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Does Destination Loyalty Impact Eco-Tourism? Evidence from International Millennial Tourists in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

This research note considers ways in which we may better understand how loyal international millennials are to the ecotourism destinations in Sri Lanka. Millennial is referred to individuals who reached adulthood around the turn of the 21st century, and millennial tourists could be identified to pay more for sustainability compared to other generations. According to F. Buffa (2015) little research has been done to date on millennials and tourism. Objectives of this study are to investigate the profile of the international millennial tourist towards eco-tourism, to determine the effect of eco-tourism perception and destination loyalty on eco-tourism, and to determine the most influential dimension of eco-tourism perception on destination loyalty towards eco-tourism in Sri Lanka. Judgemental sampling technique was used for the study to select the sample. Data was collated from 150 international millennial tourists at Ella and Horton Plains through a structured questionnaire. Descriptive analysis and multiple regression analysis were used for the study. According to the findings, most of the millennial tourists do not favour Sri Lanka as the preferred eco-tourism destination, and they highlighted that resources of the eco-tourism destination is one of the most influential factors, which tends to attract tourists to the destination. Under the recommendations, maintenance of a proper waste disposal system, use of effective promotional methods, convergence of facilities, implementation of the rules and regulations of the country are proposed. Further, sustainable tourism practices need to be adopted by the eco tourism destinations to enhance the destination loyalty towards Sri Lanka.

1. Introduction

According to Sri Lanka tourism Development Authority, average tourist arrivals in Sri Lanka has been 51736.89 from 1977 to 2019, reaching an all-time high of 253, 169 in December of 2018. Tourism plays a crucial role in supporting economic growth and development, sustaining employment and generating foreign currency receipts (Alhowaish, 2016). Attitude of tourists has gradually changed from one that emphasizes beach tourism to one that demands more natural, social and cultural experiences and interactions with locals. Ecotourism is responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education (Blangy and Mehta, 2006). As a result, the concept of ecotourism emerged with the collaboration of nature tourism and cultural tourism, as a niche market in the world (Silva, 2004). Targeting young people may enable to create bonds with the natural environment, while promoting proenvironmental attitudes and behaviours. (Cini, Leon, and Passafaro, 2012).

Howe and Strauss (1991) defined millennial cohort as consisting of individuals born between 1982 and 2004. Because from all the outbound tourists of the world, a survey manifested that millennials dominate more than 22% of the world outbound tourists (WTO, 2015). Pew Research Centre (2011) conducted a survey and highlighted that the millennial generation is more concerned about the environment than other generations. Sri Lanka is a small island, but it is rich in its variety of fauna and flora. Since Sri Lanka is rich with much cultural and natural diversity, it has the potential to develop the ecotourism concept better than other destinations for the benefit of the Sri Lankan economy and community. The natural resource base of the country as a capital good is not being well utilized by the existing tourism system of Sri Lanka (Wicramanayake, 1992). It means that the natural beauty of the country not being well utilized in an optimally (Vidanage, Kotagama, and Abeygunawardena, 1995). Being one of the 25 biodiversity hot spots in the world, and having the highest biodiversity per 10,000 km2 in Asia, Sri Lanka is an ideal destination for ecotourism with a vibrant resource base for ecotourism (Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources, 2002).

Because Sri Lanka has the potential to become best eco-tourism destination, it is very important to consider about the youth travellers and their perception regarding eco-tourism in Sri Lanka. According to Federica Buffa (2015) designing strategies that enable destinations to catch this tourist segment is significantly important for competitiveness. Therefore, identifying the perception of the young generation towards eco-tourism is very important for the future of the country. Loyalty is a concept which is closely related to tourists' satisfaction,

and as a result even with the ideas there is a high degree of satisfaction with loyal tourists (Oppermann, 2000). Although several studies of young tourist market segmentation have been carried out, the evidence gathered so far has not been used to analyse perception and destination loyalty toward ecotourism among the younger generation. This is surprising because youth tourist sector, aged 16 to 24, which accounts for 20% of the international tourism market, is growing faster than most of the other travel segments, with a global volume growth of 3% to 5% a year (WTO, 2008). Wicramasinghe (2012) asserted that Sri Lanka lacks a mechanism to capture the official data to show the size of the eco-tourism market in Sri Lanka. Similar to the situation with global tourism statistics, official tourism statistics in Sri Lanka also have not identified eco tourists as a separate tourist category. Since ecotourism has not yet been properly developed as a market in Sri Lanka, it is difficult to differentiate eco tourists from other types of tourists (Rathnayake, 2007).

