



ISSN 2278 – 0211 (Online)

## Ecotourism as a Strategy for Sustainable Natural Resource Management in Sri Lanka

**Pathmanandakumar, V.**

Lecturer, Department of Geography, Eastern University, Sri Lanka

### **Abstract:**

*Lack of economic alternatives and type of livelihood of the people greatly threat the natural resources in developing nations. Pressures on natural resources can be reduced through diversifying livelihood of the local communities. Therefore ecotourism is a viable tool enabling both diversifying livelihood and conservation of natural resources. A desk review was employed to analyze how ecotourism can support to diversify livelihood and protect natural resources. Ecotourism promotes conservation of natural resource and diversification of livelihood. Further it contributes to economic development and employment opportunities and develops sense of ownership on natural resources. Ecotourism has strong linkage with different economic activities and provides economic benefits to the local people while maintaining low impacts on ecology and local resources. Sri Lanka has great potential for promoting ecotourism and responsible parties should focus on promoting the sectors which are considered important to contribute for ecotourism development.*

**Keywords:** *Ecotourism, sustainable resource management, livelihood diversification, community participation*

### **1. Introduction**

Environment provides a wide range livelihood assets and benefits to human beings (Barrow, 2005). Environmental resources are the basis which offers goods and services needed for poverty reduction and economic growth. Mismanagement and overutilization of natural resources reduces its contribution to development. It is very important to integrate environmental concerns into development activities. Therefore, principles of sustainable development have to be included into development activities. Hence, ecotourism can play a crucial role in conservation and rural development (Nelson, 2004) which is typically called “Eco-development approach for Natural Resource management. Natural resource management through eco-development approach appeared in the early 1980s (Glaeser, 1984 as cited in Barrow, 2005) literatures. Relationship between society and natural resources in eco-development activities gives win-win outcome by reorganizing human activities. It is expected that natural resource management through eco-development will reduce depletion of natural resources and environmental degradation to an acceptable level. The deep-ecotourism promotes a harmony between human and nature and opposes use of technology. The pure ecologists view technological improvement as leading to more problems rather than progress (Colby, 1991). Environmental protection paradigm focuses on setting the limits and cleaning up after limits are exceeded but not responsible for planning development activities (Colby, 1991). Therefore, this study explores the contribution of ecotourism for natural resource management from eco-development point of view.

### **2. Methodology**

This paper has been prepared based on desk review. Different theoretical and empirical evidences were reviewed to understand the contribution of ecotourism for sustainable natural resource management and based on that, potentials for ecotourism development in Sri Lanka have also been explored.

#### *2.1. Defining Tourism and Ecotourism*

Tourism has already referred to it as both a social and economic phenomenon and there is a wide range of other definitions and descriptions attached to the term “Tourism” in the literature. This reflects partly multidisciplinary nature of the topic. Ryan (1991) in his work demonstrates that how tourism can be defined from several point of views. For example, an economist might define tourism in terms of supply of and demand for tourism products. Tourist board may adopt a technical, statistical definition. Burkhart and Medlik (1981) identify two main groups or classifications of tourism definitions. First Technical definitions attempt to different type of tourist and different tourism activities. Second, conceptual definitions are concerned with nature and meaning or essential characteristic, of tourism as an activity.

Many of the earlier attempts to define tourism were influenced by the need of the tourist destination. The first definition of tourism was proposed by a group of statisticians in 1937. They defined tourist simply as “someone who travel for 24 hours or more outside of

their normal country of residence". This definition included those travelling for business in addition to pleasure, health or other purposes and it also introduced "excursionist" as someone who stayed in a destination for less than 24 hours. However this definition excluded domestic tourism and overlooked the fundamental meaning of tourism as a social activity. The tourism society in UK defines tourism as "the temporary short-term movement of the people to a destinations outside the place where they normally live and work, and their activities during the stay at these destination; it includes movement for all purposes as well as a day visits or excursions". The major drawback of this definition is that it implies that anyone who travels for any purposes is a tourist. Indeed by including business travel, it contradicts the generally held perception that tourism is a leisure activity.

In a broad sense, MacCannell (1989) defines tourist and tourism as modern man in general and modern pilgrimage respectively. Short (1991) states that "a kind of refuge from modernity". Such conceptual definition place the emphasis firmly on the implicitly meaning of tourism. Therefore there was a need of a holistic approach to enhance both factual and theoretical perspective of tourism. Tourism on its present international scale could not occur without the existence of a large and sophisticated "industry" which enables people to be tourist.

