

Farm to Tourists: Exploring the challenges for agro-tourism in Kurupetta Division in Sri Lanka.

Abstract

Sri Lanka, an island nation adorned with a rich volume of natural resources, is emerging as a captivating destination for agro-tourism. It allows travelers to experience a unique blend of agricultural experiences and countryside eco-adventures. This research explores the key challenges faced by the agro-tourism sector in Kurupetta Division in Sri Lanka and proposed strategies to improve the sector. This study employed a qualitative research approach, by conducting in-depth interviews with families who engaged in agricultural activities in the area. Thematic analysis was used to analyze data. The research findings revealed five main challenges, hindering the agro-tourism practices in Kurupetta Division. It was mainly limited land area, inadequate infrastructure facilities, lack of awareness among farmers, lack of essential skills, and insufficient government support. Further, research emphasizes the need for agricultural and rural development that leads to sustainable national development.

Keywords: Agro-Tourism, Rural Development, Sustainable Agriculture and challenges

Introduction

Agro-tourism is an emerging concept that comes into view as an alternative to existing tourism which has consequential meaning in internalizing traditional agriculture into business to develop the rural communities. Agro-tourism is considered a subset of rural tourism which is an important strategy for rural development by improving the sociocultural and economic status of rural communities. Agro-tourism has the potential to modernize the area and attract people to the countryside in order to shift from traditional isolation to integration with the national economy. Agro-tourism is a multifunctional activity in rural areas that enables tourists to enhance their awareness of agricultural activities, agricultural occupations in the countryside, local production

chains, traditional food patterns, daily manner of living as well as cultural heritages, customs, and traditions in rural areas (Yamagishi, Gantalao, & Ocampo, 2021)). The nation island of Sri Lanka is well known for tourism as 'Visit Sri Lanka' but less for agro-tourism. Though this concept is well-known worldwide, Sri Lanka has recently given significant attention to this concept by introducing agro-tourism in areas such as Gannoruwa, Bataatha, Sita Eliya, etc. While Sri Lanka has been a tourism hub for several decades, there is a growing potential to promote agro-tourism in the countryside. Despite these growing opportunities, several challenges hinder the development of agro-tourism in Sri Lanka. This research explores those challenges encountered by communities engaging in agricultural activities in Kurupetta Grama Niladhari division which is located in Kegalle District, Sri Lanka.

Research objectives of the study are, to identify the key challenges faced by the agro-tourism in Kurupetta division in Sri Lanka and to provide strategies to improve the agro-tourism in Kurupetta division Sri Lanka.

Significance of the Study

Despite the lesser contribution from the agricultural sector to the Gross Domestic Production in Sri Lanka, agriculture plays a crucial role in improving the well-being of rural communities by fostering supplementary income, employment opportunities, social and cultural preservation, infrastructure development, etc. By exploring challenges that impede the development and strategies that improve agro-tourism in Sri Lanka, this study emphasizes sustainable tourism as a contribution to national development. The policymakers, other stakeholders, and development practitioners could be able to use these findings to map out policies and programs for rural development in the country. Furthermore, the findings of the study can provide tailored insights and recommendations that are directly relevant to the Kurupetta division as well as similar areas in Sri Lanka.

Literature Review

Agro Tourism

The terms 'agro' and 'agri' could be used interchangeably, but particularly in the context of the usage, these words have distinct nuances. Agro is used in collaboration with other words to denote activities by emphasizing how land and natural resources are used and managed(Nair, 1993). Agri is used in agricultural industry and farming practices which are more associated with practical aspects(Cochrane, 1993). This term can be identified as the possibility of participation in agricultural activities, enjoyment, recreation, or entertainment programs including farm diversification and creating greater community cohesion(Malkanthi & Routray, 2021).

