

Cultivating Experiences vs Addressing Expectations: A Deep Dive into Agro-Tourism in Sri Lanka

R.P.C.K Jayasinghe and K.M.S Weerasinghe

University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

The tourist industry has evolved to rely on agro-tourism, an inventive fusion of tourism and agriculture that provides immersive experiences that go beyond conventional traveller stereotypes. This research delves deeply into Sri Lankan agro-tourism, examining the reasons behind visits, the expectations that are made, and the positive aspects of various tourist experiences. Thirty participants—both solo and group travellers—were interviewed in-depth to identify the major elements influencing engagement. Finding the subtleties of agro-tourism experiences and illuminating the elements that lead to visitors' satisfaction and enduring recollections are the study's main contributions. The research offers insightful information to stakeholders in Sri Lanka's tourism industry by exploring these intricate interactions and pointing policymakers, tourism boards, and local communities toward sustainable practices that benefit visitors as well as hosts. Driven by reasons like gastronomic exploration, ecological practices, and cultural immersion, tourists also have other incentives. Agro-tourism experiences have a substantial positive impact on salutogenic outcomes. Implications for policy and suggestions from stakeholders emphasize the necessity of infrastructure upgrades, environmental education campaigns, training programs for service providers, community involvement, and the promotion of solo travel packages. Furthermore, by providing insights into the various factors influencing tourists in Sri Lanka, this study contributes to the advancement of academic understanding and real-world applications in agro-tourism. To promote the sustainable growth of agro-tourism in Sri Lanka, the policy suggestions that have been supplied should benefit both tourists and residents.

Keywords: Agro-Tourism, Salutogenic Affordances, Sustainable Tourism, Tourist Motivations

INTRODUCTION

Agro-tourism, the fusion of agriculture and tourism, has emerged as a significant facet of the travel industry, presenting an immersive experience that transcends conventional tourism paradigms. Against the backdrop of the verdant landscapes and rich cultural tapestry of Sri Lanka. This study undertakes a profound exploration of the diverse and nuanced encounters of tourists from various countries.

There are three main objectives for the study. Namely,

- To identify the diverse motivations driving tourists to engage in agro-tourism experiences in Sri Lanka
- To Evaluate Tourists' Expectations and Experiences in agro-tourism in Sri Lanka
- To Identify the salutogenic affordances inherent in agro-tourism experiences in Sri Lanka

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study holds significant importance as it endeavors to unravel the intricacies of agro-tourism experiences in Sri Lanka, shedding light on the elements that contribute to tourists' enjoyment and lasting

memories. By investigating the complex nature of these experiences, the research aims to offer valuable insights for stakeholders in the Sri Lankan tourism industry, including policymakers, tourist boards, and local communities. The examination of tourists' expectations and their alignment with on-site experiences is crucial for enhancing the overall quality of agro-tourism offerings. The findings may provide practical guidance to those involved in the industry, fostering sustainable practices and ensuring a positive impact on both tourists and the host communities. Moreover, the study's exploration of cultural, environmental, and socioeconomic factors influencing the interplay between expectations and experiences contributes to a broader understanding of agro-tourism dynamics. This, in turn, has the potential to inform global best practices and methodologies within the field of tourism research, enriching the scholarly discourse and guiding future studies in similar contexts worldwide.

This study holds paramount significance as it endeavours to shed light on the multifaceted dimensions of agro-tourism experiences in Sri Lanka, addressing a notable gap in the existing literature. By investigating the diverse motivations that drive tourists to participate in agro-tourism activities, evaluating the alignment of expectations and experiences, and identifying salutogenic affordances, this research contributes valuable insights to both the academic and practical realms. The study contributes to the theoretical understanding of agro-tourism by providing a nuanced exploration of tourists' motivations and experiences, thereby enriching existing theories in tourism studies. The application of qualitative research methods, including in-depth interviews with a diverse group of tourists, adds methodological depth to the field of agro-tourism research. The study's approach can serve as a blueprint for future qualitative inquiries into tourism experiences. Findings from this study offer practical implications for stakeholders in the tourism industry, including policymakers, tour operators, and agro-tourism providers. Understanding tourists' motivations and expectations can guide the development of tailored experiences, potentially boosting the attractiveness of agro-tourism destinations in Sri Lanka. Local communities involved in agro-tourism activities can benefit from insights into tourists' experiences. This knowledge can facilitate community engagement strategies, fostering positive interactions and mutual understanding between tourists and locals. The identification of salutogenic affordances in agro-tourism experiences provides a foundation for enhancing overall tourist satisfaction and well-being. This can inform the development of initiatives that cater to tourists' holistic needs and contribute to the sustainable growth of agro-tourism destinations.