The concept of alternative tourism consists of all types of tourist activities that create less harm to the environment rather than mass tourism. But those activities are called in different name in terms of the situation. For instance soft tourism, small-scale tourism, green tourism, nature tourism, integrated tourism, Eco tourism etc. the reasons behind the birth of alternative tourism are many. One reason could be the high adverse impact of mass tourism on the environment and society. The fundamental reason for rapid growth of alternative tourism is that the idea of preserving social natural and historical assets of host destination. All types of alternative tourism lead towards sustainable tourism that is as a goal of tourism development. This goal can be defined as "the tourism that meets the needs of the current generation without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs" (David, 2001).

Ecotourism is distinct from other forms of nature based tourism (for instance: wild life tourism, adventure tourism). Nature based tourism is just travel to natural places while ecotourism provides socio-economic and environmental benefits to the local community. Ecotourism is solely defined by both tourist's recreational activities and benefits to the host community and conservation of nature. Honey (1999) clearly states this responsibility of ecotourism in his definition as follows "Travel to fragile, pristine, and usually protected areas that strive to be low impact and (usually) small scale. It helps educate the traveler; provides funds for conservation; directly benefits the economic development and political empowerment of local communities; and fosters respect for different cultures and for human rights" (Honey 1999).

The Québec Declaration on Ecotourism states that "ecotourism hold on the principles of Sustainable tourism regarding the economic, social and environmental impacts of tourism (WTO 2002). According to World Tourism Organization (WTO), sustainable tourism leads to the management of resources in such a way that economic, social, environmental and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled. It is in short a tourism activity that meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future (Baker, 2008).

Ecotourism is a theoretical concept and introduced into tourism industry through combination of conservation and sustainable development. Therefore, the term "Ecotourism" can be defined in many ways. Sustainable development consists of all forms of nature based tourism including ecotourism. The International Ecotourism Society definitions ecotourism as "Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people" (International ecotourism society [IES], 2017). Ecotourism has been perceived as a universal remedy for conservation of natural resources and tangible ecosystem (Honey 1999). Ceballos- Lascurain defines ecotourism as "Tourism that involves traveling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these areas" (Ceballos- Lascurain 1996) which was accepted by United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) and World Trade Organization accepted. International ecotourism society defines community based ecotourism as "a form of ecotourism where the local community has substantial control over and involvement on, its development and management, and a major proportion of the benefits remain within the community. It fosters sustainable use of land and natural resources (IES 2017). Tourism development can't be apart from the Nature on the other hand tourism development activities must be able to enhance the conservation of nature and contribute to the Socio economic progress of the region. In that way alternative tourism showed high environmental sensitive and ecological preservation Hence alternative tourism was the best option to reduce the negative impacts of tourism on host destination.

Eco tourism attempts to get sustainable development with the strong protection of nature and pays attention on the economic and social need of the local people. Economic growth in eco-tourism is a long-term goal and step by step process. Eco tourism allows only small number of tourists and allows them to decide on where to visit, when to visit, how to visit. Ecotourism varies from other types of tourism such as nature based tourism, wildlife tourism and adventure tourism. For instance, ecotourism is a sub set of nature based tourism, because the definition of ecotourism is not incorporated with other form of nature based tourism. The concept of ecotourism includes education, conservation, and community involvement in the nature based activities (Drumm, 1998). Tourists can look at exotic places and people in nature based tourism while ecotourism focusing on the benefits of the local community host destination.

## 2.2. *Impacts of Ecotourism*

Ecotourism generally associated with direct and indirect impacts on natural environment, economy and local communities. The most proclaimed positive environmental impact of ecotourism is contributing sustainable resource management through conservation of natural resources (cater, 1993). Ecotourism is anticipated to promote conservation of natural resources and provide financial gain for the host community and destination. Ecotourism can easily damage environment due to lack of proper planning and management of ecological, social and economic objectives (Anderson, 1996). Ecotourism brings employment opportunities to local people since it is

more labor intensive sector and its expansion requires more semi-skilled workers in the managerial level. However, significant amount of industries are remain small scale and funded by local people. Ecotourism offers some supplemental income to the local people through tourist's expenditure on food, accommodation, guides and souvenirs and it links other sector of the economy to promote micro and macro-economic incentives and motivation for development. It is also possible to promote domestic industries like hotels and other services etc. lot of local products, materials and labor can be used as it has less linkage with multinational tourism concern. Ecotourism generates higher earnings and contribute much to the gross domestic product for developing countries. Investment on infrastructure results into great economic efficiency. Ecotourism could be a great source for transforming rural economy of the region. If ecotourism is not monitored and managed carefully, it may produce negative impacts on economy of the destination (Anderson, 1996). The economic opportunities generated by ecotourism may leak out of the region and go to the hands of elites or wealthier family. Developing countries don't have sufficient financial resources to construct infrastructure which pushes the country to engage on international donors. Foreign investment on ecotourism may lead to an economic leakage issues. Sometimes, local population may be ignored from the development process and given minimum paid jobs.

