
MOUNTAIN ECO-TOURISM & SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT: DUAL PERSPECTIVES FROM INDUSTRY STAKEHOLDERS AND POTENTIAL VISITORS (EVIDENCES FROM MEEMURE & KNUCKELS)

R.A.A.K Ranaweera¹, W.A.I Madhusankha² and A. A Idroos³

¹Department of Tourism Studies, Uva Wellassa University, Badulla, Sri Lanka, amayakaumadi7@gmail.com

²Department of Management Studies, University College of Matara, Sri Lanka, madhusankhaishara@gmail.com

³Department of Tourism Studies, Uva Wellassa University, Badulla, Sri Lanka, idroosuwu@gmail.com

Abstract

Previous researchers suggest that many mountain tourism destinations may not qualify as ecotourism venues and literature on mountain-specific ecotourism information is lacking. This study mainly focus on identify the impact of destination attributes on sustainable rural development through mountain eco-tourism in Sri Lanka while identifying the constraints & barriers to develop rural destination through mountain eco-tourism in Sri Lanka. Meemure & Knuckels purposively selected as a sample area of the study. Mixed method was employed for the study. According to the objectives of this research descriptive, multiple regression and thematic analyses were employed for the analysis of the data. Attraction of the destination had significant impact on sustainable rural development in Sri Lanka can identified as a key finding according to tourist perspective. Accessibility for the destination also had influence on tourists' decision making.

Keywords: Mountain Eco-tourism, Sustainable, Rural Development

Introduction

Global trends highlight the growing tourist interest in authentic and sustainable holiday experiences. Eco tourism is also one of the fastest growing segments among the tourists in the world. UNWTO research highlighted that 34% of world travellers today are willing to spend more for an environmental friendly hotel that has a record of being. Among the travellers 50% of tourists are willing to pay more for a hotel which shares the economic benefits with the community.

In 1991 the Board of Directors of the International Ecotourism Society (TIES) based in the U.S. defined ecotourism as "Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of the local people". Many mountain communities around the world have promoted ecotourism ventures to improve the problems of environmental degradation and underdevelopment. When consider about the previous researchers there is no agreement on what mountain ecotourism is or should be, it is generally believed that this form of tourism in the mountains will foster responsible tourist behaviour, conservation of important wildlife habitats and ecosystems, appreciation of local cultures and traditional lifestyles, and provision of sustainable forms of livelihood for people living in remote areas and communities. However, mountain regions in most of the countries are also characterized by high biological and cultural diversity. National and international efforts to

conserve biodiversity in these mountains haven resulted in an attractive series of protected areas & national parks and the accommodation places.

When consider about the mountain destinations, with their spectacular scenery, majestic beauty and unique amenity values, biodiversity of the place are one of the most popular destinations for tourists. The development of tourism in the mountains can be a key factor in the human concern for overall improvement in people's quality of life through sustainable economic development initiatives and environmental conservation (Nepal & Chipeniuk, 2006).

In Sri Lanka KWH is located in the Central province of the country and covers an area about 160 km² (IUCN, 1995). The Knuckles forest range in Sri Lanka has a foremost position in Sri Lanka's natural resource base. The forest is recognized as a unique ecosystem, owing to its geographical setting and related ecological aspects. In particular, it is rich in habitat diversity, which covers a wide range of habitats within a relatively small area. On the other hand Knuckles forest possesses a significant potential for forest-based tourism activities. It possesses an enormous scenic beauty, which could attract both local and international tourists. Moreover, the villages surrounding the forest are traditional villages with specific cultural and social characteristics. Thus from supply side, Knuckles is identified as an ideal site for development of ecotourism (Bandaratillake, 2005; IUNC, 1995). In addition to provision of important ecosystem services, Knuckles forest contributes a lot to the national and local economy, both by direct and indirect means.

Research Problem

Eco tourism is potentially the fastest growing segment in the international market. Previous researchers highlighted that there is a significant potential for development of ecotourism in Sri Lanka (Vidanage, Kotagama, & Abeygunawardena, 1995). Sri Lankan tourism industry is showing a strong revival following the end of civil war in May 2009. However at present Sri Lanka performs far below its potential in eco-tourism. (Rathnayake, 2007) Comparing to Sri Lanka, Other Asian, African and European countries are having many demand for eco-tourism (Rangana, 2015). According to the Wicramasinghe (2012) asserted that Sri Lanka is lacking a mechanism to capture the official data to show the size of the ecotourism market in Sri Lanka.

