

ECO-LODGE PATRONS' CHARACTERISTICS: THE SRI LANKAN PERSPECTIVE

Sumanapala H.D.P.^{*}

Perera P.K.P.^{**}

Kotagama S.W.^{*}

Silva D.A.C.S.^{***}

ABSTRACT

As negative environmental and socio-cultural impacts of mass tourism become more apparent, the appeal of alternative forms of tourism, especially ecotourism, has increased globally. With the growing demand for ecotourism and nature-based tourism, eco-lodges are becoming more popular as an alternative accommodation choice. As such, development of eco-lodge industry has wider implications for Sri Lanka, especially when considered the country's high potential for ecotourism, and the need to provide alternative forms of accommodation for rising tourist arrivals. However, eco-lodge industry is relatively undeveloped in Sri Lanka, and very few or no studies have attempted to explore characteristics of visitors who seek accommodation in eco-lodges. Such knowledge is vital in planning and systematic development of the eco-lodge industry in Sri Lanka. This study attempts to develop distinct visitor profiles of eco-lodge patrons based on their demographic characteristic, trip characteristics and travel motivation.

Survey of 220 ecolodge occupants in 12 selected ecolodges found that majority of the respondents were between the ages of 26-55 and, highly educated with at least a bachelor's degree, and moderate to high income. In terms of trip characteristics, the majority of the respondents stayed in ecolodges for 1-3 days, and travelled with spouse or family. Natural and cultural features were among the main pull motives for selecting the destination. Ecolodge patrons seem rely on the

^{*} Department of Zoology, University of Colombo, Colombo 03, Sri Lanka

^{**} Department of Forestry and Environmental, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka

^{***} Department of Economic, University of Colombo, Colombo 03, Sri Lanka

Internet, travel guide books, and word of mouth as major sources of information in selecting accommodation. Ecotourists' strong agreement with statements on nature-based elements, design and service quality indicate that Sri Lankan ecolodges provide unique nature-based experiences for visitors. However, results further indicated that Sri Lankan ecotourism industry has given less attention on the educational or learning component of ecotourism. This calls for better strategies to educate the visitors about their environmental responsibilities, and improved interpretive tour facilities.

Key words: ecotourism occupants, visitor profiles, trip characteristics, travel motivation, satisfaction

1. Introduction

Ecotourism, the form of tourism defined by the International Ecotourism Society (1990) as “the responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people”, has at present evolved into one of the most dynamic segments of the world’s tourism business. As negative environmental and socio-cultural impacts of mass tourism become apparent, the demand for alternative forms of tourism, especially ecotourism, has substantially picked up in the recent past.

Diverse needs and expectations of environmentally conscious travellers are likely to maintain a positive demand for ecotourism products in the future (Perera et al., 2012). As an industry response to this dynamic and heterogeneous demand for environmentally responsible tourism products, novel concepts in the hotel and accommodation sector have emerged. Among these, the accommodation concept known as “ecolodge” has gained broader recognition, particularly in the nature-based tourism sector (Kawan et al., 2010). Ecolodges are meant to be accommodation facilities that support environmental conservation, while providing economic benefits to host communities. Russel et al. (1995) defined “ecolodge” as a “nature-dependent tourist lodge that meets the philosophy and principles of ecotourism”. It further offers natural resource-oriented ecotourism activities and opportunities for learning about the environment (Lai and Shafer, 2005). Although there is no universally accepted definition for ecolodges, many contemporary tourism scholars (Weaver, 2001; Fennell, 2003; Mehta, 2007; Kawan et al., 2008; Raju, 2009; Erdem et al., 2013) have endorsed the core values and concepts described by Russel et al. (1995) in their definition of ecolodge, while promoting “ecolodge” as an industry label.

Despite having a generally accepted set of principles and framework for ecolodge development, there seems to be some confusion over what type of structures should be qualified as ecolodges. According to Weaver (2005), ecotourism building types can include indigenous structures, historical building types, contemporary structures, as well as portable low-impact structures. Out of these, accommodation structures influenced by indigenous designs have become very much popular among ecotourists. As identified by Kawan et al. (2008), ecotourist with varying spending capacity seek accommodation in ecolodges. In the modern ecotourism business environment, ecolodge developers have designed these indigenous structures to capture broad spectrum of ecotourists; from budget to luxury, in terms of spending capacity.

