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ECOTOURISM AND SUSTAINABLE URBAN TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN FIJI ISLANDS: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

There exists a critical balance between urbanisation, tourism and environment particularly, in the structurally constrained, environmentally more fragile island countries. The needs for environmental conservation and the needs for tourism development are greatest in these countries and due to lack or poor planning, ineffective management of resources and development, many eco-conflicts have emerged. Ecotourism or nature based tourism has emerged as a viable form in resolving many such eco-conflicts and leading to a sustainable tourism development. Urban tourism/cultural tourism or business tourism has been an evergrowing sector within the tourism industry. The linkages between nature and culture are more pronounced in the island nations such as Fiji. There exists strong linkages and marked continuum between both "urban tourism spaces" and "ecotourism spaces".

INTRODUCTION

Tourism has been contributing significantly to urban revitalisation and governments of many cities and regions are more and more waking upto the opportunities offered by tourist and leisure functions [4]. Tourism development has been becoming a cornerstone of urban management and development. A successful tourism is or becoming an integral part of the urban system [18]. Tourism creates urban employment, alleviate urban poverty and diversifies the urban economy. The tourismification of cultural resources open new perspectives for historical cities [2]. The cultural tourism offers new opportunities for the economic revival of historical cities which can be measured by the Tourist Attraction Index [17].

Despite its positive impacts of foreign exchange earning and employment generation potential, and the development of infrastructure, tourism has caused much of environmental destructions leading to an unsustainable development in the island countries. Growth of tourism has put much strain on the provision of urban water supply, sewerage and solid waste management in the urban areas.

The paper apart from identifying the existing ecotourism resources, potential areas of eco-conflicts and challenges and opportunities and recent eco-tourism development plans in Fiji, attempts to address how ecotourism instead of an "alternate form" to mass tourism is a part of the urban-ecotourism continuum.

Concept of Ecotourism

The concept of 'ecotourism' or nature based tourism has emerged to resolve many eco-conflicts, and lead simultaneously to an economic growth and preservation of ecological resources. Ecotourism is inherently sustainable, if developed, managed, controlled and monitored properly within the level of tourism carrying capacity. The activities of ecotourism are likely to be small-scale, locally-owned with low import linkages [8]. The concepts of ecotourism and 'ecotourist' are of recent origin and to be fully established and a consensus on definitions is yet to be reached. There exist a

wide range of definitions of 'ecotourism'. It is considered both as a product and a principle. Wylie has identified a spectrum of categories - ecotourism as an activity, a business, a philosophy, a strategy, a marketing device, a symbol, a set of principles, an experience and he viewed ecotourism as more business than philosophy [24]. Similarly, Anderson has interpreted ecotourism as part of tourism business and therefore, must be a "viable business concept" [1]. According to these definitions if ecotourism is a business concept, then it has to be more urban-oriented. The linkages between ecotourism and urban tourism (cultural tourism) is more pronounced in the works of Grenier, Kaae, Miller and Mobley which shows that very few "natural" landscapes can be said to be devoid of at least some cultural influences [12].

Ecotourism Trends

A recent survey [18] of ecotour operators to the Asia-Pacific region shows that, there has been a broadening of the clientele for ecotours, an increase in independent, non-group or free and independent travellers (FITs) who are more price conscious and desirous for shorter and cheaper trips and for shorter adventure destinations and attractions. They are with a greater eco-awareness and with an increasing interest in cultural interaction/meet and assist local people. According to this survey, the major anticipated changes in the ecotourism industry in coming years are: an increase in eco-sensitivities with more awareness of environmental issues and of cultural tourism; dramatic increase in ecotour destinations, products and services; and demand for more ecolodges and FIT products.

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Importance of Tourism in Fiji

Fiji has been a pioneer in tourism industry in the South Pacific region. It takes a leading position in terms of number of tourist arrivals among the twelve Tourism council member countries and a third position next to Guam and Northern Marianas in the whole of Pacific region. The industry is the largest foreign exchange earner in Fiji, earns more foreign exchange than the sugar industry and also earns "more than the garment, gold, fishing, timber industries combined" [10]. It provides employment directly or indirectly to an estimated 40,000 people i.e 15 percent of the labour force and contributes 17 percent of the total production in the economy [20]. The industry with its impact on foreign exchange and employment, play a major role in the growth of national economy.

Ecotourism in Fiji

The concept of ecotourism in Fiji, is of recent origin and it has been emerged as secondary tourism initiatives complementing the primary tourism activities. With few exceptions, the implications of a commitment to strategies of ecotourism are not well understood in the Pacific region [8]. In Fiji, Government agencies and statutory bodies define ecotourism "as community-based activities that create secondary

attractions for tourists" [10].