Literature on mountain-specific ecotourism is lacking, partly because the focus of ecotourism research is limited to well-known tropical islands, rainforests, and national parks and protected areas, not all of which are located in the mountains. There are hardly any comparable empirical studies on the impacts of ecotourism. Moreover, virtually no economic, ecological, and social evaluations of the so-called ecotourism destinations exist. "Ecotourism," "nature tourism," and "sustainable tourism" are often used interchangeably, even though these are distinct forms of tourism. (Nepal, 2012). Therefore, Sri Lanka has potentiality to develop as a good eco-tourism destination & it is researchable to find the rural development towards mountain eco-tourism.

Research objectives

- To identify the impact of destination attributes on sustainable rural development through mountain eco-tourism in Sri Lanka.
- To identify the constraints & barriers to develop rural destination through mountain eco-tourism in Sri Lanka.

Literature Review

Tourism

Comprised the activities of persons traveling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes not related to the exercise of an activity remunerated from within the place visited (Organization of American States [OAS],1997). The tourism sector is recognized as one of the biggest and fastest growing industries in the world. It also has a high growth and development rate, a large volume of foreign currency inflows and infrastructure development activity affecting the multiple sectors of the economy. In addition, the socio-economic growth of the nation will be impacted by tourism. (Nayomi & Gnanapala, 2015)

According to the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) statistics report, the number of tourists arriving in Sri Lanka in 2017 was 2,116,407. It was the third biggest foreign exchange earner in 2017, with 598,356 million. Tourists have many aims when they travel to distinct locations. According to the SLTDA, the Annual Statistical Report 2017 indicated that 82.4 per cent of pleasure visitors had arrived in Sri Lanka during the year. The purpose of the visitors who are belong to the mountain eco-tourist also coming under pleasure tourists.

Eco Tourism

Community-based ecotourism (CBE) has emerged as a precious instrument to alleviate poverty, preserve biodiversity, and deliver accountable and sustainable tourism offers. Ecotourism is a type of tourism where there is mutual interdependence between the requirements of tourists, the community and environmental conservation. (Mearns, K. F, 2011)

Sustainable Tourism

Sustainability has become an important topic and concept in relation to tourism planning and development (Inskeep 1991; Southgate & Sharpley 2002; Yuksel, Bramwell & Yuksel 1999). For tourism development to be successful, it must be planned and managed in a sustainable manner (Inskeep 1991; McCool 1995; Southgate & Sharpley 2002; Yuksel, Bramwell & Yuksel 1999). Most individuals use the phrase ' sustainable development ' interchangeably with ' ecologically sustainable or environmentally sound growth ' (Tolba, 1984).

One main key to the success and implementation of sustainable tourism development in a community is the support of stakeholders, (e.g. host community, entrepreneurs, and community leaders). An increasing numbers of researchers and professionals are currently advocating the inclusion of stakeholders in the planning process (Hardy & Beeton 2001).Sustainable tourism has also been referred to as an ' adaptive paradigm, ' encompassing a set of meta-principles within which ' several distinct paths of growth may be legitimized by circumstance ' (Hunter, 1997). A sustainable tourism development in rural area will contribute to an improved resiliency within the local community. Some strategies are needed to ensure the sustainable development or rural tourism and to sustain the local community resiliency. (Amir, A. F., Ghapar, A. A., Jamal, S. A., & Ahmad, K. N., 2015).

Mountain Tourism

A slow but constant effort has been made to increase worldwide awareness of mountain problems. Mountain problems have been at the forefront of many domestic and global organizations and governments ' policy agenda in recent years. (Godde et al. 2000). Mountains, with their spectacular scenery, majestic beauty and unique amenity values, are one of the most popular destinations for tourists. The development of tourism in the mountains can be a key factor in the local concern for overall improvement in people's quality of life through sustainable economic development initiatives and environmental conservation. In socio-economic and environmental terms, tourism in mountain regions is a mixed blessing: it can be

a source of problems, but it also offers many opportunities. (Nepal, S. K., & Chipeniuk, R. 2005). In most instances, mountain areas are inaccessible, fragile, marginal to political and economic decisions and home to some of the world's poorest community (Messerli and Ives 1997)

Destination Attributes

Accessibility

The complexity of visitor movements within locations involves a broad variety of paths and attractions that tourists can choose from, and is influenced by the features of tourists and visitors and by the spatial allocation of resources. In reality, tourist destinations function as functional areas in terms of tourist mobility to consume an attraction network (Jansen-Verbeke & Lievois, 2008).

