

Tourism Sustainability in Myanmar: Case Study of Yangon, Inle Lake, and Bagan

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Abstract

This study is only focusing to understand the Myanmar tourism sustainable business. Myanmar is currently experiencing the rapid growth of tourism and its economy for the past few years, and this study intends to mainly understand the sustainability of tourism for future business so that people can be aware. Myanmar has a very unique natural heritage and generous local hospitality and spiritual values and people have interest in the country to visit. While country is developing the economy it can be fragile when the environment and political issues occur and to reduce the impact by sustaining the environment and the community system. Yangon the former capital city of Myanmar, is one of the famous tourist attractions which has Inle Lake, and the ancient city of Bagan are the focus of this study in Myanmar tourism in order to understand the sustainability of the tourism market. The purpose of this paper is mainly to understand the tourism sustainability of Myanmar. By studying the sustainability of these 3 major tourist attractions, it is the hope to understand and have a clear knowledge of tourism in Myanmar. At the same time understanding the eco-tourism of Myanmar's ecosystem and also the awareness of tourism sustainability.

Keywords: sustainable tourism, Myanmar, environmental, eco-tourism, tourist attractions

1. Introduction

The tourism industry is one of the largest industries in the world. However, the degrading effects of tourism can become a big concern and people need to act on the issue quickly. The concept of sustainable tourism have aim of reducing the negative effects of tourism activities. Myanmar has become almost as a desirable and politically approach to the tourism development. People are interested in the experience of Myanmar's abundant wealth of cultural, natural heritage and local hospitality and spiritual values (Aung, 2013).

Coming to Myanmar can be a very unique experience to the modern tourist in exploring of something new and different. After Myanmar opened up the economy in 2012, Myanmar has become a popular choice for travelers. The country's natural beauty of people, culture, and heritage make Myanmar one of the coveted tourist destinations in South East Asia as proven by Lonely Planet's Best Travel list in 2017 (Thitsar, 2017).

Myanmar tourism has been developed mainly by the government, but there are a lot of small business owners, and private entrepreneurs who brought a wide range of visitors to the country. Advocacy groups have promoted tourism as a way of providing economic benefits to local civilians, indigenous people and to connect to the country from the rest of the world. They believe that the responsible tourism can create more benefits than harm as long as tourists are well aware of the country's situation and support the positive impact and reduce the negative aspects. They feel that visiting the country will be beneficial overall. Responsible tourists can help Myanmar a lot in the communities and small businesses, and people will be aware of Myanmar tourism worldwide.

Yangon (formerly known as Rangoon) used to be the capital city of Myanmar. It is a well known city and has many major connections and transportation through many cities and countries through the international airport.

Inle Lake is the second biggest lake of Myanmar, which is located in Shan state. It is densely inhabited by many different tribes. It is famous for its beautiful lake and the unique local culture.

Bagan is an ancient city in central Myanmar which has more than 2,000 pagodas since the 11th and 12th centuries. The sacred places and the whole city is full of pagodas and the temples are wonderful and is a proud place archeological area in Myanmar.

“The Ministry of Tourism intend to use tourism to make Myanmar a better place to live into by providing more employment and business opportunities for people, and to contribute to the conservation of cultural and natural heritage and to share the rich diversity in culture. They welcome to those who appreciate and enjoy the heritage and the lifestyle and who travel the country with respect” (Senley, 2015).

Tourism is the main source of foreign income and investment in the country, and since the early 1990s the government has supported the tourism economy and welcome tourists. Myanmar has a lot to do for the visitors, as they can visit the colonial architecture, the annual and cultural festivals, and relax at the natural scenic beauty landscape. However because of the political instability and its poor leadership Myanmar has faced the declining rate of tourism. The global economic crisis in 2009 and the civil wars made the number of arrivals drop. The face of Myanmar Aung San Suu Kyi also asked people not to come to Myanmar to prevent any harms for a certain period of time. Myanmar can find the solution to those economic benefits while preventing the political negative impacts at the same time being led by Aung San Suu Kyi (Pirogova, Nina, 2012).

The most common question that the global tourist asked is “Is Myanmar safe to travel?” The recent and current issue on the violence of Myanmar which forced 600,000 Rohingya refugees to flee the country and it has also been stated as the ongoing persecution which United Nation has branded it as the textbook example of ethnic cleansing. Myanmar is the only country the tour operator had ever boycotted when it was ruled by the military dictatorship (Morris, 2017).

