

Potentials of Underwater Cultural Heritage Towards Tourism in Galle, Sri Lanka: Perspectives of Tourism Service Providers and Maritime Archaeologists.

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Abstract

Travelling to visit places with Underwater Cultural Heritage is becoming a significant niche tourism type worldwide. Because of its remarkable position in the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka has always been a hub for sea trade. This makes Sri Lanka possess an abundant of Underwater Cultural Heritage. There lies a great amount of underwater cultural artefacts beneath the sea near Galle as the city has served as a harbour for a long time. This study was conducted to identify the contribution of Underwater Cultural Heritage towards tourism in Galle. The objectives of the study were, to identify the role that Underwater Cultural Heritage plays in tourism in Galle, to identify the destination capabilities of Galle to fulfil those requirements and to understand the ways that Underwater Cultural Heritage can be benefitted from tourism. The qualitative approach was adopted in this study. Data were collected from tourism service providers around Galle, maritime archaeologists and museum officers through semi-structured interviews. The collected data were analyzed using the content analysis method. Major findings of this research include the strengths of the Galle area in terms of underwater cultural heritage, the great interest of tourists towards underwater cultural heritage and current weaknesses in the management of these values in the field of tourism. It was revealed that both tourism and underwater heritage could be mutually benefitted because of each phenomena's presence through an integrated approach.

Keywords: *Underwater Cultural Heritage, Tourism, Maritime Archaeology*

Introduction

Background of the study

Unlike the tourists of previous generations who travelled with the purpose of seeking mere pleasure, their counterparts are more into worthwhile experiences from which they can explore new things. The tourist of the new age is a knowledge and experience seeker. As a result of this change, more attention is given to niche tourism rather than mass tourism. Various niche tourism types can be seen nowadays and travelling to visit places with underwater cultural heritage is an emerging one among them. This niche tourism type goes hand in hand with the maritime archaeological excavations as maritime archaeologists are the people who refer to the written records and thereby engage in archaeological studies to find the sunken cultural heritage values which represent past human cultures.

Among the many ports and harbours situated around the coast of Sri Lanka, Galle; one phenomenal natural harbour had gained attention during the time of middle of the 13th Century. It had been a significant port for Chinese and Arabian ships which navigated the Indian Ocean. Galle appears to have been a point of embarkation for sailors of China and the countries of the East (Perera, 1951). Therefore, it is highly likely to find underwater cultural heritage values lying beneath the waters near Galle as the seabed itself can be referred to as the biggest museum in the world (UNESCO, 2017).

The Majority of the international tourists rarely miss paying a visit to Galle during their stay in Sri Lanka. The travellers who would travel to visit the places with the value of underwater cultural heritage are highly likely to consider Galle as a paradise to fulfil their travel needs.

Research Problem

Given the background as mentioned earlier, the contribution of underwater cultural heritage towards tourism in Galle should be identified so that underwater cultural heritage values would be given with more attention for conservation while tourism operators would be able to plan well in packaging this as a worthwhile product.

Nevertheless, only a minimal number of researches have been done in the Sri Lankan context to study the link between underwater cultural heritage and tourism creating a research gap. Research is needed to understand Galle's potentiality in terms of underwater heritage and how it can be managed well to maximize benefits to both heritage and tourism. Previous researches are done either only focusing on heritage or tourism. This creates a need for multidisciplinary research. Therefore, this study was conducted to fill that research gap by examining the role of underwater cultural heritage in Galle tourism from the perspectives of both maritime archaeologists and tourism industry operators.

Research Objectives

The Main aim of this research was to understand the potential of Underwater Cultural Heritage towards tourism in Galle. More specifically, the following secondary objectives were generated to fulfil the aforementioned primary objective. Those secondary objectives were to identify the role that Underwater Cultural Heritage plays in tourism in Galle, to recognize the requirements of tourists who are interested in Underwater Cultural Heritage in Galle, to identify the destination capabilities of Galle to fulfil those requirements and to understand the ways that Underwater Cultural Heritage can be benefitted from tourism.

Significance of the Study

By fulfilling the objectives, this research will contribute to the knowledge base as a multidisciplinary study that focuses both on tourism and underwater cultural heritage aspects. The role underwater cultural heritage plays in Galle will be identified highlighting its importance for the survival of Galle tourism. Hence, this research will help create programs benefiting both tourism and underwater cultural heritage.

