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Chapter 14

Fostering Ecotourism Brands Through Local Engagement in Peru and the Maldives

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ABSTRACT

As a subset of sustainable tourism, ecotourism has increased in protected tourism sites and biodiversity hotspots as increasingly more tourists look for meaningful natural experiences. This necessitates understanding how to leverage tourist-local community engagement in ecotourism branding. The chapter focuses on two case studies from two contexts, which harness tourist-local community engagement in their ecotourism branding. While the first case study relates to the conservation of nature and cultural heritage within an Amazonian rainforest in Peru, the latter refers to preserving the ecosystems of the ocean in the Maldives. Although both cases leverage tourist-local community engagement to a certain extent, they heavily focus on uplifting local communities, guest education and scientific research in their ecotourism branding. The study lacks empirical evidence, yet it has managerial and policy implications. It advises managers and policymakers to foster a sustainable ecotourism brand with the tourist-local community interaction in mind.

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INTRODUCTION

One emerging trend in the post-Covid-19 pandemic has been the growing interest in nature-based, open-air recreational tourism in sustainable and safe tourism destinations (UNWTO, 2021). Similarly, ecotourism market size having expanded quickly lately, it is further anticipated to grow from USD 219.53 billion in 2023 to USD 249.16 billion in 2024 at an annual growth rate of 13.5% (Ecotourism Global Market Report, 2024). The growth can be traced to the interest in authentic holiday experiences, the rise of responsible travel, government initiatives and policies, conservation of biodiversity and educational components. Ecotourism has been proliferating in protected tourism sites and biodiversity hotspots as increasingly more tourists prefer to have responsible and sustainable travel to natural areas to enjoy natural environments, learn about local cultures and acquire knowledge (Lee et al., 2023). At the same time, the growing demand in ecotourism among travelers of all ages presents branding opportunities and challenges for tourism and travel brands as well as destinations to generate additional revenue streams.

The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) defines ecotourism as '*responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, improves the well-being of local people, and involves interpretation and education*' (TIES, 2015). As Fandeli (1999) in Giriwati et al. (2018) state, ecotourism involves travels and holiday experiences to natural environments mainly for leisure and recreation in addition to environmental preservation. An ecotourism approach encompasses conservation, community and sustainability (Boley & Green, 2016). As such, ecotourism has emerged not only for environmentally-friendly exploration of the natural habitats but also, as a means of enhancing local communities' well-being and educating guests with provision of awareness and sustainable practices.

With the increasing popularity of ecotourism, it has become imperative to businesses and destinations to create and maintain a stronger brand identity. Tajer & Demir (2022) highlight that where there is destination identity, there is tourism potential with both cultural and natural values. The location, historical and economic structure, as well as social and cultural structure of a place constitute important branding criteria, according to Demirkol & Taskiran (2019). Thus, development of ecotourism strategies in light of these criteria would enhance the image of destinations giving them a brand identity in ecotourism marketing efforts.

Peru and the Maldives have an important ecotourism potential with their unique habitats, protected areas, biosphere reserves and climatic features. However, both destinations' share in the global ecotourism market has started growing only recently. In Peru, for instance, ecotourism is reasonably well progressing. There is a clear need to highlight government policies considering that the country has fragile ecosystems, and the influence of environmental NGOs requires attention (Legrand et

al., 2012). Remote areas of the country where there was poor tourism infrastructure have been developing recently; however, engagement of locals for efficient use of the Amazon River was found to be a win-win situation for the Amazon communities, the businesses and the government (McCarthy et al., 2013).

In the case of the Maldives, as part of the commitment to a Roadmap on Ecotourism pledge, the country's Ministry of Tourism launched the Ecotourism Framework and Roadmap in early 2024. This roadmap was developed in collaboration with the Climate Adaptation Project group under the Ministry of Climate Change, Environment and Energy as well as USAID. The pledge included protecting at least one reef, one mangrove and one uninhabited island from each atoll of the island. This visionary project has been crafted to promote responsible tourism initiatives across the archipelago and champion eco-friendly practices. In addition to various nationwide governmental initiatives in both Peru and the Maldives, many of the sustainability efforts are still led by the private sector, which harness business opportunities and win-win solutions in addressing societal challenges.

Branding is key to the success of any ecotourism business in the sense that it helps businesses and destinations in differentiating themselves from others in a crowded marketplace and attracting environmentally and socially conscious travelers. This, however, necessitates commitment to sustainability in terms of aligned mission, vision and core business values. Costa Rica is a good example of a leading destination in ecotourism, which has successfully formed a unique identity. The brand identity of the country centers on a concept named as 'pure life', which implies a symbiotic relationship between nature and humans.

Kotler & Keller (2015) emphasize the complex structure of creating a brand identity for ecotourism brands due to the intangibility it entails. The intangible elements include visitors' experience, their thoughts, beliefs and associations, which get them to visit a destination again (Trung & Khalifa, 2019). King et al. (2012) have identified three core ecotourism pillars to craft a mission-driven brand story, which are experiential learning, sustainable living and community-building. With these ecotourism pillars, they proposed three main ecotourism branding strategies: visitor education, brand awareness, and brand building.

