

## Potential of enhancing agro-tourism in agrarian land Gurubeula Matara, Sri Lanka

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### Abstract

There are various forms of activities and resources linked with the agricultural sector towards agro-tourism. Since the tourism sector has been emerging as one of the country's key economic contributors, a link between tourism and agriculture would be mutually complementary for both sectors while rendering potential benefits to the rural farming community. Therefore, this study's objective was to explore an existing case of agro tourism with the intention to find out innovative elements of agro tourism, catalyzers, and obstacles that come in the process of agro-tourism development. The case study methodological approach was applied in this research utilizing interviews and mixed-mode methods, combining in-depth, semi-structured interview questions. Over the years, the step by step progression of tourism activities in Gurubeula was an evolutionary process for which the external influences were minimal. Innovations came from within that is interlocked with the existing system well. There is much potential for agro-tourism development at the site and the incorporation should be done with care with the least disturbance to the system. Further case studies regarding agro tourism will expose unique characteristics of individual cases that will enrich the knowledge base for a local model of agro – tourism development.

*Keywords: agrarian land, agro-tourism, case study and rural development*

### Introduction

The agricultural sector is an economic mainstay and primary national employer in Sri Lanka. Agriculture contributes to 7% of Sri Lanka's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2018 (Economic & Social Statistics in Sri Lanka, 2019:3). However, when Industrial activities have expanded 'agriculture's position as the primary economic engine has been eroded. Compared to the GDP contribution of 26.1% from the industrial sector this is a lesser contribution. However the agricultural sector synthesizes 33% of employment in the country (*Ibid*, 2019:3). This is a higher value compared to 18.3% from the manufacturing sector. This signifies that the employees in the agriculture sector get less per capita income than the manufacturing sector.



These disadvantaged people live in rural areas where agriculture is the mainstay of economic activity. Achieving higher growth in agricultural productivity is a necessary part of economic transformation; it is the only way for the agricultural sector to release labor to other, higher-value-added sectors while maintaining modest growth in rural/agricultural household incomes. In this background, it is necessary to find innovative avenues to enhance income generation in the agricultural sector. Agrotourism is an evolving sector in Sri Lanka, which is still in its infancy. How to make use of this sector more sustainably has still not been explored well. Therefore, this study's objective was to explore an existing case of agro tourism to find out innovative elements of agro tourism, catalyzers, and obstacles that come in the process of agro-tourism development.

### **Literature Review**

Agri-tourism or farm tourism is a type of rural tourism and is highly recognized as a means of farm diversification and an alternative source of farm income (Colton & Bissix, 2005; Byrd & Gibson, 2004). Brumfield and Mafoua (2002) have described agritourism as a "direct marketing activity, that may provide special opportunities to growers to reduce risks via diversification in a competing and urbanizing economic environment, which may share quasi-fixed inputs (e.g., information, machinery, labor, etc.) with other enterprises and enhance business efficiency and profitability." Moreover, agritourism is increasingly used as a diversification strategy to uphold a more diverse and sustainable rural economy and to protect farming incomes against market fluctuation (Phelan & Sharpley, 2010), and it is expected to yield several economic as well as non-economic benefits to farmers, visitors, and communities. In this sense, agri-tourism has been suggested to help family farms stay in business, protect the agricultural heritage, enhance the productivity of farm resources through their recreational use, and even to improve the economic situation of local communities (Nickerson et al., 2001; Ollenburg and Buckley, 2007, Veeck et al., 2006; Wilson et al., 2006). From the farm unit perspective, agritourism is claimed to raise farm revenues and to help other entrepreneurial goals of the farmer, such as the improvement of their quality of life (Barbieri, 2009; McGehee & Kim, 2004; Nickerson et al., 2001; Ollenburg & Buckley, 2007). At the farm level, agri-tourism improves the value of the 'farmer's products through its involvement with the social and cultural context (Nilsson, 2002) and also at the regional level; it can help with rural development by creating new job opportunities and new value-added products. The positive influence of agri-tourism on the local system is shared between diverse economic sectors, as tourist spending relates not only to farms but also to restaurants, crafts,



commerce, and other firms located in the region. Furthermore, the immediate boost made by tourist spending creates multiplying effects in the local economic system as a whole (Fleischer & Tchetchik, 2005).

