Development of Visitor Experience Model
and Best Practices for Visitor Management
at Select Tourism Sites in Sri Lanka

Final Report

Vol. 3:
Conceptual Model and Guidelines for Visitor Management at Tourism Sites in Sri Lanka

December 2025

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Acronyms

SLTDA	Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority
UN Tourism	World Tourism Organization
CC	Carrying Capacity
CDJ	Consumer Decision Journey
DMP	Destination Management Plan
DMF	Destination Management Fund
DMO	Destination Management Organization
GPS	Global Positioning Systems
GIZ	German Agency for International Cooperation
IR	Inception Report
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
LAC	Limits of Acceptable Change

STE	Short-term expert
USP	Unique Selling Propositions
WHO	World Health Organization
WHS	World Heritage Site (UNESCO)
WOM	Word-of-mouth

1 Introduction

The present project focuses on visitor experience and visitor management at select tourism sites (attractions and/or destinations) in Sri Lanka. The main objective of the project is *to design an effective and sustainable visitor experience and management model for selected cultural, natural, and man-made sites in Sri Lanka with a view to helping improve the visitor experience, considering the carrying capacity of the sites.*

Specific project objectives include:

- *Examine the factors that influence the visitors' experience at the natural, cultural(heritage) and man-made attractions.*
- *Identify how the above factors, affect the experience of the visitors.*
- *Develop visitor experience models for natural, cultural. and man-made attractions in Sri Lanka.*
- *Explore current and future demand for specified locations and recognize seasonal peaks.*
- *Identify influential factors and current issues in visitor management of specified locations.*
- *Make recommendations to develop both environmental and social carrying capacity plans and approach for specified locations, including technology integration and the use of digital tools for real-time visitor management.*

This final report includes the findings of the three field missions to Sri Lanka, visiting ten selected tourist attractions and destinations (pilot sites). An introduction to the context (context overview and project rationale) is followed by the following three main parts:

- **Vol. 1:** Site-specific recommendations for the ten selected pilot sites;
- **Vol. 2:** International Best Practice examples for visitor management at tourism sites;
- **Vol. 3:** Conceptual model and guidelines for visitor management at tourism sites (destinations and/or attractions) in Sri Lanka.

  This is Volume 3 (Conceptual model and guidelines for visitor management at tourism sites in Sri Lanka).

2 Context

2.1 Tourism development in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka, renowned for its rich biodiversity, cultural heritage, and scenic landscapes, has witnessed a significant increase in tourist arrivals over the past decades. While COVID-19 brought international tourism to a standstill, similarly as in most destinations worldwide, the industry has since recovered, and international arrivals are now again almost at pre-pandemic levels (Figure 1)[1].

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[1] Note that figures decreased from 2018 to 2019 following the Easter Sunday terrorist attacks on three churches and three luxury hotels in Colombo on 21 April, 2019,
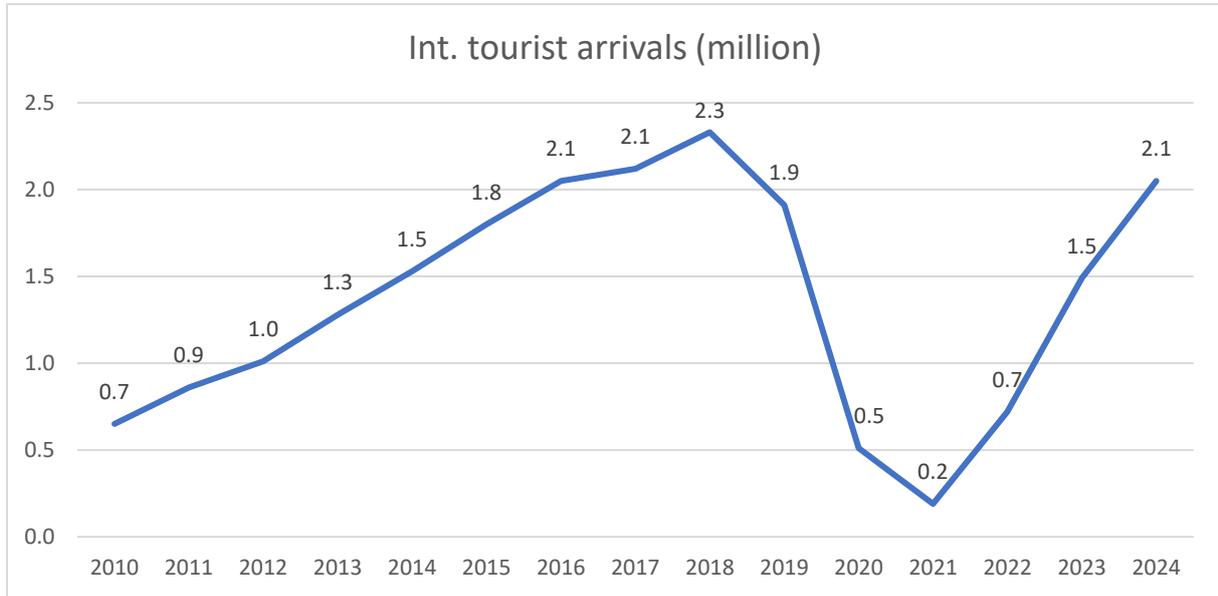
Figure 1: International tourist arrivals (million) to Sri Lanka. Source: UN Tourism (2025)

For 2025, SLTDA predicts between 2.7 and 3 million international arrivals.

