

MAPPING TOURIST VISITOR EXPERIENCE USING TRIP ADVISOR REVIEWS: THE CASE OF HURULU ECO PARK

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ABSTRACT

Tourist experience mapping is an emerging research area in tourism that has received little attention in Sri Lanka. Therefore, the present study aimed to identify how tourist experiences were constructed in a natural park during the pre-pandemic era. Hurulu Eco-Park, a popular elephant-watching site in Sri Lanka, was selected for this study. This study purposively selected and analyzed 217 TripAdvisor reviews. The key inclusion criteria for selecting the reviews were written in English between January 1, 2015, and December 31, 2019. Data were collected in the last quarter of 2022. Netnography was adopted as the key research approach in this study, and manual thematic analysis was performed to analyze the data. The key themes identified in this study were natural attractions, services, infrastructure and amenities, prices, and perceived experience. The "natural attractions" theme was constructed with two focused codes: elephants and park, while the "services" theme constituted Jeeps, drivers, and guides. The third theme, "infrastructure and amenities," included road conditions and ticket counters, while the fourth theme, "price," carried only one focused code, price. The fifth theme, "perceived experience," encompasses the type of experience and worth. While the overall experience was positive, the study identified areas of potential enhancement. This study recommends promoting sustainable park management in Sri Lanka by managing overcrowding, enhancing wildlife viewing, addressing accessibility and infrastructure, and improving visitor satisfaction. It also emphasizes a comprehensive sustainability plan covering waste management, water conservation, energy efficiency, and responsible wildlife tourism. These measures aim to build on the park's strengths, address its weaknesses, and ensure continuous improvement for future visitors. This research provides valuable insights, and the overall findings paint a positive picture of visitors' encounters with the park.

Keywords: Hurulu eco-park, netnography, Sri Lanka elephants, sustainable tourism, tourist experience mapping