

CREATE POSITIVE STORIES ABOUT SRI LANKA

Sri Lanka as a country has much to offer to visitors. The tourism industry has generally focused on mainstream attractions. Yet, the traveler of today is looking at experiences and connecting with people and places. Lars Sorensen, Managing Director, Owner and Chief of Tree Tops Jungle Lodge in Buttala has been associated with the country for 40 years. His business, which he started in 2002, is of a very unique concept that provides minimalistic and simple living in nature, thus creating an unforgettable experience for guests. He believes the way forward for Sri Lanka at this juncture is to offer unique selling proposition focusing on environmental conservation and a greener approach to nature and wildlife tourism, preservation of essential wild habitats in identified ecosystem hotspot areas. Positive stories need to emerge from the country to attract visitors to the island. Confidence is not the question he says, we have no choice but to move forward.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe and Jennifer Paldano Goonewardena. Photography Menaka Aravinda.



Describe your journey in Sri Lanka, how it all began and what it is today?

I do nature tourism. I opened an eco or jungle lodge in 2002, what was probably a first camp- style jungle place to stay in Sri Lanka. Believe it or not, at that time this was an uncommon idea and concept. Today it is very different with much more focus on nature and wildlife tourism. Before I got involved in this business, I used to come to Sri Lanka. I arrived in the island for the first time in 1980. Therefore, it has been 40 years since then. Sri Lanka was a fantastic place at that time. Extremely exotic and unspoiled. What was exciting and fascinating for me at that time and many years later is the nature of Sri Lanka. My first trips to Sri Lanka were spent in Hikkaduwa and Galle among the fish and the corals and surfing. Subsequently, I started to look at the jungles. I had a fascination with

elephants and I started exploring.

I was not in Sri Lanka all the time. I had to work and also educate myself. For example I was trained as a bank clerk. I also read for my MA in History of Religions/Cultural Anthropology.

Sri Lanka Was A Fantastic Place At That Time. Extremely Exotic And Unspoiled.

Master dissertation on the Theravada Buddhism concept of an ideal state. A research based on Pali textual research as well as tracing a red line through ancient texts such as Dipavamsa and Mahavamsa via middle age historical manifestations to the modern era and independent state from 1948 until the reign of President Ranasinghe Premadasa.

Therefore, I was away from Sri Lanka for some years but came again for long periods when there was an opportunity. I did field work two times for my master dissertation in 1992 and in 1993. Later in the 1990s, when I returned, I had a dream to do something eco-friendly and nature-friendly in Sri Lanka. I was looking for locations mainly in the South. There were still significant jungle areas in the 1980s and 1990s, vast areas of jungles in the South from the mountains down to the coast. I looked at remote places such as Balangoda, Haldumulla, Hambantota, and Buttala.

I visited Yala National Park first time in 1986. There were hardly any visitors, no jeeps. I explored Bundala in 1986 for the first time. It was a huge jungle area but not a national park and no regulations. Since there were no jeeps to Bundala I did my first walking safari there. In the good old days, I just took a bus from Hambantota for a few kilometers and got off and walked inside. Yes, it was crazy but that was my first visit to Bundala.

My ecotourism business began step by step after exploring several locations over many years, every time I visited Sri Lanka. In 2001, I came to the Buttala location for the first time.

I have been in this business from 2002 to 2019. We had to face the conflict and also the Tsunami. The market was beginning to look good. We are yet again facing a challenging period, but we have learned from the previous obstacles, and

we will be able to move forward now as well.

Can you tell us about the concept of your project and how you managed to establish your business?

The unique concept was to do something really authentic, with an uncommercial feeling, working with the local community. All members of the staff have been recruited from the local community. It is a living experience where you get to see the real, local life. It is a way to see a rural surrounding a place where you see how people live and get close to nature. It is unfiltered and raw. Conventional tourism is in big hotels where you are isolated from the environment, where you have to take tours or a drive to see nature. My ecotourism concept is nature based and about a raw and real wild living experience.