This growth brings both opportunities and challenges, particularly regarding the sustainable management of visitors at popular sites. All the sites selected to be considered in this project are currently facing, at least seasonally, issues with overtourism.

2.2   Sites to be considered
The selected sites to be considered in this project are described in brief in Table 1.

Table 1: Overview of selected sites

Site Name	Location	Type of Site	Area Extension	Total Visitor Numbers (2024 or latest)[2]	Main Target Groups	Main Challenges for Visitor Management	Important aspects
Temple of the Tooth	Kandy, central Sri Lanka, in Royal Palace Complex	Cultural heritage, Buddhist temple	Not specified	Not specified (estimated 450,000 in a single day in April 2025 during a public exposition of the tooth relic)[3]	Pilgrims, cultural tourists	Overcrowding during rituals, balancing religious and tourist needs, artifact protection	UNESCO World Heritage Site; annual *Esala Perahera* ("Festival of the Tooth") draws large crowds
Pinnawala Elephant Orphanage	Pinnawala, Kegalle, Sabaragamuwa Province	Wildlife conservation facility	10 ha	650,077 (172,940 foreigners, 477,137 domestic tourists)[4]	Families, wildlife tourists	Overcrowding, visitor safety, animal welfare, inadequate facilities, parking issues	Largest captive elephant herd globally
Sigiriya	Matale District, near Dambulla, central Sri Lanka	Ancient fortress, UNESCO site	300 ha	1,121,892 (613,239 foreigners, 508,653 domestic tourists)	Cultural tourists	Long queues, inadequate facilities, crowd management, site preservation	UNESCO World Heritage Site; iconic rock fortress
Hurulu Eco Park	Habarana, near Sigiriya, North Central Province	Protected area (forest reserve, biosphere reserve)	255,000 ha[5]	244.827	Nature tourists, wildlife tourists	Seasonal overcrowding, wildlife disturbance, balancing conservation and tourism	Known for elephant safaris; biodiversity hotspot
Polonnaruwa Ancient City	Polonnaruwa, North Central Province	Ancient city, UNESCO site	~35 ha est.	237.363	Cultural tourists, school groups	Artifact protection, visitor education, managing group travel, site maintenance	Extensive ruins; UNESCO World Heritage Site

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[2] Source: SLTDA (2025) unless otherwise noted
[3] https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20250424-sri-lanka-buddhists-overwhelm-city-in-bid-to-see-sacred-tooth
[4] Internal visitor data, Pinnawala Elephant Orphanage (2024)
[5] www.protectedplanet.net

Site Name	Location	Type of Site	Area Extension	Total Visitor Numbers (2024 or latest)[2]	Main Target Groups	Main Challenges for Visitor Management	Important aspects
Galle Fort	Galle, southern coast	Colonial fortified city, UNESCO site	52 ha[6]	Not specified (142,166 at Galle Museum, Galle National Museum & Galle Maritime Museum)	Cultural tourists, cruise visitors	Overcrowding, commercialization, conservation of old structures, traffic congestion[6]	Active urban area; mix of local life and tourism
Mirissa	Southern coast, Matara District	Beach town, marine tourism	Not specified	Not specified	Backpackers, surfers, families	Overdevelopment, waste management, marine ecosystem protection	Popular for whale watching and nightlife
Yala National Park	Southeast Sri Lanka, bordering Southern and Uva Provinces	National park, wildlife sanctuary	181,000 ha[7]	646.704	Wildlife tourists, nature-based tourists	Human-wildlife conflict, overcrowding on safari routes, habitat degradation	Highest leopard density in the world
Ella	Hill country, Badulla District	Town, scenic area	560 ha[8]	Not specified	Backpackers, hikers, nature tourists	Infrastructure strain, waste management, preserving scenic beauty	Known for hiking trails and Nine Arches Bridge
Nuwara Eliya	Central highlands, Nuwara Eliya District	Town, colonial-era hill station	Not specified	Not specified	Families, honeymooners, nature tourists, cultural tourists	Seasonal overcrowding, infrastructure pressure, environmental impact	Tea plantations, cool climate, colonial architecture

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[6] https://www.archaeology.lk/galle-fort-sri-lanka-unesco-world-heritage-site/
[7] www.protectedplanet.net
[8] https://www.uda.gov.lk/attachments/dev-plans-2021-2030/Ella%20Development%20Plan%20-%20English.pdf

2.3 Tourist attractions and destinations

Some of the described sites can be characterized as tourist attractions, while others, larger ones, are destinations and include various attractions. The proposed visitor management model applies to both, but needs to be adapted to the specific contexts. Generally, managing destinations is more challenging than managing attractions, partly, because the governance structure is often much more complex (and less well-defined).

Attractions and destinations can be defined according to key characteristics listed in Table 2.

Table 2: Key characteristics of tourist destinations and attractions. Own elaboration, partly based on Fyall (2022) and Leask (2022).