Agrotourism: A Global Overview

Globally, agrotourism has gained popularity as it helps to diversify farm income, preserves rural landscapes, and educate visitors about agriculture. Agro-tourism started in India in 2004 with the Baramati Agri Tourism Center, led by PadurangTaware, who won a National Tourism Award for this work. The idea spread to other states like Kerala, Goa, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, etc. At present, there are around 90 million farmers in 625,000 villages in India, and agriculture makes up about 26% of the country's economy(Dangi , 2018). Moreover, agrotourism in Japan has gained popularity as it offers tourists a chance to experience rural life and engage in traditional agricultural practices(Japan National Tourism Organization , 2023). The Japanese government has also recognized the potential of agritourism in encouraging the younger generation to start farming. Further, South Africa has also given their attention to the agrotourism concept These tourists not only enjoy agricultural activities such as wine tasting, fruit picking, and farm stays but also contribute to local job creation (South African Tourism, 2023).

Agrotourism: Sri Lankan Overview

Sri Lanka is a developing country in the South Asian region and it is a fertile tropical island with the potential for cultivation and processing of a variety of crops. About fifteen destinations are functioning in agro-tourism such as Hingurakgoda CIC farm, New Zealand farm in Ambewela,etc(Malkanthi & Routray, 2021). According to the survey done by Malkanthi & Routray, (2021), 67% of agro-tourism activities are performed by the private sector or outside investors, 20% by local farmers, and 13% by non-government organizations with local farmers. The motivation behind agro-tourism is to earn an extra income(Gunasekara & Silva, 2022).

There are some theoretical backgrounds behind the study.

An Agritourism Systems Model

This comprehensive model discusses three significant stakeholder groups including agro-tourism providers, visitors, and destination marketing organizations. According to this model, each stakeholder group plays a significant role in agritourism while each group possesses specific needs or requirements in order to fulfill its role in the agritourism system (McGehee, 2007).

Leisure Farm – Life– Seeing Concept

The leisure farm is an emerging and important strategy for farmers, leading to market and product diversification. In the contemporary world, people seek a relaxing and worry-free environment to spend their vacations peacefully. Leisure farm activities can create a positive vibe between farmers and non-farmers. (Lazar, 2018).

Working Farm – Life– Participating Concept

A working farm is a place where agricultural activities are practiced by the visitors. It enables visitors to experience a unique set of agriculture-related activities such as milking a cow, harvesting a crop, and making land (Lazar, 2018).

Challenges

Agrotourism has gained popularity since there are a number of benefits of this concept. However, in a country like Sri Lanka, the agro-tourism sector faces numerous challenges that hinder its growth and sustainability. One of the fundamental challenges in establishing agro-tourism is small or medium size farmlands. The limited land area restricts the variety and scale of the agricultural lands in agro-tourism operational activities. Over and above, there are similar types of natural and agricultural lands in Sri Lanka which leads to intense competition and less attractiveness. On the contrary, most farmers who engage in agro-tourism possess a rudimentary understanding of this concept and its potential. While they have sufficient knowledge of agriculture, there is a significant gap in broader aspects of agro-tourism. Furthermore, these local farmers often lack the indispensable skills that are necessary for undertaking successful agro-tourism. These include language proficiency, landscape management, interpersonal skills, etc.

Moreover, insufficient government support for agro-tourism is a profound challenge. Often, government intervention fails to address key aspects such as policy formulation, quality controls, financial support, promotion and publicity, lack of effort in coordinating with relevant institutions, etc. Agro-tourism is practiced in the countryside with less developed infrastructure. Poor transportation facilities, and inadequate basic amenities hinder the accessibility and attractiveness of agro-tourism destinations as well as restrict the potential for the agro-tourism sector (Malkanathi & Routray, 2021; Kb, et al, 2022; Wang, Hollas, & Chase, 2022).