There Is A Quality, Even If It Is Minimalistic. I Can't Easily Explain What Is Precisely Meant By Quality, But It's About Caring And Guest Experience. A Fine Balancing Of Basicness And Five-Star Service Attitude.

What you offer is very unique, it is for a niche market. Can you elaborate on this?

It is a minimalistic and simple living concept, but since there has to be quality, it doesn't mean that it is budget. There is a quality, even if it is minimalistic. I can't easily explain what is precisely meant by quality, but it's about caring and guest experience. A fine balancing of basicness and five star service attitude. Nature-based niche tourism can be a challenging service to provide. One reason is that the travel agent market is entirely based on what we can call the big attraction tourism.

In the years we have been in this business the tourists' holiday concept about Sri Lanka has changed and has become more focused on attractions. Maybe it was easier 15-20 years ago to promote something remote than it is today. I think many people imagine that the trend to look for remote places is increasing.

But I do not believe so. In the past, even if there were fewer tourists, they were looking for the real Sri Lanka. Today, there are many more tourists in Sri Lanka but the experience they are searching is not the same.

More than looking for a real and authentic Sri Lanka, the focus is today more on the highlights of Sri Lanka the big and famous attractions. Wildlife is one of them.

The accommodation concept at Tree Tops Jungle Lodge is a tent camp, providing the experience of living and sleeping close to nature. There are also a set of tree accommodation units. I believe this is the way to preserve the experience and feeling of being one with nature. If we try to make ten or 20 rooms, we lose what we had from the beginning. That is something I am careful with. I will not change the excellent experience we had to start with. That is the difference compared to most tourist ventures. They start with a beautiful beach and a lovely small hotel, then they expand and change, and when the tourists come back, they do not like the place.

What is the tourist segment you attract, and what can Sri Lanka do more to expand its offerings?

It is not easy to define the tourist segment that we attract. It is a combination of different people. Our operations costs are very high and reflecting that, our price level is quite high. Our type of guest cannot easily be categorized into a particular segment. It is not only high-end but a mixture of travelers on different budgets.

Our price level is democratic; anyone can stay with us. Even a more budget-focused segment - at least if making it a priority.

What we offer is a camp setting, which is like living close to nature, with safaris and walks in the jungle. No particular segment comes, most of the guests combine holidays and piece together different experiences. There's no hardcore nature segment bonding with nature. A typical guest will stay in boutique hotels, some may remain in special places and some in beach hotel places like Talpe, Mirissa, and Arugambay.

Most of the tourists who come to Sri Lanka want to combine different experiences and type of places to stay. Even combine different price level places to stay from very high end to a cheap guesthouse. From Tea Trails to a beach cabanas.

In the beginning, we were entirely focused on a jungle living and walking concept in the local area.

We are located near Yala National Park. We have seen the pattern of attraction focused holiday planning and the safari demand growing. Over the years we got more and more involved in safari tours in Yala National Park.

This happened naturally due to our wildlife passion and also because times are changing. If we looked back 15-20 years ago, tourists were not focused so much on safaris, as it happened later due to the heavy promotion of Sri Lanka as a wildlife holiday destination.

In many ways over-promotion of the wildlife tourism aspect since this development happened without any management plans or ideas. It just happened. As a result of promotion. An example of promotion only - while ignoring destination management considerations. And, of course, without authorities steering the development in a desired direction. The rise of the idea of wildlife tourism that took place during the last 12-15 years was never a development created or facilitated by authorities but driven by the private sector. Wildlife tourism and management of national parks as well as conservation of ecosystem hotspots and water access outside of national parks is an area where Sri Lankan authorities can take positive actions. Do something good for nature and wildlife and by extension good for tourism. Protect wild elephants. Use the existence of wild elephants in a better way for tourism in Sri Lanka. Today elephants are cornered and actually not easy to observe apart from in Uda Walawa and Minneriya.

