

# **Eco tourism structure and identification of certified information as an important influential factor in development of sustainable ecotourism industry in Sri Lanka**

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## **Abstract**

Tourism has been identified as one of the rapidly developing industries in the world, and it is associated with many key sectors of the world economy. State patronage has significantly increased for the development of non-traditional industries in post war Sri Lanka and the country is expecting to boost tourism with a new policy framework addressing broader issues faced by the industry.

Even though mass tourism poses a threat to country's natural and cultural resources, it is widely supported due to two identifiable reasons, (1) mass tourism provides a significant amount of foreign exchange and (2) many people seem to enjoy being a mass tourist. Ecotourism is a subset of sustainable tourism and has been advocated as an alternative to the consumptive mass tourism. However, Ecotourism accounts for only a small portion relative to mass tourism. Lack of reliable and readily available information on Sri Lanka's ecotourism destinations may affect one's destination choice to divert towards competing ecotourism destinations in the region.

The primary objective of this paper is to develop a model for ecotourism structure and identify destination information sources as a powerful, but less concerned influential factor that can increase ecotourism demand. Secondary objective of this paper is to emphasis the importance of third party certification of ecotourism destination information to provide readily available, reliable, credible, clear and consistent information.

According to the model discussed in this paper, structure of ecotourism in Sri Lanka consists of tourism demand, destination choice, tourist behavior, impact of tourism and identification, mitigation and evaluation of the industry. It identifies two major sets of factors (less concerned factors and well-versed factors) that influence the ecotourism structure at different stages. Destination characteristics, organizing promotional campaigns and other means to promote sustainable

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tourism, and various cleaner production tools from EMS to eco-labeling can be identified as well-versed influential factors. Tourist education to promote environmentally desirable changes in tourists' attitudes and behavior, providing credible and reliable information materials to promote sustainable tourism, identifying carrying capacity of tourist destinations, professionalism within the industry and undertaking research to identify, mitigate and evaluate impacts of tourism can be identified as less concerned influential factors in Sri Lanka. These less concerned influential factors including destination information have a greater potential to shift mass tourism towards ecotourism. Proposed framework of ecotourism highlights the importance of less concerned influential factors and identifies them as strong indirect tools for ecotourism practices through changing life style and consumption pattern of a mass tourist.

Consumer satisfaction in ecotourism can be increased by narrowing the gap between expected and experienced service. Information sources are one of the marketing communication tangibles that consumers use to perceive a service quality. Consumers tend to engage in an extended search when purchasing higher priced and more complex services, which intrinsically create a greater perceived risk such as overseas travels. In overseas travelling, information searching is necessary to select a destination and for on-site decisions such as selecting accommodation, transportation, and tours. However, information available to people varies greatly in terms of quality, accessibility, reliability, and availability. Information producers can use certification of information to improve the way in which they develop their information leading to an overall improvement in the quality of information available to people. Those destinations/organisations that meet the criteria of the pre-set information standards may then be entitled to place a quality mark on their information materials. As a result, consumers searching for ecotourism destinations in Sri Lanka can easily identify sources of information those are reliable, and trustworthy.

The Information Standards should be developed to aid people in using tourism information to make confident, informed decisions about their trip. This type of a certification system will help consumers to evaluate different ecotourism destinations, and the services they provide, to make informed decisions and reduce the risk of uncertainty which is always associated with services that cannot be experienced before purchasing. It is also argued that certified information on ecotourist destinations will increase ecotourism demand which may push mass tourism towards sustainable tourism in the country.

**Key words:** Ecotourism, Sustainable tourism, Tourist destinations and Influential factors