

# TOURISM FROM THE ACADEMIC LENS

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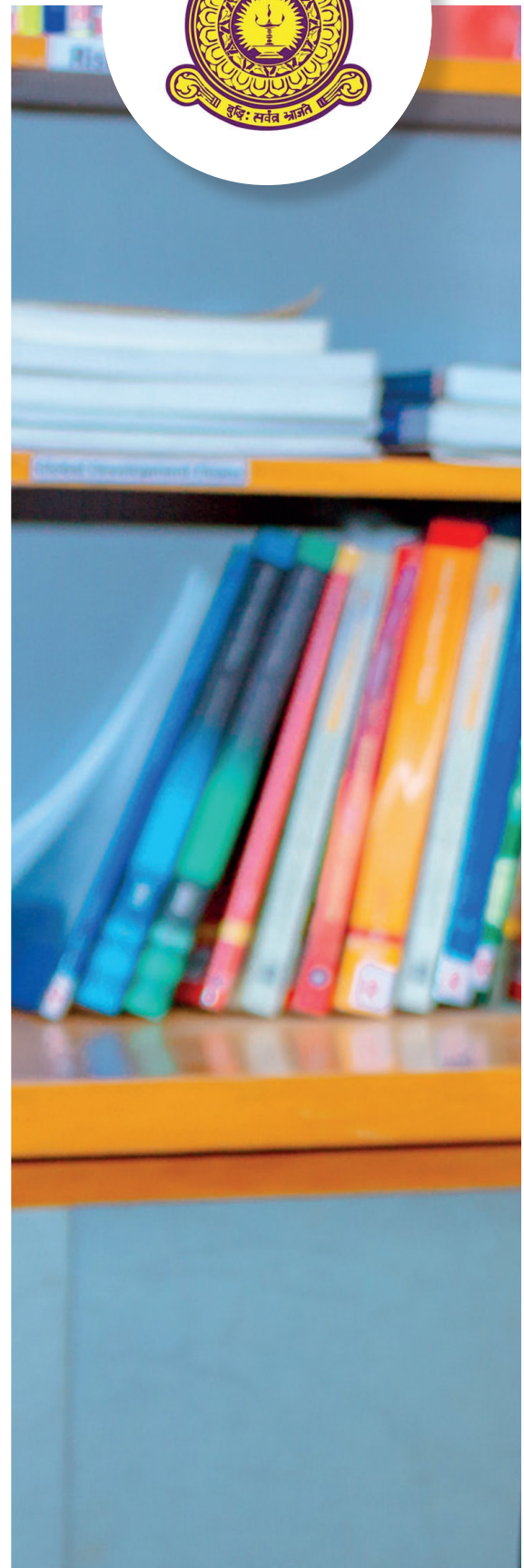
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## Can we know about your professional journey and its milestones up until your current position?

I completed my PhD in 2002 on the topic of Sustainable Tourism Development in Sri Lanka: An Appraisal of International Inbound Tourism Demand, the Tourism Industry and National Tourism Policy at the Vrije University Amsterdam, the Netherlands. After completing my PhD, I came back to Sri Lanka although I was provided with an opportunity to join the same university as a contract-base researcher cum lecturer. But I felt that I should come back and it was time for us to serve the country, ever than before.

After I arrived, I conducted an industry market survey. My research revealed that the industry required a formal education from universities and higher educational institutes, but not necessarily degrees and master's programs; instead, diplomas and short courses in travel, tourism and hospitality studies are needed.

I completed my survey through approximately 500 interviews. Among the respondents, 95% expressed the need for university-level education. Interestingly, the several of them were qualified for postgraduate courses. These findings also clearly revealed that many industry employees did not successfully complete their A/Ls (Advanced Level examinations). Consequently, their primary option was to seek employment in the tourism











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industry, often under their parental pressure. While they were passionate about their work and enjoyed benefits such as accommodation and meals, their formal education was lacking.

While it's true that operational roles within the industry may not require extensive and systematic higher education, but there was essential burning requirement to grasp the broader context. Academic knowledge provides the skill to conceptualize the industry's dynamics and valuable analytical skills to forecast them for market benefits. Recognizing this gap in tourism education within the tourism industry, the Department of Economics, University of Colombo introduced Diploma in Travel & Tourism Economics and Hotel Management (DTTEHM) Programme as a step in to fill this industry requirement.

Initially, there was no demand for postgraduate programmes as these professionals were already experts in practical aspects like four major areas of hotel management. However, they needed knowledge in areas such as revenue management, financial

analysis, marketing, forecasting and so on. In 2005, we initiated the DTTEHM Programme.

After a few successful batches of DTTEHM Programme, the students requested higher-level programmes. Consequently, we introduced Executive Diploma, Postgraduate Diploma, then Masters, and even PhD programmes in tourism education at the Department of Economics, Faculty of Arts, University of Colombo.