Should We Try To Learn Something Now? There Are Some Fundamental Questions That The Tourism Sector And The Tourism Authorities Should Start Finding Answers To. It Is A Good Time Now.

The last ten years certain wildlife tourism hotspots became major tourism attractions in Sri Lanka with a large part of tourists channeled to those few places. Today it is time to stop, take a step back and think about if those three hotspots can really absorb so many visitors. Reflect on questions of carrying capacity for tourists and wildlife.

This is not only a question of tourism, in the same period of time, the same attractions are visited much more by Sri Lankans. They travel much more than in the past.

Should we try to learn something now? There are some fundamental questions that the tourism sector and the tourism authorities should start finding answers to. It is a good time now. We have time and opportunity.

There may be something to think about: what kind of tourism future do we want?

Could we not imagine a new concept, maybe traveling less to famous attractions and discover Sri Lanka in another way. Maybe there's no need to go to Sigiriya, Kandy, Yala, Ella, Nuwara Eliya and Mirissa; it's a small country, but big enough so everyone can stay in the country without feeling that this is a touristic place. You attract high-spending tourists to your property.

How can Sri Lanka offer a similar type of experience and attract visitors?

We work a lot with national parks in Sri Lanka. We are situated close to Yala. There is much that could be done, much more than what many people are thinking about. If you follow the discussions of people in authority, there is so much talk about promotions and promoting the country. It is true that we need to promote the country, but we also need destination management. There are things in Sri Lanka that could be done better. That is something that we need to be concerned about, we must not relax and think everything is right in Sri Lanka. Things are not perfect. We can do many things much better.

One thing that is important to me is that Sri Lankan authorities, officials and departments should try to go to the field and understand a little bit more about real life because you can't develop tourism in Sri Lanka from the office. It's not enough to make a report and project proposals and get funding for the projects. Just go to Yala and see - what is the first feeling you get? The traveler has to wait for a long, and there are no clean facilities such as toilets. It is like two different worlds, people working in the field and then when you listen to the discussion from authorities, it is as if there's no connection to real life.

If we look at the Yala example again. As a company, we feel the quality of the visitor experience is just not at the level it should be.

For instance, almost all visitors are channeled inside through a single entrance. Yala has enormous potential, it is one of the best national parks in Asia, but, there is a problem with quality. I'm the king of 20 acres, and if I could be the king of a 1,000 square kilometers in Yala, then I would try to transfer the same sense of

quality. We can do more to improve the visitor experience. More importantly, the facilities for wildlife living in the national park should be improved. When it comes to that discussion, the Government should take a realistic look at the situation in Yala National Park in the popular Block 1 but especially in the rest of the national park.

About the visitor experience. Yala is a 1,000 square kilometers in extent, but only Block 1 - a smaller area of around 140 square kilometers is used by mainstream safari tourism. And all visitors are channeled inside through the Palatupane entrance near the South Coast. There's one computer, and one person issuing tickets while people are waiting outside.

There is congestion because everyone is using the same way, four times a day; in and out in the morning, in again in the afternoon and out in the evening.

I know that there is a report called a Better Visitor Experience in Yala prepared by the Wildlife Department and Tourism Board, which proposes some guidelines and things to do in Yala, such as how to improve the visitor experience. This is positive but not enough. Regulations of jeep traffic in Block 1 of Yala NP is not sufficient. Look seriously at the whole national park as well as bordering habitat hotspots and protect the wildlife. Especially where there is no safari traffic. It is essential to do something, and if we do something practical and make things better, then we can also try to start making a positive story about Sri Lanka. We need that. There are too many negative stories about Sri Lanka in the media, but we can overcome that if we think practically.

It Is Essential To Do Something, And If We Do Something Practical And Make Things Better, Then We Can Also Try To Start Making A Positive Story About Sri Lanka.

Do we need more visitors in Yala? Yes I believe so. Areas of the national park used for safari are generally much better protected than other parts.

