

Perception of the Eco Tourism Concepts and its Practices in the Hotel Industry: The Case in Eco Resorts in Sri Lanka

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Abstract:-

Tourism plays a major role in Sri Lankan economy. It accounts for Rs. 42,519.3 million of foreign exchange earnings in 2007 (Annual Statistical Report-SLTB 2007). Eco tourism is one of the alternative tourism concept which involves environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features - both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low negative visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations” (Lascurian, 2005).

Mid term strategic plan for Sri Lanka tourism (2002-2004) states that Sri Lanka had 1% percent of eco tourists. It is in a very low level comparing to other destinations. Based on these literature and preliminary findings, researcher identified there is an issue of practicing the concept of genuine eco tourism and meeting the customer expectations.

In the analysis, researcher found that Sri Lankan eco resort hoteliers perceive the meaning of eco resorts in various ways. They are more towards nature based tourism, wild life tourism and environment conservation tourism. Therefore, they were unable to target eco tourism market and attract eco tourist. Because the hoteliers’ practice of the eco concept differs from international practices and standards, they could not meet the expectations of eco tourists. Even though the eco resort hoteliers’ main market is eco tourist market, they cater and address to other

type of tourists. As a result, customer orientation concept has been dishonored for eco tourists.

After analyzing the issue, finally, researcher has pointed out some ways that the Sri Lankan eco tourism market can eliminate the adverse practices of it and managerial implications for the managers and marketers of the eco resorts on the concept of eco resort.

Key words:-Eco tourism, Eco resort, Customer orientation

1. Introduction

Tourism is currently one of the most important contributors to the Sri Lankan economy. It accounts for Rs. 42,519.3 million of foreign exchange earnings in 2007 (Annual Statistical Report-SLTB 2007). Tourism continued as the third largest earner of foreign exchange earnings in Sri Lankan economy (Central Bank, 2007).

According to Silva (2004), attitude of tourists have gradually changed from one that emphasized beach tourism to one that demands more, natural, cultural and social interactions.

The term 'Ecotourism' was first coined in July of 1983 by Hector Ceballos-Lascurain, an architect, environmentalist and ecotourism consultant from Mexico (Planeta). The original definition was as follows,

"Ecotourism is environmentally responsible travel and visitation to

relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features - both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low negative visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations"

Since Ecotourism is potentially the fastest growing segment in the international market and it holds great potential for Sri Lanka as a means of conserving biological diversity and promoting the sustainable use of bio diversity, many hoteliers tend to practice the concept as a novel market oriented concept. (Mid term strategic plan for Sri Lanka tourism 2002-2004).

Achieving genuine eco tourism may be viewed as either a difficult technical challenge or an impossible task. Some observe that those who hold the reins of power and money will always prevail and, that eco tourism will never

genuinely offer benefits to local people and customers (Boo, 1990).

Mastny (2002) argues that multinational hotel chains, resorts, tour operators, and powerful foreign owners often engage in unfair trade practices in eco tourism that allow them to squeeze economic control from local communities where the tourism activities take place in Costa Rica. Therefore, Eco tourists are trapped in their misleading the eco concept.

Based on these findings, the researcher identified there was an issue of practicing the concept of genuine eco tourism and meeting the customer expectations. Then it is important to explore this phenomenon in Sri Lankan context to find out whether there is an impact of eco tourism practices in eco resorts to the arrival of eco tourists. Therefore, the researcher did some short preliminary interviews over the telephone with both eco tourism professionals and eco resort hoteliers to get an idea about the hoteliers' practices. Here, the researcher conducted the interviews with the president of the Sri Lanka Eco tourism Foundation and few academics in the field of tourism. According to them, implementation of ecotourism concept in hotels in Sri Lanka is the use of the

concept as just a label and a marketing tool without considering the genuine practice of it and customers and local community expectations.

1.1 Research Issue

Sri Lanka Eco tourism Foundation (2001) says, many eco resorts in Sri Lanka are Trojan horse marketing tourism as environmental friendly, but in fact destroying the every eco system they claim to protect. As a result, customers are dissatisfied with the service of the eco tourist hotels. It can be proved through the mid-term strategic plan for Sri Lanka tourism (2002-2004). It states that Sri Lanka had 400,414 tourists in 2000 out of which 1% percent was eco tourists. They were identified based on the purpose of arrival that they mentioned at the airport. Comparing to Sri Lanka, other Asian, African and European countries are having many demand for eco tourism and eco resorts. Some facts mentioned in the Eco tourism statistical fact sheet (2000) and Global eco tourism fact sheet of TIES (2006) clearly shows it. For example,

- In Dominica, in the Caribbean, tourists using small, nature-based lodges spent 18 times more than cruise passengers spend while visiting the island

- In Indonesia, 80% of money for all-inclusive package tours goes to airlines, hotels, and other international companies.