Methodology

This research followed a qualitative research approach. For this exploratory study, the population comprises the families engaged in agricultural activities in selected Division. The purposive sampling technique was used to select the sample of 20 families, chosen specifically for their direct involvement in agro-tourism activities. The primary data was gathered through in-depth interviews guided by an interview guide and field observations. Thematic analysis was utilized to analyze data, allowing identification and exploration of recurrent themes and patterns that related to challenges faced by these families in the agro-tourism sector. This approach aims to provide a sound understanding of experiences and obstacles encountered by the target population.

Data Analysis

Research Area

Kurupetta is selected as the study area because of its representative blend of agricultural activity and emerging tourism potential. The geographical location of Kurupetta is in the intermediate zone and it is a transition area between the coastal and highland regions. There is a tropical climate that receives significant rainfall, especially during the monsoon periods. The local economy is mainly based on agriculture and most of the residents are engaged in the cultivation of rubber, tea, and a range of fruits, vegetables, and spices.

Table 1. Sample Profile

| Sample Name | No. of Family Members | Monthly Income | Specialized area in agriculture | Size of the Land |
|-------------|-----------------------|-------------------|---|------------------|
| F01 | 04 | 20,000 - 30,000 | Tea and Intercrops such as peppers | ½ Acres |
| F02 | 06 | 45,000 - 50,000 | Tea | ¾ Acres |
| F03 | 03 | 50,000 - 60,000 | Coconut and Pineapple | 2 Acres |
| F04 | 02 | 30,000 - 40,000 | Tea, Peppers, and Lemon | ½ Acres |
| F05 | 05 | 300,000 - 350,000 | Rubber | 3 Acres |
| F06 | 04 | 28,000 - 30,000 | Chena Cultivation includes vegetable, spices and green leaves | ½ Acres |
| F07 | 05 | 180,000 - 200,000 | Rubber and Tea | 2 Acres |
| F08 | 04 | 50,000 - 60,000 | Tea and Banana | ½ Acres |
| F09 | 03 | 15,000 - 20,000 | Tea, Fishing | ¼ Acres |
| F10 | 05 | 70,000 - 80,000 | Tea and Cinnamon (Twice a year) | ½ Acres |
| F11 | 04 | 80,000 - 100,000 | Tea, Peppers and Cinnamon (Twice a year) | ¾ Acres |
| F12 | 03 | 30,000 - 40,000 | Coconut, Tea and Lemon | ½ Acres |
| F13 | 04 | 70,000 - 80,000 | Rubber and Tea | 1 Acres |
| F14 | 05 | 45,000 - 50,000 | Tea, Ginger and Tumeric | ¼ Acres |
| F15 | 04 | 20,000 - 30,000 | Tea | ¼ Acres |
| F16 | 05 | 50,000 - 60,000 | Tea and Peppers | ¼ Acres |
| F17 | 04 | 50,000 - 60,000 | King Coconut and Banana | ½ Acres |
| F18 | 06 | 60,000 - 70,000 | Tea, Cinnamon, Peppers | ¼ Acres |
| F19 | 04 | 150,000 - 180,000 | Tea and Rubber | 2 Acres |
| F20 | 03 | 90,000 - 100,000 | Tea | 2 Acres |

The above illustrates the sample of the research which includes a diverse range of families engaging in agricultural activities in Kurupetta Division. Most of them are engaging in traditional

export crops such as tea, rubber, and coconut. Among them, the majority of farming lands are utilized for tea while cultivating the intercrops simultaneously. Further, the land size is scattered between ¼ Acres and 3 Acres. Each family engaged in similar kinds of agricultural activities but varied in family size, monthly income, and land area.

Findings and Discussion

Referring to the first objective “To identify and analyze the key challenges faced by the agro-tourism sector in Kurupetta Division in Sri Lanka”, several questions were made and the answers of the respondents were evaluated to identify the key challenges.

