

Spotlight: Econ Op-eds in Summary

Week ended 09th October '19

In Summary

The underneath contains summaries of the articles given above, including key extracts from these articles.

1. Throttling The Golden Goose By: Ravi Ratnasabapathy

- While the recent terrorist attacks had resulted in a slump in tourist arrivals, it also provided an opportunity to address the problem of overdevelopment. With the rise in independent travellers and local tourism, it has resulted in overpopulation and overexploitation of most tourist attractions.
- Overdevelopment has resulted in buildings, telephones and electricity towers being built, which is now in a state which interferes with the view and the pristine look of these locations. As such, regulations such as building codes and controls over the number of tourists accommodated should be put in place.
- While the Sri Lanka Tourism Strategy has brought light to this issue, focusing all efforts on growing tourist arrivals alone during this time would be a mistake. The current slump is a good opportunity to implement more controls given that people are more open to work with authorities in such times.

The first attempt to develop a tourist industry took place in 1966 with the formation of the Tourist Board.

- Visitor numbers grew steadily from 1966 until 1982 when arrivals peaked at 407,230.
- The violence of 1983 then leads to five years of decline, which bottomed out in 1988 when visitors hit a low of 182,660.
- The numbers ebbed and flowed with the passage of the war and rarely exceeded 400,000 until 2003 when fresh hopes of an end to conflict caused arrivals to swell to 500,642.
- After some years of growth, the resumption of the conflict in 2006 saw further declines until the end of the conflict in 2009, after which the industry witnessed a boom. Arrivals grew from 447,890 in 2009 to reach 2.3mn by 2018.
- The terror attacks of April 2019 followed by anti-Muslim riots have slowed arrivals again.

But, the slow-down also presents an opportunity to fix a fundamental problem; overdevelopment.

Sri Lanka's tourist arrivals were stagnant for a better part of thirty years, so there was not much need for an expansion of infrastructure. The massive boom post-2009 has put an enormous strain on resources that are now threatening the very beauty and tranquility that are being sought by travelers.

The market for tourism has also changed. Until the 1990's it catered to foreigners mostly on package tours. Two significant changes have taken place since then;

- the growth of the independent travelers and

- the growth in local tourism.

As the country has grown more prosperous, large numbers of Sri Lankans are traveling. As per the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, in 2016 foreigners accounted for 15.9mn guest nights while domestic travelers accounted for 2.5mn guest nights in both hotels and supplementary accommodation. While foreigners still outnumber domestic travelers, these statistics mask the extent of the overcrowding.

High demand has led to congestion. Many of the most picturesque locations have been defiled by construction and signage. Illegal, beer gardens of poor taste, restaurants and hotels dot every nook and corner; telecom towers and windmills sprout like mushrooms. This has destroyed Nuwara Eliya's charm as a hill station and has now engulfed Ella and Haputale as well. The growth is visible, but it is an ugly, unhealthy growth.

More serious is the damage to historic sites and nature reserves. The problem is partly the lack of building codes as well as the inability to enforce rules, such as encroachment into protected areas. The government and the industry must work together to ensure the preservation of the quality of the tourism product, preventing damage to heritage sites, nature reserves and areas of natural beauty through over development and over exploitation.

The Sri Lanka Tourism Strategic Plan 2017-2020 does acknowledge the issue, but the danger is that given the current slump, all efforts will be diverted to grow arrivals. This would be a mistake; it will be challenging to dissuade people from overbuilding when business is booming. During a slump, they may welcome support to downsize and agree to restrictions on new construction. Given the gravity of the problem, a separate task force should be assigned to work on these problems. The two areas of the plan that deal with these issues are:

- Developing sustainable locations. (integrated geographic planning)
- Lifting industry standards. (improve conservation, presentation, & management of natural & cultural assets)

The Hill Country

The hill country is particularly sensitive for a few reasons.

Constructing on hillsides is constrained by their difficult terrain, steep gradients, complex geological structure, climatic conditions and abundant flora. Hill towns have been experiencing pressure for development (due to population growth and tourist influx), which has changed their environment and visual appearance. They have grown to many times their design and carrying capacity. Due to limited land and narrow streets, they are prone to traffic jams.

Overbuilding converts the lush green slopes into a sea of concrete and roofs (at the minimum, tree cover must be maintained, so views from opposing hills are not spoiled). The hill regions also experience heavy rain, which can cause landslides or the collapse of poorly constructed buildings.

Ella is a classic case of overexploitation; the entire town is blighted with haphazard construction. There is also an increase in the number of buildings of dubious legality within the Knuckles nature reserve, including a partly-constructed and abandoned building at Riverstone. Logging, mining and quarrying also take place close to some hill towns and reserves, these need to be strictly regulated so as not to damage the ecology or the view. Broadly this could include

- a building code appropriate for the hill country and zoning regulations.

- **controlling the maximum number of visitors**

To understand the urgency one only needs to look at developments in India- Simla, Kasauli, Mussoorie, and Ranikhet suffer water shortages, endless traffic jams, toxic vehicular pollution, mounds of litter, unchecked development and ad hoc construction. As an Indian newspaper put it, a reverse metamorphosis is happening: the beautiful butterfly has turned into an ugly caterpillar. Do we really want the same in our hill stations?

[For the full article - Refer Echelon](#)

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