A simple way to reduce the congestion is to make more entrances? Space is big enough, in fact, something can be done so that everyone can have a better experience. We can attract more visitors to Yala and increase visitors' enjoyment and increase the positive tones that we can read on social media and also from journalists writing about Yala. Any ideas, if they are right, should be considered

at this point. Sri Lanka should think much more about conservation.

Perhaps we can start talking about it. I mean not only as a subject for a few environmentalists, but as a Government priority. Many will say that it is expensive to take on green initiatives and that they will lose money, but I do not think so. I believe there is something to win if investments are used the right way; if we use our head and our knowledge.

We have to do something in Sri Lanka to create a positive impression.

My best idea is to think about where we could develop some form of conservation of the wild. We have national parks, but it's not enough. There is much more to be done. The Wildlife Department and the Forest Department can collaborate. There should be one Minister for these subjects. There should be an influential person to coordinate it. The Wildlife Department and the Forest Department must identify ecosystems between or outside, and what is there to be protected.

Wildlife needs water and has to access the river, but it may not be within the Park or Forest Department area. It is near water and access to food that we find all the elephants. But we can't easily see them when we go on safari. In Yala the number of elephants is seriously reduced. This happened in the same 10 -15 years as Sri Lanka became extremely promoted as a wildlife holiday destination. There are enough facts and scientific knowledge about this sad situation but there is no official concern or action. Please note: safari activity is not the reason for the issues (for elephants in Yala).

If we can seriously think about acknowledging that there is a problem and try to do something, then that is one way we could create some positive stories that could be interesting for other countries, and for the media. We need a way to get the press to write about Sri Lanka abroad.

What is the positive message the Sri Lankan Tourist Board can give and take the initiative to create a positive image for the country?

The Sri Lanka Tourist Board officials travel to international travel marts in Berlin and London, and so on. Travel marts would have an impact on B2B or travel agent tourism. Still, travel marts are unlikely to make much effect on the international media.

There is an effect in the sense that there are B2B meetings and travel agents meeting each other. But in the first place, how do we make people consider Sri Lanka as a tourist/holiday destination?

For that, we need attractive stories. We need media to write about Sri Lanka without a payment.

Internationally what are people interested in at the moment?

They're interested in nature conservation, in green solutions and eco-friendly initiatives.

Climate change and ecosystem collapse is a massive subject in Western media.

We have seen in the past decade that more journalists are invited by big companies who have invested in expensive hotels and big projects. They all write the same story that Sri Lanka is beautiful, fantastic and exotic and unspoiled and about its archaeology. They tell the same story as it was said by the first charter holiday companies 40 years ago. When chartered tours started to Sri Lanka, it was about 1970.

These are paid articles. There is nothing new, all the stories are always the same. The problem is you can get only paid journalists to write about Sri Lanka. Why is that? Because in the past it was not so.

I remember we had much more media attention on Sri Lanka, may be negative and positive both. There was much more focus on Sri Lanka internationally. Today, it's like Sri Lanka has been parked in a corner. The impression has been left that there are always problems in Sri Lanka because only negative subjects remain in the minds of people. Because only negative headlines and news can be read in international media. That is a big problem. Internationally there is very little knowledge about Sri Lanka. What is this country? How is it?

Therefore, people do not find Sri Lanka easily. If there is something in media internationally about Sri Lanka, it is always negative - bad news apart from subsidized travel articles. Even the bad news will not attract the media attention for a long time.

I have been following the Guardian in the last few weeks, and already the interest in Sri Lanka has been lost. They don't write anymore on Sri Lanka.

After April 21st, Sri Lanka was in the headlines in the Guardian and other newspapers as well. But in less than two weeks, there's no more news.

In The Guardian, three weeks after the easter attacks there were again a few short stories about instability in several areas, but again, there is nothing after that.

How can we expect anyone actually to consider Sri Lanka if they have no other knowledge, but always see negative headlines? Sri Lanka must fight against this impression that is left in the minds of international travelers that Sri Lanka is a dangerous place.