Further, agri-tourism can sustain the history and culture of agriculture and the environment by preserving open spaces on farms (Bruch, 2008). However, in Sri Lanka, agro-tourism is at an infant stage and is poorly organized. In most of the farms, infrastructure facilities are not sufficiently available. Therefore, the provision of necessary infrastructure such as road facilities, clean water, and electricity is very important. Moreover, there is low awareness of agro-tourism and its attractiveness with farmers and other stakeholders. Making them well aware of agro tourism and creating a positive attitude towards agro-tourism opportunities is essential to have agro-tourism operations. Although farmers have basic knowledge and skills in farming, they are lacking in business management skills, namely entrepreneurship, management skills, and interpersonal and communication skills etc. Therefore, education and training in these areas are very much crucial for successful agro-tourism operations. However, enterprises included in the business should not be subject to the same hazards or not to the same degree, if this strategy is more effective in risk management (OECD, 2009b). It has diverse agro-climatic conditions suitable for growing different types of crops, fruits, vegetables and trees. Sri Lanka's complex paddy cultivation systems (developed over 2,500 years), huge and ancient irrigation tanks, many tea and rubber plantations, milking cattle on dairy farms, having a go at plucking tea leaves using the traditional bag-on-the-back' method, rubber tapping under expert guidance, or even working in many scenic paddy fields (plowing using bullocks, work on paddy nurseries, transplanting seedlings in muddy fields) of Sri Lanka are just some examples of its diverse agricultural developments (Advisory Panel on Community Based Sustainable Tourism in Sri Lanka, 2008).

### **Methodology**

The potential of enhancing agrarian land in agro-tourism development is examined through a single case study, utilizing Grubeula, Matara, as an area of concentration. As some researchers have pointed out, case studies can be precious as they can expand practical understanding, sharpen critical judgment, and are incredibly valuable for research on the enhancing agrarian land of tourism (Bramwell, 2011). This exploratory study utilized the mixed-mode method, combining in-depth, semi-structured interview questions. This method was selected as the researchers wanted to understand the role of enhancing agrarian land in agro-tourism development. A case study is increasingly recognized as a valuable research strategy for studying tourism



(Xiao & Smith, 2006). A case study design is concerned with the detailed examination of a single case. It is commonly associated with qualitative research techniques, though it can be used in quantitative approaches. The case study can seek to explore a topic where there has been little prior knowledge or understanding. The key element is the definition of the case could be an individual, an organization, an event or geographical area. With relevance to this research, prior knowledge is sparing. As there are fewer agro-tourism-related places in the country the research base is almost non existing. In this background, the study of individual cases in case studies would be the most relevant form of research to begin exploring the practice of agro-tourism in Sri Lanka. Stake (1995:11) defines a case study as studying the particularity and complexity of a single case coming to understand its activity within an important circumstance. Burns (1997:365), in the case study focus of attention, is the case in its idiosyncratic complexity not on the whole population of cases.

In selecting a case, therefore, you usually use purposive judgmental or information-oriented sample techniques. It provides an overview and in-depth understanding of a case(s), process and interactional dynamics within a supply but cannot claim to make any generalization to a population beyond cases similar to those studied. In this design, you are attempting not to select random sample but a case that can provide you with as much information as possible to understand the case totality. When studying an episode or an instance, you attempt to gather information from all available source to understand it in its entirety. If the focus of your study is a group or community, you should spend sufficient time building a good rapport with its members before collecting information about them. Though you can use a single method of in-depth interviewing, using multiple methods to collect data, such as obtaining information from secondary records, gathering data through observation, and collecting information through focus groups and group interviews, is an essential aspect of a case study. However, it is important that you continue to consider the case as a single entity at the time of analysis. Case study research has much strength. It clarifies our thinking and links abstract ideas in specific ways with the specific case we observe in detail. It also enables us to calibrate and adjust our abstract concepts' measures to actual lived experience and widely accept the standard of evidence. First, as we become very familiar with the in-depth details of specific cases, we can create/ build new theories and reshape current theories, complex cases or new situations.



## Discussions

The case studied in this research is Grubeula, an agrarian land developed as agro-tourism destination. It is situated in Morawaka, in Matara of Southern Sri Lanka. For a tourist it is an hour and a half drive from Galle along the Matara-Deniyaya road. The agrarian land is twenty-eight archers and one person owns it. The land has been descended from generations of the Abeywickrama family. The legacy of this historical piece of land started to change in a novel direction from in the 1990s. When the administrators decided to develop the land to enhance financial gains, they recruited a new staff headed by Mr. S.M.P.MPK Padmalal as the land manager since 1998.

In the initial period, there were many efforts taken to uplift the productivity of agricultural activities. Novel avenues have been introduced to increase income. One such effort was to produce free laid eggs. They were able to rear a hundred chickens per each acre and ultimately, it was two thousand eight hundred chickens for the twenty-eight acres. They have maintained the authenticity of their production with many difficulties. However, the chickens were succumbed to death by an infection. As the chickens were moving freely in the land, it was tough to control the infection. Being honest and authentic has been not in favor for them most of the occasion in their development process. A significant hazard in Grubeula land's history was the destruction of it during flood in 2003. At any difficult time, they have not abandoned their policy of organic farming. But they failed to sell their products via super-markets and small shops. After all, they could not face the market competition from non-organic vegetables that had a good outlook. The most immense courage they had to continue with organic farming was administrators' steady policy that persisted. The primary mode they have used to resurrect their organic farm through these hazards is community education via tourism activities. Mr. Sampath, the regional agricultural instructor in the area, interfered in educating people, especially school children, through the education programme conducted in Gurubeula farm. They launched programmes for school children. They visited Grubeula two days per week in the region. The students were educated on the health aspects of organic food and its other benefits. The visit was enriching with demonstrations and activities.