Ecotourism projects generate economic benefits to the host people and destination (Anderson 1996). Ecotourism doesn't have much pollution on environment that enhances the conservation of natural resource and cultural heritages. Ecotourism can be a good alternative for shifting cultivation, logging and mining and improves ecosystem, tourists' behavior and conservation of wild animals. These are not possible in the area where human interact is strictly prohibited. Ecotourism attempts to protect untouched areas from illegal agricultural practice, mining and rapid industrialization. In some cases, ecotourism development projects may disturb the flora and fauna but it will not destroy (Dasenbrock, 2002). Ecotourism encourages conservation activities through promoting individual conservation efforts. It is possible to keep good balance between expanding eco-tourism industry and protecting natural resource as it requires small scale hotels construction and infrastructure. Agriculturally marginal land could be utilized by ecotourism to make it productive. Ecotourism pays more emphasis on the importance of natural resource for the well-being of community. Ecotourism is not only generating environmental benefits but also creates some negative impacts on environment. Tourism development projects produce various forms of pollution. Any type of large scale tourism increases pollution and disposal of waste into water body. Increased number of tourist on an eco-destination puts some extra pressure on the local environment and necessitate additional infrastructure and amenities. Infrastructure development comes out of the coast of exploitation of nonrenewable energy sources. There will be environmental degradation when profits go to the investor's pocket instead of reinvesting into environmental protection. Some activities such as over use of vegetation, wildlife, coastal ecosystem and water resources cause gradual loss of biodiversity. Some tourists and tourism operators introduce alien species that can cause destruction of ecosystems.

Ecotourism may contribute socially by enhancing local community esteem and improve communication among diverse local people. It empowers local communities and respect for different culture (Weggono, 2008). It is evident that local people have been displaced due to establishment of protected areas. Relocating people on marginal land will not enhance livelihood of the people even ecotourism profit are invested into local community. Ecotourism alters land use rights that causes failure in delivering community level benefits. Indigenous people have contact with foreign tourist that leads to cultural change in ecotourism. Indigenous culture and tradition slowly deteriorates when local people adopt western ways. In some ecotourism destination, local people feel short of dissatisfaction with their own way of life as need to imitate the tourists. Farmers leave from agriculture as ecotourism attracts workers with slightly high salary than agriculture that cause to abandon their traditional value and in some instance, breakdown of marriage life.

### *2.3. The Ways to Minimize the Negative Impacts of Ecotourism*

Ecotourism activities, sometime, cause natural resource depletion and environmental degradation when receiving large number of tourists to a certain eco-destination (Neto 2002). Sound management techniques should be introduced to control the carrying capacity of the environment (Anderson, 1996). Various charges can limit the number of visitors. The government must be involved in order to control the side effects of ecotourism. Number of tourists and tour operators can be limited based on carrying capacity of the destination. Tourist movement pattern can be improved to minimize environmental damage. Environmental education can be given to tourists and tour operators through ecotourism activities. Modern technologies can be introduced to reduce environmental damages. Government can introduce new rules regarding construction of hotels and buildings. Local participation and involvement should be ensured to avoid conflict between tourism operators and local communities.

### *2.4. Ecotourism and Community Participation*

There should be collaborative arrangement between government and all other stakeholders to develop a national ecotourism strategy (Koeman, 1998). Ecotourism should bring the local people into planning and development to be a tool for conservation and economic development (Boo, 1990 cited in Koeman, 1998). Local participation in conservation process should be encouraged through ecotourism and adequate consideration should be given on distribution of benefits to the local communities. it is very important to clarify the local people that tourist destination requires more forest resources than other land used type such as logging, rising cattle (Anderson, 1996). Unless ecotourism create positive impacts on host community, local people will not welcome the presence of tourism and this could undermine its local prospects (Hardyment, 2003). Local participation must be taken into account in order to protect natural resources. Mostly, ecotourism projects are introduced in designated protected areas or national parks. Local people will not view ecotourism positively without economic benefits to them and the destination. Sustainability of the eco-destination depends on the degree of control the local people has over the destination. Participation of the local people should be ensured in the design stage of a project which provide opportunity to aware about the pros and cons of the projects. Providing managerial training to local

community can minimize misunderstanding and possible conflicts (Hardyment, 2003). Several community based ecotourism projects have initiated after mid 1980s with the intention of local empowerment, governance and conservation of resources.