Mai et al. (2020) argue that while the demand side of ecotourism necessitates responsible consumption among travellers, and have received reasonable amount of attention, the supply side concerning local community engagement has received limited focus. Although academic literature on ecotourism branding talks about tourists' involvement and community-led ecotourism as two emerging areas within sustainable tourism (Koure et al., 2022; Adom, 2019;), the interplay of these two has remained under-researched in the branding of ecotourism destinations. There is limited research on fostering tourist-local community engagement in ecotourism branding of rural and remote areas as well as vulnerable archipelagos, as demonstrated

by the prevalence of exploratory studies in the literature (Mafi et al., 2020; Chen & Rahman, 2018; Harum et al., 2018). Furthermore, there is lack of case studies in Peru and the Maldives as thriving ecotourism destinations (Rosalina et al., 2021).

Therefore, this study aims at investigating how and to what extent, tourist-local community engagement is harnessed by ecotourism companies in their ecotourism branding. For this purpose, two complementary case studies from two different ecotourism contexts are introduced and analyzed using a case study strategy. Since ecotourism branding is a complex phenomenon, a case study as a research design helps portray different yet complementary contextual factors, shedding light upon potential differences and similarities. The chapter offers inspiration and value not only to tourism practitioners and Destination Management Organizations (DMOs), but also to academicians involved in ecological and marine research as well as other stakeholders such as local communities and visitors.

The chapter is structured to first illustrate the significance of tourist-local community engagement in ecotourism branding. The chapter then moves on to contextualise the case studies highlighting the methodological approach, and shedding light upon the different destination contexts, the challenges addressed, the ecotourism branding aspects deployed and the socio-economic and environmental benefits provided to the ecotourism destination. This is followed by Case Learnings where the findings from the two cases are outlined and learnings are discussed. Finally, the chapter concludes by highlighting the value each case brings to light as well as the recommendations for future studies in sustainable ecotourism branding.

Tourist Local Community Engagement in Ecotourism Branding

Ecotourism entails the management and governance of tourism activities in a way that preserves natural resources, striking a balance between the supply and demand side of tourism. In this regard, it addresses social challenges such as host community empowerment, income generation and capacity building of visitors in addition to employment opportunities it provides

(Samal & Dash, 2023). Ecotourism can be community-based or could entail an adventure component. Community-based ecotourism aims at cultural and economic diversity through engaging host communities in the governance of natural resources (Stone & Duffy, 2015). In other words, empowerment and engagement of host communities in ecotourism activities is the ultimate purpose. Furthermore, wildlife tourism, as a subset of ecotourism, revolves around the exploration of nature including ecological communities as well as animal and plant species

(Timothy & Boyd, 2014). Finally, another type of tourism associated with ecotourism is agritourism, which entails a trip to the villages and farmhouses in a countryside whereby tourists participate in festivals and traditional rural labor with the local residents (Fennell, 2014).

Ecotourism is also considered as a means to reduce environmental degradation such as biodiversity decline. However, in addition to minimizing negative impacts, it also contributes to enhancing the quality of various habitats such as wetlands, deserts, forests and marine habitats (Das & Chatterjee, 2015). It is an important contributor to the sustainable development of natural areas. As such, the local community is considered to have a significant role in ecotourism as they can affect sustainable tourism development to a great extent (Palmer & Chuamuangphan, 2018). In this regard, promoting ecotourism activities is necessary for achieving socio-economic development of a destination and environmental sustainability. Ecotourism is significant in the pursuit of adoption of sustainable practices, allocation of resources for environmental and biodiversity conservation, education of travellers through exchange between locals and tourists, local community empowerment, cultural heritage preservation, provision of alternative livelihoods and cultivation of global consciousness (Kumar et al., 2023).

Ecotourism was found to increase community resilience and boost cultural values (Musavengane & Kloppers, 2020). Since ecotourism sites are nature-based protected areas, it is of great significance to turn visitors into repeat tourists by providing memorable experiences through interactions with the local culture and environment. Sharma & Sarmah (2019) posit that engagement of travelers with host communities contributes to clean ecotourism destinations. Similarly, tourists' search for authentic experiences leads them to interact with local residents to learn about their indigenous heritage, resulting in overall visitors' satisfaction (Sharma & Sarmah, 2019; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2019).

Since the early days of ecotourism were more about awareness raising about environmental preservation, nature-based activities such as hiking and bird watching in remote areas were popular among nature and adventure lovers. However, as ecotourism evolved over the years, it became evident that visitors sought meaningful experiences with a human touch, which included learning about various cultures, traditions and cultural heritage. This shift in visitor interests and attitudes highlighted the importance of community engagement and cultural preservation as important pillars of ecotourism branding (Lee & Jan, 2018). This is noteworthy because as tourists seek authentic experiences for more meaning in their holidays (Guan et al., 2019), tourism businesses work harder to meet this demand by offering local experiences that involve engagement with local communities (Goodwin, 2013). As such, ecotourism branding promotes local community engagement in the preservation of

ecosystems and biodiversity, which ultimately leads to economic incentives to the local community.

Although branding of tourist destinations became popular in the late 1990s, it is only in the last couple of decades that it started gaining attention of academia (Me & Buchalis, 2019). According to Mearns (2007), branding is about differentiating a business from its competitors, and it entails internal and external communication of organizational culture to various stakeholders. Branding helps a business to stay ahead of the game in the marketplace, creating business value. In this sense, integrating visitor experience into branding of tourism destinations helps differentiate a business, leading to business success (Berry, 1989). In the context of destination branding, a destination must be distinguished from others by means of various elements that differentiate it, creating a unique brand (Morgan et al., 2007). As such, destination branding may be defined as a process of getting acknowledgement and buy-in of various stakeholders through communication as well as advertising. Brand development centers on the personality of a destination, thus leans on cultural heritage, natural beauty and a unique identity to shape a campaign. This entails crafting a narrative that authentically represents the destination's uniqueness and attractiveness, focusing on brand identity, a connection with guests and visitors, and business goals.