- In US, UK and Australian market, More than two-thirds of U.S. and Australian travelers, and 90% of British tourists, consider active protection of the environment and support of local communities to be part of a hotel's responsibility.

These facts obviously illustrate that if the eco tourism service providers practice the concept properly, customer demand is very high.

As mentioned earlier, in Sri Lanka, arrivals of eco tourists are less than 1% over last decade. Therefore, Sri Lankan eco tourism market is not enjoying the benefits of it (National policy of eco tourism- SLTB, 2003).

1.2 Significance of the Study

Since the contribution of tourism sector to foreign exchange earnings and the development of the society, marketing and implementing the tourism concepts properly to the customers is very much significant.

Therefore, it is important to understand the whether the implementation of eco

tourism concept in eco resorts is successful enough to meet the customer expectations. Then it will provide a clear picture whether the hoteliers really look at the customer orientation or sales orientation.

It is also important to explore that area for the benefit of the hotel industry and the policy makers in Sri Lankan eco tourism sector.

1.3 Research Questions

- How do the eco resort hoteliers in Sri Lankan eco tourism sector perceive the meaning of eco resort?
- What are the differences between the Sri Lankan eco resort hoteliers' interpretation and the international standard?

1.4 Objectives of the Study

- To explore the perception of the meaning of eco resort concept by Sri Lankan eco resort hoteliers.
- To investigate differences between the Sri Lankan eco resort hoteliers' interpretation and the international standard.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Eco Tourism and Misuse of the Originality

Tourism is widely believed to be the most rapidly growing global industry. According to World Tourism Organization ecotourism is believed to be the fastest growing tourism segment (Buckley, 1994; Deardon & Harron, 1993). However, there is considerable debate over what ecotourism really means.

The term 'Ecotourism' was first coined in July of 1983 by Hector Ceballos-Lascurain, an architect, environmentalist and ecotourism consultant from Mexico (Planeta). His definition was later revised in 1993 to move the focus to conservation and the role of the tourist from passive observer of nature to participant with a responsibility for its preservation,

"Ecotourism is environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features - both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low negative visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations"

The main problem that has stemmed from this is that often the term is misused or misinterpreted for developments which do not hold true to the original meaning of eco tourism (Ross & Wall, 1999). This is usually attributed to the vagueness of its definitions. With the many meanings and redefinitions over the years it is hard to regulate it (Font, 2002). As ecotourism has grown in popularity, sometimes resembling traditional mass tourism, its definitions have been expanded to incorporate ideas about eco tourist responsibility; environmentally friendly destination management, profit linkages to conservation efforts, and the sustainable development of local human populations (Campbell, 1999). There are many definitions of ecotourism.

2.2 Eco Tourism Practices in Eco Resorts

Eco resort is an establishment where providing hospitality services to the eco tourists while practicing eco tourism principles. All eco resorts reflect the creative initiative and entrepreneurialism of business pioneers, rather than large multinational corporations. (TIES, 1993) In addition to TIES, green globe 21standarads has guidelines of practicing eco tourism concept. There are eight principles.

1. Focus on giving visitors the opportunity to personally and directly experience nature (Natural Area Focus)
2. Provide opportunities to experience nature in ways that lead to greater understanding, appreciation and enjoyment (Interpretation)
3. Represent best practice for environmentally sustainable tourism. (Environmental Sustainability Practice)
4. Contribute directly to the conservation of natural areas.
5. Provide ongoing contributions to the local community.
6. Be sensitive to, interpret and involve the culture/s existing in the area (Cultural Respect).
7. Consistently meets consumer Expectations.
8. Be marketed and promoted honestly and accurately so that realistic expectations are formed

Hotel industry definitely can contribute towards protecting the environment following these guidelines. There are various areas in the hotels where these concepts can be incorporated

conveniently and smoothly without adversely affecting normal operations or guest satisfaction (SLEF, 2001).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

When conducting a research, it is important to identify the framework for the study. Here, the researcher used the qualitative research approach to conduct this research. Interpretive paradigm was the based paradigm for this research. Therefore, social constructionists' philosophical stand of the researcher was more helpful to conduct this research.

3.2 Strategy of Inquiry

Here the researcher did a qualitative case study with the intention of providing a thick description to the concept of eco resort and its customer orientation focus.

3.3 Population, Sample and Sample Selection

The target population for this study was self-declared eco resorts, which were registered under the Sri Lanka tourist Board. Here the researcher identified 36 Eco friendly resorts based on the accommodation guide of the Sri Lanka

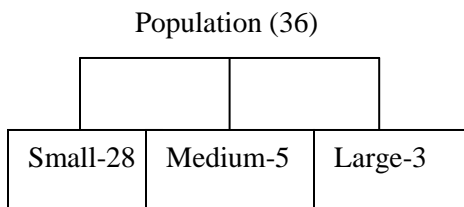
Tourist Board. Those selected resorts were confirmed as eco friendly resorts, after verifying their web sites. When selecting the cases for the study, scale of number of rooms was used to categorize the resorts according to their size. It is the international scale to classify the hotels in relation to their size. The scale provides following standards to classify the hotels.