Feature	Tourist Destination	Tourist Attraction
Definition	A place where tourists travel to and stay for a period of time	A specific site or feature that draws visitors due to its appeal
Purpose	To deliver a holistic tourism experience, often including multiple attractions and services	To provide interpretation and engagement with a specific asset; may also support conservation or education
Scope	Broad, encompasses multiple attractions, accommodations, services, and the local community. Boundaries can be fluid.	Specific, usually a single site or asset within a destination. Often clearly defined boundaries and points of entry and exit.
Geographic area	Larger	Smaller
Stakeholders	Highly diverse: public and private sectors, local government, residents, businesses, and more	Typically owners, managers, staff, conservation groups, funding bodies, and sometimes local communities
Dependency	Can exist without a specific attraction but benefits from them	Often relies on being part of a larger destination that offer additional attractions and services for tourists
Economic Impact	Generates revenue to the local economy through tourism-related businesses and infrastructure.	Contributes to the economy by drawing visitors to a specific site.

3 Experiences and visitor management

Effective visitor management and visitor experience management are essential to ensure the protection of environmental and cultural resources, enhance visitor satisfaction, and maintain the well-being of local communities.

3.1 Visitor experiences as key drivers of satisfaction and loyalty in tourism

Tourism is a type of hedonic consumption that involves strong emotions, aesthetic aspects, and symbolic elements (Fyall et al., 2019). While experiences have become a core component of tourism offerings, their significance has only recently been fully recognized. Experience in this sense goes way beyond ensuring service quality.

Visitor experience in tourism refers to the sum of **emotional, sensory, and cognitive responses** that individuals have during their interactions with a destination or attraction, and this experience is a key determinant of visitor satisfaction and subsequent behaviors. Studies consistently show that a positive

and memorable visitor experience significantly enhances visitor satisfaction, which in turn increases the likelihood of repeat visits and visitor loyalty (e.g., Arnegger et la., 2024; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021).

This relationship is mediated by emotional responses: the more meaningful and pleasurable the experience, the greater its impact on satisfaction and loyalty (Bagheri et al., 2023). Thus, the visitor experience is both a direct and indirect driver of satisfaction and loyalty, forming a cycle that is crucial for the long-term success of tourism destinations.

3.2 Visitor experience and the Customer Journey

As stated above, the visitor **experience** at attractions and/or destinations is the most important product in tourism, and it is a function of services produced by numerous entities, from hotels to guides, from museums to restaurants, from tour operators to protected areas.

In fact, the **destination experience** can be substantially impacted not only by actors directly linked to the tourism industry, but also by other stakeholders with indirect influence. For instance, the attitudes of local residents toward tourism, whether positive or negative, and the effectiveness of public services, such as waste management or transportation, may have a significant impact on the overall quality perceived by travelers. In short, the destination experience (Figure 2) is a complex phenomenon, on which individual actors, including Destination Management Organizations (DMO), may only have limited influence: "[The] management of the destination product [is] vastly more complex compared to the management of most simple products produced by single firms." (Crouch, 2011: 27).
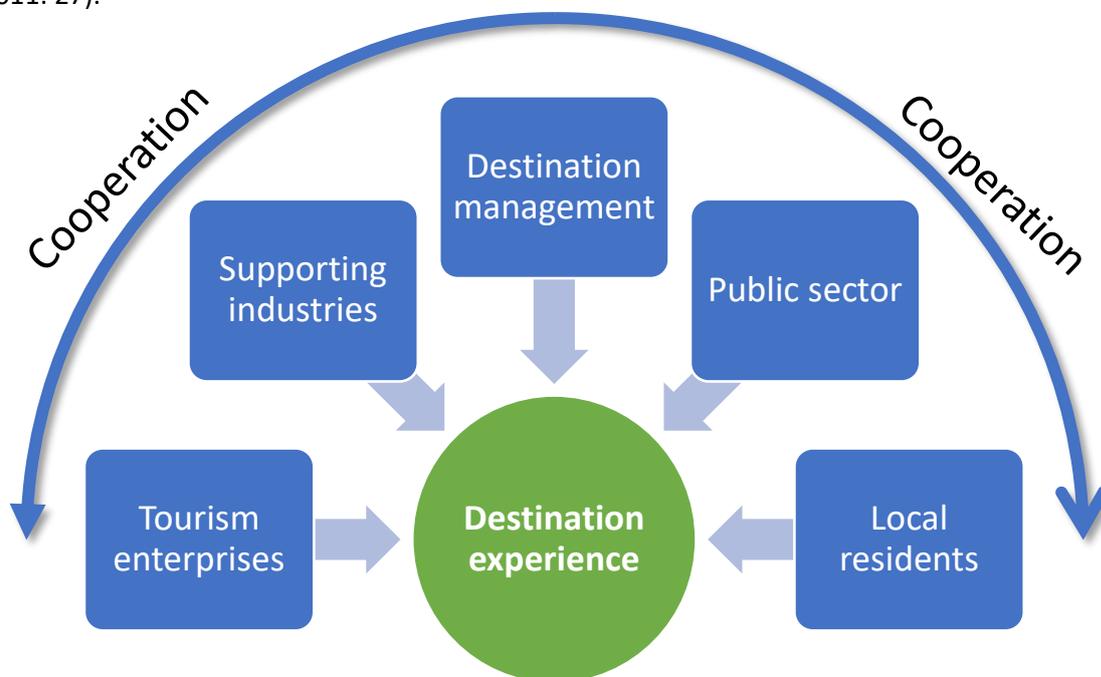
Figure 2: The Destination Experience. Source: own elaboration.