When the bombs exploded on April 21st, I was inside Yala on a camping tour with American clients. They told me that all their friends and families had warned them not to go to Sri Lanka as they believed it to be a dangerous place and they were told this before the IS attack. There is still this perception which is hard to fight against. At the same time, it is a significant limitation for the number of tourists that we can receive into the country, and we need many more. The numbers were growing slowly, and now the stream of tourists into the country is almost a zero. But even before that, it was not growing enough. It was too slow.

What about repeat guests?

We received a lot of repeat business in the past until around 2008. Before the New Era of tourism in Sri Lanka. When I spoke to hoteliers at that time, they said they were happy with the number of repeat visitors but their biggest challenge was that they were not getting any new tourists. That was the problem ten years ago and before that, where repeat business was a bigger part of the cake. But today, I think it is the other way, many new travelers, but they don't come back. Sri Lanka has become an international tourist destination like other nations. Maybe we are seeing a new kind of tourists visiting the country. They visit new countries every year and then at one point they select Sri Lanka. But they have no particular reason for choosing Sri Lanka. They do not get connected emotionally like before.

One reason may be that tourists are traveling too much from place to place, two nights in one attraction and two nights in another attraction. It is just too confusing. I believe it was not so in the past, people stayed in one place and got an emotional connection to the place. The people that you will get back are those

who spend more time in one place. It is more superficial today. Following the beaten tourism track to places like Sigiriya, Nuwara Eliya, and the colonial places, I think something is lacking with that kind of tourism. I believe this concept is not sustainable.

As far as I can remember some years ago, maybe 15-20 years ago there was a tagline from the Tourist Board, 'Away from the Beach,' because at that time the problem was that Sri Lanka was considered a beach destination only, and tourists had no knowledge of other attractions that they could experience away from the beach.

But today maybe it's time to keep some tourists on the beach. Even try thinking about new ideas of a beach tourism concept in Sri Lanka. The lack of repeat customers is partly due to the price label in Sri Lanka. In the past, Sri Lanka was more comfortable to live in for a more budget focused tourist.

In so far it can be controlled or encouraged we need to facilitate development of the medium market level tourism in Sri Lanka.

More high-end tourism in Sri Lanka is only positive given it happens without destroying the locations where new hotels are built. Unfortunately this is not the case at the moment. Too many new high-end hotels pop up on the most beautiful spots, on top of rocks and mountains making themselves visible for the whole area. Gradually, on every high point and rocky outcrop along the beach a five-star hotel suddenly shines at night, where you saw only stars shining before. I strongly believe this is totally unsustainable for a high-end tourism strategy. The success will be very short-term. Long-term it would leave a spoiled impression.

Maybe We Are Seeing A New Kind Of Tourists Visiting The Country. They Visit New Countries Every Year And Then At One Point They Select Sri Lanka. But They Have No Particular Reason For Choosing Sri Lanka. They Do Not Get Connected Emotionally Like Before.

The Tourist Board needs to encourage and make regulations to provide so that the industry provides value for money for the big tourism segment looking for this facet of the Sri Lankan attraction.

Sri Lanka is not a country like the Maldives. Generally we can never charge like

in the Maldives. There are differences. First of all the difference that destination management is more strictly enforced in the Maldives, keeping locations with an unspoiled feel, clean and un-polluted, there is clear awareness of beach preservation and it seems like there is an understanding of the importance of not removing the natural line of vegetation on the beach as is often seen in Sri Lanka when hotels are built. The Maldives or the business operators seem to understand that it is of fundamental importance to conserve the impression of an unspoiled paradise tropical island. It is their brand. Their business concept, combined with luxury of course.

This is not really the Sri Lankan brand any longer. Luxury yes. But the unspoiled dimension, no.

I am not convinced about the idea that we need to build more and more high-end or five- star hotels. What is lacking is the average and good value hotels. If you look at Thailand, many tourists are traveling every year to Thailand, but not to Sri Lanka like in the past. In the 1980s and 1990s Sri Lankan tourism was almost depending on repeat tourists who came back every year.