Small scale hotel - Rooms (0-50)

Medium scale hotel - Rooms (50-100)

Large scale hotel - Rooms (more than 100) As a result of categorization, following continuum was obtained through the identified population

Figure 1 – Continuum of resort Classification



Out of the total population, 3 resorts were selected representing each level of the scale for the case study analysis. In-depth analysis of each resort was done using various data collection methods. Samples were selected purposively. Therefore, purposive-sampling strategy was used in this study. In the sample,

resort staff was selected representing the all levels of the employees to conduct in-depth interviews to explore the meaning of the term of eco resort. Here, the researcher conducted 15 in-depth interviews representing 5 in-depth interviews for each case. Interviews were done covering following levels of the resort staff.

- Managerial level - 2 interviews
- Executive level - 2 interviews
- Operational level (Customer contact staff) - 1 interview

In these interviews, the researcher paid more consideration to the management and executive level staff since they are mainly contributes to the construction of the meaning.

3.4 Data Collection

Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews in this research. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner and expected to run for 1-2 hours. Interviews were conducted with the all levels of employees selected from the sample of 3 eco resorts.

In addition to the interview method, the researcher used observation method. Here, the researcher utilized an observation guide to check the

components of an eco resort. Besides, customer blogs of web was selected to obtain the customers comments about the eco resorts. This was a novel method used to get the perception of customers about the eco tourism practices of the eco resorts in Sri Lanka. This method was more useful than analyzing customer comments cards to acquire the comments of customers. Since customer comment cards are internal, comments are not published to the outsiders. Therefore, customer blogs are ideal to get customer comments. Here, the researcher used independent customer blogs instead of hotel owned customer blogs. Then it eliminated the biasness of the blogs.

Finally, secondary data were used to analyze the current situation of eco tourism practices in eco resorts. Here, a document analysis was done to clarify the situation.

Using these different data collection methods (Data Triangulation), the researcher expected to have reliable data for the research.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Concept of Eco Tourism

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the way that the eco resort hoteliers perceive the meaning of the eco resort. The researcher has applied four data analysis methods to study the research issue. They were in-depth interview analysis of eco resort hoteliers, observation analysis of eco resort components, document analysis of eco resorts and a customer blogs analysis.

As a result of the analysis, the researcher was able to identify five main themes. They are eco tourism, components of an eco resort, eco tourist, ways of practicing the eco concept in hotels and the attitude on local eco tourism market. Results of analyzing those themes gave a clear picture of the way that the eco resort hoteliers mean the concept of eco resort. Results of those analyses can be discussed as follows.

In the analysis of eco tourism concept as a main theme that identified by the researcher, four basic perceptions were resulted. Sri Lankan eco resort owners define the concept of eco tourism in four various ways such as;

- Nature related tourism
- Environment conservation tourism
- Wildlife related tourism
- Nature and cultural related tourism

These findings showed that there is no a standard way of understanding the eco tourism concept. The hoteliers perceive the concept in different manner. Sri Lankan hoteliers believe that the concept of eco tourism is equal to the above mentioned concepts. But in the international context, the above concepts are totally different from eco tourism.

One of the main international definitions of eco tourism is "Ecotourism is environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate the nature (and any accompanying cultural features - both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low negative visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations" (Lascurian, 2005).

In the international context nature based tourism means sustainable practices of natural areas. It is totally relating to the

natural areas and enjoys them in a sustainable manner.

"Nature based tourism is any sustainable tourism activity or experience that relates to the natural environment" (Eco Tourism Statistical Fact Sheet, 2000). It is a one component of eco tourism and narrower concept than it. In the concept of eco tourism, it concerns more about the environment responsibility, conservation and socio-economic involvement.

Therefore, it is not similar to the eco tourism. But in Sri Lanka, Some of our eco resort hoteliers believe it as eco tourism. They used the term 'eco' for nature based tourism.

In addition, most of the eco resort hoteliers consider eco tourism as the environment conservation tourism. They do not consider any other aspects. They only concern the conservation of environment. This is also a major component of eco resort that practices the eco tourism concept according to the green globe 21 standards. But there are many components to be satisfied by an eco resort. Here also our Sri Lankan eco resort hoteliers consider only one aspect. They did not consider about culture, local community involvement, interpretation aspects of eco tourism. It is proven in the data analysis through

some explanations given by the hoteliers. Therefore, environment conservation tourism cannot be similar to eco tourism. It is a broader concept than that in the international context.