Methodology

The qualitative approach was used in this study. To collect primary data from the tourism service providers and maritime archaeologists, semi-structured interviews were conducted via telephone calls considering barriers in conducting face-to-face

interviews. Secondary Data were collected from reliable textbooks, journal articles, reliable web sites and newspapers. The sample consisted of ten participants including five tourism service providers in Galle and five maritime archaeologists and Galle maritime museum's officials. The Sampling technique used was the convenient sampling method while collected data were analyzed using the content analysis technique.

Results & Discussion

Tourism Demand for Galle and its tourism facilities

Galle is considered one of the major tourism regions in Sri Lanka and widely known among tourists for its breathtaking beaches and Old Dutch Fort, which was declared a world heritage site. Even during the most challenging times of Ethnic war, this region was able to attract tourists because of its resource availability. The tourists who visit Galle and the nearby area are drawn to this place to engage in beach tourism, heritage tourism and water-based activities like diving and snorkelling.

This region encompasses a strong tourism network with sound facilities to cater for its tourists. Among them are the accommodation facilities from boutique hotels, five-star hotel to homestays, food and beverage facilities from fine dining restaurants to budget restaurants, proper transportation facilities including public transportation and other ancillary services.

Availability of Underwater Cultural Heritage around Galle

Galle harbour is the area in which the highest number of archaeological studies have been carried out. According to the maritime archaeological findings, Galle harbour possesses a very high density for shipwrecks. Nearly 26 sites were discovered by the archaeological work carried out since the 90s around the Galle area. Nearly about ten shipwrecks can be reached within ten to fifteen minutes from the land. Some of those ships can be considered as quite old while some are very glamorous ships. Significantly, the outer harbour wrecks are abundant with marine life making them a paradise for tourists who are interested in underwater archaeology and marine life.

The main shipwrecks that were explored during maritime archaeological studies after referring to the Dutch historical records were the ‘Geinwens’ (1776), The ‘Dolfijn’, The ‘Barbestejn’ (1735) the ‘Hercules’, (1661) and the ‘Avondster’ (1659). These ships are a great source to reconstruct past life. Apart from the shipwrecks located in the harbour itself, the shipwrecks can be found from the outer harbour area, Unawatuna and Hikkaduwa as well.



Figure 1: 2: Archaeological sites in the Galle Harbor. Source: ICOMOS

Modes of providing underwater cultural heritage experience to tourists

According to El Kady (2017), there are four main ways that the underwater cultural heritage can be interpreted for tourists. Those are namely, museums on land, underwater museums, underwater archaeological parks and virtual underwater museums. Therefore, the methods of heritage interpretations available around Galle and tourists' behavior in those places were taken into consideration below.

Maritime Archaeological Museum on Land and Tourist Behavior

These museums usually store and exhibit the material culture which was recovered from sunken ships. The artefacts that were found from the vessels mentioned above sunken near Galle are quite higher in number. These prominent artefacts are now displayed at the Galle Maritime Archaeological Museum to be visited by the people interested in learning about past sailing life so that this museum is an attraction that is not being missed by tourists who visit Galle. Maritime Museum is a significant museum currently in Sri Lanka that engages in the act of making the public aware of the marine biological and anthropological aspects of the Southern coastal area.

When considering the exhibits available for the tourists to visit, some of those artefacts encompass a large number of copper alloy nails and a few wooden frame parts that were found from the ‘Geinwens’, the bell of the vessel of ‘Hercules’ which was wrecked near the Galle harbour on 22nd May 1661. The following Latin inscription is found on the outer surface of the bell: ‘AMOR VINCIT OMANIA ANNO 1625’, which means ‘love conquers everything – year 1625’ (Mandawala, 2017; Galle Maritime Archaeological Museum).

Moreover, some stone anchors were found on the sea bed. Among these anchors, one of the most special facts that were found is two wooden flukes that were fixed to the Arabian type stone anchor. Other than the aforementioned artefacts, during various studies, the structure - Bala Oruwa was also found from the Southern coast. This is a traditional type of fishing boat, used for fishing in the deep seas. It is made of strong timber such as wild breadfruit (*Artocarpus* sp. *Nobilis*), mango (*Mangifera indica*), and domba (*Calophyllum inophyllum*). Normally, this boat is about 32 feet in length (Galle Maritime Archaeological Museum).