In general, ecotourists choose their destinations first, based on the attractions or desired activities, and subsequently choose where to stay (IFC, 2004). In the context of Sri Lanka, rich biodiversity, diverse landscapes and other natural environments act as main pull factors that attract ecotourists to the destination. Sri Lanka boasts having the highest biodiversity per 10,000 km² in Asia, and it is also rated as one of the 25 biodiversity hot spots in the world (Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources, 2002). At the same time, country's highly sophisticated Protected Area Network which accounts for approximately 26.5% of the land area along with other natural landscapes provides diverse nature tourism opportunities within the country (Senevirathna and Perera, 2013). As such, ecotourism has wider implications for Sri Lanka, especially when considered the country's ecotourism resources and potential.

The interest on Sri Lanka as a travel destination has grown tremendously in the recent past, especially with the conclusion of 30-year long conflict. The Government of Sri Lanka has also identified tourism sector as one of the key area to focus on in order to attract foreign exchange. For instance, the Government of Sri Lanka along with the partnership of private sector recently launched an ambitious program to increase country's hotel room capacity to 45,000 by 2016 to accommodate 2.5 million tourist arrivals (SLTDA, 2011). However, this target involves doubling the country's hotel room capacity which is currently at 22,745 rooms. In this context, alternative forms of accommodation will be vital in future development of Sri Lanka's tourism sector. Especially, the development of low-cost, low-impact accommodation facilities in the form of ecolodges will have significant implications.

In terms of numbers, Sri Lanka's ecolodge industry is blossoming. For instance, in a study that assessed the geographical distribution of ecolodges, Buckley (2003) reported that, out of 64

countries, Sri Lanka ranks 7th in terms of number of ecolodges, development of ecotourism industry, and significant natural attractions. However, in terms of practice and adhering to core principles and values of ecotourism, the Sri Lanka's ecotourism and ecolodge industry can be described as relatively undeveloped with numerous malpractices and green washing taking place.

In order to develop country's ecolodge industry in a sustainable manner, it is essential to have an understanding of attitudes, perceptions and characteristics of tourists who seek accommodation in ecolodges. This aspect of ecotourism in general has received scant scholarly attention, and existing literature are predominantly from countries outside Asia (Weaver and Lawton, 2002; Kawan et al., 2008; Kawan et al., 2010). In the context of ecotourism research in Sri Lanka, past studies have predominantly focused on understanding type of tourists visiting nature-based attractions or destination management (Tisdell, 2003; Perera et al., 2012; Senevirathna and Perera, 2013; Perera and Vlosky, 2013), and no study thus far has attempted to explore characteristics of visitors who seek accommodation in eco-lodges. To bridge this knowledge gap, this study attempts to develop distinct visitor profiles of eco-lodge patrons based on their demographic characteristic, trip characteristics and travel motivations.

2. Methodology

Sampling frame

In Sri Lankan, eco-lodges are mainly concentrated in Hambathota, Rathnapura, Kandy, Dambulla and Kalpitiya areas, as all these towns are located in close proximity to country's prime ecotourism attractions, protected areas or cultural sites. The purpose of this study was to determine the socio demographic characteristics, travel motivation and trip characteristics of visitors staying in ecolodges. The sample frame for this study included tourists who stayed at least one night at 12 selected ecolodges from Dambulla, Kandy, Rathnapura and Hambantotha areas in Sri Lanka. The ecolodges were selected based on the subjective criteria of (i) the business is advertising itself as an ecolodge, (ii) the ecolodge management's endeavor to work together with local community (iii) appear to cause minimal disturbance to surrounding natural environment (or making attempts to enhance natural resources) and (iv) offer interpretive guidance to visitors to educate them about surrounding natural and cultural environment. However, the selected ecolodges showed heterogeneity in terms of lodging style, dining, amenities, nature-related activities, and quality of the interpretive guidance provided.