The destination experience is created and consumed simultaneously on site. However, travel decisions are being taken at earlier stages in the **customer journey**, meaning that (potential) tourists need to have a high degree of trust in the quality of the product they are about to buy. Tourists will only be able to assess whether the quality of the experience meets their expectations when the main travel

decisions cannot be altered anymore. As opposed to the consumption of physical goods, experiences in tourism cannot be returned. Therefore, quality is important at all stages of the customer journey, before, during, and after the actual trip.

Traditionally, the customer journey has been depicted as a linear graph, or a **funnel**, in which consumers begin with a set of different options (brands, destinations, etc.) in mind, and narrow it down until the purchasing decision. In contrast, strategy consulting company McKinsey proposed a more circular and dynamic model of a *consumer decision journey* **(CDJ)** that reflects the complexities of modern consumer behavior (Court et al., 2009). It acknowledges the multitude of touchpoints and the active role consumers play in their decision-making process. Stages include:

- Initial consideration
- Active evaluation
- Moment of purchase
- Post-purchase experience

Touchpoints at different stages are numerous and varied, including consumer-driven sources, and the information-flow includes two-way conversation and information sharing. The CDJ highlights that the journey doesn't end with a purchase. The post-purchase experience significantly impacts future decisions and the likelihood of a consumer becoming a loyal advocate. This implies that marketers should focus not only on driving sales but also on creating positive experiences that foster loyalty and word-of-mouth marketing. The concept of the **Loyalty Loop**, a key element of the CDJ, describes the stage where satisfied customers bypass the active evaluation phase in future purchases and directly repurchase from a brand, potentially becoming strong advocates.

For tourism, this concept of a circular customer journey can be related to Google's **five stages of travel**:

- During the **Dreaming** phase, travelers are inspired by stories and images they have encountered online or offline. These inspirations may come from peers who have already experienced the same things or from other individuals discussing it.
- The **Planning** phase is when travelers actively seek information about products, services, and attractions in one or more destinations for a travel experience.
- The **Booking** phase is the moment when travelers purchase tickets and services that will compose their travel experience. This occurs after they have conducted active research and comparison of different prices and services.
- The **Experiencing** phase encompasses the actual travel to the destination and the sum of all the experiences made at the destination.
- The **Sharing** phase encompasses the moments in which the traveler shares the travel experiences created before, during, and after the trip.

Therefore, the customer journey in modern tourism can be depicted as in Figure 3:
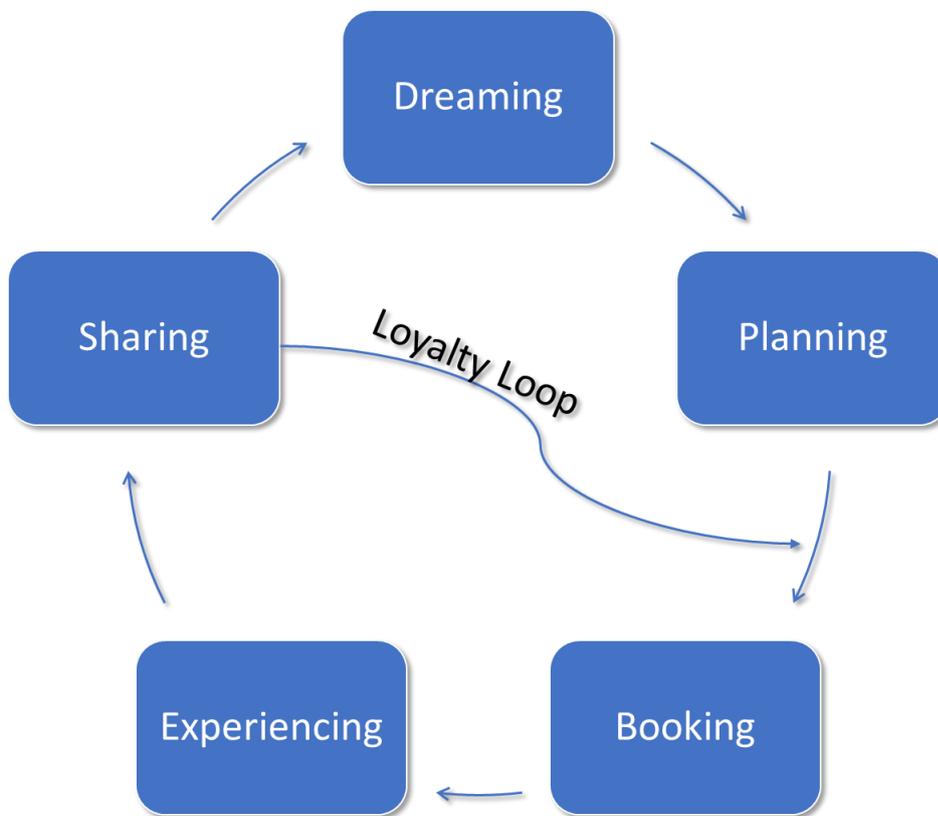
Figure 3: Customer Journey in tourism. Sources: own elaboration based on Court et al. (2009), Google

In the current business environment, the sharing phase is becoming increasingly **cross-temporal**, occurring in parallel with other phases.