In the context of ecotourism branding, The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) (2015) posits that those planning, implementing and marketing ecotourism need to: *'minimize physical, social, behavioral and psychological impacts; provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts; build environmental and cultural awareness and respect; provide direct financial benefits for conservation, generate financial benefits for both locals and private sector; deliver memorable interpretative experiences to visitors; recognize the rights and spiritual beliefs of the indigenous people in a community and work in partnership with them to create empowerment; and design, construct and operate low-impact facilities'*. Bulbeck (2012) reduces these aspects to five, and posits that when planning ecotourism activities, the main aspects to consider are: *'the minimization of environmental impacts, the protection of nature, creating a possibility of educational potential, the participation of residents, and the sustainable development of the region'*. These dimensions also relate to ecotourism branding, the focus of which is to create customer experiences and satisfaction about a unique brand identity rather than profit (Zenker & Martin, 2011).

By integrating sustainable practices into their branding efforts, ecotourism businesses can enhance their brand equity. Brand equity is defined as the 'net present value' attributed to a brand (Shankar et al., 2008) as it builds trust, and drives positive change within the tourism industry. In this sense, branding activities of ecotourism businesses, in certain instances, can support a tourism destination's efforts towards sustainable development (Ushakov et al., 2018; Janjua et al., 2022).

This is reflected in the shared value proposition by Porter & Kramer (2011), which rests on the notion that when businesses act as businesses rather than charities, they become the most powerful force for good to offer win-win solutions in addressing today's sustainability challenges.

From the perspective of co-creation and collaboration in ecotourism branding, it is critical to understand tourism stakeholder groups and their influence on branding of ecotourism businesses (Yuliati et al., 2023). It is the critical role of destination stakeholders that determines the success or failure of branding efforts. Unlike product brands, destination brands are subject to more diverse stakeholder groups, and can be consumed for different purposes such as employment, economic development or building a brand identity (Balmer & Greyser, 2006). A tourism provider or a destination can use brand identity for positioning itself or its products. In this sense, the desired image of a destination is connected to its brand identity and lies largely in the control of its stakeholders. Thus, tourist and community engagement centered destination offerings, operations and governance models with a multi-stakeholder approach become important. Gong et al. (2019) assert that tourist-local community engagement is of paramount significance, and that it results in responsible behavior and tourists' appreciation and respect of local culture and heritage, resident safety, and adherence to regional tourism and pollution mitigation policies. Social engagement between local communities and tourists and the infrastructure development of the ecotourism sites eventually leads to sustainable tourism growth (Mai et al., 2020).

This highlights the importance of stakeholder theory, which is regarded as one of the relationship management theories which are essential to understanding ecotourism branding (Fyall, Garrod & Wang, 2012). According to Freeman (2010), a stakeholder is defined as any individual or group who has interest in an organization, and who can influence or be influenced by activities of that organization in question. The theory is relevant to ecotourism branding in order to identify stakeholders including guests and local communities. Stakeholder theory can be used to understand the extent of stakeholder power in the branding of destinations (Marzano and Scott, 2005). In the specific context of destinations, different stakeholder groups consisting of local residents, tourism authorities and local businesses can contribute to Collective brand building. Similarly, relationship-based approach is another concept which is instrumental in ecotourism branding as it emphasizes the importance of mutual benefits and win-win situations for stakeholders in a tourism destination (Ledingham, 2003; Choi & Cai, 2012).

From the Amazon Rainforest to the Maldives

This section introduces the two cases in detail. Both case studies leverage tourist-local community engagement to a different extent due to their unique context, yet they demonstrate complementary practices regarding the way they involve local communities in their ecotourism branding. The first case study presents an ecotourism company that places community engagement at the heart of its community-centered ecotourism business model and harnesses the indigenous community's knowledge as its unique brand identity. The second case study talks about a marine conservation project within a luxury resort hotel leading in sustainability and harnesses community engagement to initiate and lead transformation towards a destination's brand image.

Methodological Approach

The case studies in our study aimed to explore how and to what extent, tourist-local community engagement is leveraged in the ecotourism branding of two different ecotourism contexts from different regions. A case study is essential when there is a need to deeply understand the big picture of a certain case (O'Leary, 2004). Employing a case study strategy facilitated a holistic understanding of the ecotourism destination contexts. Furthermore, it provided useful insights that could be transferred to similar ecotourism contexts (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Finally, this strategy helped to broaden our perspectives through awareness of differences and similarities in the cases, leading us to delve deeper into the phenomenon (Merriam, 1998). According to Yin (2003), when 'why' and 'how' questions are the overarching drivers on a real-life context, then case studies should be the preferred strategy.

These grounds are also utilised within this chapter for understanding the extent of tourist-local community engagement in ecotourism branding. Exploring the main aspects of a case is scientifically fruitful, especially for the planning and execution of ecotourism branding, which is influenced by several factors such as participation of local communities or residents, educational potential of tourism activities, minimization of environmental impacts, protection of nature and the sustainable development of the destination. In our case, the two exploratory case studies are based on secondary data, which was obtained from online databases, from journal portals and online media. A comprehensive review of academic literature including journal articles and consultancy reports mainly published between 2021 and now, was undertaken, aiming to unveil the nature and extent of tourist-local community engagement for sustainable ecotourism branding.

