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Corresponding Author's Email: toetetpaing.company@gmail.com*ABSTRACT**

Myanmar is one of the poorest countries in the World although it has good natural resources, geopolitical location. It is the northwestern-most country of mainland Southeast Asia, bordering China, India, Bangladesh, Thailand and Laos. Myanmar Economy faces serious challenges to gain probable benefits and success. Therefore, this research focuses on the assessment on Myanmar ecotourism strategy, potential sites and current challenges to develop ecotourism in Myanmar. There are geopolitics opportunities, high potential sites to develop sustainable ecotourism than other neighboring countries of South East Asia. This research recommended to apply good practices of international standard ecotourism sites, to build world peace through ecotourism, and to function ecotourism policy to poor community participations, etc.

Keywords: *Myanmar Ecotourism, Sustainable Ecotourism, Geopolitics, Peace Building, Community Participation*

INTRODUCTION

Myanmar is a land full of richness in nature and the diversity of species. The ecosystems in this country constitute one of the biological reservoirs in Asia. The land area of Myanmar is 261,228 square miles, with a variety of natural resources, plants and animals. The Ministry of Forestry is responsible for maintaining the forests of Myanmar. There are over 7,000 plants and over 1,000 endemic species. Also, there are about 1,000 bird species, 300 mammals, 350 reptiles are recorded. The richness of the biodiversity in nature gives Myanmar a way for Ecotourism. The general concept of ecotourism is to restrict the number of visitors within the carrying capacity of the ecotourism site. The allowable tourism level at such areas will vary with the tolerant sensitivity of the type of forests and its environment like the nature reserves and wildlife centuries for ecotourism development (Ecotourism, 2012).

Since 1992, the government has encouraged tourism in the country. In 2010, 791,505 foreign tourists visited Myanmar, with 295,174 foreign tourists entering the country via Yangon International Airport. In 2012, more than 1 million foreign tourists visited Myanmar. In 2013, the number of foreign arrivals reached more than 2.04 million, counting both air and overland arrivals. Therefore, tourism has been promoted as providing economic benefit to Myanmar civilians, and to develop and expose the country from the rest of the world. But, the arrival of visitors/tourists is only 2-3% of the total tourists and that need to be increased more in numbers year by year (Tin, Thida & Mishra, 2018).

Myanmar's tourist' arrival is increasing gradually since 1992 and the Ministry of Hotel and Tourism. The

ministry has permitted about 1,628 hotels and guest houses with some 65,470 rooms to operate as of March 2018 (Global Times, 2018). Moreover, Myanmar's Government implements obligatory policies, strategies and regulations to foster tourism sector investment through private sectors of the country and Foreign Direct Investment since 2015. Yangon city has the most number of hotels in Myanmar, thus it has 395 hotels with 25,000 rooms, Mandalay has 211 hotels with 8,800 rooms, Taung Gyi & Inlay lake has 143 hotels with 4,500 rooms, Bagan has 85 hotels with 2,900 rooms, and Nay Pyi Taw has 84 hotels with 5,500 rooms that promote local job opportunities in these regions.

In accumulation, foreign tourists should be aided with specialized culinary stuffs, entertained by their requirements. Specifically, advantaged tourism stuffs such as cultural-festival tourisms which have not been established identically in provinces (Dang & Ali, 2018).

LITERATURE REVIEW**(1) Integrated Ecotourism Programme Planning**

The Ministry of Hotels and Tourism announced that 3 million foreigners visited Myanmar in 2014, but, only 3.5 percent, or 164,000, travelled to Myanmar's ecotourism sites, most of the visitors have been to Inle Lake. Moreover, Kyaiktiyo in Mon State received some number of tourists starting from Mount Popa near Bagan to Lampi Island in the Myeik Archipelago are visited by a few tourists because of the lack of development in ecotourism sites and not integrated attractive ecotourism activities (Soe & Kean, 2016). Myanmar's ecotourism sector has the potential to establish integrated ecotourism planning to make sure that it reinforces community-based ecotourism sites

from the Myanmar's better-known cultural destinations and biodiversity richness (Fennell, 2002).