So why are tourists not returning like in the past ?

This may be due to too much focus on attractions. Everything in a week, on a single holiday. We are selling all the attractions in a week. Once all this is shown, they don't come back. If we focus on one particular attraction and give the traveler a relaxed and wonderful good value experience, they might return.

How can we target a particular segment?

We have wildlife in Sri Lanka, and I think we can do more to attract enthusiastic tourists, wildlife photographers and bird photographers. The number of specialized tourists coming in is small, except for places like Arugambay that provide unique experiences to visitors like surfing and wildlife. If you look at Yala, there are fewer

specialized tourists. The big majority of visitors are average tourists and average Sri Lankans touring the country. Tourists also go to Yala because it is famous, passing from the mountains on the way to the beach. It is an entirely superficial experience. We can develop the products, the National Park experience and attract a more significant number of more specialized tourists. If it's hard to find

the money for investment in Sri Lanka at the moment, then at least keep the income received from the parks without taking the money to Colombo, where the money will disappear somewhere to repay debts. Ideally, the money should be spent closer to where the income is, that is in the national parks and develop other parts like Block 1. The animals need waterholes and we need more jeep tracks.

We don't know in which way, the situation is going to develop in the next short, medium, and long-term. I believe that in one kind of segment, we can try to target is nature tourists, bird watchers and wildlife photographers. They will come. They will not be too concerned about the situation. But the average visitor who goes to Thailand or Bali who has no knowledge about Sri Lanka might think there are too many problems in this country.

But nature tourists will want to study, look at the kind of experience they will have in this country and the type of photographs to capture. This will give them a greater desire in spite of the negative vibrations in the media to not think of it as a huge problem. After all, the ISIS is present in all countries, and bombs explode in Europe as well. So we desperately need a strategy to improve the country as a nature/wildlife destination and we need to implement the plan by action and in real life. Then the nature tourism segment will definitely grow.

ISIS and bombs, I believe is not the big problem. Tourists are used to that. That was the first feedback I received from the guests I was with at the time of the incident and days after. They told me that it's normal. They said, there are bombs everywhere, in all countries. They were from America, the United Kingdom, Italy and Spain, they were the tourists we had around those days. There was no big disaster like immediately after the bombs, which was surprising. The terror attack in itself, I think, is not the biggest problem. The side effects are worse. Continued negative news. It would be good if these side effects can be minimized as much as possible.

Of Course, Sri Lanka Can Bounce Back, And The Tourists Can Come Back. But It Depends On The Ability Of The Authorities To Control The Side Effects. International Tourists Will Understand And Feel Sorry For Sri Lanka If The Situation Is Limited To Only The IS Problem.

Considering the time, you started in Sri Lanka and the types of challenges

the tourism industry has faced, are you positive that the tourism industry will bounce back?

Yes, but we need some time. This situation is a little bit hard to predict because it's a new problem. It's not similar to the other issues. The Tsunami had a significant impact at that time. Tourists canceled visits and it took nearly two years to recover and reach the same level of bookings. The tsunami was only on the coast. The rest of the country was alright. But tourism in the whole country was affected for a long time.

People began living normally on the beach after a few days. So the effect was not as significant as people imagined. Again it was created by the media.

Of course, Sri Lanka can bounce back, and the tourists can come back. But it depends on the ability of the authorities to control the side effects. International tourists will understand and feel sorry for Sri Lanka if the situation is limited to only the IS problem. Then they will feel sorry for the country and will want to come back to support the country.

I have more bookings that have not been canceled than canceled bookings, but I haven't received new bookings as yet. I'm sure people are weighing in on whether they should cancel or visit Sri Lanka. They will rationalize that they should not let IS dictate their life and that if they want to go to Sri Lanka, then they should. But if other things are disturbing the picture, then it'll be a problem. The travel advisories are a big problem. It is essential that different countries' travel advisories be changed and made more positive. Otherwise, nothing will work if the travel advisories from the leading countries generating tourists are not revised.

