

Service quality Practices in Sri Lankan Eco Resorts: An Analysis of Satisfaction and Behavioral Intention of Eco-tourists

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Abstract

Ecotourism is environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features - both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low negative visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations. Since Sri Lanka is rich with much cultural and natural diversity, it has the potential to develop the eco-tourism concept better than other destinations for the benefit of the Sri Lankan economy and community. The contribution of tourism sector to foreign exchange earnings and the development of the society, marketing and implementing the tourism concepts properly to the customers is very much significant. Currently the world tourism trend is moving from generic or bulk tourism to more of specific sectors like ecotourism. It serves the purpose of both high profitability as well as larger social benefits.

Key words: Customer Satisfaction, Behavioral intention, Eco tourism, Eco resort, Eco tourists, service quality,

Introduction and research problem issue:

Ecotourism is potentially the best growing segment in the international market. Many hoteliers in Sri Lanka promote the sustainable use of this concept as a new market oriented concept. However, arrivals of eco-tourists to Sri Lanka have been very low over the last decade. Therefore, it is important to identify the reasons behind this situation. Preliminary survey was conducted with the intention of identifying the reasons for the low arrivals of the eco-tourists. The researcher was able to identify various reasons for the displeasure of eco-tourists through the survey. The service quality practices in the eco-resorts is one of the major factors highlighted in the survey. Majority of the eco-tourists told their displeasure about the service quality practices of eco-resorts in Sri Lanka. It shows that the satisfaction of eco-tourists not only depends on eco-tourism practices but also the service quality standards.

Customer satisfaction is widely recognized as a key influence in the formation of customers' intentions to repurchase. Satisfied customers are also expected to tell others about their positive experiences and thus involve in optimistic word of mouth advertising. Dissatisfied customers are likely to change brands and engage in negative word of mouth advertising. Tourists' satisfaction can be measured with their holiday experience and the measurement of satisfaction provides some indication of the degree of

customer. Thus, there is a relationship between overall satisfaction and intention to make a repeat visit, loyalty and recommendation. Customer satisfaction, service quality and retention are global issues that affect all organizations. Service quality and customer satisfaction have been known as playing a vital role for success and existence in today's competitive market. Hence, this study was conducted to identify the level of influence of service quality practices to the satisfaction and behavioral intention of eco-tourists who are visiting eco resorts in Sri Lanka.

Research Methodology

The target study area for this study was self-declared eco-resorts, which are registered under the Sri Lanka Tourism and Development Authority. When selecting the cases for the study, scales of number of rooms were used to categorize the resorts according to their size. The study used the quantitative research approach using questionnaire survey to conduct this research. It provided an overview of eco-tourists attitudes towards tourism and their opinion on practices considering future state of service quality practices expected by them. Since the target population for the study (eco-tourists) is unknown (No sample framework) the researcher used the unknown population formula to identify the sample. 385 eco-tourists were surveyed during the study. Sampling technique was convenience sample which is a non-probability sample. Questionnaire data were analyzed using SPSS Statistical package. To draw the valid conclusions and test them empirically, an exhaustive use of statistical technique of Factor Analysis was made. To further determine reliability of the data, alpha co-efficient was used to identify the sampling adequacy. Correlation were used to identify the relationship among factors determined. In addition, regression analysis was used to analyze quantitative data of relationship among factors. In this study Sobel's equation was used to test the mediation effect.

Results and findings

The study tested five service quality dimensions of an eco-resort, which are significant contributors towards behavioral intention of arrival of eco-tourists. They are namely tangibles, responsiveness, empathy, responsibility and trust, accessibility and flexibility. The research findings revealed that there is a significant and positive relationship with service quality components practices in eco-resorts and behavioral intention of ecotourists. In addition, there is a significant positive relationship with service quality components practices in eco-resorts and eco-tourists satisfaction. Apart from these direct relationships, further the study depicted that the dimension of eco-tourists (customer) satisfaction of service quality components practices in eco-resorts performs a mediator role in the consequences of service quality components practices in eco-resorts and behavioral dimension of eco-tourists. Service quality satisfaction partially mediates the relationship between practice of service quality components in eco-resorts and ecotourists behavioral intention. It means there are other factors affecting the satisfaction and behavioral intention of eco-tourists. Service quality is also one of the main contributors for it. The research findings revealed that there is a significant and positive relationship with service quality components practices in eco-resorts and behavioral intention of ecotourists. In addition, there is a significant positive relationship with service quality components practices in eco-resorts and eco-tourists satisfaction. Apart from these direct relationships, the study further depicted that the dimension of eco-

tourists (customer) satisfaction of service quality components practices in eco-resorts performs a mediator role in the consequences of service quality components practices in eco-resorts and behavioral dimension of eco-tourists. Service quality satisfaction partially mediates the relationship between practice of service quality components in eco resorts and ecotourists **behavioral intention**.

Conclusion

Throughout this research, the researcher tried to identify the service quality practices in Sri Lankan eco-resorts and the effect of it to eco-tourist arrivals. In the questionnaire survey analysis of eco-tourists, the study found service quality practices in eco-resorts are affecting the satisfaction and behavioral intention of eco-tourists. It clearly indicated that if the service quality components are not practicing in the resorts correctly, it would badly affect to the satisfaction and behavioral intention of eco-tourists. As a result, the tourists' intention to travel, remain and recommend the destination to others were negatively influenced. Since some major service quality components are not practicing properly in eco-resorts, it has caused the dissatisfaction of eco-tourists and their behavioral intention.

As a result, Sri Lanka is experiencing less number of eco-tourists.

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