(2) Apply good practices of international standard Ecotourism sites

The ecotourism site' Xingkai Lake National Nature Reserve in China creates worthy alternative livelihood for local community bringing good job opportunities as tour guides, boat operators and as services in tourism facilities. Thus, it reduces fishing practices and increases the number of fish and birds. Therefore, local fishing communities' perception towards ecotourism as a positive job opportunity and they are enthusiastic to participate in ecotourism business (Su, Wall & Ma, 2014).

The huge majority i.e., 88% of respondents of local community in Tawushan Nature Reserve in southeastern Taiwan' ecotourism sites have good opportunity to participate and articulated their support in three declarations, including'

- i. 'Communicating with local government for ecotourism planning'
- ii. 'Participating in Ecotourism Planning' and
- iii. 'Increasing ecotourism related jobs' (Lai & Nepal, 2006).

As Wildlife Conservation Society (2018) mentioned that Nam Et-Phou Louey National Protected Area (NEPL NPA) of Lao' ecotourism service groups of four villages have created job opportunities through effective and meaningful engagement with communities. All the ecotourism sites, trails and infrastructures have been developed and co-managed by ecotourism site communities at NEPL NPA. To ensure that communities are incentivized to support conservation activities, it is sharing benefits by forming Ecotourism Benefits Fund (EBF).

(3) Responsible ecotourism functioning

The International Ecotourism Society defines the subset of the ecotourism trade as responsible travel to natural areas that conserve the environment and improve the well-being of local people and encompasses interpretation and education. It also lists several principles, including minimizing impact and building environmental awareness (TIES, 2015).

Myanmar's tourism industry is developing gradually as compared to the neighboring countries like China, India, Laos, Cambodia, Malaysia and Thailand. Therefore, the responsible business practices are generally absent in Myanmar ecotourism sector. Most stakeholders don't know how to set up and function the responsible tourism

practices in their business, particularly for women and children, through setting up laws and policy level procedures to protect their rights to access to justice, right to work and fundamental human rights, etc.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is based on literature review related conference, journal, website, books of ecotourism in Myanmar. Therefore, it will need to be followed up the field data collection to ensure literature finding. But, most of the literature review methodology and analysis try to cover the absence of this weakness of field data collections'. Most of the Myanmar ecotourism literatures are found only in few numbers and it was found that more data, information related to Myanmar ecotourism was found particularly through previous practices and challenges. Therefore, this research fills this technical need of Myanmar ecotourism industry' challenges and its opportunities.

RESULTS

This review meets research objectives and recommendations for Myanmar ecotourism success ways.

There is an increase in the number of tourists and the expenditure during 2015 to 2017. Table 1 exhibits that there is at least 1% increase in the number of tourists visited Myanmar and the tourism expenditure.

Table 1: Tourism Expenditure from 2013 to 2017 Year (million in USD)

Agenda	2013 Yr.	2014 Yr.	2015 Yr.	2016 Yr.	2017 Yr.
Total expenditure	926	1789	2122	2197	1969
Average Expenditure per person per day	145	170	171	154	153
Average length of stay (Night)	7	9	9	11	9

Source: Myanmar tourism statistics (2017)

Moreover, table 2 exhibits that there is an increase in the foreign direct investment in tourism sector.

Table 2: Foreign investment in hotels and commercial complexes till 2017 (country wise)

No	Country	Hotel/Apartment	Investment (million USD)
1	Singapore	32	2719
2	Thailand	12	486
3	Vietnam	1	440
4	Japan	6	394
5	Hong Kong	5	187
6	Korea	1	100
7	Malaysia	3	23
8	United Kingdom	3	14
9	Luxembourg	1	5
	TOTAL	64	4368

Source: Myanmar tourism statistics (2017)

DISCUSSION

(A) Myanmar Ecotourism governance

i. Myanmar National planning

The goal for average annual GDP growth remains 7.7% originally set out in the Fifth Five-Year Plan - higher than the 6.8% for 2014-18 forecast. The maximum percentage of GDP export sector is Mineral products 42%, Wood 15%, Vegetable products 11%, Textiles 11%, Pearls, precious stones, metals, coins 12% and others is only 9% in 2013 (Trademap). With regards to the policy challenges of implementing the national plan in Myanmar, it highlighted on how to cooperate with the private sector through PPPs, empower business start-ups and stimulate civil society (OECD, 2015). Therefore, in national planning, the other sectors must be increased in percentage and should reduce the percentage of mineral products and wood exports. In terms of other sectors, they should be focused on services, value added products and tourism sectors.

ii. Importance of Ecotourism in Myanmar

Myanmar is rich in natural resources, but other business industries are not well developing if compared to the neighboring countries. Therefore, ecotourism is one of the potential business that is appropriate for Myanmar and it need to:

- Gather appreciation from the visitors
- Generate awareness among locals living in the area
- Help preserving and protecting the environment (Aung, 2008).