We get many bloggers visiting Sri Lanka who claim to be promoting the country. How do you think that will help in boosting the image of the country abroad?

Around ten bloggers had been invited by the Sri Lanka Tourist Board, which was a big story in the Sri Lankan media. It is neither harmful nor destructive, but I don't know how constructive it is. It is useful in the sense that it is not harmful. There is probably a small effect. The last months I received inquiries from some Instagram influencers - that they call themselves - that they wanted to come, stay and eat free. They said that they can promote me. I accepted a few of them to

check it out. Personally, I feel the results were not like what they promised. They were over-promoting their own ability to do something. One blogger or ten bloggers can't do much.

The effect is only among those who see their blogs, seen by people who follow them, Facebook friends, and followers on Instagram. So what is the impact that you get from that? Probably some likes, but I am not sure whether Sri Lanka can get even one tourist from blog posts. I may be too cynical and skeptical, maybe it has more effect. We had some guests at the lodge who told me that Instagram is essential today. But compared to the traditional media, I think Instagram is not that important. Instagram is just social media. There is no editor, everyone decides the subject they want to write about, and there is no control on anything like in the real media. The social media content may be good, but it is better if positive reviews about Sri Lanka come from real old fashioned and credible information media sources.

How can we move forward?

We need more positive stories about Sri Lanka internationally, and we need positive stories to balance all the negative stories. How do we get stories? We have to do something positive in the country as part of country destination management, do something attractive and something that international tourists would like. Hence my proposal to do something for conservation and development of national parks and ecosystems; not only national parks but ecosystems and make it a good story that everyone will love that this country is working for conservation and saving the elephants because they have identified a critical ecosystem where the elephants need to move. It's a good story and a fantastic story that will attract the attention and sympathy of tourists and even journalists who, even without being asked, will come to study this. I suggest this not because I'm obsessed with the environment, but I look at this practically as an investment. I think environmental and wildlife conservation is one of the best ideas to make good stories. So make this a political priority.

We need something that really can grab attention. The environment is one significant subject in the world even during elections in Europe. It is something that is in the media every day. If Sri Lanka is doing something positive for the environment, for its wild animals, for the ecosystems, and for biodiversity, it will be a big story. But it has to be done, it can't be limited to talking. Something real

has to be done to see the difference.

All this can be done by following the environmental laws, rules and regulations and Flora and Fauna Protection Act and with probably a little bit more effort than that.

We Need More Positive Stories About Sri Lanka Internationally, And We Need Positive Stories To Balance All The Negative Stories. How Do We Get Stories? We Have To Do Something Positive In The Country...

What about Airline tickets? It is an issue for Sri Lanka that airline tickets are too expensive. Why is that?

We have to fight that problem if possible. I know from my own experience that airline tickets to Sri Lanka are costlier than others. I had some clients in the past winter season who were asking for prices and availability, but then they informed that they were not coming this year because airline tickets were too expensive. They were ready to visit Sri Lanka, but they didn't want to pay the price of the airline tickets. I don't know the logic and the systems behind the costs but apparently airline tickets to Sri Lanka are too expensive.

Authorities should try to investigate the reason behind this problem and understand what can be done. Is it something with the Katunayake airport? The cost of the airlines maybe higher in Katunayake than in other airports. It is an obstacle for the number of tourists coming into the country. That is something essential to investigate and change because airports are large business entities in other countries and very competitive. Airline companies look at the cost of an airport, which is essential for the final selling price of an air ticket.

Therefore, conservation and more green thinking and economical travel to Sri Lanka by cutting the cost of airline tickets are important. There should be good value economy hotels as you get that in other countries because medium level economy tourism compared to high-end and low-end may be the most interesting.