Attractions

Intensity in terms of amount of attractions also impacts patterns of low intensity consumption associated with more set patterns of consumption and greater intensity with greater variation. Finally, the presence of prominent or distinctive attractions will improve the patterns of space consumption, with tourists willing to travel longer distances to visit them. (Nyaupane & Graefe, 2008).

Amenities

As far as amenities are concerned, personal toilet was identified as the most important (Felix et al., 2008; Zane, 1997). However, B&B clients also expect other amenities, such as fireplace, TV, cooked breakfast meals, and so on, to be viewed as having an impact on satisfaction. (Scarinci & Richins, 2008)

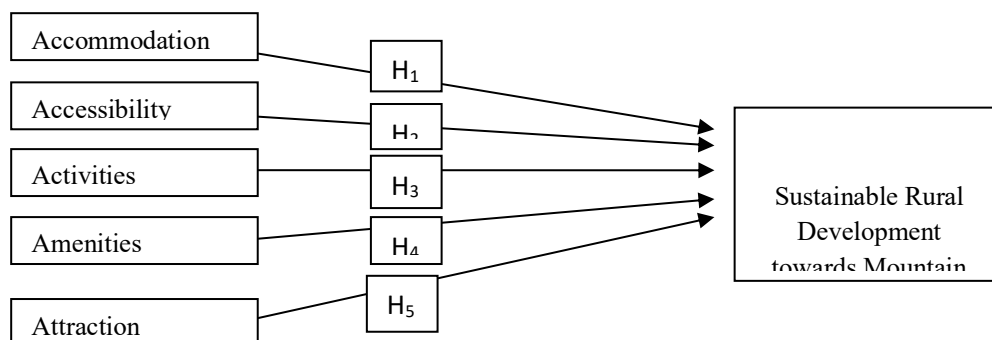
Activities

The meaning of the activities refers to the activities available at the location and what customers will participate in during their visit. Tourism activities are significant motivators for visitors to visit a specific destination. (Zhou, Q & DeSantis, R. 2005).

Accommodation

Within the patterns of movement of destination there are two features: static and hub-and-spoke patterns. Static motion patterns indicate staying at the lodging place most of the time, while hub and speech movements are characterized by daily journeys to nearby attractions coupled with exploration around the accommodation place. (González-Díaz, B., Gómez, M., & Molina, A. 2015)

Figure 1: Conceptual framework



Hypothesis Development

- H1- There is an impact of ‘Accommodation’ on Sustainable Rural Development towards Mountain Eco-tourism.
- H2- There is an impact of ‘Accessibility’ on Sustainable Rural Development towards Mountain Eco-tourism.
- H3 - There is an impact of ‘Activities’ on Sustainable Rural Development towards Mountain Eco-tourism.
- H4- There is an impact of ‘Amenities’ on Sustainable Rural Development towards Mountain Eco-tourism.
- H5- There is an impact of ‘Attraction” on Sustainable Rural Development towards Mountain Eco-tourism.

Methodology

All tourists who visit to meemure & Knuckles in Sri Lanka & All tourism stakeholders who engage with mountain eco-tourism activities in Meemure & Knuckles considered as population of this study. Researcher selected the sample of 100 tourists & 12 tourism stakeholders from population for the collection of data. Data collected from Meemure & Knuckles. Convenience sampling technique addressed for the study to select the Tourists & tourism stakeholders for the study. As the data collection instruments, structured questionnaire filled by the respondents & interview method were used. This study mainly focus on identify the impact of destination attributes on sustainable rural development through mountain eco-tourism in Sri Lanka while identifying the constraints & barriers to develop rural destination through mountain eco-tourism in Sri Lanka. In here researcher mainly focus on Regression analysis & thematic analysis in order to address the objectives of the study.