The importance of customer loyalty in tourism

It costs much more to attract new customers than to retain existing ones (between five to 25 times as much, depending on the industry). There are various reasons for this:

- **Lower marketing costs**: Loyal customers are already familiar with a destination and its offerings, requiring less advertising and promotional effort to encourage repeat visits (see the **Loyalty Loop**, which bypasses the marketing-intensive Dreaming and Planning phases).
- **Word-of-mouth** (WOM) marketing: Loyal customers often act as brand advocates, spreading positive word-of-mouth and recommending the business to their friends and family.

Furthermore, repeat visitors tend to **spend significantly more money** than new customers.

In short: Building **customer loyalty** is one of the most important steps for any destination's **success**. Loyalty is, to a large degree, driven by visitor **satisfaction** through high-quality **experiences**.

It is noteworthy that **experiences are important at all stages**, not only during the "Experiencing" stage, during which lived experiences take place:

- During the **Dreaming** stage, potential travelers are inspired by the *idea* of a trip and the *experiences* they could have. Compelling content showcasing exciting activities, beautiful scenery, unique cultural encounters, and the overall *feeling* of a destination fuels their imagination and adds places to their "dream list". Furthermore, learning about a place via well-designed websites, social media channels, blogs, or traditional media coverage and advertisement, can be an experience in itself, that strengthens the desire to visit a place.

- Once a destination is determined, travelers actively research and plan the specifics of their trip (**Planning**). They seek detailed information about the types of experiences available (e.g., hiking trails, museums, restaurants), the logistics of participating in them (e.g., cost, time, booking procedures), and reviews from others who have had those experiences. They want to ensure that the reality of the destination matches their initial expectations. For many travelers, the planning experience is a critical component of the decision-making process. As with the dreaming stage, it is essential to support this experience with appropriate marketing and communication strategies.

- While the **Booking** stage is transactional, the *promise* of specific experiences can be a key driver in the final decision. Clear descriptions and enticing visuals of tours, activities, and even the ambiance of accommodations contribute to the perceived value and influence booking choices. Bundling experiences with accommodation or transportation can also be a strong motivator. Tourism businesses and DMOs need to understand that customers place a significant amount of trust in them during the booking process – a transaction that takes place before the actual lived experience. Therefore, providers must ensure pricing, services, and terms and conditions are transparent, booking processes (including online booking) are smooth and trustworthy, and customer service is quick and effective. In many cases, personal service provides much higher trust than automated chatbots, specifically for more complex cases.

- **Experiencing**: This is the stage where the actual *lived experiences* take place. The quality of these experiences directly impacts traveler satisfaction, their likelihood of returning, and their willingness to share their journey with others. Positive, memorable, and even transformative experiences are the goal.

- After the trip, travelers often share their experiences through photos, videos, reviews, and word-of-mouth (**Sharing**). These shared experiences, both positive and negative, become powerful content that influences the "Dreaming" and "Planning" stages of future travelers, creating a continuous cycle. Positive shared experiences act as social proof and can be a significant driver of destination appeal.

3.3   The role of visitor management

Visitor management is essential in tourism. It is the process of regulating the **movement and impact of visitors** in a manner that safeguards resources, optimizes visitor safety and security, and fosters positive experiences and satisfaction. Visitor management is thus directly linked to providing **high-quality visitor experiences** while maintaining the **sustainability** and **reputation** of destinations and attractions.

"Visitor management is based on the acceptance that tourism – and thus visitors – have positive as well as negative impacts on destinations. It is insufficient to conduct marketing and promotion to attract tourists; they must also be monitored and managed." (Morrison, 2022: 693-4).

Providing high quality visitor experiences involves **coordinating guest intake, tracking visitor flows, and optimizing the overall experience**, which helps to reduce wait times, improve security, and allocate resources efficiently. By managing how visitors interact with a site, destinations can provide seamless and enjoyable experiences, which are crucial for **positive first impressions and long-term satisfaction**. High-quality visitor experiences are directly linked to increased **loyalty**, positive **word-of-mouth**, and **repeat visits**, all of which are vital for the economic success and competitiveness of tourism destinations.

Morrison (2022) distinguishes the following key reasons to establish visitor management programs at attractions and destinations:

Table 3: Key reasons for establishing visitor management programs. Source: adapted from Morrison (2022)

Supply-side reasons	Demand-side reasons
Resource protection & conservation	Visitor safety & security
Visitor monitoring & management	Visitor expectations, experiences, enjoyment & satisfaction
Community resident quality of life & wellbeing	Visitor interpretation, education & information
Destination image	Visitor behavior
Yield management	Other reasons

Thus, it is noteworthy that **visitor management goes beyond the channeling visitor flows on-site**, and also involves actions at previous stages of the customer journey. Not least, effective **marketing** should attract visitor groups that are deemed appropriate and attractive, and potentially deter those that are not desired, e.g., due to inappropriate behavior, low spending levels, etc.