Myanmar is also very vulnerable to global warming, climate change, and lacking resilience, which make them extremely at high risk. It will cause droughts and water shortages in the central area of the country. The highest risk of natural disasters to Myanmar are floods, droughts, and earthquakes. People have an awareness of the threats and taking action in reducing global warming activities.

Ecotourism in Myanmar is to protect the surrounding areas which focus on the management tools and systems. The process of delivering the conservation of biodiversity and ecosystems for education, culture and natural assets of the regions with benefits to communities in economic and social ways. The approach of protecting the area management is to reduce the unwanted environmental and natural issues toward the ecosystems (Strien, 2015).*

“The intention is to use the ecotourism as the network to protect the area network which can driving force to strengthen the management of Myanmar tourism. The ambition is to implement the policies of ecotourism to all stakeholders. Business models and management approaches that protect the unique ecosystem of the country and perform the local group that have made the areas as their home place and system. As the communities has been associated with environmental, social and economic benefits by the ecotourism globally, it focuses on the quality of the visitor great experiences while travelling in Myanmar” (U Win Tun & U Htay Aung, 2015).

Myanmar has changed and now the country has been experiencing the great political and economic situation in South East Asia for the past few years. The number of tourists in the country has boosted up for the past few years as an impact of the tourism sector. During last year, Myanmar had welcomed more than two million visitors into the country (Stewart et al., 2017).

2. Objectives

The objective are as follows: To understand tourism when Myanmar have environmental issues and political issues to sustain the tourism business by studying 3 major tourist attractions. To understand the ecotourism and to obtain the knowledge of ecosystems in Myanmar. To get a better understanding of the tourism business and attract more tourists to come to Myanmar and get more foreign income of successful businesses.

3. Material and Method

This research aims at understanding the current research information, creating some direction for future knowledge, and therefore advancing the application of sustainable development in tourism by studying 3 major tourist attractions with a quantitative research method.

The questionnaires are used under the tourism sustainable circumstances survey. The procedure has been analyzed by the questionnaire survey from the employees of travel & tour companies, international college students and professors from the faculties of hospitality and tourism management, international relationship development, international political philosophy & economic development, and international business management. By the belief that the questionnaire will be able of find out the opinions of certain people of the tourism business in Myanmar. 7 questions are asked to know about the personal information of the respondents, 7 questions about nature resources used in tourism in Myanmar, and 12 questions are asked for the opinion of the degree of agreement and disagreement on tourism statements.

The review of sustainable tourism development Myanmar

Sustainable tourism development has been one of the fastest growing sector areas of tourism research and it attracted a lot of attention in a lot of scientific ways particularly in tourism development. This tourist sector is important because some of Myanmar sites such as Bagan, Kyaiktiyo, and Inle Lake are already under the social and environmental pressure from the effect of tourism.

Understanding the impact of the sector which is necessary to improve Myanmar and its people need a lot of potential growth. Sustainable tourism development meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future. It is conceivable that the possibility of leading to management of all natural resources in such a way that benefits the economy, and society. Its needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, and biological diversity and life support systems.

Tourism development is considered one of Myanmar's priority sectors. It has been prioritized in the Government's 'Framework for Economic and Social Reforms (FESR)' as "*potentially one of Myanmar's most important sectors, with tremendous potential to contribute to greater business opportunities and balancing social and economic development if properly managed and developed*" (Zolfani et al., 2015). A number of tourism sector specific policies have been launched in the past years.

Environmental Development

"Myanmar's environmental administration faces an enormous challenge as the country's economy opens up. Agriculture, forestry, fishing and mining are important for Myanmar's development and economic growth. This has led to a rapid depletion of the country's natural resources and a worsening of the environmental problems. Myanmar's environmental administration does not currently have sufficient capacity to effectively respond to all the environmental issues the country faces" (Suokko, 2016).

Political Development

“Since the time of Myanmar Constitution in 1948, the minorities of ethnic have denied the constitutional right, which has been controlled by their people and participation in the government. The various minority ethnic groups have been suffered the dominant consistent oppression by the Burman majority, and also from the regional lords and ethnic alliances” (Politic of Myanmar, 2017).