Understanding the evolving direction of tourism, it's essential to incorporate sustainable practices at the highest level. To achieve this, we introduced Certificate for Sustainable Tourism Destination Management (CSTDM) in collaboration with the Global Sustainable Tourism Council and UNDP.

I have been appointed as the lead trainer for sustainable tourism by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), and we were also working towards establishing a Sustainable Tourism Unit at the University of Colombo building partnerships with various entities to achieve this national endeavour. All these



initiatives have significantly elevated the status of the Faculty of Arts and have a direct impact on human resource development

Finally, 21st of August 2023, as a most probably my final contribution as the coordinator to the university education before the retirement, Sustainable Tourism Unit (STU) has been introduced at the Faculty of Arts, University of Colombo.

Establishing the University of Colombo Sustainable Tourism Unit (UOC-STU) at the Faculty of Arts, University of Colombo is to cater a dynamic and evidence-based knowledge platform incorporating different dimensions of sustainable tourism development applying through an interdisciplinary approach that engages different subject disciplines of not only the various departments belong to the Faculty of Arts but also all means of evidence-based knowledge contributions from different faculties of the University of Colombo. The

STU also aspires to establish a robust multistakeholder dialogue platform that effectively engages stakeholders for successful sustainable tourism practices and implementation in Sri Lanka.

The STU is to empower industry stakeholders by enhancing their knowledge, skills and competencies for fostering sustainable practices and successful implementation in the tourism industry.

The STU aims to forge partnerships with national bodies like SLTDA and other organizations/authorities and also with international organizations such as GSTC, UNWTO, WTTC, and the other related international organizations to ensure a productive knowledge partnership for sustainable tourism while offering learning opportunities for the students of the university to apply sustainable practices, expanding their professional networks.

With the tagline or the moto of UOC-STU - "Wisdom Enlightening

for Sustainable Tourism," the STU is developed under the vision of providing outcomes-based learning & research, knowledge-driven innovation and results-focused training to be the Center of Excellence in Asia for sustainable tourism development.

### **What are the key challenges faced by the Sri Lankan tourism sector after the COVID-19 pandemic, and how is your organization/government/university addressing these challenges?**

COVID-19 has not been the only significant challenge for the Sri Lankan tourism sector. In fact, our industry has faced difficulties since its inception in 1967, a mere four years after my birth. Allow me to take you through our history. In 1971, we encountered significant challenges, and in 1983, the ethnic crisis struck, persisting until 2009 as we grappled with the ethnic war.

In 2010, I assumed the role of Director General at Sri Lanka Institute of Tourism and Hotel Management (SLITHM), Ministry of Economic Development, marking a turning point for me. We experienced remarkable growth, with arrivals surging by more than 275%, making it the highest growth rate in the world at that time. Sri Lanka gained recognition as the 'Best Island to Visit' by Lonely Planet. By 2013, we were lauded as the best in Asia and ranked among the top 13 destinations globally. We maintained this standing in 2019.







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However, 2019 brought new challenges. Just as we were poised for continued success, we were hit hard by the Easter Sunday attacks, COVID-19, and an economic crisis. While other countries were managing the COVID-19 pandemic, we faced unique difficulties compounded by pre-existing crises stemming from terrorist attacks. A recent survey revealed that over 70% of businesses in the SME sector within the travel industry had to close, and more than 60% of employees lost their jobs. This had a significant impact, affecting not only newcomers but also seasoned professionals.

Nevertheless, despite these setbacks and economic crises, our industry has shown remarkable resilience. We have become adept at navigating crises and, despite setbacks, are making a comeback. Currently, our industry attracts nearly a million visitors, although it's essential to note that not all of them are tourists; some

are immigrants or other types of visitors. We will delve into this aspect later.

In summary, this represents the most challenging scenario our industry has ever encountered. However, we are determined to recover and continue our growth. Our most pressing challenge at present is attracting tourists amid the ongoing pandemic. Without tourists, there is no way to promote tourism. While we have explored various avenues, such as virtual tourism, we acknowledge that these are not ideal solutions for making a meaningful contribution to the country. Fortunately, the situation is improving, and we must remain adaptable to address the evolving landscape.

**How do you see tourism contributing to the overall economic growth of Sri Lanka, and what role can the private**

**sector/government/universities play in this?**

In the current scenario, the tourism industry plays a pivotal role in generating foreign currency for Sri Lanka's economy, ranking third after remittances and apparel exports. Over the past three years, we've lost more than 10 billion USD in revenue due to various challenges. Had we retained this revenue; our economic situation would be far better today. The connection is clear: a thriving tourism industry can greatly enhance Sri Lanka's economic sector.

Tourism is a multifaceted industry that has far-reaching effects on economies and communities. Its impact can be categorized into three main dimensions: direct, indirect, and induced.

