

Impact of Tourism Operations in Spice Gardens for the Sustainable Tourism

Development: A Case Study in Sri Lanka

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1. Abstract

Sri Lanka is famous for its spices since historical period. Presently, the spice gardens promote *Spice Tourism* which is tourist-centric memorable visit to various spice plantations and instils a sophisticated service culture rooted in the ancient times. Kandy, Matale and Mawanella are prominent spice growing regions where most of the spice gardens are located within the radius of hill country. The study was conducted mainly to explore the role of spice gardens and their impacts in moving Sri Lankan tourism in sustainable directions. Additionally, the study has investigated into the problems and difficulties faced by the spice garden operators and the attendant effects on tourist. In-depth interviews, group discussions, participatory observations were inculcated to gather primary qualitative data gathered from the different parties of spice garden operators, tourist guides, tourists, and travel agency operators. The research pointed out the Sri Lankan spice garden physiognomies, significance of the spice garden and spice tourism to Sri Lanka and prevailing negative reviews from the visitors in relation with overpricing, over promising and poor quality products. Mushroomed spice gardens, over competition, climatic changes, and unregistered and unregulated spice gardens have created big challenges and issues for spice garden operators. Even though, the industry has faced a big challenge for its survival and sustainability, the relevant and responsible organizations have not taken the necessary measures effectively. Finally, the study concluded with possible in-hand solutions for spice garden operators to enhance their sustainability and the SLTDA's responsibility in

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monitoring and continuously maintaining the standard and quality level of the existing spice gardens.

2. Introduction and research problem/issue

Spices have been integral to Sri Lanka's history as Sri Lanka has been wellknown for its high quality spices for centuries which influenced by its authentic geographical location and the tropical climate. From the ancient historical time, these spices have been used for local cuisine as ingredients applying for [flavouring](#), aromatizing, [colouring](#) or [preserving](#) food; for medicine as having their own healing powers in traditional Ayurveda; for [religious rituals](#), [cosmetics](#) or

[perfume](#) production, or as a vegetable that virtually ingrained them into the Sri Lankan culture and heritage.

Sri Lankan history and the spices have interwoven with regard to cinnamon, which laid the foundation of the ancient spice trade. So, today Sri Lanka has been identified as the best quality cinnamon producer along with exporting pepper, cloves, cardamoms, nutmeg, mace, vanilla and allied products. Apart from this spice trade, Sri Lanka is employing spices in destination branding and encouraging spice gardens to move towards tourism that exhibit a pool of spice gardens plotted in the Central Province mainly covering Kandy and Matale districts. Even though, those spice gardens are introducing their visitors to the wonderful world of spice and herbs by its physical appearance, the researchers could grasp an overall negative tourist perspective when reviewing the online travel agent (OTA) websites.

Therefore, the main objective of this study is to explore the role of spice gardens and their impacts in moving Sri Lanka tourism destination in sustainable directions. Additionally, the study investigated the problems and difficulties faced by the spice garden operators and the attendant effects on tourist.

3. Research Methodology

The study was carried out adopting the qualitative methods. In-depth interviews are the widely used primary data collection method and that allows researchers to focus on meaningful insight into spice garden featuring herbs and plants, operational activities, sales items, prices and their quality level etc. Therefore, the researchers had in-depth interviews with randomly selected 25 spice garden operators along

Mawanella- Kandy and Kandy-Matale routes. Mainly the researchers gained primary data in relation to the tourists' views and their comments on spice garden visit through group discussions. Also, the data collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with 22 tourist guides representing 12 national and 10 chauffeur guides respectively. Interview participants were selected via a non-random sampling method. Apart from that, the researchers involved 10 most famous travel agencies in Sri Lanka and got primary data relevant to tourists' views, comments or complains on spice garden visits during their tour and travel agency collaboration with spice garden operators.

Participant observations were applied at various spice gardens to observe and record ways that spice garden guides conduct garden tours, their interpretation skills, salesmanship and their behaviour; allowing the researchers to determine the accuracy of the information gained in document analysis and other data collection methods.

Apart from that, the researchers had semi-structured interviews with a representative from government and other related tourism bodies (Municipal councils, SLTDA).

Finally, the researchers have reviewed the tourists' comments appeared on TripAdvisor and VirtualTourist web pages to identify their ideas on spice gardens in Sri Lanka.

The information used for this research also based on a review of the literature and documents relating to the Sri Lanka Tourism industry and spice garden tourism, government media releases, peer-reviewed academic journals and books, guest comments book at spice gardens, customer feedback forms handled by various travel agencies. The data collection process was conducted in January 2017.

4. Results and findings

Sri Lanka has been operating spice gardens to promote spice tourism as another unique product among the tourists. Spice tourism brings benefit not only to the tourism operators and the tourists but also to the community and the general public. Therefore, it is vital to take actions

to ensure that the maximum benefit of tourism is passed on to the community and economic growth is supported through domestic value creation.

In view of this, the existing regulations and guidelines have been reexamined and modified and several new regulations and guidelines have been introduced by the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) in maintaining the qualities of the services provide in those spice gardens. Such guidelines emphasis the extent of a Spice Garden should be minimum of one (01) acre with diverse species of spices/herbal trees/plants minimum of 70% of the total; the Spice Garden shall be landscaped, cleaned and well-maintained; all trees must be marked and labelled preferably with their botanical names; the garden should have sufficient information material to get the knowledge about the herbal plants and the trees; the existence of at least two trained members of the staff knowledgeable on this field and fluent in English and /or other foreign language.