### 2.5. Ecotourism and Sustainable Development

In recent years, ecotourism is applied for poverty reduction, local governance, livelihood diversification and sustainable natural resource management (Barkin, 1996). It is a powerful tool for protection of natural resources. The basic idea behind ecotourism is preserving natural resources while generating economic benefits from them (Hardyment, 2003). Further, ecotourism enhances the quality of fauna and flora while preserving them for future visitors (Barkin, 1996). Core principles of ecotourism and sustainable development are interconnected and should not try to separate both. Most of the ecotourism related literatures have, at least, a small portion of text regarding sustainability. Blamey (2001) mentioned that sustainable tourism is the combination of mass tourism and ecotourism. Sustainable tourism has been in effects for more than 15 years. Interrelationship between ecotourism and sustainable development is demonstrated in sustainable tourism. Sustainable tourism is looked as a leading tool for management of natural resources while improving social integrity, rich biological diversity (Sirakaya et al., 2001). However, it is difficult to measure sustainability. The most feasible way to improve ecotourism is to follow sustainable development principals.

### 2.6. Ecotourism in Sri Lanka

Ecotourism is a huge trend in Sri Lanka right now and shows positive growth. Sri Lanka's tropical biodiversity is the key strength for promoting ecotourism all around the island and has designated 13% of its land area for wildlife and nature conservation. According to Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA), Sri Lanka possesses wide range of tourist attraction that include historical, cultural, archaeological, scenic and climatic and fauna and flora sites that ensure the great potential for development of sustainable ecotourism. Sri Lanka has number of lakes with variety of birds, wildlife and vegetation which attract great interest of eco-tourists. There are eight world heritage sites, namely, City of polannaruwa, the ancient city of Sigiriya, the Golden temple of Dambulla, the old town of galle and its fortifications, the sacred city of Anuradhapura, the sacred city of Kandy, Singaraja forest reserve and the Central high land of Sri Lanka which are of tremendous international tourism appeal. Further, Sri Lanka has very rich tropical bio diversity and environment which is a great potential to promote ecotourism and sustainable tourism. Sri Lanka's great national parks (Example: Yala, Udawalawa, Kumana, Wilpathu) are interest of eco-tourists. Kumana National park is best place for tourist who likes to watch birds. Hospitality in Sri Lanka is also a potential to promote ecotourism.

There are some ecotourism initiatives like Walaw Nadee Ecotourism project. Sri Lanka Ecotourism Foundation is the pioneer national ecotourism organization in Sri Lanka, established in 1998 to promote the principle ecotourism and to address the challenges faced by the ecotourism sector. Sri Lanka tourism has identified as one of the important source for economic growth and employment generation. Tourism resources are not properly utilized even though country has huge potential for ecotourism development. Ecotourism benefits should be invested on local economic and infrastructure development to achieve sustainable resource management. The sense of ownership should be developed among the local community.

### 3. Conclusion

Ecotourism can be used to promote community based natural resources management and livelihood diversification. It supports economic development and conservation of resources through generating local jobs, providing sense of community ownership. The revenue from ecotourism can be invested to manage eco-tourism destination in a sustainable way. Generally, local people will show their enthusiasm to project the natural resource when they get directly benefit from it. Therefore it is very important that ecotourism project should focus on increasing socio-economic benefits of the local communities, sustainable management of the environment, creating awareness for supporting conservation, and diversifying livelihood of the rural communities. It is expected that when ecotourism is economically viable alternative, people will largely way from environmentally harmful practices. Ecotourism in Sri Lanka is in booming stage and steps have been taken to promote ecotourism all around the island. Properly planned and managed ecotourism will contribute to boost local economy and manage resources in sustainable way. Responsible parties should pay more concentration on overcoming degradation of protected areas and improving livelihood of local people when while developing ecotourism.

