

Tourism and Biodiversity

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Chairman of Jetwing

Interminably expanding populations force cities to spill into the forests and wetlands that once grew lush and abundant. Businesses, following on the heels on this expansion, take their toll on the environment as well. While vital to serve the populace and strengthen the economy of a nation, the expansion of businesses is, more often than not, at odds with the interests of biodiversity. Despite this general perception, which unfortunately rings true in most cases, businesses do not necessarily have to be built upon the ashes of the environment.

Businesses, directly or indirectly, trace their products, services, and operations to ecosystem functions which are underpinned by the biodiversity contained within them. It is in their interest, therefore, to work to enhance the environment and coexist in a mutually benefitting harmony with each other.

The tourism industry, both in Sri Lanka and in a global context, often operate in environmentally sensitive areas and indeed offer services which are dependent on a healthy, unspoilt environment. While the construction and operation of a hotel can, in most cases, be considered detrimental to the existing ecosystems, careful planning and dedication can be beneficial to the environment around it. Nowhere is this better exemplified than at Jetwing Vil Uyana, a landmark hotel in the heartlands of north central Sri Lanka whose story of concept to construction to operations is an ode, not simply to the preservation but enhancement of the local ecosystem.

Jetwing Vil Uyana's story begins in the early 2000s when an abandoned plot of land previously used for slash and burn cultivation, colloquially known as *chena* cultivation, was selected as the site for the most ambitious hotel project in Sri Lanka. The idea was to build a luxury resort nestled within a lush wetland but there was one glaring problem – the wetland in question did not exist.

Drawing inspiration from the Barnes' wetland in the outskirts of London, Jetwing embarked on a mission to convert the chena cultivated land into a thriving wetland. It was a daunting task: the land lacked floral diversity and a biodiversity survey carried out at the site prior to construction returned paltry results. Just 29 species of birds were reported from the site, along with 12 mammals, and a handful of other animals – a mere fraction of the rich fauna that comprises the north central regions of Sri Lanka.

As the canals and lakes were dug and the land replanted with native vegetation, the fauna began trickling in. Jetwing Vil Uyana's doors opened in 2006 and, as of August 2018 the faunal diversity had swelled from pre-construction numbers and slowly but surely the wetland settled and stabilized. Jetwing Vil Uyana currently boasts of over 140 species of birds, over 20 mammals, with the numbers of butterflies, reptiles, and amphibians also showing marked increases.

Alongside the overall increase in biodiversity at the hotel, the story of the slender loris garners special consideration. Being discovered by the resident naturalist in 2010 in an area of the hotel earmarked for expansion, their existence prompted the management to cancel the development plans and declare the area a loris conservation site, dedicated to the conservation of and raising awareness on the nocturnal primate.

Furthermore, the discovery of all three of Sri Lanka's small cats within the premises, particularly the fishing cat whose population appears to be thriving, has led to the development of a research project in order to better understand the behavior of this secretive creature. Camera traps have been installed around the premises and the territories and movements of the cats can be taken into consideration in further development.

With simple foresight and the will to make a difference, Jetwing restored a wetland that also aligns with its business model. The resounding success of the project, coupled with the enhanced ecosystem services enjoyed by both the property and the surroundings, saw the concept of environmental coexistence being repeated in the construction of Jetwing Kaduruketha, in Wellawaya, which incorporated the elements of a traditional Sri Lankan village where man and nature has, for centuries, existed in a harmonious relationship.

As mentioned above, the hospitality industry often operates in areas where the environment is especially sensitive to disturbance and degradation, but in the vitality of the environment there can be found an opportunity to enhance it. The industry relies on the appeal of the natural environment to the traveler but needs to understand and take on the responsibility of conserving it as well.

Taking stewardship of a forest patch or engaging guests in reforestation programs can ensure that a hotel gives back to the environment. Where excursions and tours are organized to area an area of sensitive environmental conditions, special care should be taken. It is the responsibility of the industry to not only observe all laws and regulations pertaining to the environment and its wellbeing, but also to ensure that they take conscious action and set in place internal guidelines that go hand in hand with the national policies. The industry, in itself, can be a trailblazer in terms of conserving Sri Lanka's biosphere.

The responsibility to protect the biodiversity is shared, not simply by the hospitality industry, but all industries and businesses operating within a nation, and the world is slowly but surely waking up to the importance of ecosystem services to their respective business and taking active efforts to mitigate their adverse impact. Sustainability is now a key consideration in almost every sector.

Of course there is plenty of room for improvement where Sri Lanka is concerned. It is crucial that businesses understand the ecosystem functions that form the foundation of their operation and work to conserve and enhance them. Aligning sustainability initiatives and other projects carried out under Corporate Social Responsibility to internationally recognized programs such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals allow a business to fine-tune their practices in a way that is meaningful and structured, rather than ad hoc, and also affords them the ability to speak of it to a wider audience.

The idea that businesses need to work with the environment rather than off of the environment is propagating and is now widely accepted among the countries in the developed world. Taking a leaf out of their book and positioning Sri Lanka as a country where businesses and biodiversity coexist is advantageous, not only for the business but, in long term, for the country itself.