Sri Lankan spice gardens provide knowledge on the various indigenous spices grown in the area. Cinnamon, cardamom, nutmeg, clove, pepper, vanilla, ginger and turmeric are the main spices grown in the visited spice gardens which have taken to **spice tourism** on a mega scale. Apart from that, the visitors could get an in-hand experience and complete study with explanation of the scientific background, natural benefits, culinary uses, healing possibilities of huge number of spices and herbs which are grown in eco-friendly, well-arranged gardens. While on the garden tour, which extend for 30-90 minutes, visitors could get an inhand experience on a sample to crush and smell at each herbal/spice plot. Properly maintained spice gardens entitled with multi-lingual experts on

German, French, Italian, Russian, Hungarian, Japanese, Slovenian, Spanish, Czech, Chinese, Arabian and etc.

None of the spice gardens charge an entrance free and it is free of charge and also followed by free specialty welcome tea (spice tea, cinnamon tea, coco tea, ginger tea, etc.), free head, shoulder or foot massages in order to enlighten visitors with better personalized service. When asking about the reason for not initiating an entrance fees, most spice garden operators come up with different answers.

“Our main purpose is to promote Sri Lankan traditional Ayurvedic valued spices and herbs among foreign visitors”

“Our main motive of not charging an entrance fees is to promote the sales of our own products in shop/sales centre”

“We don’t want to charge at the entrance as we get enough donations from the foreign visitors”

Some operators, as their strategic value charge no entrance fees. *“When you are going to give any treatment, when you going to check the pulse, when you going to give any information, you cannot charge”*

Some want to reduce the current black mark on all spice garden operators through the emphasis on their valued service.

“We are not interested in initiating an entrance fee as we want to convince our visitors that we are practicing a service rather than a business.”

Spice garden operators receive an average number of 100-200 visitors per day in the season representing a huge influx from Germany, France, India, China, Russia, Italy, UK, and Czech Republic and 10-20 or less than 10 in off-season. In order to cater to the visitors, spice gardens maintain around 15-20 employees including garden workers, language operators, herbalists etc. in the season and around 4-5 in off-season. In maintaining spice garden and handling employee salaries and welfare facilities, spice garden operators are indirectly induced to earn money through the sales of spice products that indirectly create unethical malpractices such as overpromising, misguiding, forcing to purchase, overpricing, pilferages, mixing and resealed with bogus contents.

Spice gardens offer a wide variety of herbal based medicinal preparations like herbal syrups, oils, balms, powders, and indigenous Ayurvedic natural cosmetics. In the real sense, in most of the spice gardens visited, the sales center products were wrapped with no transparent paper in a way that cannot realize the genuine of the contents and in labelling itself also mentioned only the name of the spice garden and price. The in-depth interviews revealed most of these spice gardens are not self-sufficient and source Ayurveda products from a few centralized processing

facilities, and they buy spices from the wholesale spice markets, albeit they package the spice in-house and label it with the spice garden brand name. Even though these spice gardens houseplant a wide variety of spices and herbs, the amount of production is insignificant and is primarily acting as a 'show garden'.

Apart from the spice garden tour and sales centre, some operators expand their service towards other supplementary businesses such as spa centres, which provide specially prescribed Ayurvedic course of treatments; meditation centres, which offer body and mind rejuvenating programmes; live cooking programmes, and restaurants which offer different culinary experience like traditional Sri Lankan cuisine, Indian cuisine, which use the garden-grown spices, and Halal, Western, Eastern foods as well.

When analysing the comments given by foreign visitors, one of the major complaints was the exorbitant prices of the selling products. In-depth discussions revealed the operators charge higher prices than the normal market price as they pay commissions for the tour guide, driver and the travel agent from whom they get group of tourists apart from other type of promotional techniques such as Spice Garden website, SLTDA website, travel magazines and word-of-mouth promotions. These commission rates may fluctuate between 40% to 70%. Apart from prices, the other factors that create more complaints are the low quality of the products, non-guaranteed products, pushing marketing.

When analyzing the views of the tourist guides, they highlighted majority of the tourists ignore visiting spice gardens even though it has been recommended by the travel agents and by themselves because the tourists believe visiting spice garden seems to be a tourist trap.

Among the major challenges faced by the spice garden operators, some highlighted establishment of unregistered spice gardens, huge competition among spice garden operators, low price of pavement herbal/spice sellers, excessive online bad comments, climatic changes in planting specialty herbs and plants, seasonal drop in tourist influx.

5. Conclusions, implications and significance

Sri Lanka is inherent with endemic, invaluable, expansive spices, herbs and plants which attract foreigners from the ancient time. The concept of Spice Garden seems to be the best application where Sri Lanka can promote its authentic value of spices among all nations. However,

this spice garden concept has been commercialized and limited only for exhibit garden, which does not create a significant harvest. The better economic value will create if these garden operators focus more on their own spice products on mass scale cultivation as called 'spice farms'. SLTDA, as a responsible legitimate tourism body, should implement a procedure that eliminates spice garden malpractices in order to survive sustainable spice tourism within the region. In supporting that, there should be a price ceiling in order to reduce overcharge. The operators could flourish if they initiate a reasonable entrance fee for the service they provide for the visitors and better to diversify the garden activities like promoting different garden tours on **species of spices and herbs, flowers, vegetables, fruits; promote self-guided tour with audio devices in different languages (in order to reduce the required staff); promote Guided**

Tours subject to additional costs;

Promote Children's Nature Education Programs; Cooking classes fully hands-on affairs with individual work stations; Expanding more dining options; Fully-equipped Ayurvedic spa centres with meditation programmes; all for additional charges. Therefore, they can mitigate a large number of black comments appeared in OTA websites regarding the spice garden malpractices occurred while struggling to earn money only through sales centres.

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