In essence, this study's significance lies in its potential to advance both academic knowledge and practical applications in the realm of agro-tourism, ultimately contributing to the sustainable development of tourism in Sri Lanka and serving as a model for similar studies in diverse cultural contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Agro-tourism in Sri Lanka has been recognized as a significant opportunity for the country's economic growth and development. The tourism sector has been identified as a key driver of economic growth in both the short and long run (Suresh & Senthilnathan, 2014). After the end of the civil war in 2009, the tourism sector in Sri Lanka began to improve, positioning the country as an important tourist destination (Robinson & Jarvie, 2008). The tourism industry has also been acknowledged as a major export income earner, contributing around 12% to the country's GDP (Munasinghe et al., 2020). The government has prioritized the tourism sector as a key growth pillar in the economy (Jolliffe & Aslam, 2009).

Agro-tourism, particularly initiatives such as spice tourism, has gained attention as an important aspect of leveraging the benefits of tourism in Sri Lanka (Gunasekara & Silva, 2021). Studies have been conducted to assess the factors affecting the establishment of spice tourism in the country (Malkanathi et al., 2015). Additionally, the potential for Chinese cultural heritage tourism in Sri Lanka has been highlighted as a strategy for attracting tourists during the post-COVID-19 tourism revival phase (Samarathunga, 2021).

The development of agro-tourism in Sri Lanka aligns with the country's efforts to position itself as a

significant tourist destination. The government has been urged to pay special attention to the tourism sector, indicating the recognition of its importance for the country's overall development (Jolliffe & Aslam, 2009). However, challenges such as lack of coordination in tourism management and political instability have been noted, emphasizing the need for sustainable tourism practices (Sivesan, 2019).

METHODOLOGY

This study has used qualitative research which endeavours to illuminate the complex relationship between the cultivation of agro-tourism experiences and the multifaceted expectations held by tourists.

Sampling and Participants:

A cohort of thirty tourists from a variety of backgrounds who had recently visited agro-tourism areas in Sri Lanka were carefully chosen through the use of judgmental sampling in the research design. This sample strategy was specifically chosen to collect different viewpoints on agro-tourism experiences. Two separate groups of participants were identified: fifteen individuals who travelled in groups or families, and fifteen individuals who travelled alone. This deliberate separation makes it possible to thoroughly examine the many dynamics and expectations connected to agro-tourism experiences for both solo and group travel.

Data Collection:

The research team performed in-depth interviews with thirty participants, assuring participant welfare, informed consent, and confidentiality as part of their commitment to following ethical standards. A carefully designed interview guide that was adapted and offered a methodological foundation for investigating the various viewpoints of tourists toward agro-tourism.

Using a tailored interview guide gave the study more coherence and organized aspects. The guide was specifically designed to address how tourists view agro-tourism. It allowed for a methodical investigation of elements including agro-tourism's allure, the impact of cultural elements, and overall experience satisfaction. An extensive and rich dataset was ensured by the interview guide, which gave participants leeway to express their viewpoints within the predetermined themes while offering a predetermined framework.

The participants were deliberately chosen according to their travel plans and past experiences, which made it possible to conduct a focused investigation of the dynamics of agro-tourism. The study's goal of identifying the various facets of visitors' agro-tourism experiences in Sri Lanka is in line with the purpose of this intentional sampling approach.

In this study, a pre-test was conducted to assess the validity of the interview guide questions. Following this, a pilot study involving five English fluently speaking tourists was undertaken to evaluate the reliability of the questionnaire, ensuring its effectiveness in garnering accurate and consistent responses. These preliminary measures contribute to the methodological rigor of the research, enhancing the overall robustness of the data collection process.