Analysis, Results & Discussion

Descriptive analysis

According to the research findings majority of tourists in the sample were, male, age group was 26-35 years, marital status was single. Region of tourists were Western Europe regions, most of them were educated people and graduated from university, employment status was professional category. Majority tourists were like to travel as alone & source of information to select these destinations were travel agencies and tour guides. Considering about Length of stay in Sri Lanka, Half of them were stayed more than one week. Eco-tourism experience profile of respondents, same proportion of respondents answer as twice and more than 3 time visited eco-tourism destinations in the world except Sri Lanka.

Regression Analysis

In order to identify the best model and impact of the variables, it was tested by using linear regression analysis. The process of performing a regression allows to confidently determining which factors matter most, which factors can be ignored, and how these factors influence each other. In order to understand impact of destination attributes on sustainable rural tourism development towards mountain eco-tourism, this study was carried out.

Table 1: ANOVA Table

Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1 Regression	3.239	4	.810	164.366	.000a

Source: SPSS output from field information

According to the regression ANOVA result, P value is 0.000. It is less than 0.05. The model is highly significant. It means that the model is appropriate and destination attributes jointly influence on Sustainable Rural Development towards Mountain Eco-tourism

Table 2: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted Square	R	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.935 ^a	.874	.868		.07019

Source: SPSS output from field information

According to the model summary, R Value is 0.935. This interprets that the joint association between independent variables and the dependent variables. As the coefficient is more than 0.7, there is a strong association jointly with eco-tourism perception dimensions and destination loyalty. In this study, R Square for the model is obtained as 0.874. It suggested that 87.4% of variation in sustainable rural tourism development is explained by destination attributes of mountain eco-tourism destination.

Table 3: Regression coefficients of independent variables

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.421	.109		12.996	.000
	Accommodation	.098	.014	.263	7.100	.000
	Activities	.247	.022	.429	11.246	.000
	Accessibility	.099	.020	.189	4.983	.000
	Amenities	.023	.029	.026	0.781	.436
	Attraction	.223	.013	.650	17.652	.000

Source: SPSS output from field information

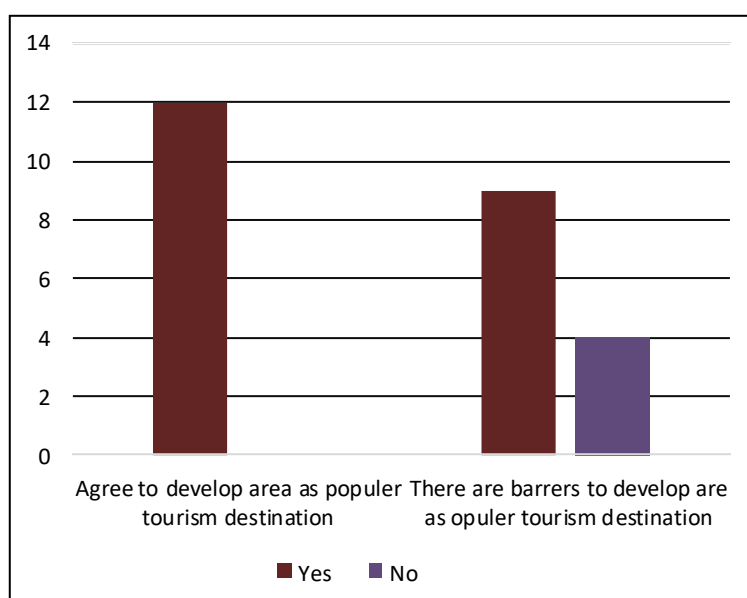
$$DL = 1.421 + 0.223 (\text{Attraction}) + 0.099 (\text{Accessibility}) + 0.023 (\text{Amenities}) + 0.247 (\text{Activities}) + 0.098 (\text{Accommodation})$$

According to the analysed output Table 7, constant (β_0) was 1.421 which implies that, while all destination attributes remain zero, sustainable rural tourism development is 1.421. P-Value of constant term was 0.000 and, which stated it was statistically significant at 0.05 significant levels. In addition, all five beta coefficient values represented positive values; hence it is obvious that there is a positive effect between destination attributes and sustainable rural tourism development towards mountain eco-tourism. Out of eco-tourism perception dimensions there were four destination attributes had significant impact on sustainable rural tourism development. The dimensions were “Accommodation”, “Activities”, “Accessibility” and “Attraction”. Therefore it implies that Accommodation, Activities, Accessibility & Attraction positively effect on sustainable rural tourism development towards mountain eco-

tourism. According to analysis researcher found that “Amenities” haven’t significant impact on sustainable rural tourism development towards mountain eco-tourism. Since the P-value was not less than 0.05. According to the regression result, Standard coefficient β value of resource and content is 0.650. It was the highest value among other dimensions. Therefore most influential destination attribute which effect on sustainable rural development towards mountain eco-tourism is “Attraction”. Conclusively, the regression analysis implies that tourists who satisfied with “attraction” of the destination help to impact the sustainable rural development towards mountain eco-tourism in Sri Lanka.