Limited Land Area

Land is a crucial factor for agricultural activities in any part of the country and its limited availability poses a significant challenge for implementing agro-tourism in rural areas. For instance, F16 noted *“Yeah, the idea is promising, but we are facing a challenge with the land size. To implement these kinds of activities effectively, we will need spaces for different purposes, such as resting areas, dining spots, and scenic viewpoints. So, I think if we have a land like 2 acres this is possible”* Similarly, F12 emphasized *“Imagine that we started these kinds of activities for non-farmers, then we have to facilitate some things like restrooms to ensure their comfort. So, we don't have enough land area to facilitate these things”*. Further, F04 also expressed concern stating, *“It's a really good idea. But as we think, it might worry the people living nearby since homes are close to the farmlands. They might raise concerns about this”*. As noted by respondents, the small size of farmlands restricts the ability to create diverse attractions including resting areas and dining spots which are essential for a better visitor experience. This finding is consistent with the literature that indicates small or medium-sized farmlands limit the variety of agricultural activities and that would impact the attractiveness of agro-tourism destinations (Pushpa,2021: Dangi, 2018).

Inadequate Infrastructure Facilities

Infrastructure facilities are also crucial for the success of agro-tourism as they directly impact the experiences and satisfaction of the visitors. Good roads and transportation networks, adequate lodging options, reliable internet, and mobile networks make it easier for visitors to reach areas. F01 pointed out *“How can we start these things without having proper roads? How can they*

come into the village in this situation? Even you might have already noticed that”. F09 added, “Franklyspeaking, we don't have a stable connection for digital devices in this area. If it is a rainy day, we can't even make a phone call”. Further, F13 also mentioned “I have seen in some Facebook videos when they are participating in activities like plucking tea leaves, harvesting fruits, and so on. They must have a sound internet connection todo so.” F18 also raised concern regarding accommodation saying, “If foreigners come to our village, where are they supposed to stay at night? I don't think there are good hotels and restaurants for them to stay. We can't facilitate that as we are also living in a small house”. Inadequate infrastructure facilities such as poor transportation networks and insufficient shelters for visitors hamper the accessibility of these agricultural areas. According to the findings, the challenges that occur due to unpaved roads and unreliable internet connectivity will deter visitors from coming to the village. Stephan et al., (2022) have emphasized the importance of robust infrastructure in enhancing the interest of agro-tourism. Without adequate infrastructure facilities, the potential for agro-tourism remains underutilized.

Chart

Lack of awareness among farmers

The knowledge of agro-tourism has an impact on the successful application of this concept in rural areas. Most of the farmers are unable to capture how agro-tourism boosts their income and quality of life compared to traditional agricultural activities. Because of that knowledge gap, it would hinder the accessibility to agro-tourism practices and it may result in preventing them from diversifying their income sources. F05 admitted “I never heard about that word before. But my daughter has shown me some videos like planting trees, fishing, harvesting, and fertilizing by foreigners.” Moreover, F20 shared that “I once visited Ganrnoruwa farm with our Govijana Samithi and we were able to see the hard work of farmers up close. We had the chance to participate in some of the farm activities like you said now.” Further, F06 highlighted the potential saying, “Actually, I didn't have much knowledge about these activities before. However, I realized that engaging in them could potentially increase our income. It's a good thing. It is essential to learn more about these practices before we start.” Accordingly, a notable knowledge gap among farmers regarding the benefits of agro-tourism was found during the study. Many of the respondents were unfamiliar with this concept and its potential to improve their quality of life while increasing their income level. This lack of awareness among farmers is

reflected in the literature, which suggests that farmers must have sound knowledge regarding these new agricultural practices. Education initiatives are needed to bridge this gap and encourage farmers' participation in agro-tourism(Gunasekara & Silva, 2022; McGehee, 2007).

