

ECO-LODGE PATRONS' CHARACTERISTICS: THE SRI LANKAN PERSPECTIVE

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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

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Internet, travel guide books, and word of mouth as major sources of information in selecting accommodation. Ecolodge patrons' 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 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.

Key words: ecolodge 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.