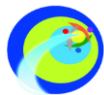
Along with those, an out-let was started near the main road to sell the farm's product. It has been a success. Diversification of products was also initiated and cows were reared for milk. Selling fresh milk was also a challenge because there were many myths about drinking fresh milk, such as it induces



"flam'. The educational programme again utilized to take the healthy message of fresh milk to the people. Free distribution of milk for the visitors coming to visit the Grubeula was such an effort. Distribution has also been extended to the maternity clinics and school seminars. That project also was a success and they had good acceptance from the community. The milk product diversifies into yogurt and ice-cream. The high quality and reliability made it popular among people. The outlet has been expanded more to incorporate diversified products. Building a restaurant attracted tourists more and provided more facilities to increase visitor time. With the enhancement of tourist activities, they have added other tourism elements like an auditorium, natural swimming pool. They had added an advantage in promoting tourism. The farm is situated near a great natural tourism Attractions, the Sinharaja rain forest, Nilvala River, Morawak mountain and Gongala. They have a guest room facility and provide tour packages to these places as well. We have conducted nearly 10 informal interviews with visitors to Gurubeula. Most of them have visited the place on their way to several other tourism destinations towards Deniyaya. The natural pond has been the most attractive place in Gurubewula as it was rated by the interviewees. This implied that the activities that provide entertainment and fun can serve as sources of additional income and potential attractors. The visitors have also appreciated the food stall for its authenticity and they named it a rare opportunity of that type. Following table shows the currently functioning activities and several other potentials that have been identified concerning tourism promotion at Gurubeula.

Table 1. Functioning activities and several other potentials tourism promotion at Gurubeula, Matara

Activities	Currently available activities	Potentials
Agro-based activities	Agro tours, farm tours/ farm demonstrations	participation in farming activities (pick, cut, gather or grow on your own), stocked ponds for fishing, wine tasting and cattle rides Farm/Ranch stays,
Cuisine and accommodation	unique dining experiences Bread and breakfast, agro-catering business, organic foodstuff facilities to consume farm products in the farm	picnic areas cookery classes and cookery demonstrations
Entertainment and educational activities	Nature trails, watching wildlife, kayaking,	hiking, boating, museums/ heritage, festivals and special events (range from food and craft to nature, flowers, art, heritage and cultural themes) fairs, Starting diploma course on Agro-tourism
Selling of farm products On-farm direct sales	Sale in special events Direct and indirect sales of value-added products	U-pick operations or roadside stands Off-the-farm direct sales - 'Farmers' markets, county and state fairs,



Supplementary  
products and  
activities

Natural swimming pool

Sale of village-based handicraft  
activities related to local enterprises  
Wildlife  
photography

Compiled by authors from Kizos and Isoifides (2007) and Beus (2008).

The evolution of agro-tourism in Grubeula has been started not as external enforcement but as an internal requirement. There are some decisive factors for establishing and developing agro-tourism ventures such as sites near tourism attractions / natural attractions, physical resources and infrastructure, safe and clean environment and sanitary facilities, strong networks and partnerships, strong networks and partnerships, marketing opportunities and marketing plan human resource, diversification of activities skills and awareness, government incentives, directions and institutional support. About Gurubeula, most of these decisive factors were in operation to establish the agro-tourism ventures except government incentives, directions and institutional support. So agro-tourism development in Gurubeula is a model of bottom-up approach where the ideas for development and progress came from within.

## Conclusions

The twenty-eight-acre Gurubeula agrarian land was meant for organic farming. Tourism has been an intrinsic factor in the development process of the Gurubeula farm from the 1990s. Tourism activities become a promoting and rescue avenue for enhancing organic farming when it was at stake. Tourism has neither been a byproduct of their agricultural activities nor was an external enforcement. The ideas for novel tourism activities or product have been emanated from the people in the system itself. The case study of the Gurubeula concludes that agro-tourism has been an alternative path for agrarian people to overcome the economic deprivation. The popular practice of empowering by Government or NGOs has not taken place in the development process of Gurubeula. The success has come from within and the empowerment was from below. There are five main areas that Five main areas need to be further addressed by agro tourism sector in Sri Lanka, specifically policies formulation, marketing and advertisement, financing, access to information, and infrastructure development. The results also indicate that access to information for education and training purposes is key to the future success of agrotourism development in Sri Lanka. Providing education to small businesses will play an essential role in the future success of agro-tourism development. Previous research has shown that the quality of service received by tourists will reflect on the perception of the price paid, influencing their value; thus, impacting destination competitiveness. For cities/destinations to develop and become competitive, education and training



will become a key factor in creating a destination niche. A similar point was made by Semrad et al. (2014), who stated that the provision of education and training on the subject of tourism would benefit local tourist operators and their employees, increasing the quality of their products, and hopefully leading to a larger market share. Next, an improvement to the overall bureaucratic system is needed.

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