Survey development and data collection

A structured questionnaire was used as the primary research instrument. The purpose of this 5-page questionnaire was to gather information on traveller demographics, trip characteristics, travel motivations, and their perceptions on ecotourism and ecolodge attributes. Items related to ecotourism perceptions and ecolodge attributes were chosen based on literature (Eagles, 1992; LeBlanc & Nguyen, 1996; Callan & Bowman, 2000; Chu & Choi, 2000; Callan & Kyndt, 2001; Mehta et al., 2002; World Tourism Organization, 2002; Kawan et al., 2008, Kawan et al., 2010.). Respondents were asked to evaluate the 33 ecolodge attributes based on their experience at the ecolodge, and these were measured on a 7 point Likert scale anchored by 1=very dissatisfied to 7=very satisfied. Perceptions on the concept of ecotourism and ecolodges were measured on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1= strongly disagree) to 7= strongly agree).

A set of 14 motivational items adopted from previous studies (Eagles 1992; Wight 1996b; Kawan et al., 2008; Kawan et al., 2010) was used after modifying to fit the Sri Lankan context. These items were measured using a 7-point Likert scale anchored by 1 = not at all important to 7 = very important. All items included in the questionnaire were given to a panel of subject experts to establish the face validity.

Following the procedures used in Kawan et al. (2008; 210), the front-desk staff of the ecolodges, were briefed by the researcher in advance about the study requirements and visitors were provided with the questionnaire during check-in. Visitors were further informed that participation in the survey is voluntary. Occupants of each registered room at the ecolodge received a questionnaire. When there were two or more guests in one room or cabin, only one questionnaire was given. The guests sharing the same unit, decided whom to respond to the questionnaire. On completion of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to put the completed questionnaire in a drop box at the front desk during check out, or return it to the front desk. Those who declined to participate in the survey were treated as non-respondents. Data were collected from January 2014 to January 2015.

Data were cleaned by performing a consistency check before proceeding to detailed analysis. Incomplete questionnaires with many missing responses were discarded. Data were coded and entered in Microsoft Excel 2010 and analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 20.

3. Results

Out of 403 occupants approached in 12 ecolodges, a total of 224 completed questionnaires were received. After removing invalid questionnaires including those completed by respondents below 16 years of age), this accounted for an adjusted response rate of 52.38%. The response rate varied at individual ecolodge, and appeared to be highly dependent on the enthusiasm and effectiveness of the front desk staff who distributed the questionnaires.

Respondent demographics

General respondent socio-demographic characteristics are summarized in Table 1. Approximately 55% of the respondents were male. Most of the ecolodge occupants participated in the survey were in the age group of 26 to 35 years. About 78% of respondents were middle-aged (36 to 55). Approximately 81.3% of respondents have attained an educational level of Bachelor's Degree or higher. This represents the highest level of education completed by respondents at the time that they participated in the survey. The average monthly income for foreign respondents" Most ecolodge occupants were foreigners; hence only foreigners were included in the survey." was US\$ 669.

Table 1: General Respondent Socio-demographic Profile

| Socio-demographic Variable | Frequency | Percentage |
|----------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Gender (n=220) | | |
| Male | 121 | 55.0 |
| Female | 99 | 45.0 |
| Age (n=218) | | |
| Below 16 | 3 | 1.3 |
| 16-25 | 29 | 13.3 |
| 26-35 | 91 | 41.7 |
| 36-45 | 40 | 40.0 |
| 46-55 | 38 | 38.0 |
| 56-65 | 14 | 6.4 |
| Above 66 | 3 | 1.3 |
| Education (n=220) | | |
| High-school or below | 41 | 18.63 |
| Bachelor degree | 74 | 33.63 |
| Post-graduate degree | 92 | 41.81 |
| Above post-graduate degree | 13 | 5.9 |

| | | |
|------------------------|-----|-------|
| Married status (n=215) | | |
| Married | 115 | 53.48 |
| Unmarried | 92 | 42.7 |
| Divorced | 8 | 3.72 |
| Income (n=200) | | |
| Below 30,000 | 4 | 2.0 |
| 30,001-50,000 | 10 | 5.0 |
| 50,001- 75,000 | 23 | 11.5 |
| 75,001-100,000 | 70 | 35.0 |
| Above 100,000 | 93 | 46.5 |

Trip Characteristics

Average length of stay

As evident in Table 2, most respondents spent relatively short duration at ecolodges with 64.1% of the respondents staying between 1 to 3 days at a particular ecolodge. A large portion of the respondent travelled with their spouse (40.9%) or with friends (21.4%) Only 7.3% of respondents travelled alone (Table 4).