1.1. Research Problem

The percentage of consumers who are willing to pay more for sustainable brands that showed commitment to social and environmental values went up from 55% to 66% between 2014 and 2015. Millennials pay more for sustainability compared with other generations (CREST, 2016). Further, the research conducted by Pew Research Centre in 2011 shows that millennial generation is more concerned about the environment than other generations. With their proenvironmental attitude, the percentage of youth tourists has also gradually increased. According to McKinnon (2013), UNWTO has revealed that around 20% of the 940 million international tourists worldwide each year are youth travellers. Eco tourism is potentially the fastest growing segment in the international market. Previous researchers have highlighted that there is a significant potential for the development of eco-tourism in Sri Lanka (Vidanage, Kotagama, and Abeygunawardena, 1995). Sri Lankan tourism industry is showing a strong revival following the end of civil war in May 2009. However, at present Sri Lanka performs far below its potential in eco-tourism (Rathnayake, 2007). Compared to Sri Lanka, other Asian, African, and European countries have much demand for eco-tourism (Rangana, 2015). According to F. Buffa (2015) little research has been done to date on millennials and tourism, but it is a particularly interesting area of study given that millennials are "one of the largest consumer cohorts today with some of the highest levels of discretionary spend at their disposal". Since there are adequate resources available in the country, and now young generation is more concerned about the environment than other generations. Therefore, to uplift eco-tourism in Sri Lanka it is very important that research is conducted about the perception and destination loyalty of international millennial tourists towards eco-tourism in Sri Lanka. The following are the objectives of this study:

1.2. Research Objectives

- To identify the profile of the international millennial tourists towards eco-tourism in Sri Lanka.
- To determine the impact of eco-tourism perception dimensions on destination loyalty of international millennial tourists towards eco-tourism in Sri Lanka.
- To determine the most influential dimension of eco-tourism perception that effects destination loyalty towards eco-tourism in Sri Lanka.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Tourism and Eco-tourism

Tourism is widely believed to be the most rapidly growing global industry. According to the UNWTO annual report of 2014, over 1.1 billion tourists have travelled internationally. The number of overnight international tourists has increased by 4.4% with the Americas, Asia, the Pacific and the Middle East manifesting the highest growth rates. From 25 million tourists in the early 50s, it has increased up to 673 million tourists in 2000, which means that it has multiplied by 26 times during that period. Sri Lankan tourism became a booming industry after the war. "After ending thirty years of the terrorism problem in 2009, the tourist arrival has increased gradually" (Wijesundara and Gunanapala, 2016).

Niche tourism is an emergent form of tourism. Niche tourism comes from the concept of "Special interest tourism" in the 1980s (Weiler and Hall, 1992). Special interest tourism targets homogeneous tourists who have similar interests, such as ecotourism and photographical tourism (Stebbins, 1982). In 1999 Scheyvens revealed that tourists have a growing desire to travel to wilderness. Although the market is hard to quantify, the trend confirms a strong consumer awareness and enthusiasm for the ecotourism experience. However, there is considerable debate over what ecotourism really means. In 1991 the Board of Directors of the International Ecotourism Society (TIES) based in the U.S. defined ecotourism as "Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of the local people". Previous researches have also suggested that as eco-tourism is concerned with environmental education, tourism education, and respect for local communities, interpretation seems to be an

2.2. Global and Sri Lankan view of Eco-tourism

According to World Tourism Organization, ecotourism is believed to be the fastest growing tourism segment (Buckley, 1994; Deaden and Harron, 1994). Since the 1980's, ecotourism has become the fastest growing segment within the tourism industry by attracting millions of