Moreover, Myanmar's ecotourism must accomplish the below-mentioned characteristics for its development:

(i) well-balanced ecological diversity, (ii) rare and endangered flora, fauna and landscapes, usually endemic to the region and (iii) indigenous cultures and communities living in it (Aung, 2008).

Although most of ecotourism sites of Myanmar need to develop to increase its allure but there are many popular and potential ecotourism sites in Myanmar, such as (Myanmar Ecotourism Sites, 2018):

- i. National Botanical Gardens
- ii. Moneyingyi Wetland Wildlife Sanctuary
- iii. Shweseztaw Wildlife Sanctuary
- iv. Kakaborazi National Park
- v. Inlay Lake (wetland) sanctuary
- vi. Sein-Ye Forest Camp

- vii. Myaing Hay Wun Elephant Camp
- viii. Indawgyi Lake Wildlife Sanctuary
- ix. Nat Ma Taung National Park
- x. Chatthin Wildlife Sanctuary
- xi. Popa Mountain Park
- xii. Alungdaw Kathapa National Park
- xiii. Meinmahla Kyun Wildlife Sanctuary
- xiv. Hlawaga Park
- xv. Yangon Zoological Gardens

(B) Assessment on Myanmar Ecotourism Strategy

Although sustainable tourism approach was raised in Myanmar by the authorities more than a decade ago, but till now the new democratic government plans to finally put those plans into action and the challenges persist. However, the Tourism Master Plan which was released in 2013, there the government committed to develop an ecotourism management strategy for protected areas to ensure that tourism supports biodiversity conservation, community-based income generation, and strengthens the management of protected areas, there are not action yet so far. Beyond that, the new policy also overlooks the issue of land, and land confiscations, and was created without i.e., the eloquent stakeholder consulted on the affected communities of the land (Soe & Kean, 2018).

(C) Ecotourism Challenges in Myanmar

There are certain challenges that Myanmar needs to overcome for its ecotourism development.

• **Benefits of community:** It is a major challenge to implement Myanmar's Ecotourism Policy and Management Strategy to gain better livelihoods. However potential conflicts with the livelihoods of the local people, such as farming and hunting, still pose challenges against the implementation of the ecotourism plan (Wai, 2018).

• **Local people cooperation:** People from villages located in wildlife sanctuaries depend on hunting for their livelihood. For example, in early March in Chat Thin Wildlife Sanctuary, a forestry worker who was guarding the camp was attacked by 10 hunters. Therefore, implementation of ecotourism without the cooperation of local people won't be easy.

• **Lack of job creation:** Farmers in nearby villages are expanding their crop cultivation areas. Moreover, there are golden deer and other wildlife around ecotourism sites that local people hunting as their common

livelihood. There is lacking to create job opportunities for local people to continue to implement ecotourism.

- **Poor facility and conservation:** Most of the ecotourism sites do not have enough transportation and electricity. Building restaurants, accommodation for foreign tourists as well as planting trees to conserve forests are the other things that need to be focused.
- **Lack of capacity building to local people:** For sustaining ecotourism it is necessary to create job opportunities for locals as tour guides because they are well-versed about these regions and can guide the tourists well. Their cooperation is the most important thing. If it creates job opportunities for locals, electric-shock fishing will decline.
- **Poor conservation practices:** Need to preserve protected wildlife areas, natural reserves, reforestation areas through biodiversity perspectives. That need budget, technology and community participation on these conservation areas.