Rainforest Expeditions, Peru

Context

Peru often comes under the list of ecotourism destinations due to its diverse natural resources and various ecological attractions that require preservation. The country's high biodiversity shapes its natural heritage. Wildlife watching and diverse vegetation characterize ecotourism in Peru. Travelers can learn a lot about the country's rich history, heritage and authentic traditions, coupled with relaxation opportunities in eco-lodges. For those interested in ancient sights and tropical forests, Peru has been developing as a new hotspot. The country possesses three different climatic zones, boasting local tropical rainforests where thousands of species live (Legrand, Simons-Kaufmann & Sloan, 2012). Visitors can walk along local natural reserves, visit the desert of Nazca and climb the Andes.

Although Peru has forests, of which seventy percent sit in the Amazon jungle, it suffers from deforestation due to wrong practices in agriculture, heavy extraction and cattle ranching. This poses a threat to its virgin rainforests and economic development that is fueled by income generation through tourism. Thus, Peru faces an ongoing challenge to strike a balance between sustainable tourism development and income generation. As Peru's popularity grows slowly, there are currently more eco-lodges than before, and many rainforest regions are more accessible in terms of infrastructure than previously (MINCETUR, 2020).

Overview of Rainforest Expeditions

Among Peruvian ecotourism businesses, *Rainforest Expeditions* stands out as a leading innovative ecotourism company. Founded in 1989 by a group of conservationists, the mission of *Rainforest Expeditions*, as stated on its corporate website, is: 'to create a harmonious relationship between tourism and nature, fostering a deep respect for the rainforest while supporting local communities'. Specializing in the ecotourism expeditions with focus on wildlife observation, science and conservation, and authentic cultural immersion, *Rainforest Expeditions* ensures that majority of jobs and benefits in the country stay local. *Rainforest Expeditions* operates on an all-inclusive business model that covers land, river transportation, a wide array of excursions and activities, all meals and accommodation. The company owns and operates three ecolodges, which are named as *Posada Amazonas*, *Refugio Amazonas* and *Tambopata Research Center*, respectively. These ecolodges have been constructed

to have minimal imprint on the surrounding fragile environment, featuring locally sourced materials and renewable energy sources.

Recycling efforts include prohibition of single-use plastics, responsible segregation of waste, with biodegradable materials processed in septic tanks. The ecolodges are the first carbon-neutral ones in the Tambopata National Reserve, and this covers daily operations, administrative offices and staff transportation. The company has carbon offsetting initiatives with a partner company that measures its carbon footprint. Furthermore, it collaborates with Nature Services Peru to provide guests with options to offset their travel emissions.

Posada Amazonas ecolodge is a 30-room jungle ecolodge situated in a 9,500-hectare communal reserve in the Tambopata River, which belongs to a community called *Ese Eja Native Community of Infierno*. The region boasts endangered species such as the giant river otter and the Amazonian turtle due to its rich biodiversity. The ecolodge has a business model in which this native community owns the lodge and *Rainforest Expeditions* takes care of its management and branding. Families with small children as well as cultural travelers and adventurers constitute the target market of this ecolodge due to wildlife observation opportunities in addition to ancient indigenous heritage. Guests are offered a large array of highly engaging experiences which include Jungle Night Walks, Giant River Otter Search, Parrot Clay Lick, Amazon Birdwatching, Jungle Mountain Biking, Night Lectures, Jungle Farm Visit, Children's Trail, Rainforest Tattoo and Sunset Cruise.

Refugio Amazonas ecolodge is a 32-room ecolodge situated on a 200-hectare private land consisting of Brazil nut forest, deep in the tropical jungle of the Tambopata National Reserve. It is the headquarters of the Wired Amazon Program thus guests can participate in scientific projects for the conservation of Tambopata when they visit this ecolodge. The ecolodge is ideal for adventure tourists seeking comfort and nature lovers short on time. The ecolodge offers a range of experiences unique to its location, which include Crested Eagle Nest Observation, Overlook Trail, Mammal Clay Lick, Parakeet Clay Lick, Tambopata Aerobotany, Brazil Nut Trail & Camp, Circle of Fire, AmazonCam Tambopata, Ethnobotanical Center of Nape, Canopy Tower and Oxbow Lake.

The *Tambopata Research Center* is an ecolodge with only 28 rooms located in the middle of the rainforest within the Tambopata National Reserve. It is one of the most remote ecolodges in South America, which boasts 300 meters (almost 1000 feet) of elevated walkways suitably located in between the floor and the canopy of the forest. This ecolodge is ideal for photographers and nature lovers due its secluded location. The ecolodge offers guest experiences, some of which are Rainforest Master Hike, Amazon Creek Trail Hike, Island Exploration & Pond, Bamboo Trail, Adventure to the Bowl, The World of Butterflies, Ceiba Walk, Monkey Search, Giants of the Amazon, Palm Swamp Trail, 8 Primates and Colorado Macaw Clay Lick.

Amazonian Conservation / Nature Protection

Rainforest Expeditions facilitates easy data collection for tropical field biologists, contributing to scientific discoveries. Therefore, the company collaborates with a community of citizen scientists for various tasks such as photographing monkeys for their catalog and tracking them via GPS or smartphones, contributing to wildlife research and conservation.

To remind guests of the importance of preservation after their visit and give them a transformative experience in the comfort of their home, Posada Amazonas offers virtual experiences through a pre-recorded video of 10-15 minutes. The video takes the audience through the most famous activities in Tambopata, whereby guests learn about the biodiversity of the Tambopata National Reserve, as well as stay emotionally connected to their Amazon experience for future visits to Posada Amazonas.