tourists and rising to over \$335 billion a year worldwide (Arlen, 1995). It was suggested in 2004 that eco-friendly tourism was growing three times faster globally than the tourism industry as a whole (WTO 2004, cited in TIES 2006). Ecotourism is a small but fast growing industry working within a niche market. In terms of land area Sri Lanka is only a small island, but it rich in its variety of fauna and flora. Since ecotourism is potentially the fastest growing segment in the international market, and it holds great potential for Sri Lanka as a means of conserving biological diversity and promoting the sustainable use of bio-diversity, many hoteliers tend to practice the concept as a novel market-oriented concept based on ecotourism. Therefore, global coordinated marketing campaigns were launched to attract eco tourists by focusing on their needs and wants profitably (Mid-term strategic plan for Sri Lanka tourism 2002-2004). In 2000, some selected countries such as Costa Rica, Ecuador, Belize, Kenya, South Africa, and Hawaii had high contribution to the national income when compared to Sri Lanka. (Lindberg et al, 2001). According to Wadippuli Arachchi et al. (2015), other Asian, African, and European countries have more demand for ecotourism and eco resorts compared to Sri Lanka.

2.3. Eco Tourist

Consumer research shows that the eco-tourism market is extremely beneficial, and is one of the fastest growing markets in tourism (UNEP, 1998). Studies have shown that eco-tourists are wealthier, better educated, more mature, and more environmentally focused in comparison to other tourists (UNEP, 1998). Wight (2001), Weaver and Lowton (2002) and Swain (2004) found out that eco-tourists are more likely to be female as they were talking about an 'eco-feminist approach' to manage ecotourism. Many studies show that women are more concerned when it comes to environmental issues due to their mother hood attitude (Mida, 2009). Education is also a factor to take into consideration regarding eco-tourists. According to Hvenegaard and Dearden (1998), and to Backman and Potts (1993), 50% of eco-tourists have higher education than other consumers or general tourists. Regarding the jobs of eco-tourists, Backman and Potts (1993) also discovered that 35% of eco-tourists were in the professional or managerial occupation group. According to Sarah et al., (2013) youngest people prefer to travel with friends or family. People who like to travel alone the most are young adults from 26 to 35. In general, the theory stated that the duration of the eco-tourism visit is between 8 to 14 days (Fair wings)

2.4. Millennials

The term Millennial is usually considered to apply to individuals who reached adulthood around the turn of the 21st century. Millennials are also called generation Y (Guardian News and Media Limited, 2017). Howe and Strauss define the millennial cohort as consisting of

individuals born between 1982 and 2004. There is research conducted by Pew Research Centre noted that Millennials are more concerned about environment than other generations. The UNWTO underlined the growing importance of the young tourist segment (compared to other market segments), in terms of both tourist flow and spending power. According to previous research regarding Millennials, about 80% of participants expressed willingness to experience eco-tourism in natural protected areas (Cini et al, 2012). Data from the UNTWO and WYSE Travel Confederation supports these findings, describing youth travellers as "paving the way for responsible tourism". According to Wang (2015) majority of eco-tourists belonged to the young generation. Previous researches showed that young generation prefers more to protect the local environment, support the culture than other generations (Buffa, 2015: Talbott, 2012).

2.5. Destination Loyalty

Destination loyalty is defined as the plethora of feelings and attitudes that encourage tourists to revisit a particular destination. However, in the context of travel and tourism, a review of literature reveals an abundance of studies on destination loyalty; destination image and tourist satisfaction have not been thoroughly investigated. Destination loyalty is desired by destination providers, because it secures the relationship between destination providers and visitors when visitors are faced with increasingly attractive destination competitive offers or by their own short comings (Jayasinghe, 2013). Rajesh (2013) developed a "holistic model for destination loyalty". The model, suggests that overall destination loyalty is influenced by the perceptions that tourists have before travelling to the destination. Rajesh (2013) mentioned that there are the earlier studies' results that reveal that tourist perception, destination image, and tourist satisfaction directly influence destination loyalty. Yoon and uysal (2005) and Chi and Qu (2008) noted revisit intension, positive word of mouth, and recommendation as indicators of loyalty.