(D) Opportunities of Myanmar ecotourism

- **Potential Environment:** Myanmar has almost all the physical features to sustain ecotourism than other countries in the Southeast Asia. More than half of the country, Myanmar, is still covered with forests and contain high biodiversity, 135 ethnic and its different cultures than others. The land area of Myanmar has snowcapped mountains, Himalayan. The far north of Myanmar is a vast and remote wilderness rarely visited by foreigners. Take the opportunity to see the highest mountains from Himalayas to Southeast Asia (Go-Myanmar, 2018). Moreover, a variety of natural resources, plants and animals, can be found in Myanmar. There are over 7000 plants, about 1100 bird species, 300 mammals and 350 reptiles. The richness of biodiversity makes Myanmar perfect for ecotourism. Myanmar has a swiftly expanding protected area system. Wildlife sanctuaries are areas preserved and protected from human action that may distract the wildlife. There are more than 20 wildlife sanctuaries. The natural forests and extensive coastal areas of Myanmar provide significant opportunities for ecotourism development (The traveler, 2014).
- **Geopolitics Opportunity:** The geopolitics of Myanmar is not only unique as compared to the highly populated countries like India and China but also its active politics is different from the democratic countries like India and communist's stronghold China. Consequently, Myanmar has near about 135 different tribes and ethnic groups, each having its own culture, history, traditions and preserved ethnic language.

Christianity was fetched to Myanmar by European missionaries in the 1800s. Islam reached this country at approximately the same time, but never gained a foothold outside the geographically isolated seaboard running from modern-day Bangladesh. Buddhism reached Myanmar around the beginning of the Christian era, mingling with Hinduism (also imported from India) and indigenous animism.

- **Multi-Historical Interest:** Myanmar was governed by a strong powerful kingdom for nearly 2,000 years, British colonized it for approx. 100 years, Myanmar socialist party ruling more than 60 years footprinted different good and bad history, cultures and its different generations are good opportunities for ecotourism sectors for outsiders than other Southeast Asia countries.

- **High Potential Sites:** There are many potential ecotourism sites located throughout the country as The MeinmahlaKyun Wildlife Sanctuary in the Ayeyarwaddy Delta, the Hlawga Park near Yangon, the Moeyungyi Wet-lands Wildlife Sanctuary near Bago, the Seinyay Forest Resort on the strategic road across Bago Yoma teak forests, the Popa Mountain Park and the Shwe-set-taw Wildlife Sanctuary in the Central Myanmar. The Pyin-Oo-lwin Botanical Gardens, the Alaungtau Kathapa National Park in Upper Myanmar and the Inle Lake Wetlands Wildlife Sanctuary on the Shan Plateau of Eastern Myanmar are among those with outstanding ecotourism potential (Let's Go Myanmar, 2011).

Popa Reserved Forest was instigated in 1902. It now spreads over an area of 31,763 acres. In 1954-55, forest adjacent the reserve was reported as Protected Forests to act as a buffer zone. The rehabilitation of Mt. Popa was started in the early 1980s by the Ministry of Forestry and UNDP. Infrastructure development happenings for Popa Mountain Park were employed initiated from 1982 under the Nature Conservation and National Parks Project executed jointly by the Ministry of Forestry and UNDP. The park is of national significance in terms of environmental (such as Mt. Popa- an extinct volcano, evergreen forest, water sources, medicinal herbs) cultural (such as Min Gyi and Min Lay spirit festivals), social and recreational values (peace, good weather, adjacent agriculture-based villages, near Bagan Ancient Pagodas site, good hotels/motels/monasteries).

(E) Economic Development

Myanmar ecotourism sector will support explicitly to local ethnic communities can be found in the states of Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Shan, Chin, Mon and Rakhine (Arakan).

But, these states must build peace in the community and generate awareness about the good practices of ecotourism. Therefore, it must introduce the research area and the empirical model, policy and facilities of community-based ecotourism based on the CE (choice experiments) model by the year 2020.

(F) Build peace building in ecotourism sites

Most of the potential ecotourism sites are in Kachin, Chin, Shan, Kayah, Mon, Karen States and Thaninthayi Region. Most of the communities, CSOs, LNGOs, SMEs needed to build their knowledge related ecotourism which will be provided by Government and donor organizations. Peace building and social security are supporting in these areas and need peace for all communities, tourists and visitors near and in the ecotourism sites.

(G) Construct local transportation facility

Most of the current ecotourism sites are not easily accessible to road transportation. The roads are accessible but only in summer season by small car, motor bike or walking and it takes 2 or 3 days to visit from villages to villages. These villages need small bridge construction for accessibility and mobility. There are poor facility and mode of transportation like car, bus, train, flight, etc. to ecotourism sites, regions throughout the year. Usually States have lack of transportation facility than Regions in Myanmar.