The Wired Amazon Program is an initiative by Rainforest Expeditions aimed at merging conservation efforts and scientific biodiversity research with the ecotourism experience in the Tambopata National Reserve and Bahuaja-Sonene National Park. The initiative was launched in 2016 and is actively engaging global citizen scientists to create a deeper connection with the Amazon rainforest. Some of the Wired Amazon Projects are the *AmazonCam* initiative which uses camera traps to monitor wildlife including the majestic jaguar; *8 Primates* which uses innovative bioacoustics monitoring and GPS tracking for the behavioral study and conservation of eight different primate species in the region; and *Aerobotany* which uses drones to monitor the health and phenology of rainforest canopy trees, supporting sustainable harvests and thousands of jobs in Madre de Dios. To maximize research impact and enhance research capabilities regarding the sustainability of conservation initiatives, *Rainforest Expeditions* collaborates with various academic institutions and organizations such as National University of San Marcos, San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance and Peruvian National Service of Natural Protected Areas (SERNANP).

Community Engagement

A fundamental aspect of *Rainforest Expeditions'* ethos is supporting local communities. Since its inception, *Rainforest Expeditions* has provided over 30 million Peruvian sols in income; fostered formal employment benefits and trained 200 individuals. In their Posada Amazonas

Lodge, 75% of profits directly benefit the community of Infierno as part of a strategic alliance-based business model. The formation of the community dates to 1974 when the Native Communities Law in Peru was passed, giving certain rights to indigenous Amazon communities. The law enabled communities to determine their territorial boundaries and obtain formal recognition of territorial rights. Claiming

recognition as the first native official community in Madre de Dios, the community currently owns both banks of the Tambopata River. Twenty community members work as full-time employees, and annual incomes increase twenty-five percent annually resulting from the sharing of profits among the community members. As for visitors and guests, they experience the Ese Eja's life and provide support with conservation of their indigenous culture and lands.

This innovative win-win ecotourism business model operates in a way that the local community provides forest land, local culture and local ecological knowledge; and *Rainforest Expeditions* provides tourism management experience, marketing know-how and financial capital.

Guest Education & Engagement

Through the *Tambopapa Macaw Project*, which is one of the Wired Amazon projects, tourists and volunteers are engaged in hands-on conservation efforts, helping to protect these iconic birds. Initially focused on macaw ecology and conservation, the project has expanded to study parrots, clay licks and forest protection through tourism. Similarly, through the flagship project *Discovering New Species*, guests can participate in research activities where citizen scientists help discover new species of insects in the Amazon's hidden biodiversity. This contributes to bio-literacy through DNA sample submission to the International Barcode of Life (IBoL) which aims to achieve bio-literacy by instantly identifying living organisms using a DNA barcode library. As part of the *8 Primates project*, participation from individuals of all levels including guests staying at the Tambopata Research Center are encouraged to experience learning from researchers during mealtimes and spending unique moments with them and the monkeys. Through participating in the *AmazonCam Tambopata* initiative, Refugio Amazonas lodge guests can set camera traps during rainforest tours, providing valuable footage through motion-triggered cameras.

Tourist-local community Engagement

In addition to owning the ecolodge territory, the community of Infierno also takes care of daily operations and interactions with guests. Since members of the native community also work as community guides, local community and tourists can easily interact with and learn from each other on various tours and activities. One such tour is called the Ethnobotanical Walk close to the Posada Amazonas lodge. Guests can also visit an *Ethnobotanical Nape Center* where they meet the local community who share their traditions with guests and visitors to the area. Moreover, guests can meet farmers and taste local food at an organic farm by taking

a *Jungle Farm Visit* where guests can learn farming traditions and agricultural life of the communities in the Amazon.

The Maldives Underwater Initiative (MUI) by Six Senses Laamu, the Maldives

Context

The Maldives is an island nation that stands at an average height of just one meter above sea level. This makes unpredictable weather patterns and increased groundswell a threat to life on the coral atolls as the 2,500 coral reefs constitute a dominant ecosystem across the archipelago consisting of 1200 islands. As the seventh largest reef system in the world and the largest in the Indian Ocean, these atolls contain many coral species, and diverse megafauna. The Maldives is the world's lowest nation and considered as the most vulnerable country to climate change in the world.

In addition to rising sea levels, increases in ocean temperature are also impacting life on this island nation, which is protected from monsoon season swells by a natural barrier of coral reefs. Rise in ocean temperature leads to the symbiotic algae in the coral turn white – a process called bleaching – which in turn poses a threat to the vitality of the entire reef, sixty percent of which has already been bleached. While the very survival of the Maldives depends very much on limiting the impacts of climate change, most of the the nation's five hundred and forty thousand citizens that live on the 200 islands rely on tourism for their main income. In 2019 alone, tourism contributed to 56% of the nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), with 1.7 million tourists having visited the Maldivian archipelago (Worldbank, 2021).

Recognizing the importance of environmental protection and sustainability as well as the natural disposition of the country, the Maldives is embarking on a transformative journey towards ecotourism. With tourism and fishing as the two primary industries in the Maldives, the natural environment is significantly important to the Maldivian communities in terms of sustaining their livelihood, employment as well as food and water security. Leading the way in tuna fishing, the country depends on fishing for its primary income. Ecotourism has big business potential for the country's resorts, which have awareness of the unique ecosystems, natural beauty and tranquil atmosphere that attract visitors. Thus, Maldivian resorts, as private businesses, are leading the way in ensuring the development of ecotourism in the Maldives through sustainability initiatives aimed at raising ecotourism awareness, coral conservation and erosion prevention.