Data Analysis:

Thematic analysis served as the methodological lens to discern recurring themes and patterns in tourists' responses. This analytical approach unravels the intricate ways in which agro-tourism experiences contribute to overall satisfaction, cultural immersion, and the well-being of visitors exploring destinations like Colombo hotels, Down South, Peradeniya Botanical Garden, and Ella in Sri Lanka. The identification of these themes enriches our understanding of the multifaceted dimensions that shape the tourists'

perspectives, offering valuable insights into the nuanced dynamics of agro-tourism in the Sri Lankan context.

Tourists' Varied Motivations for Agro-Tourism (Code: ATE-MOT):

In this section, this study discusses the narratives and discoveries discovered through in-depth qualitative interviews with thirty tourists who visited Sri Lankan agrotourism destinations. It carefully divided the participants into two categories: those who went on solitary adventures and those who travelled in groups or families. The storylines and types of experiences and motivations that followed were as follows:

Sub-theme 1.1: Cultural Immersion and Authentic Experiences (Code: ATE-MOT-CIAE):

Tourists who took comfort in agrotourism recalled the happiness they experienced from fully absorbing the culture of the area. They talked about how being in the midst of beautiful scenery and actively engaged in farming tasks may be soothing. "Being in the middle of vibrant tea plantations in Ella felt like a therapeutic escape from the hustle and bustle of daily life," said Emily, a lone traveller.

The emphasis on engaging with local communities during agro-tourism experiences was a recurring theme among lone travellers. Anecdotes of homestays, community gatherings, and learning about traditional farming methods from locals were exchanged by the participants. Reflecting on his journey alone, Javier said, "Ella wasn't just a destination; it was an opportunity to connect with the people and understand their way of life."

Authentic experiences were highlighted by tourists who aimed for cultural immersion. Getting involved in local customs, ceremonies, and everyday activities became the main driving force. Traveling alone, Rachel noted that "agro-tourism allowed me to immerse myself in the local culture, fostering genuine connections with the community."

Sub-theme 1.2: Culinary Exploration and Experiential Learning (Code: ATE-MOT-CEEL):

For those exploring agro-tourism for culinary experiences, the voyage extended beyond just sightseeing. The participants related tales of taking part in local agricultural methods, investigating spice gardens, and taking cooking workshops. Family member Raj said, "We learned how to cook the cuisine, not only taste it. It gave our trip an entirely new level of complexity."

Sub-theme 1.3: Sustainable Practices and Environmental Awareness (Code: ATE-MOT-SPEA):

When visiting agro-tourism destinations, travellers who are interested in sustainable practices emphasized how they participated in environmental education programs. They talked about learning more about conservation initiatives, organic farming, and the value of protecting regional ecosystems. Maria said, "Visiting Peradeniya Botanical Garden was not just about enjoying the scenery; it was a lesson in sustainable practices and biodiversity." Maria was a member of a group tour.

Alignment of Expectations and Experiences in Agro-Tourism (Code: ATE- AEE):

Participants' accounts highlighted the intricate dynamics between their expectations and actual experiences during agro-tourism visits in Sri Lanka.

Sub-theme 2.1: Challenges in Aligning Expectations (Code: ATE- AEE-CAE):

A few tourists admitted that it was difficult to match their expectations with the actual experiences of agrotourism. There were occasionally obstacles due to things like bad weather, language issues, or different cultural standards. Lisa, who went on the tour with the others, stated, "While the experience was incredible,

there were moments where our expectations didn't quite match the reality, especially in navigating the local customs.”

Sub-theme 2.2: Cross-Cultural Communication and Understanding (Code: ATE-AEE-CU):

Language barriers and differing cultural norms occasionally presented hurdles, impacting the alignment of expectations. Open discussions about these challenges fostered cross-cultural understanding among tourists and locals alike. Carlos, a solo adventurer, noted, “Misunderstandings became opportunities to learn and appreciate the local way of life.”

Salutogenic Affordances and Overall Well-Being in Agro-Tourism (Code: ATE-SAOWB):

The interviews unveiled the salutogenic affordances inherent in agro-tourism experiences, shedding light on how these experiences contribute to tourists' overall well-being and satisfaction.