2.6. Ecotourism Perception

Perception is immediate awareness. To perceive something is to become directly or immediately aware of it. For instance, through our senses we perceive or become aware of the objects, events, and persons in the surrounding environment. Perception amounts to apprehension or intuition. How people perceive their physical and social environment is an important question for the contemporary eco-tourism operators. Perceptions of tourists of a destination correspond to the perceived contribution of the different tourism services to be found there: accommodation, food, transport, and more (Gallarza et al, 2002). Eco-tourism is a type of tourism activity that reduces environmental degradation in the process of economic development, and supports environmental conservation, social justice, and environmental

education as its major principles. To implement these principles, perception of eco-tourism should be developed first, not only of the local residents, but also of the tourists participating in eco-tourism. Chan and Baum (2007) have revealed that eco-tourists' perception is multidimensional in nature and consists of participation in eco-activities, interaction with service staff, socialization with other eco-tourists, and acquiring information. According to Wang (2015) eco-tourism perception dimensions were named "resources and content," "environmental education and interpretation," "giving back to the community," "public-private partnership," and "the concept of sustainable development". The results of the regression analysis showed that visitors who supported "giving back to the community" had higher levels of eco-tourism satisfaction. (Baral et al, 2012) in which no significant relationship was found between visitors' perceptions of eco-tourism and their satisfaction, Coghlan (2012) explained that the weak links might be derived from the complex system of cause and effect, and hence to become "messy" as noted by McCool (2009).

2.7. Perception and Destination Loyalty

According to Rajesh (2013), the destination loyalty construct is influenced by, word of mouth promotion, intentions to revisit, and recommending to others. The earlier study results revealed that tourist perception, destination image and tourist satisfaction directly influence destination loyalty. Hence, destination loyalty comes from tourist perception, destination image and tourist satisfaction. It reveals that tourist perception directly influences destination loyalty.

2.8. Conceptual Framework

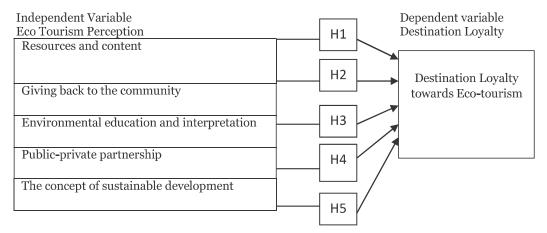


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Source: Developed by researcher based on literature review

2.9. Hypothesis development

- H₁- There is an impact of 'Resources and content' on destination loyalty towards ecotourism.
- H₂- There is an impact of 'giving back to the community' on destination loyalty towards eco-tourism.
- H₃ There is an impact of 'Environmental education and interpretation' on destination loyalty towards eco-tourism.
- H₄- There is an impact of 'public-private partnership' on destination loyalty towards eco-tourism.
- H₅- There is an impact of 'the concept of sustainable development' on destination loyalty towards eco-tourism.

3. Methodology

All international millennial tourists who visit eco-tourism destinations in Sri Lanka were considered as the population of this study. Researcher selected the sample of 150 from the population for collection of data, and to check the response of the international millennial tourist towards eco-tourism. Data was collected from Ella and Horton plains eco-tourism destinations. From each destination data was collected from 75 respondents. Judgmental sampling technique was utilized for the study. Ella and Horton plains were selected for data collection based on the below reasons: the survey conducted by Dilshan (2016) highlighted that among all the tourists who visit Ella, the majority visited for nature and adventure based activities. The unique climate in Ella and the high percentage of oxygen (O2) in Ella are major reasons for its popularity among nature lovers and eco-tourists. There are mainly two types of visitors in Horton plains national park, those are the eco tourist and the generalist (Rathnayake and Gunawardena, 2014). According to previous researches Horton plains has high eco-tourism, and 55% of the total surveyed visitors of the survey are mainly visiting the Horton Plains Park with the purpose of nature tourism (Nazeema and Kotagama, 20107; Breuste, Jayathung, 2010). According to Wicramasinghe (2012) there are no official tourism statistics to show the size of the eco-tourism market in Sri Lanka. Similarly, to the global tourism statistics, official tourism statistics in Sri Lanka also have not identified eco tourists as a separate tourist category (Rathnayake, 2007). As the data collection instrument, a structured questionnaire filled by the respondent would be used. In order to achieve the objectives of this research the researcher conducted a descriptive analysis and a regression analysis.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Descriptive analysis