Another contrasting finding was also found by the researcher in the in-depth interviews. That was, some managerial level hoteliers believe that wild life is as an essential component of eco tourism. But in the global context that concept is identified as wild life tourism. It is totally different from eco tourism.

“Wild life tourism means the experience of observing and exploring the flora and fauna in the wilderness area” (Saleem, 1996). Here, the tourists visit these places only to see the wild life and experience it. In that case, they are not considering about the conservation and other aspects of eco tourism.

As result, Eco tourism concept practiced in the eco resort are also different from the global standards. This is one of the reasons to dissatisfy the real eco tourists who visited to Sri Lanka. That caused to the decrease of eco tourists’ arrival too.

4.2 Components of an Eco Resort Compared to the International Standards

As the researcher pointed out earlier, if a resort wants to use the term ‘eco’ in a resort, they have to satisfy those components. They are natural area focus, interpretation, and environmental sustainability practice, contribution to conservation, benefiting local communities, cultural respect, customer satisfaction and responsible marketing. As the hoteliers define the meaning of the eco tourism concept, they also practice it in different ways. Therefore, the researcher found that the hoteliers did not concern about above components that much. They only address a few components in their eco resorts. Even though the hoteliers satisfy the other customer segments needs and requirements, they do not pay much attention on the eco tourist needs as the major customer segment. The reason for this is the failure of identifying the true customer segment properly.

In another case, many hoteliers had launched awareness programmes and interpretation programmes to their stakeholders about the environmental conservation practices of the resorts and the hotel facilities. Therefore, they

believe that they satisfy the interpretation component of the eco resort. But, here they have consider about the awareness programmes of the conservation practices. It is not about the eco resort and eco tourism concepts. Therefore, they could not achieve the main purpose of their programme.

Observation analysis of the eco resorts showed that all the resorts were trying to address the conservation practices of environment, natural area focus, environmental sustainability practice, benefiting local community. Even though the practices of these components were not correct, at least they have tried to launch some programmes on those aspects. The researcher identified these facts through the observations of sub components of each major component. In case of promotional material analysis and observations, the researcher was able to recognize some similarities as well as disparities between the in-depth interview ideas of the hoteliers and the practice of the concept. It is specially relating to the practice of responsible marketing component.

For example, in some resorts, resort is promoted as an eco friendly resort in their web including some photos taken from the other resorts and activities

which are not practices in the resort. It is not responsible marketing. Even though that the hoteliers said that they are satisfying the customers well. Customers have complained about these practices.

4.3 Perception of Eco Resort

As a whole, if all the analysis taken together, what is very much clear is that the eco resort hoteliers in Sri Lanka define the concept of eco tourism in different ways than the international standards and it manipulated the practice of eco resorts. Therefore, they could not satisfy the international standards of the eco resort except touching a few components in a narrow way. As a result, the eco tourists who are coming to the eco resorts could not get the expected service. They have identified the concept of eco tourism in four various ways such as;

- Nature related tourism
- Environment conservation tourism
- Wildlife related tourism
- Nature and cultural related tourism

Therefore, they practice those concepts in their resorts; As a result, their resorts have become more towards nature resorts, wild life resorts and

environment conservation resorts rather than eco resorts.

According to all the results and findings of all analysis, the researcher found that when the eco resort hoteliers perceive the meaning of the eco resort concept, they used their awareness and understanding of the eco tourism concept. Since their understanding of the eco tourism concept is different from the global context, the way that they construct the meaning of the eco resort is also different from global framework.

5. Conclusion

At the end of the research, the researcher found that the practice of eco resort concept has been misused by the hoteliers in Sri Lanka as pointed out by the tourism professionals. But, they are not purposefully doing it. It is due to lack of understanding of the concept. Therefore, they are unable to classify the eco tourists and identify the market and customer segment clearly. They cater to different customer segments as eco tourists and earn profits neglecting the components of an eco resort. In the customer web blog analysis, the researcher found that eco tourists' needs of eco resorts had not been addressed properly by the eco resort hoteliers. When the main guests

are dissatisfied, there is a possibility of long term dropping of the business. That is what they are starting to experience currently. It has created dissatisfaction to eco tourists. Therefore, they are moving away from the Sri Lankan eco tourism market to other destinations.

According to the researcher, the issue of failure to practice the eco resort concept happened due to the following reasons.

- Sri Lanka eco tourism business is not being guided by international principles.
- A "National Policy Plan on Eco Tourism" is yet to be formulated by the tourism authorities in Sri Lanka
- There are no sufficient qualified people to handle eco tourists.
- Non- availability of genuinely planned eco resorts that guarantee the economic benefits to the community living around the eco resort areas.

Therefore, there is a need of eliminating these adverse practices which threaten the healthy development of the Eco tourism and eco resort practices in Sri Lanka.

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