Old Chinese Porcelain pottery was also found in various parts of Sri Lanka are now displayed in several galleries. They depict evidence to the relations which had been existed between China and Sri Lanka over many centuries. Some of the artefacts including traces of sailing life back then including maps, naval craft, ropes, earthenware, beer mugs, smoking pipes, barrels, vast numbers of articles including artillery guns and sailor shoes are also displayed for the visitors.

According to the museum officials, a large number of local and foreign tourists visit this museum annually. In 2017, the museum has received 2942 foreign tourist arrivals and 45,196 domestic tourist arrivals, resulting in around 1,288,265 LKR of total earnings. It was revealed that the majority of the visitors both local and foreigners focus on the location of the actual site of the shipwrecks, how they have been salvaged and the historical stories related with them. And it is the foreign tourists the most who look for in detailed interpretation about the material culture displayed. These foreign tourists normally come from worldwide especially regions like Europe, India and East

Asia etc. It was revealed that tourists are interested in purchasing souvenirs which would remind them of the visit. The income earned by selling tickets for the tourists is again used by conservation and manage these underwater heritage values. This shows a way that the tourism activities are supporting underwater cultural heritage. Furthermore, the museum officials' interpretations also help educate both locals and foreigners, which leads to increased awareness of these inherent values. This awareness thereby ultimately encourages people in conserving heritage values.

Underwater Museum and Tourist Behaviour

An underwater museum is a construction that is made, designated or put underwater, particularly in a natural body of water. These museums can be visited by glass-bottomed boats, snorkelling, or scuba diving, depending on the site. Therefore, the artefacts found from the nearby shipwrecks can be placed in a submerged way closer to the coast, stable and solid enough to resist the destructive waves and currents. In the Sri Lankan context, even though we find an underwater museum in Galle, the exhibited artefacts do not belong to the shipwrecks around the areas. Hence, it is hard to consider this museum as a mode of interpreting underwater cultural heritage. According to the tourism service providers, given the travel restrictions due to COVID-19, it is hard to conclude the tourists' engagement in this underwater museum. They also stated that if this model can be practised while placing artefacts and monuments salvaged from the sunken ships, it has the potential of reaping positive benefits. Maritime archaeologists' perspective also supported this idea of tourism service providers.

Underwater Archaeological Trails – In Situ and Tourist Behaviour

Another method of giving experience and knowledge on underwater cultural heritage is in-situ. In Sri Lanka, tourism service providers such as diving centres provide the experience mainly. When it comes to the areas in which the diving trails are provided, even though the harbour itself has a high density of shipwrecks, those have accessibility restrictions because of the harbour and nava base's security concerns. Given this reason, tourists are not able to engage much with the shipwrecks located

in the harbour. But tourists can take diving trails in other parts such as outer harbour, Unawatuna and Hikkaduwa.

According to the operators of diving centres, many tourists come to their centres requesting for diving trails during the period of November to April which is considered the tourism peak in Sri Lanka. Among them are local tourists who travel majorly from Colombo and urban areas and international tourists from countries like India, the UK, Russia, Netherlands, Germany and China etc. Some of the tourists visit Galle for the sole purpose of witnessing and learning about shipwrecks and repeat tourists can be seen in a higher number. These are generally willing to spend a higher amount of money for the diving trails to shipwrecks. Typically, these tourists spend 2-3 days engaging with the diving activities. According to the operators of diving centres, tourists provide nearly 90% of positive feedback regarding the experience gained and this positive experience had led to the previously mentioned repeat visits.

Even though, tourists highly demand souvenirs related to the shipwrecks they have visited, there are no particular outlets to sell. Moreover, tourism service providers provided remarks on a lack of shipwrecks accessible despite the fact that there is huge demand from the tourists. This is mainly because the shipwrecks in the harbour are not reachable for outsiders.

Since every phenomenon has both pros and cons, archaeologists revealed that the main problem linked with diving trails to shipwrecks is looting and vandalism. Some people, mainly local divers fetch artefacts from shipwrecks and sell them for antiques. Moreover, breaking iron wreck parts to obtain iron are behaviours that can be seen from the local divers. However, these behaviours are now less intense compared to the previous generations.