Overview of Initiative

One initiative that stands out among others in terms of its contribution to ecotourism branding of the Maldives is the Maldives Underwater Initiative (MUI). Based at Six Senses Laamu on the Olhuveli Island, the initiative aims at marine conservation. Located in a Mission Blue Hope Spot in the southern Laamu Atoll, boasting the Maldives' largest resort-based marine biology teams as well as the Marine Turtle Rescue Center led by veterinarians, the resort leads in the sustainability of the island. The initiative was formed in 2018, as a multi-stakeholder platform among the resort's marine biologists and three NGOs as partners. The marine research MUI undertakes fuels the sustainability and conservation measures at the Six Senses Laamu as it creates awareness and shares up-to-date research on marine resources.

MUI consists of staff from the resort, ten resort marine biologists, sustainability experts, community outreach specialists as well as its three partner NGOs, all of whom work together to contribute to guest education, marine research and community outreach goals. While the community outreach initiatives focus on local capacity-building through trainings and infrastructure to Laamu's residents, guest education includes activities such as junior marine biology program, guided snorkel outings, sunset dolphin cruises, nightly marine conservation presentations, weekly reef and beach clean-ups, local island experience, visiting seagrass meadows and reefs, and sustainability back-of-the-house tours. Some marine research focal topics include biodiversity surveys, megafauna monitoring and seagrass protection. Marine research is further shared with resort's stakeholders such as citizen science volunteers, guests and the community. A consequent outcome of this has been the Maldivian government's declaration of six new marine protection areas in Laamu Atoll.

Ocean Conservation / Nature Protection

On every dive and snorkel, the MUI and Deep Blue Divers (Six Senses Laamu's dive center) teams collect data on any megafauna sighted, which, in 2019 alone, summed up to over 1870 hours of survey time across 2256 surveys. Such information helps identify seasonal and tidal shifts in site preference for the animals in addition to abundance and hotspots which require greater protection, feeding into planning Laamu's protected areas which are managed by the residents. More specifically, the MUI team also collects data on the locations and timings of dolphin encounters by making estimates of pods sizes and compositions of calves and adults, which helps draw a picture of the movements, behavior and population of the dolphins. This, in turn, helps identify important areas for the conservation of whales and dolphins in Laamu.

Community Engagement

MUI also entails community-minded initiatives for the Raa Atoll locals to increase access to clean drinking water and medical care. MUI has an Education and Community Outreach Manager that oversees outreach programs centered on overfishing, overdevelopment and climate change. MUI collaborates with various stakeholders from schools and active local NGOs through quarterly meetings to foster environmental stewardship in young people to enact change. As such, MUI provides training and infrastructure to Laamu's residents so that they can tackle environmental issues better. An example of this community engagement is the *Ekku Eku* program which brings together community leaders from all eleven inhabited islands to represent the atoll's 13,000 residents for a plastic-free atoll. The program supports local stakeholders and empowers them to lead sustainability projects in the atoll through the sustainability fund that offers financial support, and through provision of various courses such as grant writing or project management.

Since 2018, MUI has also been organizing a community festival in Laamu Atoll aimed at raising awareness for protection of sea turtles. The community festival has been growing over the years exponentially reaching about 1,500 participants before the Covid-19 outbreak. The festival hosted the country's first sport team medal winners and highlighted the important role of young people in making a difference to local communities. Having a balanced mix of fun and education for its participants, the community festival broadened its scope and adopted a theme called 'Our Ocean – Safe and Protected' for awareness raising.

During the pandemic years, in search of finding new ways of coming together for marine conservation as well as educating local stakeholders, MUI launched a virtual alternative to the festival through a community-driven social media campaign under the name 'Ekku Eky Dhas Kerama', which translates to English as 'Learning from each other'. The *LaamafaruFestival2020* campaign, having reached over 38,000 people, over 11,000 views and eighty percent local audience, empowered the Laamu Atoll community to use digital communication for educating and inspiring one another. Furthermore, six local news websites published articles about the campaign and its success, scaling up the potential of Laamu Atoll's branding efforts to other atolls in the Maldives. The Year 2021 saw even better success with thousands of community members in seven different Laamafaru Festivals. This was essential due to the local travel restrictions during the pandemic. The educational activities taught by the resort team were about marine protected areas which included debates, speeches and performances of students, teachers, principles and local fishermen. The kids further participated in various competitions of plastic up-cycling, poster making and sand sculptures as well as engaging in beach clean-ups together with other community members.

Although MUI removes thousands of single-use plastic bottles and plastic bags through reef and beach clean-ups, it further tackles the issue of waste management at its roots, with education programs as well as making single-use plastic alternatives accessible and affordable to the local community. For instance, since 2019, Six Senses Laamu donated a total of 63 reverse osmosis water filters to all inhabited islands and all schools and helped to avoid around 1.6 million single-use plastic water bottles on a yearly basis.

Finally, since 2016, MUI has been running a six-month marine education program with Laamu Atoll's schools, which is called 'Hello Hallu'. The MUI team delivers this condensed education program by visiting all 13 schools in the atoll and facilitates the provision of marine ID books to schools through the Blue Marine Foundation (BLUE). The books help students with identifying and appreciating the marine life they see during their field trips. Furthermore, field trips are organized to coral reefs, seagrass meadows and mangrove forests as the three important habitats in the Maldives, whereby students learn about the interconnectivity of these habitats, inhabitants of each system, the threats they face and the functions they serve. MUI also teaches students snorkeling and enables the purchase of snorkeling equipment for schools in Laamu Atoll.