Direct Impact of tourism refers to the immediate economic activities generated by tourists' expenditures within a destination. These include spending on accommodation,





transportation, food, attractions, and souvenirs. Direct impact is often the most visible and quantifiable aspect of tourism's contribution to an economy. It includes revenues generated directly from tourists and is a key driver of the tourism sector.

Indirect Impact of tourism encompasses the secondary economic activities stimulated by the direct spending of tourists. These activities are associated with the supply chain that supports tourism. For example, when tourists visit a destination and spend money on accommodations, this creates demand for goods and services such as furniture, construction, and food supplies. These secondary businesses, in turn, hire employees, purchase goods and services, and contribute to the overall economic health of the region.

Induced Impact represents the tertiary economic effects resulting from the spending of those employed in the direct and indirect

sectors of tourism. As tourism-related businesses hire employees and pay wages, these employees, in turn, spend their incomes on various goods and services within the destination. This cycle of spending creates a ripple effect throughout the local economy, boosting sectors like retail, healthcare, education, and more. The induced impact demonstrates how tourism can have a broader and sustained influence on a community's economic well-being.

However, the key challenge exist in this context of our country is how much local industries can cater all these contributions competitively. This underscores the need for an integrated and interconnected approach between tourism and the related sectors.

The tourism industry is significant in terms of generating income, employment, and foreign exchange. A dollar invested to tourism industry in Sri Lanka has

the potential to generate more than 2 dollars through its direct, indirect, and induced impacts. It is because of Sri Lanka tourism industry's high backward and forward linkages, such potential must be realized by decision-makers if it requires effective implementation.

### **What strategies can be employed to enhance the tourism offerings in Sri Lanka and attract more visitors?**

Tourism is a unique industry; it's not like buying a shirt or a product where the experience isn't directly involved. In tourism, the experience is everything. If visitors have a memorable experience, they will not only return but also promote it to others. Tourism is all about creating memorable experiences.

To enhance tourism offerings in Sri Lanka and attract more visitors, we must focus on providing exceptional



experiences. This means that developing tourism activities and products should generate unique and memorable experience. For example, we can promote wellness tourism by organizing wellness retreats that offer a unique and life-enhancing experience.

We can also capitalize on Sri Lanka's beautiful beaches by combining them with our renowned hospitality. Sri Lankan cuisine, villas, agriculture, culture, and people are all essential elements that can enhance the overall experience for tourists.

In a competitive tourism landscape, we must create outstanding and memorable products driven by unique experiences. While our current offerings are doing relatively good, we have more untapped potential waiting to be explored.

For instance, consider Singapore, a small country with over 10 million tourists annually. In contrast, we are striving for just 2 million tourists. However, it's not merely about the number of tourists but the quality of their experience and their spending habits. We must maximize income

and ensure that it benefits all stakeholders of our economy, rather than concentrating wealth in the hands of a few. Fair distribution of income among various sectors is vital to sustainable tourism growth.

Therefore, in a nut shell, it's not just about increasing tourist numbers but providing them with exceptional and unique experiences that make Sri Lanka an attractive destination. We must focus on the quality of the tourist experience and how it contributes to our economy while ensuring a fair distribution of income among all stakeholders

## How can Sri Lanka balance the need for tourism development with environmental sustainability and conservation?

Balancing tourism development with environmental sustainability and conservation is essential, and fortunately, it's not a difficult task. The global tourism landscape has evolved, with travellers increasingly seeking socially and environmentally

friendly experiences. Many tourists visiting Sri Lanka already prioritize sustainable options.

To attract more visitors while preserving our environment, we must provide products and services that align with this demand for sustainability. Tourists from developed nations, in particular, actively seek sustainable products and experiences. Therefore, our responsibility is clear: we must offer products that meet these expectations. This requires innovation, research, and evidence-based decision-making.

Our academic institutions and researchers play a vital role in identifying sustainable tourism practices. They should provide the necessary evidence and recommendations to guide policymakers and industry stakeholders. The key is to provide a lifetime of quality experiences at the right price to the right customer.

However, we should be cautious about pricing. While it's essential to provide value for money, Sri Lanka should not overprice its offerings.







We must remain competitive in the global tourism market. For example, Singapore charges a premium at its airport but provides exceptional facilities and services. Our pricing should reflect the quality and value we offer.

Sri Lanka is an attractive destination, thanks to our natural beauty and the warmth of our people. Our friendliness is often praised by travellers. However, we must ensure that our marketing promises align with the actual experience visitors have. Minor issues, like stray dogs and traffic, can leave a negative impression.

Balancing tourism development with environmental sustainability is not difficult. It involves offering sustainable products and experiences that align with the expectations of modern travellers. Our academic institutions and researchers can play a crucial role in guiding sustainable practices. Pricing should reflect the value we offer, and marketing should be aligned with the reality of the visitor experience.