Ecotourism within the South Pacific as Weaver said a "circumstantial" undertaking with only a few local "deliberate initiatives" [21] Fiji has been undertaking a mixed approach of a "deliberate ecotourism" along with a mass tourism. For the long term sustainability of ecotourism a mixed approach is very much desired. Ayala argued that long term future of ecotourism may very well depend upon a "strategic alliance" with mass tourism, [3].

Urban/Resort tourism and Eco-tourism continuum

Fiji has emerged as a mature tourist destination in the South Pacific region with visitors mainly from the metropolitan markets like Australia, New Zealand, USA and United Kingdom and other European countries. The number of tourist arrivals has reached to 409 955 in 1999 (Table 1), an overall growth of nearly 29 percent during 1995-99.

Table 1 Trends of Growth of Tourists and Accommodation in Fiji

Year	Tourist Arrivals	Tourist Growth Rate %	Accommodation (No. of Bures/rooms/units)	Growth Rate (%)
1995	318,495	-	-	-
1996	339,560	6.61	5452	-
1997	359,441	5.89	5606	2.8
1998	371,342	3.31	6118	9.1
1999	409,955	10.40	NA	NA

Source: Fiji Visitors Bureau, Visitor Arrivals, 2000 and 1999 Tourist Marketing Plan, Suva, Fiji

Tourists in Fiji tend to congregate in leading urban centres such as Nadi, Suva, Lautoka, Levuka, Savusavu, Nausori, Sigatoka, Navua and Tavua and the resort island complexes - like Coral Coast, Mamanuca, Pacific Harbour. Due to unavailability of data and information at city/town and resort level, the exact number of visitors in these areas cannot be ascertained. However, the concentration of hotel accommodation and the room-night occupancy rate (Table 2) reflect the pattern of concentration of tourists in Fiji. They are found to be highly concentrated to the West of Viti Levu close to the International gateway. They are confined to urban and resort areas of Fiji. The room-night occupancy rate in 1998 was seen to be highest in Mamanuca (71 percent) followed by Coral Coast (67 percent) and Nadi (61 percent). Similarly, the hotel turn over was also high in these areas (Table 2).

Table 2 Tourist Arrivals by Purpose of Visit and Average Length of Stay in Fiji, 1998

Purpose	Number of Tourists	Share of Tourists (%)	Average Stay (Days)
Holiday	296031	79.7	802
Business	18753	5.1	7.1
Official Conference	8078	2.2	7.0
VFR	22026	5.9	17.8
Education/Training	4021	1.1	13.4
Transit/Stopover	-	-	4.2
Others	22433	6.0	11.8
Total	371342	100.0	7.3

Source: Bureau of Statistics, Current Economic Statistics, September 1999, Table 13.1 pg. 94. VFR - Visiting Friends and Relatives.

In addition to the pristine state of natural environment, the urban centres have provided cultural attractions both primary as well as complementary ones. Natural environment is one of the main attractions of tourists to the South Pacific region. The main purpose of tourists visit to Fiji has been 'holiday'

which accounted for nearly 80 percent of the total tourist arrival in the country in 1998. The 4s resources such as smile, sun, sea and sand are readily available tourist resources in Fiji. The other purposes of visit were being business purposes and for visiting friends and relatives etc (Table 2).

Table 3. Hotel and Tourist Licensed Accommodation, Room Occupancy Rate and Hotel Turnover by Areas, 1998

Area	Room-Nights Available	Room Occupancy Rate %	Hotel Turnover (F\$000)	% Share
Suva	366,153	49.9	21,907	8.1
Lautoka	141,304	30.0	13,002	4.8
Nadi	638,142	60.9	81,069	30.1
Coral Coast	423,626	66.5	65,559	24.4
Mamanuca	234,646	70.9	65,171	24.2
Northern Areas	120,571	37.1	13,272	4.9
Others	111,069	33.7	9,245	3.4
Total Fiji	2035,511	56.2	269,225*	100.0

Source: Bureau of Statistics, "Statistical News", 3 March 2000, Suva, Fiji.

* The components include: accommodation (58 percent), food (21 percent), bar and liquor (11 percent) and telephone (2 percent), and miscellaneous (8 percent).

The ecotourism products in Fiji mainly consist of: coast ecosystem, limestone caves, waterfalls, dams, mountain rainforests, mangrove, coral reefs, palm forests, river gorges, sea bird nesting colonies, atolls, beaches, turtle nesting sites, marine notches, iguana habitats, botanical gardens, and so on. The country is rich in bio-diversities with endemic mammals 26 endemic birds and 760 endemic higher plant species [23]. In addition, Fiji had 641,000 hectares tropical forests and 52,000 hectares of mangrove areas in 1995. However, the country lacks protected areas and natural parks that constitute the primary ecotourism attraction sites. By 1998-99, Fiji had 5 national protection systems covering an area of 19,000 hectares i.e. only one percent of the total area of the country (Table 4). If tourism is to be both sustainable and successful it is essential that the scenic heritage of destination areas be protected [19].