Guest Education & Engagement

MUI engages guests in educational activities such as immersive marine conservation experiences through a 217 square meter (2,336 square-foot) central exhibition space called the Sea Hub of Environmental Learning in Laamu (SHELL), where guests are invited to explore the vibrant local marine life. In addition to research and conservation activities, the MUI team conducts hands-on guest activities and presentations to contribute to sustainable resource management in Laamu.

Junior Marine Biology Program, with its thirteen different sessions on different skills and specialties, engages 7- to 12-year-old kids with science experiments, snorkeling adventures in the ocean, and teaching them to make their own conservation videos. Furthermore, the complimentary marine biologist-guided snorkels are run daily around the Olhuveli Island for spotting turtles, sharks and rays, and sharing stories about the colorful fish and invertebrate inhabitants of the house reef. Similarly, a guided seagrass snorkel lets guests explore diverse seagrass meadows. To explore reefs that offer different vistas, a snorkel boat tour is run four times a week further into Laamu Atoll in addition to private snorkel boats and private guided snorkels around the island. Through snorkel excursions, guests are educated about what makes up a coral reef, what bleaching is, how the organisms on a reef work together and what research MUI is undertaking to understand these processes. Through these

excursions, guests add to their turtle ID database by collecting images of the facial scale patterns of the turtles they spot.

Daily dolphin sunset cruises for guests follow a *Dolphin Watching Code of Conduct* to minimize stress to the dolphins and was the first to be developed in collaboration with International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) for the Maldives tourism industry. By answering questions related to dolphins, dolphin cruises give guests the opportunity to help the MUI team with their research. Furthermore, fun interactive marine life and sustainability presentations are delivered every night in the resort's ice cream parlor, whereby ideas are shared about how guests can help conserve the marine environment after their holiday, with topics such as 'Seagrass: Unsung Hero of the Sea' or 'Reefs in Recovery: Life After Bleaching'.

Tourist Local Community Engagement

MUI also offers guests the opportunity to engage with the local community in weekly reef and island clean-ups as an education on how waste should be managed for a plastic-free atoll. Furthermore, the complimentary sustainability back-of-the-house tour facilitates guests' interaction with the local communities through visits to the Earth Lab, Kukulhu Village chicken farm, onsite tailor, carpentry shop, host village and desalination plant. Finally, a tour of one of the 11 inhabited islands, L. Hithadhoo, gives guests the chance to experience the local culture while visiting the local school, the mosque and the homes of Hithadhoo's residents.

Contextualizing Case Learnings

By partnering with indigenous communities, *Rainforest Expeditions* ensures that their operations directly benefit the Amazon rainforest and its people. Through an innovative community-based ecotourism governance model that integrates the Ese Eja Native Community of Infierno, community members engage with guests in story-telling and showcasing of local traditions. Such tourist-local community interaction empowers the local community to take the lead in clearing any security or maintenance concerns. Finally, since the profits from this business model are shared among the community itself, this acts as a motivator for the community to take more interest and work more. This, in turn, leads to community cohesion and community participation. Promoting 'ownership' is crucial for community-based ecotourism (Stone, 2015), as lack of ownership of local people could result in less community participation (Chirenje, Giliba and Musamba, 2013). However, caution should be exercised regarding the grant of full ownership to community members and keeping them accountable, as this could, in fact, contribute to their vulnerability when something goes wrong (Thornham, 2013a). Also, it could further be rooted

in the rationale of a broader '*field of power*' where dominant and managerial elites exert dominance (Skerratt et Steiner, 2013).

Committed to science, *Rainforest Expeditions* showcases how conservation can be made viable by finding a sustainable way in ecotourism. Utilizing the latest technology with active citizen participation and community participation in various Wired Amazon conservation projects such as Discovering New Species, AmazonCam or Tambopata Macaw Project, *Rainforest Expeditions* ensures that conservation efforts are both engaging and effective for the community as well as for guests. Indeed, as Pookhao et al. (2018) posit, Motivation, Opportunity, and Ability (MOA) constitute the pillars of good ecotourism. Similarly, interactive network platforms empower local communities to communicate with tourists, which in turn promotes the healthy growth of tourist-local community relationships (De Noni et al., 2019).

Furthermore, *Rainforest Expeditions* raises global awareness about the significance of Amazonian conservation through educational programs and direct participation of the host community. The company creates awareness about the importance of cultural diversity and promote respect for indigenous people and their rights. This awareness is further reinforced through the virtual videos the company provides to guests for a long-lasting awareness on rainforest conservation in the postvisit stage. In brand equity, awareness is essential and linked to the possibility that visitors remember the brand (Tasci, 2020). The indigenous community culture is further used as a unique brand identity to support tourism activities at the Tambopata National Reserve. This leads to a live community culture and a well-run and sustainable ecotourism business (Utama & Trimurti, 2019; Widari, Antara and Paturusi, 2019).

As for MUI, by tackling the sustainability challenge of ocean conservation and protecting the marine ecosystems within marine protected areas, MUI significantly contributes to sustainability of Maldivian tourism. Harnessing unique wildlife diversity, low tourism and strong local stakeholder relationships, MUI contributes to the branding of Laamu Atoll. MUI achieves this by developing and showcasing a well-managed, protected marine reserve with robust scientific input; harnessing strong community engagement; displaying public-private partnership as a sound management practice; and delivering measurable results under-and above water. Bringing science, marine conservation and education together, MUI serves as a regional role model and best practice in the branding of Maldives as an ecotourism destination. Indeed, businesses can be a force for good in leading social change by simultaneously creating business value and social value out of environmental and societal challenges (Porter and Kramer, 2011).