### **What steps can be taken to promote Sri Lanka's lesser-known destinations and diversify the tourism**

### **product beyond the traditional beach and cultural attractions?**

Firstly, it is essential to distinguish what is known from what is unknown. Promoting lesser-known destinations must be approached with caution. A destination alone, even if well-known, is not sufficient. Attractions must be thoughtfully connected with activities. Failure to link them with appropriate, verified activities and instead promoting obscure businesses or places can have detrimental long-term consequences. For example, some may boast Sri Lanka has many beautiful, nature-based locations. In such cases, when these places attract visitors without proper guidelines, they risk environmental degradation. Therefore, for the numerous lesser-known places we have, we should develop packages while simultaneously creating suitable guidelines to protect these treasures.

Take Ella as an example—a destination that initially lacked government planning but gained popularity through social media. It exemplifies a demand-driven destination. When promoting lesser-known tourist places, we must comprehensively understand these locations, the appropriate promotion strategies, and the potential

outcomes that can be generated.

There are also instances where we are aware of well-known places but are not effectively promoting them. Consider Sigiriya. Is it visitor-friendly? Does it operate sustainably? Next, look at Nelum Kuluna. Is it being marketed effectively? Established destinations should be marketed properly, integrating sustainability principles to introduce them to new audiences.

In pursuing this, we require a clear vision. We must decide how to promote these places, the methods to employ, and the activities to incorporate. Failure to achieve the desired results in promoting lesser-known places can lead to severe and painful consequences.

In my opinion, universities should take the lead in identifying lesser-known places and promoting them with specific guidelines tailored to target audiences.

### **How can Sri Lanka leverage digital technology to enhance the tourism experience and improve visitor satisfaction?**

Yes, recently I got to know that a couple of hotel chains also make use

of AI continuously and progressively and at times it feels unbelievable what it can do. It designs its plans, and gives marketing directions and pricing strategies. AI provides convenience for the tourism industry. For example, a package designer would prepare a package suitable for each customer with the help of AI after inputting the number of people, interests, and budget. Once suggested, the package designer could see how it best fits the pertaining situations and decide on it. Additionally, if you want to prepare a poster for a conference or any event, you just need to provide what you require, and it will be available in your fingertips. Likewise, digital technology can provide you ample number of benefits. Right now, we can ask the students to develop the best and the most feasible tour package and AI will possibly provide you the answer, but we must see how we can apply that answer into the reality. So, I think we need to capitalize this technology in the best way possible.

## How can the tourism sector in Sri Lanka collaborate with other industries to create more authentic and immersive experiences for visitors?

Yeah, basically, tourism industry is an interconnected industry. If you are asked what industry is not affected by tourism, there is probably no such industry in any country. Transport, agriculture, entertainment, banking, shopping, everything is connected. This is what makes tourism a beautiful industry, not only in Sri Lanka but all over the world. So basically, there are prime industries which should be connected; Environment Ministry, Agricultural

Ministry, Transport Ministry, Trade Ministry. As much as these industries are connected with the tourism industry, the service can be handled better. Otherwise, in getting approval from, for example, the beach authorities, railway authorities and other relevant authorities, the disturbances faced are going to be higher. Therefore, there is no doubt that the integrations and networks with the other industries is vital to provide an authentic experience.

In addition, integration between Sri Lanka's tourism sector and various industries can significantly enhance visitor experiences. This synergy can be achieved through partnerships with culinary experts, artists, and cultural institutions to offer diverse and authentic culinary and cultural experiences. Engaging with local farmers and eco-tourism initiatives enables tourists to participate in sustainable farming activities.

Adventure sports providers can create immersive adventures, while wellness retreats and Ayurvedic practitioners promote wellness tourism. Universities and educational institutions can offer workshops, language classes, and historical lectures. Heritage conservation organizations can restore historical sites, making them accessible to tourists. Collaboration with local communities facilitates homestays and cultural exchanges, enriching tourists' understanding of local life.

Environmental initiatives, in partnership with conservation organizations, promote responsible tourism. The transportation industry can improve connectivity to lesser-known destinations. Tech companies can develop innovative solutions like mobile apps and virtual reality experiences. Effective marketing and promotion, often involving



**Sri Lanka's long-term goals for its tourism sector should encompass sustainability, inclusivity, and economic growth. Achieving these objectives necessitates a multifaceted approach.**

influencers, spread the word about these partnerships. A coordinated effort among government agencies, tourism boards, industry associations, and local businesses is crucial for successful collaboration, benefiting both tourists and Sri Lanka's overall economic and social development.

## What are the long-term goals for the Sri Lankan tourism sector, and how can these be achieved in a sustainable and inclusive manner?

I envision Sri Lanka as the most eco-friendly and people-friendly destination in the region. For