On the contrary, foreign tourists unlike local visitors are highly concerned about protecting these artefacts and shipwrecks. Even though the tour guides and divers of previous generations encouraged their clients to fetch artefacts from shipwrecks as souvenirs, maritime archaeologists revealed that the tourism operators in the area are

now concerned in protecting shipwrecks. This is because these resources help tour guides in attracting tourists and earn an income from the same.

In that way, many archaeologists agreed that when the tourist service providers are well aware of the underwater heritage values, they try to preserve those values and thereby communicate the same message to their clients.

In general, maritime archaeologists look at present tourism activities to strengthen and preserve underwater cultural heritage rather than a destructive thing.

However, it was also revealed from both the perspectives of tourism service providers and maritime archaeologists that government officials' attention should be given to the protection of these sites.

Conclusions

It can be concluded that Galle and nearby territory has a high density of shipwrecks which are ultimately considered as underwater cultural heritage. A large number of shipwrecks can be seen inside the harbour while a lesser number of wrecks can be found from the out harbour area, Unawatuna and Hikkaduwa according to the archaeological studies that have been conducted up to now. There is a huge demand and enthusiasm generated from the tourists mainly from the foreigners to learn about the underwater cultural heritage around Galle. Some foreign tourists visit Galle for the sole purpose of visiting shipwrecks and the majority of these tourists are willing to pay a large sum for diving and related activities and products. There are two main ways that tourists could engage with the underwater cultural heritage in Galle. The first way is to pay a visit to the maritime museum while the second way is to dive into and see the shipwrecks in situ. The service providers of these centres usually get positive feedbacks from tourists which also causes repeat visits. All these facts indicate strengths in terms of underwater cultural heritage availability and demand of potential tourists.

Despite that fact, there are specific issues when the management of underwater cultural heritage in tourism is concerned. Those challenges include the illegal looting

and vandalism in underwater archaeological sites, limited access to shipwrecks, some weaknesses in the usage of advanced technology in terms of interpretation and poor selection of interpretation techniques and lack of souvenirs and related products to be carried away by the tourists etc.

When these limitations are considered against the strengths Galle possesses, it can be said that there is an unexploited high potential of underwater cultural heritage towards tourism in Galle.

Recommendations

According to the findings of this research, the following recommendations can be made to the proper utilization of underwater cultural heritage in tourism.

Even though the UCH in Sri Lanka is considered under the Archaeology Act, the monitoring procedures to examine the activities such as diving happening in the ocean is quite weakened due to lack of personnel. This can be solved by raising awareness of UCH law and identifying UCH among officers of Sri Lanka Navy and guards of the department of coast. Moreover, enough personnel can be allocated for monitoring and field operations.

Local visitors and general public should be given proper knowledge about the importance of underwater cultural heritage and the local communities' support for the conservation of these heritage values. This awareness can be raised from a formal education system by introducing new subjects in primary, secondary and tertiary education and awareness programmes.

Moreover, heritage interpretation can be enhanced by adopting new technologies such as virtual museums in which tourists are able to gain experience of the sailing life of ancestors with the usage of 3D reconstructions, augmented reality and virtual reality, Remotely Operated Vehicles and interactive mobile applications. Virtual museums can perform well in situations when underwater heritage is located in quite deep waters with poor visibility far away from the coast (Kady, 2017).

More income can be generated by introducing tourism products related to underwater cultural heritage such as souvenirs that can be carried away by the tourists.

Furthermore, replicas of glamorous ships such as Avondstar can be developed to be visited by tourists to get experience of a Dutch environment, like the replica of Cutty Sark in UK. This replica can be developed in shallow waters and a whole tour package can be created to sell a wholesome experience. A higher-income can be earned this way and the amount earned can be used to further archaeological studies and conservation of underwater cultural heritage.

The stories of each shipwreck can be told to the visitors by using more visual marketing techniques. This would lead to enhanced awareness, satisfy the visitors' requirements and help us earn an income. The knowledge of maritime archaeologists and the local community can be used in this process.

It would also be a great initiative if artefacts found from the shipwrecks nearby Galle could be placed in the underwater museum so that it will add more value to the visitor experience.

Sustainable principles should be adapted to promote underwater cultural heritage in tourism so that these heritage values can be preserved for a long period of time while generating an income for the participants. Therefore, proper plans should be implemented in order to utilize these underwater cultural resources to provide a worthwhile experience for the tourists who are interested and thereby reap benefits from them and inject those benefits again for the conservation of underwater cultural heritage.

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