According to the result and discussion the majority of international millennial tourists were female, same as in the literature (women are more concerned about eco-tourism) (Mida, 2009). The highest proportioned age group was 26-35 years. Majority of the international millennials were single. When considering about the region of the tourists, more than third of fourth were from the Western Europe region. Generally, the majority of international ecotourism consumers are European, North American and Japanese (UNEP, 1998). According to Hvenegaard and Dearden (1998), and to Backman and Potts (1993), 50% of eco-tourists possess a higher level of education than other consumers or general tourists. According to the education level of the tourists it can be concluded that, most of them were educated people. Since majority of them had graduated from a university. Majority of the millennial tourists belonged to the professional category. Most of the international millennial tourists liked to travel alone. Majority of the millennial tourists were influenced by travel agencies and tour guides as the source of information to select the eco-tourism destination. When considering the length of stay in Sri Lanka, half of them stayed more than one week. When considering about the eco-tourism experience profile of the respondents, the same proportion of respondents answered that they had visited eco-tourism destinations in the world twice or thrice, except Sri Lanka. When considering the most preferred eco-tourism destination in the world, most of them were answered Costa Rica as their preferred eco-tourism destination; Borneo, Galapagos, South Africa were also mentioned. Based on their preference, Sri Lanka was the attractive among all other destinations. The results are quite balanced, since according to the previous researchers other Asian, African, and European countries have more demand for ecotourism and eco resorts than Sri Lanka (Wadippuli Arachchi et al., 2015). The majority of international millennials same scenario was applicable for the Frequency of Previous experiences regarding Sri Lanka as an eco-tourism destination. That means the highest proportion of tourists that come to Sri Lanka for eco-tourism was belonged to the 'never visited category' (46 percent). Their most preferred eco-tourism destination in Sri Lanka was Horton plains. When considering the level of awareness, a high proportion of tourists had heard a little bit about eco-tourism activities within Sri Lanka. The most preferred eco-tourism activity within Sri Lanka was wild life safari.

4.2. Diagnostic tests (validity tests)

In the regression model there are some assumptions. These assumptions are tested as a diagnostic test to improve the validity of regression model. In here the researcher used independent of residuals (Auto correlation/ Serial correlation), Multicollinearity test,

Heteroscedasticity test, Relationship between independent variables and residual tests.

4.3. Regression analysis

In order to identify the best model and impact of the variables, it was tested by using linear regression analysis. The process of performing a regression allows to confidently determine which factors matter the most, which factors can be ignored, and how these factors influence each other.

Table 1: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.940 ^a	.884	.880	.11924

Source: SPSS output from field information

Table 2: Analysis of Variance

Model	Mean Square	F	Sig.	
Regression	2.931	206.310	0.000	

Source: SPSS output from field information

According to the model summary, R Value is 0.940. This interprets the joint association between independent variables and the dependent variables. As the coefficient is more than 0.7, there is a strong association jointly with eco-tourism perception dimensions and destination loyalty. In this study, R Square for the model is derived as 0.884. It suggests that 88.4% of variation in destination loyalty towards eco-tourism is explained by eco-tourism perception dimensions. According to the regression ANOVA result, P value is 0.000. It is less than 0.05. The model is highly significant. It means that the model is appropriate and eco-tourism perception dimensions jointly influence destination loyalty towards eco-tourism.

According to the analysed output of Table 7, constant (60) was 0.623 which implies that, while all eco-tourism perception dimensions remain zero, destination loyalty towards eco-tourism is 0.623. P- Value of constant term was 0.000, which states that it was statistically significant at the 0.05 level of significance. In addition, all five beta coefficient values represented positive values; hence, it is obvious that there is a positive effect between eco-tourism perception dimensions and destination loyalty towards eco-tourism.

Out of eco-tourism perception dimensions there were only two dimensions that had significant impact on destination loyalty towards eco-tourism. The dimensions were

"resource and content" and "the concept of sustainable development". Therefore, it implies that "resource and content" dimension positively affects destination loyalty towards ecotourism, and "the concept of sustainable development" dimension also positively affects destination loyalty towards eco-tourism.