Sub-theme 3.1: Stress Reduction and Therapeutic Escapes (Code: ATE-SAOWB-SRTE):

Several tourists highlighted the stress-reducing and therapeutic aspects of their agro-tourism experiences. Being surrounded by nature, engaging in hands-on activities, and disconnecting from urban routines contributed to a sense of tranquillity. Sarah, a solo traveller, emphasized, “Agro-tourism acted as a therapeutic escape, providing a much-needed break from the stresses of daily life.”

Sub-theme 3.2: Cultural Connection and Emotional Fulfilment (Code: ATE-SAOWB-CCEF):

Participants shared narratives of emotional fulfilment and cultural connection during their agro-tourism journeys. Engaging with local communities and traditions provided a profound sense of enrichment. Diego, part of a family group, expressed, “The emotional fulfilment of connecting with local communities and understanding their agricultural heritage added layers of depth to our travel experience.”

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study into the motivations, expectations, and salutogenic affordances in agro-tourism experiences in Sri Lanka has provided a rich understanding of the diverse dimensions that influence tourists. The narratives shared by thirty tourists, including solo adventurers and those traveling in groups or families, revealed nuanced patterns that contribute to the overall tapestry of agro-tourism in the country.

The exploration of tourists' motivations uncovered distinct themes that shape their engagement with agro-tourism. Cultural immersion emerged as a powerful motivator, with tourists relishing the authentic experiences gained through interactions with local communities. Solo travellers, in particular, emphasized the therapeutic escape offered by being amidst the vibrant landscapes of tea plantations and actively participating in farming tasks. Culinary exploration and sustainable practices were additional driving forces, providing tourists with experiential learning opportunities and a deeper understanding of environmental conservation.

The section on the alignment of expectations and experiences delved into the challenges faced by tourists in reconciling their anticipated outcomes with the realities of agro-tourism. Weather-related obstacles, language barriers, and cultural differences occasionally disrupted the seamless alignment of expectations. However, these challenges were acknowledged as integral parts of the journey, fostering adaptive resilience and contributing to a more authentic experience. Cross-cultural communication became a crucial aspect, turning misunderstandings into opportunities for mutual learning and appreciation.

This examination of salutogenic affordances revealed the therapeutic and well-being benefits that agro-tourism experiences offer to tourists. Stress reduction and therapeutic escapes were highlighted as significant outcomes, with nature immersion and hands-on activities playing pivotal roles. Cultural connection and emotional fulfillment were predominant themes, showcasing the profound impact of engaging with local communities and traditions during agro-tourism journeys.

SUGGESTIONS

Initiatives for Community Engagement: Inspire agro-tourism operators to actively involve nearby communities in creating genuine experiences, promoting cross-cultural dialogue, and guaranteeing fair financial gains.

Programs of Training for Service Providers: Develop cross-cultural communication skills training programs for service providers, including guides. This can facilitate visitors' experiences and help them have a better grasp of regional customs. This initiative can be carried out by registering tourist guides by the tourist board and they can provide training to tourist guides.

Programs for Environmental Education: Create and promote environmental education initiatives in conjunction with agro-tourism destinations. These programs can raise visitors' knowledge of the value of biodiversity protection and sustainable behaviours.

Infrastructure Improvements: To lessen the effects of weather-related difficulties, work to upgrade the infrastructure in agro-tourism destinations. This can involve providing improved shelter, transit, and information-sharing facilities.

Promotion of Solo Travel Packages: Acknowledge the allure of agro-tourism for lone travellers and provide packages tailored to their tastes in unique experiences, healing getaways, and cultural immersion. By getting the support from Railway Department and Transport board, government can arrange tour packages to solo travellers. Further services can be expanded through other authorities.

Collaborations with Academic Institutions: Form alliances with agro-tourism suppliers and academic establishments to generate educational prospects for learners. Field trips, seminars, and internships with an emphasis on sustainable agriculture and cross-cultural engagement can fall under this category.

By putting these policy suggestions into practice, stakeholders and legislators may support the long-term development of agro-tourism in Sri Lanka and guarantee that visitors and locals alike gain from these enlightening experiences.

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