However, as stated above, the **destination experience** is the key product in tourism, and thus, a key element of visitor management does indeed refer to visitation flows at destinations. Here, the following approaches can be distinguished:

Visitation caps: This approach involves limiting the number of visitors to a destination or attraction through mechanisms like quotas, entry fees, and infrastructure limitations. Quotas are formal limits often used in protected areas and some countries. User fees and infrastructure restrictions act as informal caps by affecting affordability and accessibility.

Redistribution: This strategy aims to manage visitor distribution in both space and time. Spatial redistribution can involve zoning and designating areas for specific activities, such as through the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum

(ROS)[9]. Temporal redistribution uses methods such as time limits and incentives to shift visitation across different times.

Education: This approach focuses on influencing visitor behavior through various interpretive techniques and communication. Effective education seeks to inform and persuade visitors to act responsibly, using methods like codes of conduct and on-site interpretation. Interpretation can be static (e.g., signs, maps, interpretation panels) or dynamic (e.g., tour guides, mobile apps, web-based info via QR codes), each with its own advantages and disadvantages in terms of cost, reach, and effectiveness.

Key aspects of successful visitor management include the use of **advanced booking and distribution systems** to control visitor numbers and avoid overcrowding, ongoing **monitoring** of visitor impacts, and the implementation of **adaptive management** strategies. Monitoring allows managers to assess the effects of tourism on both the environment and the visitor experience, enabling timely adjustments to policies and practices. Involving **stakeholders**, including local communities and visitors themselves, in designing visitor management strategies, ensures that management strategies are relevant and widely supported.

An appropriate **visitor monitoring** system is a key **prerequisite for effective visitor management**.

Without robust visitor monitoring, management actions would be reactive rather than proactive, risking ecological damage, reduced visitor satisfaction, and inefficient use of resources. Monitoring thus provides the **foundational evidence** required for **effective, adaptive, and sustainable visitor management systems**.

Common **data sources** for visitor monitoring include automated counters, entrance ticket data, social media platforms, and digital tracking technologies.

It is important to emphasize that effective specific visitor management strategies will always be site-specific. However, general models can provide a suitable framework for deriving such site-specific approaches.

3.4 Visitor management and destination management: links and interdependencies

Visitor management and destination management are highly interdependent, each influencing the effectiveness and sustainability of the other. Visitor management focuses on regulating and enhancing the experience of tourists at specific sites or attractions, ensuring that visitor flows are balanced to minimize negative impacts on local resources, communities, and the environment. Destination management, on the other hand, encompasses a broader strategy that integrates marketing, infrastructure development, stakeholder engagement, and policy-making to shape the overall appeal and sustainability of a tourism destination.

Therefore, **effective visitor management** should be considered a **key component of tourism management**, and should play an important role in both attraction and destination management

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[9] The Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) is a planning framework that classifies outdoor recreation settings along a continuum from primitive to highly developed. It is relevant for visitor management as it provides a basis for defining, providing, and managing diverse recreation opportunities to meet a wide range of visitor preferences and ensure a quality experience while minimizing conflict and environmental impact.

plans. Visitor management helps maintain the quality of the visitor experience and protects the assets that make a destination attractive in the first place.

The synergy between these two management approaches is crucial for achieving sustainable tourism outcomes. For example, destination management provides the overarching framework and resources necessary for implementing visitor management strategies, such as zoning, interpretation, and monitoring systems. In turn, well-executed visitor management contributes to the goals of destination management by reducing overcrowding, preserving cultural and natural heritage, and ensuring that tourism benefits are distributed equitably among stakeholders. This interdependence means that both must be systematically integrated: visitor management plans should align with the broader objectives of destination management, while destination management strategies must account for the practical realities and needs of visitor management on the ground.

Visitor management thus cannot be viewed and implemented independently from attraction or destination management. Ultimately, an adequate **destination management** framework is a **prerequisite for implementing effective visitor management**.

In this report (Volume 3), both visitor and destination management are considered – specifically, since assessments at specific sites have shown that destination management is so far underdeveloped in Sri Lanka.

4 Conceptual model for visitor management at tourism sites in Sri Lanka

4.1 Overview of the conceptual model

The following model shows a step-by-step approach for implementing **visitor management** at tourist sites in Sri Lanka. The approach is valid for all types of sites, including cultural heritage sites, nature-based sites, and urban areas.

The approach is presented as a **step-by-step guide**. However, the ten steps do not necessarily have to be implemented in the exact chronological order depicted below, and can be adjusted according to site-specific requirements and information available at the time of initiating the process.

1) Preliminary Assessment
- Identify stakeholders
- Implement desk research
- Conduct baseline assessments

2) Define Vision, Objectives, and Policies
- Establish a Shared Vision
- Set Clear Objectives
- Develop Management Policies

3) Develop a Visitor Management Plan
- Visitor Flow and Capacity Management
- Infrastructure Planning
- Service & Experience Enhancement

4) Implement Monitoring and Feedback Systems
- Visitor Monitoring
- Feedback Mechanisms

5) Governance and Management Structure
- Establish Management Body (DMO or Tourism Management Committee)
- Build Partnerships

6) Communication, marketing and Stakeholder Engagement
- Develop Communication Strategies
- Ongoing Stakeholder Involvement

7) Adaptive Management and Continuous Improvement
- Review and Update Plans
- Crisis and Risk Management

8) Sustainable Funding and Resource Mobilization
- Identify Funding Sources
- Ensure Transparent Financial Management

Figure 4: Conceptual framework for visitor management at tourism sites in Sri Lanka. Source: own elaboration.