Thematic Analysis

12 tourism stakeholders were interviewed for identify level of awareness of the host community and barriers to develop mountain are as mountain eco-tourism destination. The first question was about desire of the host community on developing area as a popular tourism destination. The second question address host community’s opinions regarding barriers for develop the area as tourism destination.



Source: Field information conducted by researcher (2019)

According to the responds of the stakeholders all are agree to develop the area as popular tourism destinations. 9 responders mentioned that there are barriers to develop the area. Third question addressed the barriers can be occur when area develop as a popular destination. According to the perception of the people who live in mountain area there can be number of barriers when developing the area as a popular tour destination. Accessibility will be a major barrier tourist face when travelling to mountains in Sri Lanka. The infrastructure facilities of the area also not in a proper condition for travel around the area. Other main barrier is environmental degradation occurred because of the tourism activities. “I believe that it will be difficult to develop this area as tourism destination. We don’t have proper roads to travel around this area. Heavy vehicles cannot move because the roads are cracked. So tourists have to reach these area by facing many difficulties. Public infrastructure facilities of the area also not in proper condition in the area. And when tourists visiting these area, there can be environmental pollution. So it will be difficult to develop these area as tour destination.” Respondent 04; Next question addressed tourism stakeholders’ contribution for development of tourism in area. According to the responders they encouraging host community to engage

with more business related to tourism and they always escalating positive idea among host community. “We always help others to increase their income by tourism related business such as home food, home-stay and area guide. Previously people in this area have negative mindset regarding tourism. But because of tourism activities conducted recently, peoples’ mindsets has been changed positively regarding the developing tourism around area.” Respondent 06; According to the perception of tourism stakeholders in sample areas it can be identified type of barriers to develop tourism around the area. By overcoming existing barriers tourism can be highly developed in this areas.

Conclusion

According to the findings tourists were mainly affected by “attraction” of the destination & it helps to sustainable rural development of the mountain eco-tourism destination. And “the concept of sustainable development” dimensions. “Giving back to community”, “environmental education and interpretation” and “private-public partnership” dimensions were jointly influenced on destination loyalty towards eco-tourism. The most influential dimension which effect on sustainable rural development towards mountain eco-tourism is Attraction. It implies that through “Attraction” can address sustainable rural tourism development towards mountain eco-tourism. Accessibility will be a major barrier tourist face when travelling to mountains in Sri Lanka. The infrastructure facilities of the area also not in a proper condition for travel around the area. Other main barrier is environmental degradation occurred because of the tourism activities

Recommendations

Based on the findings attraction had higher level of impact on sustainable rural tourism development towards mountain eco-tourism & only amenities haven’t impact on the sustainable rural development. All other destination attributes including accommodation, accessibility, activities had impact on impact on the sustainable rural development towards eco-mountain eco-tourism. Therefore as implications can suggest that Sri Lanka rich with natural attractions like hills station with plenty of attracted areas, using effective promotional methods can promote this beautiful destination & it will be directly effect on the tourist arrivals of the country. It helps to develop the rural areas . Development of infrastructure facilities without harming to the natural areas, enhance the local people to develop their tourism related business & increase the awareness of the mountain eco-tourism concept is much important. Therefore, there should be proper procedures to maintain the mountain eco-tourism destinations. Maintain clean trails of the destination, maintain proper waste disposal procedures, Use separate bins for the wastages, minimize the air, water, sound, pollution within the destination. Other than that they suggested to develop legal environment such as rules and regulations, improve the quality of eco-tourism activities in the country, use technological methods to promote the destination, improve the quality of the train network, maintain the entrance cost for some eco-destinations, introduce awareness programme for accommodation owners of the country and develop the accommodation facility with real eco-tourism concept. Since eco-tourism is responsible travel for natural areas. To protect the nature is a responsible duty of both visitors and also local people.

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