### 4. References

- i. Anderson, M. (1996) From sea to sea: ecotourism Trends in Alaska and Canada. Report to Winston Churchill Memorial Trust Board, Wellington.
- ii. Baker, N. (2008) Sustainable wetland resource utilization of Sango Bay through ecotourism development. African J. Environ. Sci. and Technol. 2(10), pp.326-335.
- iii. Barkin, D. (1996) Ecotourism: A tool for sustainable development [Online]. Available from: [www.planeta.com/planeta/96/0596monarch.html](http://www.planeta.com/planeta/96/0596monarch.html) [Accessed on 4<sup>th</sup> August 2017].
- iv. Barrow, C.J. (2005) Environmental Management & Development. London: Taylor & Francis Group.
- v. Blamey, R. (2001) Principles of Ecotourism. In Weaver, D. (ed.). The Encyclopedia of Ecotourism. Wallingford: CABI: 5-22.
- vi. Burkhart, A. & Medlik, S. (1981) Tourism: Past Present and Future. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Oxford: Butterworth Heinemann.
- vii. Cater, E. (1992) Profits from paradise. Geographical. 64(3), pp. 16-21.

- viii. Ceballos-Lascuráin, H. (1996) *Tourism, ecotourism and protected Areas: The state of nature based tourism around the world and guidelines for its development*. IUCN: Switzerland.
- ix. Colby, M. E. (1991) *Environmental management in development: the evolution of paradigms*. *Ecological Economics*, 3, pp.193-213.
- x. Dasenbrock, J. (2002) *The pros and cons of ecotourism in Costa Rica: TED case studies*, No.64
- xi. David, (2001) *Sustainable Tourism: Is it Sustainable*. In Bill, F., Gianna, M., Eric, L. (ed.) *Tourism in the Twenty-First Century*. London: Continuum.
- xii. Drumm, A. (1998) *New Approaches to Community based Ecotourism Management*. In Lindberg, K., Wood, M.E. & Engeldrum, D. (ed.) (1998) *Ecotourism: A Guide for Planners and Managers 2*. The Ecotourism Society: Vermont.
- xiii. Hardymont, C.L. (2003) *Ecotourism definition; Pidra, Blanca ecotourism consultant* [Online]. Available from [www.piedrablanca.org/ecotourismdefinition.html](http://www.piedrablanca.org/ecotourismdefinition.html) [Accessed on 3rd August 2017].
- xiv. Honey, M. (1999) *Ecotourism and Sustainable Development: Who Owns Paradise?* Washington, D.C: Island Press.
- xv. Koeman, A. (1998) *Ecotourism Based on Sustainable Development*. *Proceedings. Workshop on Ecotourism in sustainable development in Vietnam*. Hanoi: VNAT.
- xvi. MacCannell, D. (1977). *The tourist. A New Theory of the Leisure Class*. New York: Schocken.
- xvii. Nelson, F. (2004) *The evolution and impacts of community-based ecotourism in northern Tanzania*. International Institute for Environment and Development: Issue paper number 131.
- xviii. Neto, F. (2002) *Sustainable tourism, environmental protection and natural resource management: paradise on Earth?* [Online]. Available from: <http://www.mtnforum.org> [Accessed on 5<sup>th</sup> August 2017].
- xix. Ryan, C. (1991) *Recreational Tourism: A Social Science Perspective*. London, Routledge.
- xx. Short, J. (1991) *Imagined Country: Society, Culture and Environment*. London: Routledge.
- xxi. Sirakaya, E., Jamal, T., & Choi, H. S. (2001) *Developing tourism indicators for destination sustainability*. In Weaver, D. B. (Ed.). *The encyclopedia of ecotourism*. New York, NY: CAB International: 411–432.
- xxii. The International Ecotourism Society (2017) (1) *What is ecotourism?* [Online]. Available from: <http://www.ecotourism.org/index2.php?what-is-ecotourism> [Accessed on 14<sup>th</sup> August 2017].
- xxiii. Weggono, N.C. (2008) *Community tourism-gateway to poverty reduction* [Online]. Available from [www.iipt.org/.../101203\\_CC7\\_Severre\\_Tourism.com](http://www.iipt.org/.../101203_CC7_Severre_Tourism.com) [Accessed on 10<sup>th</sup> August 2017].
- xxiv. World Tourism Organization (2002) *The World Tourism Summit: Final report may 2002* [Online]. World Tourism Organization. Available from [www.gdrc.org/uem/eco-tour/Final-Report-WES-Eng.pdf](http://www.gdrc.org/uem/eco-tour/Final-Report-WES-Eng.pdf) [Accessed on 6<sup>th</sup> August 2017].