Political risk is such a huge impact on tourism. Such as, 2008 Saffron Revolution in Myanmar was a terrible incident in the capitals cities which made tourists stop coming. Most of travel and tour company's incoming tourist rate had collapsed to 80% in 2008. It took some years to rebuild tourism businesses. After the 2015 election, when Aung San Suu Kyi's (democratic) party won, the development of small business and tourists' incoming rate has risen up (Politic of Myanmar, 2017).

Yangon Tourism

Yangon used to be the capital city before Nay Pyi Daw. Since it is the major city which connects most of the international arrival are from, the city itself has been developing rapidly. For most tourists, Yangon is the first city that they will land by plane. Yangon has a large number of colonial buildings which has now become offices or a place to stay. The commercial core is centered on the Sule Pagoda, which is reputed to be over 2,000 years old. The city is also home to the Shwedagon Pagoda – Myanmar's most sacred Buddhist pagoda.

Shwedagon Pagoda is one of the most sustainable tourist attractions of all time. It is shining with gold and famous for its sacred holy place and rich in history. According to legend, the pagoda was constructed more than 2,600 years ago, which made it the oldest Buddhist pagoda in the world and the pride of Myanmar. The government collects an entrance fee of 10,000 Kyats for each tourist a day.

Inle Lake Tourism

Inle Lake is a freshwater lake, in June 2015, it became Myanmar's first designated place of World Network of Biosphere Reserves. Transportation on the lake is traditionally by small boats which they row the boat by feet, or by somewhat larger boats fitted with single cylinder inboard diesel engines.

The government and locals are taking a lot of action to sustain Inle Lake. It is a beautiful lake which is rich and has a lot of biodiversity. A number of festivals happen every year from August to October on the lake and surrounding areas. Currently, Inle Lake has been working on reducing the unsustainable activities such as overfishing, lumber removal, cultivation practices. Also Inle Lake area's population is growing and has a major concern of lake water being lessened every year. The health sanitation is also a big concern of untreated sewage.

In order to sustain the lake itself, the government has been taking action and plans for the future of Inle Lake according to the future sustainability of Inle Lake and tourism master plans for Myanmar by the Ministry of Hospitality and Tourism.

Bagan Tourism

Bagan is an ancient city with over 10,000 Buddhist temples which were constructed in the Bagan plains alone, and has remains of over 2,000 temples and pagodas still survive to the present day. The Bagan Archaeological Zone is a main attraction for the country's nascent tourism industry. It has huge interest of tourists and famous places in neighboring countries.

Over 2,000 Buddhist temples are all in one place called Bagan which has been in Myanmar since the 11th and 12th centuries. Powerful history lies in the ruins and stupas of Bagan. All temples are considered sacred by Myanmar people. Every tourists have to dress modestly, no shoes and no shorts especially when going inside pagodas and people are very serious about it.

Bagan has suffered several earthquakes, so many temples had been taken down by natural disasters. It is also possible that natural disasters could happen again anytime in Bagan, so people are very cautious and give their best respects to Bagan.

Local people in Myanmar destinations had been considered Bagan and Shwedagon Pagoda as their bucket list. It is an absolute honor and the perfect opportunity to pray for their life.

4. Result and Discussion

The research question were surveyed by 149 from Bhutan, Myanmar, and Thai international college students, professors and freelancers. The result will be concluded by the number of surveys which has completed by the update time of 10 December 2017, Time 11:59 pm. Almost all questions asked about the opinion of the surveyors and their personal life info.

As a result, the majority of the questionnaire is filled by the ages between 18-29 with the percentage of 86.7%, and 73.7 percent are currently staying in a foreign country for study and 20 percent are staying at their home country. The main interest to travel is adventure and coming up with the cultural, natural and visiting friends.

The question which asked about the most challenging problem of selecting a destination is that 53.3 % answer is the quality of services, 46.7% consider the prices, and the rest had answered reliability and communication. When travelling, 86.7 percentage prefer to tour independently.

Out of 149 people 73 percent have been to Myanmar or the resident in Myanmar and 25 percent have an experience of tourism work field for more than one year. As their opinion to Myanmar tourism sustainability 46 said that Myanmar is in a good condition and 39 percent said that Myanmar needs a lot of improvement on sustainability overall. As the statistics from the result 60 percent said that tourists are friendly over local people and 20 percent are indifferent. As the knowledge out of 149 people said that over 50 had no idea about Myanmar and should be off limits to any places for tourists, but 20 percent said that sacred ground, conflict zones, and military places should be off limits to independent travelers as much as possible.