(H) Function ecotourism policy to poor community participation

There is no community benefit in sharing and participation of ecotourism planning, implementation, decision making to participate in local communities of these potential ecotourism sites. Therefore, policy must be set up and function well for participation of the poor communities, mostly women and children for their social security and economic opportunities.

(I) Do Capacity building to local community

Ecotourism communities are illiterate and having poor knowledge and experiences in hospitality, communication and marketing for this sector development. Thus, capacity building of local communities is essential in hospitality skill, cooking skill, culture dance skill, handicraft making skill and language communication skill, etc.

(J) Sustainable conservation

Myanmar has a large expansion of forests than other neighboring countries. These forests must be sustainable and conserve well to protect from climatic changes. These forests can be very good quality ecotourism sites

than other countries. The forest areas form natural regeneration, community forests, and reserved forests and if maintained well quality forest can be utilized for recreational, conservational and educational purposes. Forest Department has insufficient budget and inadequate staff capacity and lack of organizational structure to conserve forests well. Thus, it is challenging to develop sustainable conservation of the forests of Myanmar.

(K) Sustain the property of ecotourism sites

Myanmar need to protect the utilization of the ecotourism sites in favor of forest conservation, community use and ecotourism development purposes. Therefore, initiatives must be taken to develop land use plan and agreement among stakeholders and Government of local and central level because most potential ecotourism sites are in the living areas of ethnic people.

(L) Financial access to stakeholders

There is a lack of financial support who grants loans including both the governmental and non-governmental organizations particularly to SMEs of ecotourism business. These enterprises don't know how to obtain financial support as well as nobody do lobby or persuade policy makers of Government, ADB, World Bank organizations, etc.

(M) Stakeholder coordination

In terms of Myanmar's business culture, Myanmar is poor in coordination and support as compared to the other developed countries. Therefore, Myanmar business sector especially ecotourism or tourism industry is lacking the global village approach i.e., working together more closely. Although, there are many tourism organizations of other countries who are neither involve nor cooperate or support the poor communities.

(N) Create attractive ecotourism sites for India, China and Thai nationals

For the welfare of the Myanmar ecotourism industry, there must be environmental, cultural and religious related ecotourism for India, China and Thai nationals due to its neighboring and potential tourists at present and in future. Consequently, it must create more attractive activities, accommodations and providing the pertinent culture for India, China and Thai tourists.

(N) Deliver ecotourism information sharing

Myanmar has no information based on sharing system to visitors/tourists with relation to ecotourism sites like environmental knowledge, ecosystem, climate change,

metrology data, local economy, environmental conservation education, culture or religious related information, etc. But, most tour agencies fill some information need to cover this gap.

(O) Develop research for ecotourism' market, model, policy interventions

There should be survey, assessment and research to develop sustainable ecotourism. Moreover, it must do marketing research upon preference of visitors, affordable prices upon accommodation, transport, leisure facilities, etc. It should be supported by tourism private companies, NGOs, Government and donors.

CONCLUSION

The Government of Myanmar (GOM) initiates its 'Ecotourism Policy and Management Strategy for Protected Areas', according to which they will work with all stakeholders to confirm management plans for 10 priority protected extents are in place by 2020. Where market value is high and technical resources accessible, efforts will also be taken to formulate conservation and ecotourism management plans for additional locations. In 2020, the Ecotourism Working Group will initiate an in-depth review of this Policy and Management Strategy to ensure its continuing relevance, the practicability of the implementation framework and set out a 2020-2025 five-year work program.

The European Union and Asian Development Bank support ecotourism to strengthen the management of Myanmar's expanding protected area. It was found that 10 sites among the 21 needs to be prioritized for ecotourism development and calls for US\$15 million to be spent for implementing the policy and strategy by 2020.

The strategy mainly contains the strengthening institutional arrangements, planning in and around destinations, marketing, and research and monitoring. It also aims to engage with local communities and to invest in infrastructure and responsible business models. But road maps are not available and need to follow up the comprehensive work plan in strategy implementations.

Thus, this research concentrates on promoting and generating awareness for sustaining the eco-system of our surrounding. Consequently, generate vocational training prospects for the communities, make more job prospects in all tourism related supporting industries, and provide formal education opportunities for everyone are few of the aspects that the Government of Myanmar needs to concentrate.

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