecosystems are smaller. However, Sri Lanka has other advantages to capitalize on, such as a range of different ecosystems, with diverse habitats and a fauna and flora, which can be visited with relative convenience in a short time and at a relatively lower cost. Because ecotourists visit on a small spatial scale, and not across the vast expansive habitats of larger countries, it is possible to promote the diversity of habitats, rather than their expansiveness. Most tourists would also like to maximize the time spent in the field, and easy access to field sites are important. Thus, the promotional campaigns should highlight Sri Lanka's diverse natural attractions and the ease with which they can be visited.

ECOTOURISM AND CONSERVATION: THREATS, MITIGATIONS, AND BENEFITS.

There will be threats and adverse impacts from tourism on the environment and wildlife. But if properly organized and implemented with long-term goals in mind, these impacts can be minimized and mitigated to a large extent. This is where the conservation community can play an important role - in liaising with the tourist industry to develop visitation strategies and programs which minimize the adverse impacts on the environment and to identify how and where the tourist industry can reinvest to help conserve the resources on which it depends.

Some of the potential impacts on wildlife and habitats from unrestrained and unplanned tourism practices will include:

- Behavioral changes in animals and populations. For instance, many visitors approaching too close to animals can cause physiological and behavioral stresses; animals can be denied access to habitats and food; migratory routes can be blocked; daily and seasonal behaviour patterns can be disrupted.
- Nesting and breeding behaviour can be affected because female birds can be ousted from nests; eggs and nests of ground nesting birds can be destroyed, albeit inadvertently; young can be separated from the parents, leaving them vulnerable to predation and starvation; reproductive and courtship behaviour can be disrupted.
- Buying animals, and animal and plant products can encourage killing and collecting, thereby threatening the very resource the tourist industry depends on. The tour guides who are in the field with visitors can play a big role here by discouraging - or better yet, preventing - tourists from buying artifacts and souvenirs made of banned animal and plant products, and should refrain from patronizing commercial establishments, ranging from jewelry shops and souvenir stands to restaurants, which sell such products.
- Habitat degradation due to over-use of resources. Exceeding carrying capacities can degrade habitat, destroy the vegetation, kill seedlings, wear out paths and trails, cause erosion and litter problems, etc.

Other impacts on the local communities, such as acculturation, over-dependencies, and social disruption, must also be addressed by the industry.

A self-policing umbrella organization - an "Ecotourism Society" - can be formed to address most of the potential and realized impacts. Such an organization would then be able to internally regulate the industry and implement tourism practices which are sustainable and environment-friendly. The mandate of the ecotourism society should be to promote responsible tourism by both visitors and the tourist industry and to implement wise tourism practices which are conservation-friendly and sustainable over the long term.

The ecotourism society should be comprised of the tour operators involved in ecotourism, members of the conservation community (from relevant NGOs, academia, etc), representatives from the Tourist Board, the Department of Wildlife Conservation and the Forest Department, and some representatives from sociological NGOs. The society will thus provide an opportunity for the tourist industry and the conservation community to develop an alliance, and work together to identify potential and realized problems; to design viable and sustainable programs which include developing itineraries and interpretive programs; identifying and developing trekking routes; developing and writing guide books; conducting needs and reinvestment strategies; addressing social issues; etc.

Even a basic task such as preparing an itinerary for a special interest group would benefit from such a cooperative effort because some knowledge of the ecology and biogeography of species is necessary to design good programs. For example, the itinerary of a bird-watching group interested in seeing Sri Lanka's endemic birds can

be prepared by field ornithologists who would know where in Sri Lanka these species can be seen.

The society will also help to form a close relationship with the Forest Department and the Department of Wildlife Conservation to develop infrastructure, interpretive services, and the administration of other programs.

The responsibilities of the society would include;

- setting guidelines and rules for the industry, ranging from developing field itineraries to the behaviour and conduct of tour-guides in the field.
- enforcing a policy of non-patronization of commercial establishments which sell banned animal and plant products. Sponsoring monitoring programs in frequently visited sites to assess the effects of visitation on the habitat and wildlife. The monitoring programs can be offered as research projects, with funds, to interested research organizations and/or researchers.
- implementing practices which ensure long-term sustainability of the resources by heeding carrying capacities and rotating visitation schedules to allow for site recovery.
- identifying conservation and sociological problems which can benefit from reinvestment of some tourism revenue
- developing new, innovative visitation practices.
- setting rules for dealing with organizations which violate the charter.

ECOTOURISM AND CONSERVATIONISTS: THE NEED FOR A MUTUALISTIC RELATIONSHIP.

Most tourism developments in Sri Lanka are viewed with suspicion by many conservationists and environmentalists. Given some past, and even recent practices, this attitude may be justified. But Sri Lanka's natural resources have a lot to offer the tourist industry, and the tourist industry, in turn, has a lot to offer the conservation effort. Wise use of Sri Lanka's natural resources will entail some compromises and a resolution of professional conflicts between the conservationists and the tourist industry, and the development of a cooperative relationship. Such an alliance will help to establish good, low impact visitation programs which will bring economic benefits to the central and local governments, and incentives for protecting Sri Lanka's fauna and flora. It is time for the conservation community to move beyond the traditional status quo approach to conservation, and for the tourist industry to practice a sustainable form of tourism with long term objectives.

The tourist industry can reinvest in conservation programs to sustain the very resources it depends on. Financial benefits can be provided for park and wildlife management programs and research projects. Field equipment and uniforms can be donated to field staff of the departments of wildlife conservation and forests. Research projects which will benefit wildlife management and conservation can be supported. These projects can be used as tourist attractions, and the researchers can provide interpretive services to tour groups who visit their study sites. The industry should invest in developing communities in and around the parks. It is especially

important to provide area residents with tangible incentives to conserve wildlife, and not abstract concepts such as "the need to preserve biodiversity....", so that they will be more receptive towards assisting with tourism programs and conservation efforts. Area residents can be employed as local field guides and interpreters. Conservationists can also take advantage of the ecotourism programs for education and awareness purposes. The conservation community and the Departments of Wildlife Conservation and Forests must strive to get their conservation message across to the public and other stakeholders. Through ecotourism programs the message can reach a broad audience, from tourists and local communities to polity makers and funding agencies.

Thus, good ecotourism practices will present the economic incentive most compatible with conservation of Sri Lanka's protected areas and wildlife. These practices have to be developed through a close, cooperative relationship between the conservation community and the tourist industry. Such a covenant will eventually benefit Sri Lanka and all Sri Lankans, because conserving our natural resources will help to maintain the ecological health of the country and make this a better country to live in.

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