Table 2: Trip characteristics of respondents

| Number of days | Frequency | Percentage |
|----------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Length of stay in days (n=200) | | |
| 1-3 | 141 | 64.1 |
| 4-7 | 32 | 14.5 |
| 8-11 | 14 | 6.4 |
| 12-15 | 12 | 5.5 |
| >15 | 1 | 0.5 |
| Travel party composition (n=210) | | |
| Alone | 16 | 7.3 |
| Family (with kids) | 42 | 19.1 |
| Friends | 47 | 21.4 |
| With another adult | 90 | 40.9 |
| Tour Group | 9 | 4.0 |
| Other | 6 | 2.8 |

Major sources of information

When asked about their major sources of travel information, out of 210 respondents, most gathered travel information mainly from the internet 35.2%, followed by travel guide book (15.5%), word of

mouth (12.7%), personal experience (11.4%), and travel agents (9.5%). Other sources of information included environmental associations, magazine articles, travel brochures and television.

Travel motivations

As evident in Table 3, the most important attraction-specific motives/pull motives for respondents were to observe national parks or wildness areas. When ecolodge patrons were asked about other motives or main reasons for selecting Sri Lanka as the destination, most frequent response was “the quality of accommodation”, which was closely followed by “inexpensive goods and services”, friendliness of people, and variety in local cuisine (Table 3).

Table 3: Travel motivation attributes: attraction motives

| Attractive motivation | Total | |
|--|-------|----------|
| | Mean | St. dev. |
| National parks/wildness area | 6.15 | 0.95 |
| Good opportunity for adventure | 5.98 | 1.10 |
| Photography of landscape and wildlife | 5.89 | 1.12 |
| Good opportunity to see historical sites | 5.74 | 1.22 |
| Nice and unique architecture | 5.69 | 1.20 |
| Other motives | | |
| The Quality of Accommodation | 6.37 | 1.04 |
| Friendliness | 6.25 | 1.00 |
| Different local food | 6.10 | 1.06 |
| Nice to learn local customs | 6.01 | 1.03 |
| Personal safety | 6.01 | 1.16 |
| Relaxing | 5.95 | 1.16 |
| Climate | 5.64 | 1.21 |
| Price level | 5.59 | 1.17 |
| Inexpensive good and services | 5.51 | 1.20 |

Respondent evaluation of ecolodge attributes

As evident in the Table 4, attributes related to ecolodge design, setting, natural environment and food received higher ratings, by respondents. In general, education and conservation related attributes received comparatively low scores. More importantly, respondents seem to believe that ecolodges included in the sample are making sufficient effort to provide economic benefits to host communities.

Table 4: Respondent ratings of ecolodge attributes

| Attribute | Mean | Std.Dev |
|--|------|---------|
| Lodge setting | | |
| A variety of lodging styles | 5.45 | 1.423 |
| Ecolodge design appropriate to local setting | 6.30 | 0.801 |
| Quality of the environment | 6.14 | 1.121 |
| Room | | |
| Comfort of bed | 6.23 | 0.806 |
| Descent sanitary condition | 6.05 | 0.896 |
| Provide private sleeping room, wash room | 6.34 | 0.988 |
| Nature | | |
| Availability of trees and wildflowers around lodge | 6.41 | 0.714 |
| Availability of observing wildlife | 6.33 | 0.795 |
| Availability of particular habitat and species | 5.90 | 0.995 |
| Value for money | 6.08 | 0.970 |
| Food | | |
| Local food ,produced with local Ingredient | 6.36 | 0.735 |
| High quality food | 6.23 | 0.935 |
| Location | | |
| Convenient location, easy accessibility | 5.40 | 1.362 |
| Service | | |
| Availability of library and information facilities | 4.99 | 1.282 |
| Availability of research facilities | 4.47 | 1.437 |
| Availability of Natural trail facilities | 6.11 | 0.913 |
| Benefit to local communities | 6.36 | 0.851 |
| Bird-watching facilities | 6.13 | 0.944 |
| Efficient reservation | 6.18 | 0.919 |
| Knowledge of the interpreters | 6.22 | 1.153 |
| Conservation and education programs | 5.40 | 1.362 |