The marine research MUI has been undertaking over the years drives conservation measures not only at the Six Senses Laamu, but beyond, having led to the Maldivian government declaring protection for six marine areas. This aligns with Widari, Antara and Paturusi (2019)'s assertion that ecotourism attracts government interest to enable

infrastructure, provide transportation routes, and establish information systems for visitor safety and security. To avoid negative impacts, collective processes to brand a place revolve around sustainability as the solution, thus as de Bruyn et al (2023) assert, holistic thinking sets the stage for understanding sustainability efforts and creating a collective brand identity in a destination.

The conservation efforts of both companies enable tourist engagement in various ecotourism activities and help them learn more about the local environment so that they can contribute to conservation efforts in collaboration with the local community. This leads to the intention to consume ecotourism products and forms the basis for pro-environmental branding efforts (Wang, 2022; Chi, 2021). Moreover, green and sustainable practices can fuel visitors' intention to revisit a destination (Kim & Thapa, 2017; Yu & Hwang, 2019). However, revisit intentions of tourists also depend on cultural intelligence, as people behave according to their cultural values where they grow in different countries and can adopt different cultural norms more effectively than others (Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). In fact, previous studies show that cultural intelligence has a significant and positive connection to branding of destinations (Frias-Jamilena et al., 2018; Ang et al., (2006).

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, sustainable ecotourism branding is rooted in a systems-thinking approach to marketing, which leads destinations to be economically healthy, and tourist experiences to be environmentally conscious and socially considerate. We could argue that for ecotourism to thrive, tourism businesses must be economically viable, natural ecosystems must be preserved, and host communities must be respected with ethical fairness. In the evolving context of tourism today, ecotourism branding is not only about the promotion of destinations but also about educating tourists and travellers on being socially responsible during their holidays and travels. In this respect, it has evolved to encompass community involvement, environmental conservation, responsible business practices and cultural preservation. This entails respecting local traditions, supporting local businesses, and minimizing the use of resources. It further requires facilitating education of tourists and local communities through exchange of learning in recreational, research-related and cultural activities that encourage responsibility for sustainable travel.

In terms of social benefits, our examination of the two case studies leads us to argue that tourist-local community engagement has a role in increasing the effectiveness of ecotourism branding by boosting the adaptive capacity and capabilities of communities such as collaboration, agility and visibility. Facilitating social interactions between tourists and local communities fosters learning, which further leads to the

improvement of living standards for local communities, the revitalization of local artisanry and preservation of cultural traditions (Musavengane & Kloppers, 2020). In terms of environmental benefits, both case studies demonstrate that by facilitating responsible practices including preservation of various habitats, energy conservation and waste management in their branding, ecotourism businesses can help safeguard vulnerable natural habitats as well as biodiversity. This would help ecotourism businesses with increased revenues through attraction of environmentally-conscious travellers, who are happy to pay more for sustainable experiences. Furthermore, it would lead to prosperity of local tourism businesses, ultimately resulting in economic uplift through employment opportunities (Mansur et al., 2021). As such, benefits associated with ecotourism branding could be integrated into branding strategies of forward-thinking tourism businesses who strive for simultaneous creation of business value and societal value at large (Porter & Kramer, 2011).

The selected case studies offer a complementary view as to how tourist-local community engagement can aid in incentivising scientific ecosystems research as well as collaborative destination governance models, which are essential for sustainable ecotourism branding. An ecotourism business can promote the overall image of an ecotourism destination by creating a distinctive brand identity that involves the local community, a deep connection with tourists through provision of authentic experiences, and long-term goals such as sustainability. As such, the *Rainforest Expeditions* case study focuses on rainforest conservation by preserving the cultural heritage of the indigenous communities and empowering them to take ownership of the rainforest ecosystem as its guardians. *Rainforest Expeditions* is a good example of a community-led ecotourism model as it is a successful venture between a local community and an ecotourism company, highlighting the role of indigenous communities in contributing to tourists' education and co-creating a brand identity.

As for MUI, the resort-led multi-stakeholder initiative demonstrates how engaging tourists with local communities in educational activities helps preserve the ecosystems of a marine habitat in a fragile archipelago. Although previous literature shows that tourists participate in initiatives of ecotourism resorts mainly for leisure (Mansur et al., 2021), it would be interesting to explore how travellers' personal values enhance host communities' welfare in ecotourism branding efforts. MUI further demonstrates how a tourism business can become a role model and a force for good in shaping tourism policies towards a destination's ecotourism branding. The *MUI* case study focuses on ocean conservation by putting community at the heart of conservation in the Maldives.

The critical analysis of the case studies, although limited to academic articles, books and reports without empirical validation, sets the foundation for future case studies. These two cases were limited to two regions only, thus they may not stand

as a representative of branding efforts in ecotourism concerning other regions of the world. Future research could focus on similar cases from other parts of the world to shed light upon differentiating contextual factors.

Furthermore, future studies could consider the branding of other types of tourism to compare and contrast differences and similarities in tourist-local community engagement. This study did not look into the economic aspect of branding, which could further be integrated into prospective studies. Future studies could also specifically address greater understanding of the pros and cons associated with ecotourism branding in different geographical settings where there may be different cultural norms that could affect the level and quality of tourist-local community interactions.

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