Lack of essential skills

In terms of promoting agro-tourism in the countryside, the lack of essential skills among farmers is a significant factor to be considered. Many farmers in rural areas are lagging behind in skills such as language skills, land management, technical skills, hospitality, marketing and advertising, interpersonal skills, etc. Bridging this skill gap can foster a thriving agro-tourism sector and create a win-win situation for both farmers and the local economy. F09 raised concern saying, *“How can we communicate with them in English or any other language? I only completed grade 8. So, it would be a real challenge for me. But I think I can handle local visitors”*.F08 noted *“Then we have to make our farmlands as attractive as possible to them. Right. How can we manage to do those things without having any assistant?”* In addition, F17 expressed his idea saying, *“If we tell the truth, the only thing we can do is farming. For an example, I use a button phone to make a call. With this situation, how are we supposed to do these kinds of activities?”* F18 also expressed his interest saying, *“I don't have any idea how it works. But it seems interesting. If someone trains us to do things we can try them out. We also like to go ahead in our lives.”* Subsequently, the study identified a significant deficiency in essential skills among farmers. Respondents articulated the fact that their ability to communicate with visitors and manage these activities effectively is required to reap the real benefits of agro-tourism. This finding is supported by previous research that emphasized the necessity of skill development for successful agro-tourism practices (Lazar, 2018).

Insufficient government support

The government of a country plays a crucial role in facilitating rural development through the agricultural sector and insufficient government support is a key challenge in stimulating agro-tourism in rural areas. In the form of insufficient government support, inadequate funding, resources, policy framework, infrastructure, and guidance could be identified. This may result in restricting the opportunities for training, skills enhancement, financial management etc. Addressing this challenge is significant in order to foster a vibrant agro-tourism sector. F17

expressed his view, *“Yeah... the government is doing nothing for farmers like us. They do not even distribute the fertilizers properly.”* F02 added *“Even though we ask some officers in some centers that are related to agricultural activities, they don't pay enough attention to our issues. They rarely visit our farmlands. But we can buy some seeds from these centers.”* Further, F04 commented, *“If the government help us, we can do better than this. We also want enough markets to sell our products. Sometimes they pay lower prices for our harvest.”* F07 also expressed his idea regarding the inadequate government support, *“Although there is an agricultural officer in our area, she only gives advice on how to do other agricultural activities and none about the word that you said before.”* Finally, the lack of government support emerged as one of the key challenges faced by the farmers living in this area, highlighting the need for policy formulation, financial assistance, and promotional efforts. Enhanced government engagement could facilitate the necessary infrastructure and a policy framework to encourage sustainable agro-tourism practices.

Accordingly, the findings of the research highlight significant challenges faced by the agro-tourism sector in rural areas. The study identified five key challenges hindering agro-tourism in KurupettaDivision. They are limited land area, inadequate infrastructure facilities, lack of awareness among farmers, lack of essential skills, and insufficient government support.

In conclusion, addressing these challenges through targeted strategies and a well-defined system is crucial for unlocking the potential of agro-tourism in KurupettaDivision and other similar regions.

Agro-tourism, a new avenue for agriculture plus tourism and in this journey from traditional agricultural practices to new innovative practices, the farmers may encounter different challenges. Encouraging and supporting farmers in KurupettaDivision will facilitate rural development as well as their individual development. For that, it is significant to diversify their agricultural activities by introducing new, high-demand crops or livestock that attract visitors. Furthermore, developing unique, themed agro-tourism experiences that highlight the specific cultural and natural heritage of the area would also attract visitors. Implementing targeted training programs for local farmers and agro-tourism initiators should come into the context by focusing on the essential aspects such as infrastructure development and financial support. Based on the research

findings, the potential operators of agro-tourism include the need for skill development that enhance their language proficiency and directly address the issue of communication barriers. To bridge this skill gap, it is required to conduct workshops, onsite experiences, and training programs, provide access to an array of modern tools and data, etc. Moreover, in terms of management skills, it should improve land management, technical skills, hospitality, marketing and advertising, and financial management among farmers by providing knowledge of agribusiness, the technology of promoting, and ongoing support to enhance hospitality and financial management. It enables them to continue a sustained agro-tourism business and interact with visitors.

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