Perceptions on Ecotourism

In order to understand ecolodge patrons' perceptions on ecotourism, respondents were asked to rate the level of agreement on 8 items related to concepts and philosophy of ecotourism (Table 5). In general, respondents had positive perceptions on ecotourism with high levels of agreement being recorded for all statements except the one that was negatively worded (last item in Table5).

Table 5: Ecolodge patrons' perceptions on ecotourism

| Statements | Total | |
|--|-------|----------|
| | Mean | St. dev. |
| Ecotourism businesses should allocate a portion of their profit to protect the local natural environment | 6.41 | 1.13 |
| Ecotourism promotes sustainability | 6.34 | 0.87 |
| Ecotourism provides financial benefits and empowerment for local people | 6.22 | 0.87 |
| I would be willing to see a unique plant or animal of interest to me | 6.09 | 1.24 |
| I like to visit destinations that few others have visited | 6.01 | 1.22 |
| Ecotourism provides direct financial benefits for conservation | 5.81 | 1.12 |
| I try to find out as much as about the natural environment of a destination before I actually go there | 5.45 | 4.37 |
| I prefer to travel as part of a larger group, as opposed to a small group(i.e., 4 persons or less) | 2.58 | 2.09 |

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The main objective of this study was to develop distinct visitor profiles of eco-lodge patrons based on their demographic characteristic, trip characteristics and travel motivations as no study thus far has attempted to explore characteristics of visitors who seek accommodation in eco-lodges in Sri Lanka.

Numerous studies have investigated the demographic characteristics of ecotourists. Many of these studies described ecotourist as older than the average tourist, between the ages of 36 and 55 (Ballantine, 1991; Eagles and Cascagnette, 1995; Wight, 1996a; Kawan et al., 2010). Present study found that plurality of ecolodge patrons (35%) are relatively young, and between 26 to 35 years of age. Hence, results of the present survey indicate a relatively younger ecotourist segment seeking accommodation in ecolodges of Sri Lanka. Previous ecotourist profiling studies in Asian countries such as Thailand (Kerstetter et al., 2004) and Sri Lanka (Perera et al., 2012) found that ecotourism market segment in these two countries to be characterised by young travellers. However, results of the present work further indicate that more than 50% of respondents are over 35 years, suggesting the overall middle-aged to elderly nature of the ecotourism market segment (Eagles and Cascagnette, 1995; Wight, 1996a; Kawan et al., 2010).

Ecotourists are generally described as highly educated, and high income group (Higham et al., 2001; Saleh and Karwacki, 1996; Wight, 1996a, Kawan et al., 2010). Present study findings in

general, are in agreement with literature. Hence, Sri Lankan ecolodges caters to a highly educated consumer segment with positive environmental attitudes, similar to most other ecotourist markets in other countries. This is evident from the fact that majority of respondents highly agreeing with statements related to ecotourism principles and environmental conservation. However, presence of highly educated, but younger and possibly financially less-stabilized ecotourist segment may hint an emerging trend where Sri Lanka being viewed as a destination for budget ecotourists. This notion is further supported by respondents strongly agreeing with survey items “price level” and “inexpensive good and services” as main reasons for selecting the destination. Similar observations have been made by Kawan et al. (2008) who compared ecolodge patrons’ characteristics in Belize, and identified three price segments based on their spending capacity; Upscale, Mid and Budget. ‘Budget’ ecolodge patrons were between ages of 16-35, and highly educated (66.6 % had at least a Bachelor’s degree).

