

Post-conflict Models for Sustainable Tourism

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Recent dramatic news of the war's conclusion in Sri Lanka and the death of Prabhakaran, long-time leader of the LTTE, have brought almost immediate attention to the potential of Sri Lanka's Jaffna Peninsula for tourism. According to the Sri Lanka Financial Times on May 31, 2009, "everyone wants a piece of the action and foreign contractors are flowing into the city, already housed in five star hotels." The paper continues, "Already plans are underway to attract 1.5 million tourists, with immediate targets set for 500,000." The author asks at the conclusion of this piece, "is this the right kind of development? Are we going to cut trees, carve out huge construction sites, intrude into peaceful areas of the country's coastline and tamper with nature?"

A holistic model for sustainable tourism development needs to be at the immediate fingertips of the leaders of Sri Lanka. They need to know that there are sound economic development models that can be applied and built into solid sustainable destination development approaches. Poverty alleviation, respect for local cultures, environmental management and conservation are all key tactics in this once in a life time opportunity to create a holistically designed place for tourism.

Do Sri Lanka's leaders need to have a set of clear methodologies that they can immediately review in this situation? Certainly. Sustainable tourism must be framed out within the context of long term consequences and results. Without a consistent set of methodologies, which demonstrate how outcomes fit into a larger holistic model, again and again, decision makers will opt for the model of piece meal projects that produce lackluster results, or standard foreign investment without benefit of sustainable design processes.

It is hard not to notice that tourism is increasingly the most important source of foreign exchange for developing countries around the world, and increasingly so for countries emerging from conflict. The fact that few methodologies exist for replication to allow professionals and ministries to immediately determine how to proceed with development when opportunities arise needs to be fixed.

If Sri Lanka is becoming the target of massive interest in unsustainable development after a brutal civil war one has to ask, have the Ministers in charge been exposed to holistic models for sustainable development of tourism that could create much longer term value and genuine benefits for local people on the Jaffna?

Responsible and culturally sensitive product development, conservation and preservation of both ecosystems and culture, bioregional planning, community-based rural and urban development and benchmarking are all key parts of their mandate, which could be launched as part of reconstruction and implemented as a key tool to ensure appropriate redevelopment.

Does Sri Lanka need to catch hold of what has been achieved via the research of the pro-poor tourism movement and integrate it into this model? Without question! Research on building supply chains that rely on local goods has been so valuable it has been proven that by developing more local skills, with an eye on the supply chain, tourism can alleviate poverty at a much deeper level.

Does the geotouristic model of integrating place into the development of economy make sense? Indeed! How will social and environmental assets on the Jaffna be preserved as a unit unless there is more focus on the geographic continuity, historical past, and a vibrant cultural present that is evolving even as projections are being made about the number of tourists who may visit.

Should the accomplishments of ecotourism, and the impressive body of work relating to using tourism as a tool to support parks and conservation initiatives worldwide be employed? Of course, there must be rich biodiversity at stake in the north and east of

Sri Lanka! Ecotourism has from day one accounted for the well-being of local people and continues to improve upon its ability to create rural enterprises associated with parks and protected areas.

Does anyone truly question that holistic models for sustainable tourism are not the appropriate tools for Sri Lanka? There is strong evidence and solid case examples to prove that sustainability is the right approach for creating a tourism economy that will have both stable roots and solid returns.

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