Regarding to get an idea of people's view regarding Myanmar, the questions have been asked to indicate the degree of agreement or disagreement with each of the statements. The results are as follows:

Table 1 Tourism makes local people inferior about their culture

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Number	11	32	11	83	12

The highest number of degree of statement is disagreement so that people believe that tourism does not make local people inferior about their culture.

Table 2 Tourism helps local people better appreciate their community

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Number	53	62	12	24	0

The highest number of degree of statement is Agree which people believe that tourism helps local people better appreciate their community.

Table 3 Tourism would bring increase crime to Myanmar

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Number	33	51	44	21	0

The majority of people believe that tourism would bring increased crime to Myanmar but that degree of state of being undecided is the second highest which means a lot of people have no idea about increasing crime rates in Myanmar caused by tourists.

Table 4 Tourism development would increase protection of natural areas

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Number	42	43	22	32	0

The statement of Strongly Agree and Agree is very high which people believe that tourism development would increase protection of natural areas.

Table 5 More people in Myanmar should be involved in tourism

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Number	53	75	12	0	9

The majority agree that a lot more people in Myanmar should be involved in Tourism. The statistics show that more people getting involved means a better employment rate and the interest in the country's development.

Table 6 Environmentally destructive activities should be discouraged

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Number	61	63	25	0	0

The statistics have shown the obvious fact that environmentally destructive activities should be discouraged and even banned if possible.

Table 7 Tourism sustainability is important to a country

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Number	105	44	0	0	0

A very well developed country has a lot of people's interest in visiting and while developing countries show their culture and other unique developments. The numbers degree has shown that tourism sustainability is very important to a country. In the case of Myanmar, which business has just begun a decade ago as the beginner of business and tourism development the sustainability is very important to this country.

Table 8 Tourism sustainability reduces political and environmental issues

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Number	21	72	35	3	18

Tourism sustainability is hard to do. In order to get sustainable tourism it definitely needs to reduce political and environment issues. Effective leadership in government and a well maintained environment by reducing global warming. The information collected is not a hundred percent reliable but in common sense the sustainability meant to reduce the political and environment issues.

Table 9 Reducing political and environmental issues makes sustainable tourism

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Number	42	54	53	0	0

The reverse back question to the previous one that reducing political unrest and almost 65 percent strongly agree and agree with the statement. But only reducing the political and environmental issues couldn't alone make sustainable tourism.

Table 10 The infrastructure in the local area would improve because of tourism

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Number	30	86	21	12	0

The infrastructure in the local area is very important to tourism. The road, bridge, building such as hotel, restaurant, airport or etc. can be improved by effective tourism and globalization.

Table 11 Ecotourism is the solution to tourism sustainability

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Number	41	80	28	0	0

It is definitely one of the solutions to tourism sustainability, which is meant for conservation, communities, and interpretation of understanding nature, local society and culture diversity. Myanmar is rich in ethnic diversity and the appreciation through the cultural, enhancing biodiversity, and taking care of natural heritages will be helpful to sustain tourism in an effective way.

Table 12 Taxes or entrance fees should be increase for tourism sustainability

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Number	52	54	27	8	8

Myanmar has implanted quite a number of tax on tourist companies according to the company and national license for businesses. Also, for tourists Myanmar has set up tourist entrance fee to entering certain places or cities. For instance, Bagan ancient city entrance fee is \$20 USD, Inle Lake is \$10 USD and Shwedagon Pagoda is \$8 USD accordingly. Tourists can choose whether to pay in US dollar or exchange to a current price in Myanmar Kyats to pay for the entrance fees. Myanmar Tourism Federation had stated that tourist have been paying \$1 USD per night as a tax while staying at a hotel or guest house which is meant to raise the tourism budget without having to rely on the government only. (Win, 2017)

Table 13 Tourism service should be improved smoothly

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Number	71	56	21	0	0

Tourism services are crucial to tourists and services such as having tour guides, renting a car, renting a house and hotel and local exploring. Tourists could be fascinated by the service and willing to come to visit to the place again with friends and family. Myanmar has very friendly behavior towards tourists, and local people like to have them. Myanmar's tourist services are good enough to maintain the tourism business but need to improve more for sustainable future tourism.