Literature suggests that ecotourists most often travel as couples (Saleh and Karwacki ,1996; Kawan et.al., 2010; Weaver and Lawton (2002). Families also make up a sizeable portion of ecotourists (Salenand and Karwacaki, 1991; Twynam and Robinson, 1997). Present study results are comparable with findings in literature. This may work advantageous for the Sri Lankan ecolodge industry and creates new opportunities, as the industry can develop their accommodation facilities to target this family-oriented market segment.

Weaver and Lawton (2002) described three distinct ecotourist segments on the hard-soft spectrum. ‘Harder’ ecotourists had a strong desire to learn about nature, enjoy visiting the wild and remote destinations, looked for physical and mental challenges, and preferred backpacker accommodations, camping, and recreational vehicles. Demographically, the hard-core ecotourists were much younger, highly educated, and less likely to be in a high-income bracket than the other ecotourists. ‘Softer’ ecotourists were less committed to the environment, and enjoyed beach resorts as much as the nature settings, favored accommodations with a good array of services and facilities. Demographically, these tourists tended to travel with their family, were highly educated and were usually from a high-income bracket. Accordingly, most visitors to ecolodges in Sri Lanka could be identified as “Soft” ecotourists.

Present study found that the time spent by ecotourists at a particular ecolodge is relatively short i.e. about 3 days. Previous studies conducted elsewhere have made similar observations (Twynamand Robinson, 1997; Kawan, 2010). Random conversations made with ecolodge patrons

and ecolodge management during field visits revealed that many ecotourist tend to move from one ecolodge to another, in quest of observing unique environment and cultural places as much as possible. Short term stays at an ecolodge may not be ideal from single business and local community perspective as it can lower the financial returns to the business and limit economic opportunities for the host community. However, from the ecotourism industry perspective, this may have positive impact as it would disseminate the benefits to broader geographical regions of the country.

With respect to their information search behaviour, the Internet was found to be the most frequently used source of information for ecotourists in making travel decisions. This suggests that Sri Lanka tourism promotion organizations and ecolodge management should focus more on online marketing methods including social media and travel blogs etc.

The study results suggested that ecolodge attribute plays an important role in customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction is the key to success in ecotourism and accommodation business. Ecolodge patrons give higher priority for factors such as ecolodge being located in a natural setting, proximity to nature-based attractions, ecolodge design influenced by local architecture (i.e. indigenous structures), local cuisine with variety and appropriate sanitary facilities. As such, these provide important guidelines for Sri Lanka's ecolodge industry to consider in ecotourism product design and marketing.

Results of this study further suggest that ecolodges in Sri Lanka are quite successful in meeting customer requirements, and this was evident by respondents scoring higher for items in the survey that were on ecolodge attributes and satisfaction based on their experience at the ecolodge. Strong agreement with statements on nature-based elements, design and service quality indicate that Sri Lankan ecolodges provide unique nature-based experiences for visitors. Especially, the nature-based and design elements seem to provide a competitive advantage for Sri Lanka's ecolodge industry over its counterparts in the region.

Despite several positives in the current practices of ecolodge industry in Sri Lanka, there is still plenty of room for improvement. Blamey (2001) suggests three core criteria upon which ecotourism definitions are based: a nature based element, an educational or learning component, and the requirement for sustainability which includes both financial and socio-cultural elements. Present study findings indicate that Sri Lankan ecolodge industry has given less attention on the educational or learning component of ecotourism. This calls for better strategies to educate the

visitors about their environmental responsibilities, and improved interpretive tour facilities. If the ecolodge industry is to provide superior nature-based experience in line with ecotourism principles, it is important that they give equal attention all these key elements of ecotourism.

Present study provides insights to characteristics and motivations of ecolodge patrons in Sri Lanka; a research gaps that was not previously addressed by researchers. This study has implications for the ecolodge industry as the novel information generated through this study would enable the industry to develop unique ecotourism products to match visitor requirements and desires. However, much research is still needed to have a full understanding of ecolodge patrons' characteristic, especially their attitudes, behaviours and preferences.

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