Furthermore, the steps should be first used as a checklist to identify tasks that still need to be fully addressed, those that need updating, and those that are already partially, or fully, implemented:

Figure 5: Visitor management checklist.

Roles, responsibilities and leadership

Before embarking on a visitor management journey, it is important to clarify **roles and responsibilities**. Since no formally established Destination Management Organizations currently exist in Sri Lanka, it is important that key stakeholder(s) take the lead in initiating and steering the process described in the next chapters. This could be a governmental agency, a private sector association, etc. It is important that objectives, roles and procedures are clearly communicated to all key stakeholders (see chapter 4.2), to make sure that all relevant actors feel considered, and accept the roles (including leadership roles) and responsibilities in the process.

4.2   Preliminary assessment

☑ **Identify stakeholders**
☑ **Implement desk research**
☑ **Conduct baseline assessments**

Conducting a thorough preliminary assessment sets the foundation for effective destination and visitor management. Begin by **mapping out all key stakeholders** – such as local residents, government

agencies, tourism businesses, environmental NGOs, and cultural custodians – and involve them in initial consultations. For instance, protected areas might have park rangers and indigenous groups as important contributors.

It is highly recommendable to graphically illustrate stakeholder groups in a chart. There are various options for stakeholder map templates available online. Useful tools include mind mapping software that can be used collaboratively on the web, e.g.:

- Miro (https://miro.com/strategic-planning/stakeholder-mapping/),
- Microsoft Visio (https://www.microsoft.com/en-au/microsoft-365/visio/flowchart-software)
- Canva (https://www.canva.com/graphs/stakeholder-maps/).

Stakeholder maps can be displayed as network diagrams, emphasizing relationships between different actors and groups of actors. An example is depicted in Figure 6.
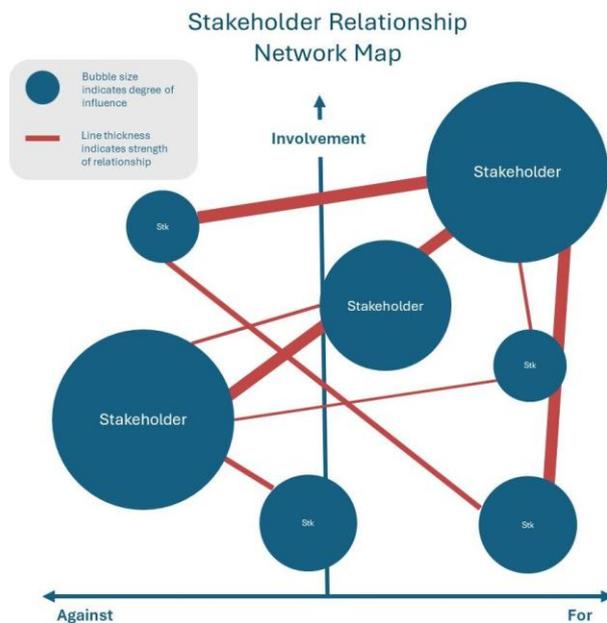

Figure 6: Stakeholder relationship network map. Source: https://simplystakeholders.com/stakeholder-mapping-template/

A different way of visualizing has been developed by the German Development Cooperation Agency (GIZ), and focuses on a categorization of stakeholders by sectors (state, private, civil society) and levels of influence on a given topic (e.g., destination development and management). A more detailed description, including an example, of GIZ's stakeholder mapping approach can be found under the following link: https://changing-transport.org/wp-content/uploads/2020_tool_stakeholder_map.pdf.
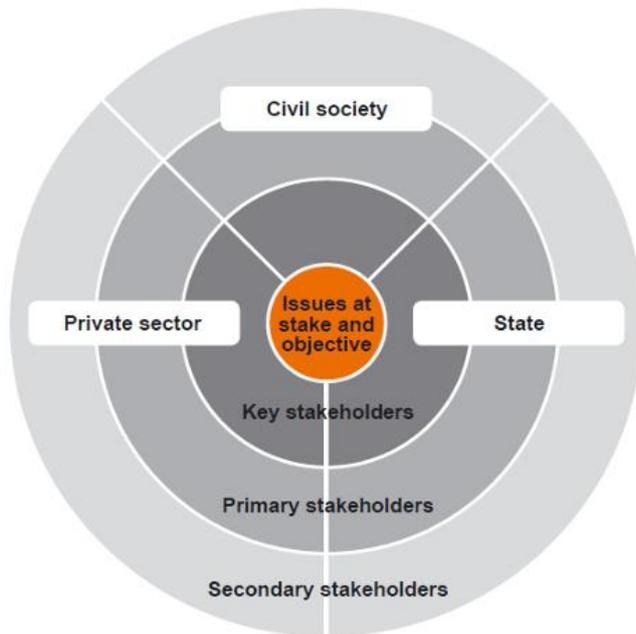
Figure 7: Stakeholder map as presented by GIZ's Capacity WORKS project management framework.