Table 4. National Protected Areas in Fiji

Year	Number	Area (000 hectare)	Percent Land Area
1994-95	4	6	0.3
1998-99	5	19	1.0

Source: World Resources, 1994-95 and 1998-99.

Fiji clearly depicts Weaver's [21] typology of "ecotourism spaces" such as:-

- (i) Supplementary ecotourism space, referring to the existence of small ecotourism sites within resort and/or urban tourism spaces eg. in Suva, Nadi, Lautoka, etc.
- (ii) Regional ecotourism spaces such as mountainous interiors, peripheral smaller islands, Coastal cliffs and mangroves, coral reefs, green tourism areas etc. Fiji has been promoting ecotourism as a small scale niche activity on the peripheral islands such as Taveuni Kadavu islands. The Minister of tourism once said that, "ecotourism projects in Naitasiri, Kadavu and Namosi were private sector initiatives based on demands" [11].
- (iii) However, the third type of the 'comprehensive ecotourism space', where urban and resort tourism are the secondary activities found within a primarily ecotourism oriented destination, is yet to emerge in Fiji.

The strong tendency in Fiji is concentration of tourists in urban and resort tourism surrounded by the existence of ecotourism space. The mapping of tourist 'activity space' is essential in order to develop strategies for management of resources and visitor [16]. A marked continuum exists in Fiji between urban tourism and ecotourism both with mutually reinforcing functions in their systems. Linking together of nature and culture is something that is particularly well suited to the Pacific Islands [7]. Ecotourism which is also equated with green tourism and rural and agricultural tourism may help promoting rural development and thus may help curbing the problem of urban drift in significant way. The existence of ecotourism product within the major tourism projects in the urban areas will have greater social, economic impacts and may thus lead to a sustainable urban tourism development. An integrated planning approach is needed to promote sustainable tourism development in historical cities [15].

Challenges and Opportunities

There have been many eco-conflicting areas in tourism development in Fiji which include: the basic philosophical conflict between the need of environmental conservation and need for tourism development, land owner-tourism conflicts, disputes with fishing rights, a growing competition between the tour operators, travel agencies, lack of coordination between large number of agencies involved in the tourism planning and development. Availability of land for tourism projects, land ownership, customary rights are the critical issues. Moreover, small size, young landscape and fragile ecosystems make the environmental resources vulnerable to degradation. Inadequate environmental management, legislation and administration, limited skilled manpower, tourism investment and lack of proper infrastructural developments (lack of knowledge about ecotourism by agencies involved in its development are the major constraints. Bulk of population, human activities including tourism activities are concentrated to coastal zone which are more fragile, ecologically complex for management and highly susceptible to natural hazards. Growing competition arising from many tropical island destinations including in the South Pacific region, is one of the major challenges in the sector.

Fiji has a distinct cultural heritage, a pristine environment for future tourism development particularly with greater opportunities for development of ethnic tourism, rural and green tourism, development of cultural and ecotourism in old cities like Suva. Fiji has a broad based market potential and scope for further expansion. Great potential exists for developing protected areas and natural parks for drawing more ecotourists. Both terrestrial and marine environment resource opportunities are vast in Fiji and they are to be fully utilised with careful planning and development.

Government Initiatives

A Tourism Development Plan has been prepared by EU in close consultation with industry and Government. Opening of weekly flights by Air Pacific to Los Angeles, Canada and Japan will boost visitor arrivals from North America, Europe and Asia. The Fiji Visitors Bureau had been promoting the theme "Discover the Fiji You Don't Know". The tourist infrastructural development plans such as construction of the Five Star Grand Hyatt Hotel and the 82-beach front villas, a proposed 150 room hotel at Denarau, projects along Coral Coast and upgrading airport facilities will expand the tourist infrastructures. Establishment of the Fiji Eco-tourism Association, and a national Eco-Tourism Advisory Committee in the Ministry would address ecotourism development issues. The other government initiatives and marketing strategies such as: 'Bula Host Programme', Fiji Matai Programme, Global Branding, 'Niche' Market development, Internet, Backpacker and Telemarketing will boost tourism development, particularly the ecotourism in Fiji.

CONCLUSION

Coordinated strategies between public and private sectors are essential for successful ecotourism development. An ecotourism planning using environmental and ecological planning approaches with careful land use planning, zoning etc are essential. There is an urgent need for development of natural protected areas with twin objectives of drawing more ecotourists and protecting and preserving the natural resources. Ecotourism should be more integrated with the local economy (urban and rural), and culture and an integrated planning and management linking urban, environment, tourism and other sectors is vital. Greater efforts should be made to spread tourism to new areas. There is a greater need for introducing more sustainable development values in the ecotourism products and practices. Greater knowledge about ecotourism by governments and non-

government, improvement of standards of industry and operators, with greater professionalism, education and training and production of high quality guides and skill manpower for the sector are crucial in achieving a sustainable tourism development.

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