

The Impact of International Tourism  
on Peripheral Regions:  
**The Case of Sri Lanka**

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## Abstract

The growth of tourism in a specific location cannot be viewed as an isolated phenomenon. Instead it is laden with variety of impacts affecting the society, culture, economy and the environment of the tourist destination. These impacts and the attitudes of the host population are very important for the existence of the tourist industry. In other words negative response by the host population towards tourism may destroy tourism. Thus the well-known aphorism or paradox "Tourism destroys Tourism" is indeed to be seriously considered by planners involved in tourism development.

Since the 1960s, tourism has emerged to be a promising phenomenon for most of the developing countries in solving some of their crucial problems such as lack of foreign exchange, balance of payments, unemployment and regional development. From the initiation of tourism development, Sri Lanka too has placed a keen emphasis on tourism as a strategy for the development of peripheral regions.

Since 1967, many peripheral tourist destinations of Sri Lanka have become dependent on the newly introduced economy. It is evident that during the initial stages of tourism development planners have paid less attention on maintaining development strategies that would not bring in unwelcome impacts on tourist destinations. The government as well as the private sector has been motivated in tourism development with the main intention of earning the crucially needed foreign exchange. The unplanned nature of this development policy has brought in positive as well as negative impacts of to the particular tourist destinations.

Some of the popular tourist destinations of the South Coast Tourist Region are already experiencing such negative impacts of tourism development. As a result these destinations were subject to socio-economic and environmental changes of which some are beneficial to the destination concerned, and some are not. Especially destinations with higher tourist densities (such as the beach destinations of the South Coast Region) have experienced socio-economic and environmental impacts at a very much higher degree than the areas which are not frequented by international tourists.

There are spatial variations in the nature of these impacts according to the type of tourists visiting each area. Normally negative socio-economic impacts are visible in destinations where the majority of tourists are hippies or the back packers. In contrast, negative impacts are minimum in destinations frequented by the high spending tourists. In the economic perspective the latter group is more important because of their high contribution to the foreign exchange earnings.

This study unveils some of the social, economic and environmental impacts that have been created with the development of tourism, as well as the nature of dependency on tourism development in the selected study areas. Since the impacts vary according to the type of visitors patronizing each tourist destination, special attention was paid to select regions that would represent the various types of impacts. Based on the above criteria four tourist destinations (Unawatuna, Tangalle, Hambantota, and Tissamaharama) have been selected for the present study, from the most popular tourist region in Sri Lanka, namely, 'The South Coast Tourist Region'.

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