Table 14 Tourist guides are needed to go along with when travel in Myanmar

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Number	61	49	30	0	0

If tourists come to Myanmar for the first time they have a very high possibility of culture shock, misunderstanding and hardship. Tour guides are very well educated and experts in history of Myanmar. If tourists are interested in having knowledge about Myanmar's past and present they are perfect for your trip and they will give you the best service.

Table 15 Lack of tourism business understanding is a serious obstacle

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Number	34	72	31	11	1

Lacking tourism is a very serious obstacle, people need knowledge and communication in the sense of basic tourism and being able to sustain and understand the local people.

Table 16 Political division and poor leadership is not applicable for tourism

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Number	33	67	30	10	10

Political division and poor leadership is not applicable for tourism. Once the country's political situation is getting worse the number of tourists coming inside the country have decreased by a huge amount. Such Myanmar has experienced the 1988 revolution, and Saffron revolution (2007 upspring) are examples of political and poor leadership and is not being applicable for sustainable tourism.

The opinion of 149 people from 3 countries wasn't enough surveys for the whole country of Myanmar and the 3 major cities. But, these opinions led to the result of this research in a certain way that mixes the domestic and international way of Myanmar's tourism sustainability in some ways, such as knowing the statistics of the degree of agreement and disagreement of the research questionnaire. These statistics helps to come up to the understanding of the domestic and international opinions on tourism sustainability in Myanmar.

As the tourism development is going on the belief that Myanmar is developing well. Increasing in tourists sure does show the fact that the country has prosperity and peace. The potential of Myanmar tourism is growing a lot in different ways. It makes for employment for future foreign income. Increasing the tourist attractions and cultural attractions are meant to be sustainable.

In Myanmar, most of the tourist attraction are mostly pagodas, and pagodas. Myanmar has a very strong belief in religion especially Buddhism. Many temples and pagodas around Myanmar have all become tourist attractions. These places will be very sustainable as long as people believe in religion.

People are willing to get more tourists in Myanmar but the issue that Myanmar has been challenging is the environmental issue, and political issue which can be only fixed by the government and people lifestyles. It has been a lot of action of development since Myanmar has opened up their economy. The sustainability of old pagodas are being taken care of by the local and monks. The newly established pagodas are everywhere as well. Ecotourism is one of the sustainable solutions to the environmental issue in Myanmar. People are understanding and responsible to natural areas and environmental awareness. It can be very well sustained when people are starting to act on the well-being of building an environmental awareness, providing direct financial benefits for conservation, empowerment for the local people, and the respect for culture. A lot of people in Myanmar don't have the knowledge of ecotourism and still need to educate in the rural places and the cities.

For the few past decades, the civilians used to hate government and the authority so much because of the military dictatorship governing the country for its own benefits. The country is rich in natural resources and culture, but people are poor and the limited access to education make it worse.

In Myanmar, there are still limited access to certain places because of the ongoing civil wars and conflicts with various ethnic minority. Myanmar government has taken action in a dominant way to control the conflicts. The conflicts need to be solved one way or another to become one united country.

5. Conclusion

Myanmar maybe one of the undeveloped countries. However, rapid growth in tourism is very helpful for the development of Myanmar. For several years, Myanmar tourism industry has been isolated by neighboring countries. It might be the time for Myanmar to stand up and take advantage of tourism after the changes of political situation which led to positive effects in this sector. The sustainability of tourism will be stable as long as the country's political and environmental situations are stable. According to the survey collected from respondents, the statistics have shown the obvious fact that the environmentally destructive activities should be discouraged and banned even if possible. Effective political leaders and reducing major and minors issues which happen in the country would make tourism income rate higher.

Eco-friendly tourism which had led to alternative benefit for both locals and tourists such as ecotourism, cultural tourism, and natural tourism can be promoted in a sustainable way. Yangon, Inle, and Bagan travel and tours are expected to perform well over time. In the future, hopefully travel and tours is expected to lessen military involvement, and positive feelings towards the tourism sector in Myanmar.

As a conclusion, the sustainability of the tourism of Myanmar, organizations should cooperate with local businesses, and local people should get involved in tourism businesses as an employee, ecotourism and cultural tourism should be developed, local products should be more promoted, the infrastructure such as transportation road and hotels should be built, and travel and tour companies are expected to perform well to be able to achieve the sustainable tourism business in Myanmar.

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