In most countries the big piece of the cake of tourism is the medium segments where you get the big numbers. High-end tourists may spend more, but it is not crucial in Sri Lanka. High-end tourists may spend 250 dollars per day per person. Is it important? No. If you get ten times more tourists spending 125 dollars a day,

it is much better. There is something to work on there as well.

The problem with ensuring satisfaction in nature tourism is with the prominent taglines in the last 10 - 12 years. There are three great hot spots for nature tourism - the elephant gathering in Minneriya, the leopards in Yala, and Blue Whales in Mirissa. All the tourists I met who went there told me that it was terrible. The jeeps were all in one long line, with few centimeters in-between. It's the same story from Mirissa. It's unregulated, and so they have bad experiences. It's the same story, same situation in Yala with the leopards.

But if you think 15 years back, nobody was thinking about the Gathering, Yala and Blue Whales in Mirissa and nature and wildlife tourism was spread into other areas. At that time people were going to Wasgamuwa, and Maduru Oya hoping to see animals. Now they want a guarantee - 200 elephants in Minneriya, Blue Whales in Mirissa, but there is a heavy price to pay for that. You have to travel with all the other tourists, so maybe you get the results, but you are not happy. You see the leopard, you see the Blue Whale, you see more than 300 elephants in Minneriya, but there is no joy. That is related to trying to develop the potential of nature and the national parks much more, not in a distorted way, but in a positive way and help with conservation.

Tourists are concentrated in the few centers. The result is high, but satisfaction is low. Authorities must seriously think about how to use the other natural habitats in the country because there is more than Minneriya and Yala where far too many people are attracted to the same places.

Are you saying it's not about the quantity but the quality?

Yes, exactly. We need to double or aim even higher the number of tourists expected into the country. The target for this year was four million tourists. If we increased this number in a few years, provided things go well - eight million tourists would be expected, and if these tourists still want to go to the same places, for instance from the airport to Sigiriya and stay in the same hotel, it will be crazy. Driving like crazy. The movement of tourists must be dispersed to other places. The capacity to accommodate people in Sigiriya and the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy can be higher than for nature tourism. Quantity is still possible, but we need to think of new solutions. When you have eight million tourists coming to Sri Lanka, they will continue to stay in Tissamaharama, travel to the

office in Palatupana and will still have to deal with one man with one computer. Something must be done, and it must not be harmful to nature. We need more quantity, but we also need more quality.

There's one more challenge - that is that Sri Lanka tourism today is based on high seasons, maybe we get 75 percent of the tourists in the high seasons. Sometimes even the short seasons in July-August, Christmas and New Year and February are sold out. We have full bookings during the high seasons, but during the rest of the year, much less. Some periods empty. That is also a matter to look at, but I don't know how we could change this because all the countries probably have this problem. But it is different compared to the past. I believe in the past tourism, this was not based solely on seasons.

People in authority and the tourism industry should try to create a think-tank on how to counter this status because we need not only more tourists, we need more tourists at the right time between the high seasons because hotels are empty, and we sometimes have to send the staff home as there's nothing. The changes in numbers during high and low seasons is a challenge for tourism in Sri Lanka, as it's difficult to retain staff because there's no income to pay salaries every month.

Today we get more families with children than in the past, but comparatively maybe fewer couples, solo travellers and senior travellers. We need to adapt to the changing customer demographics. Maybe the Government and tourism sector in collaboration should involve and get inspiration from international branding companies for destination branding. There are specialized, expert companies offering such services.

As an expatriate, you have remained in the country. That means you have confidence in the country?

That's is a good question. I have got used to Sri Lanka, irrespective of whether I have the confidence or not, it is my home. It would be fantastic if things could work a little bit easier, without having to fight against problems coming from outside. I have no choice but to go ahead. Otherwise, we may have to think about moving to Africa, but that is also difficult. Confidence is not the question for me, because I'm here now.

I Have Got Used To Sri Lanka, Irrespective Of Whether I Have The Confidence Or Not, It Is My Home... Confidence Is Not The Question For

Me, Because I'm Here Now.