Table 3: Regression Coefficients of Independent Variables

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardize d Coefficients	_	Sig.
_	В	Std. Error	Beta	_	
(Constant)	.631	.199		3.177	.002
Resource and content	.735	.026	.902	28.289	.000
Giving back to community Environmental education	.013	.025	.017	.529	.598
and interpretation	.023	.029	.026	.781	.436
Public-private partnership The concept of	.028	.037	.025	.766	.445
sustainable development	.074	.033	.069	2.234	.027

a. Dependent Variable: Destination Loyalty Source: SPSS output from field information

$$DL = 0.631 + 0.735 (RC) + 0.013 (GC) + 0.023 (EI) + 0.028 (PP) + 0.074 (SD)$$

According to the analysis it was found that "giving back to community", "environmental education and interpretation", and "private-public partnership" have no significant impact on destination loyalty towards eco-tourism. Since the P-value was not less than 0.05, these dimensions do not individually affect destination loyalty towards eco-tourism, but these dimensions jointly influenced it. According to the regression result, the Standard coefficient β value of resource and content is 0.919. It was the highest value among all dimensions. Therefore, the most influential dimension, which affects destination loyalty towards ecotourism, is "resource and content".

Conclusively, the regression analysis implies that international millennial tourists who are satisfied with "resource and content" had higher levels of destination loyalty towards ecotourism in Sri Lanka. Based on the research results, millennial tourists with a greater perception of eco-tourism are likely to experience greater destination loyalty, especially in the area of "resource and content". If international millennial tourists can add value to the local natural environment, helps to get experiences regarding local history and culture, identify contains issues regarding conservation and environment protection and increases the awareness of the area's natural and cultural systems can be converted into destination loyalty towards eco-tourism with their visit to the Sri Lanka. According to the previous researches, it

is understood that the young generation prefers to protect the local environment, and support the culture (Buffa, 2015; Talbott, 2012). It implies that millennial generation is more concern about the indicators of the "resource and content".

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1. Conclusion

According to the research findings the majority of international millennial tourists in the sample were female, age was 26-35 years, and the marital status was single. The region of the tourists was Western Europe regions, most of them were educated people, had graduated from university, and employment status was in the professional category. Majority liked to travel alone, and sources of information to select the eco-tourism destination were travel agencies and tour guides. Considering about length of stay in Sri Lanka, half of them stayed more than one week. Eco-tourism experience profile of respondents: the same proportion of respondents answered that had visited eco-tourism destinations in the world twice or thrice, except Sri Lanka. Respondents named Costa Rica as their preferred eco-tourism destination. That means the highest proportion of tourists that come to Sri Lanka for eco-tourism belonged to the 'never visited category' (46 percent). Their most preferred eco-tourism destination in Sri Lanka was Horton plains. Awareness about eco-tourism activities within Sri Lanka was highlighted as "Heard a little bit". Most preferred eco-tourism activity within Sri Lanka was wild life safari.

According to the findings destination loyalty of international millennial tourists was mainly affected by "resource and content", and "the concept of sustainable development" dimensions. "Giving back to community", "environmental education and interpretation", and "private-public partnership" dimensions jointly influenced destination loyalty towards ecotourism. The most influential dimension that affected destination loyalty towards ecotourism is resource and content. It implies that international millennial tourists who were satisfied with "resource and content" had higher levels of destination loyalty towards ecotourism in Sri Lanka.

5.2. Recommendations

According to the research findings, most of the international millennial tourists mentioned Costa Rica as their preferred eco-tourism destination. Only a small number of visitors preferred Sri Lanka as a eco-tourism destination. Most of the respondents highlighted that the cleanliness of the eco-tourism destinations was not at a satisfactory level. Therefore, there should be proper procedures to maintain the eco-tourism destinations. The owners must

maintain clean trails, maintain proper waste disposal procedures, use separate bins for the wastages, minimize the air, water, sound, pollution within the destination. Other than that they suggested to develop a legal environment including rules and regulations, to improve the quality of eco-tourism activities in the country, to use technological methods to promote the destination, to improve the quality of the train network, to maintain the entrance cost for some eco-destinations, to introduce awareness programmes for accommodation owners of the country, and to develop the accommodation facility according the real eco-tourism concept. Since eco-tourism is responsible travel to natural areas, to protect the nature is a responsibility of both the visitors and also the local people.

Resource and content had significant impact on destination loyalty towards eco-tourism. Therefore, millennial tourists are more concerned about resources and contents of the destination. The following are suggestions to improve the attractiveness of the destination: providing adequate infrastructure and facilities (Sanitary, Health, accommodation), striving to understand the social and ecological use of an area through appropriate management and research, developing system framework to continuously evaluate the impact of eco-tourism on the resource base and link to other resource conservation measures, ensuring the cleanliness of the destination.

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