Stakeholders can also be categorized and mapped according to the **level of influence** (their ability to impact the destination) and their **level of interest** (how much they care about the destination's success or issues). A common and effective tool for this is the **Power-Interest Grid**, also known as Mendelow's (1991) Matrix (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Power-Interest Grid for stakeholder analysis. Source: adapted from Mendelow (1991).

A combination of mapping approaches is also possible. Note that stakeholder maps should be regularly re-assessed and updated, since the stakeholder landscape can be very dynamic, and new information may become available over time.
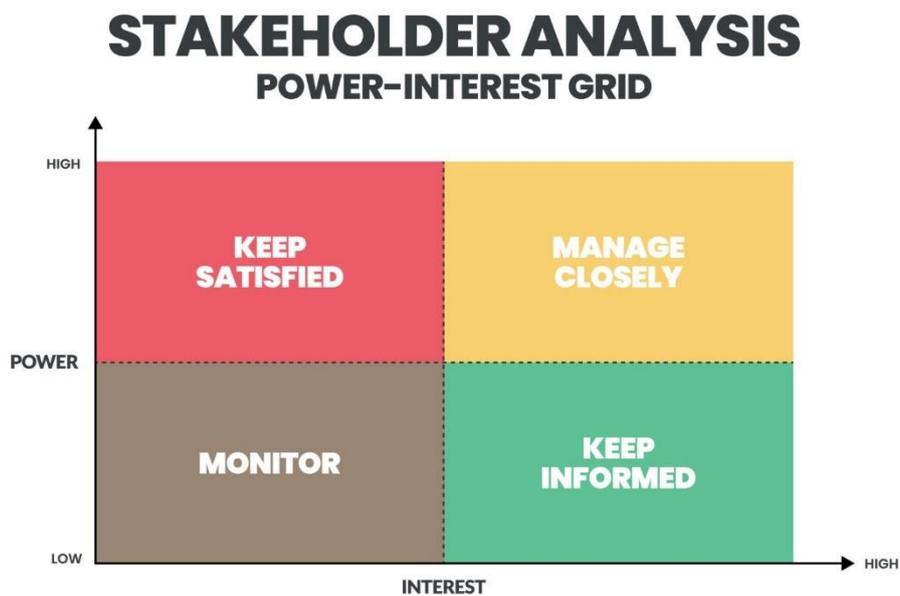
It is important to **gather all available tourism-related data**, including data on visitation and visitor flows, environmental conditions (including on ecologically sensitive zones), attractions, infrastructure capacity, tourism businesses, and cultural assets. In most cases, data will not be centrally available, but needs to be compiled from a variety of sources (identifying these sources may take as much time as gathering the data itself).

If secondary data is not available, **own baseline surveys** may be useful. Baseline surveys may be implemented as full assessments (e.g., among all accommodation providers in the destination), or using a sampling method to reduce costs and time. When relying on a sampling method, the sample should be as representative as possible.

The following categories should be assessed in detail:

Accommodations

An inventory should include all existing providers in the destination, including hotels, guesthouses, resorts, B&Bs, self-catering rentals. Important data includes:

- Accommodation category (including sub-categories, such as star ratings for hotels)
- SLTDA registration status (registered / unregistered)
- Number of Rooms and Beds
- Employment figures
- Occupancy rate (per season)
- Average length of stay

Data sources can include SLTDA's registration data, online travel agency (OTA) portals such as booking.com or Airbnb, hotel associations, and/or own field surveys.

Tour operators and tour guides

Tour operators and guides are vital to the destination value chain, and in many cases manage a large proportion of the visitor experience – good or bad. Thus, tour operators and guides should be inventoried:

- Number of operators and guides
- SLTDA registration status
- Price ranges
- Types of packages

Attractions

Attractions such as outstanding geological features, significant cultural monuments, important historical events and famous sites motivate people to become tourists. In the absence of attractions, there is no incentive for visitors to come. Therefore, it is vital to assess a destination's attractions in order to identify potential markets (if any) and understand the comparative position in the

marketplace. As outlined in the Inception Report, it is recommended to categorize attractions according to the following types:

a) Nature-based
b) Cultural
c) Other/mixed[10]

Firstly, location data should be gathered, ideally including Global Positioning Systems (GPS) coordinates to enable mapping. Further data to be collected includes:

• Accessibility
• Number of visitors
• Revenue generated
• Resources consumed/produced
• Current and/or potential uses
• Drawing power

In order to assess the level of sensitivity of the attraction to tourist disturbances, it is also necessary to consider the environmental and socio-cultural aspects. It is also recommended that intangible attractions be given due consideration. Local food and beverages are often key identifiers of a location, along with its arts and social atmosphere.

It is recommended that the inventory include visual media such as photos, videos and audio, in order to effectively demonstrate the outstanding features.

Wherever possible, quantitative data (e.g., on visitor numbers, revenues, etc.) should be collected, which enables the establishment of clear benchmarks.

4.3   Define Vision, Objectives, and Policies
☑ **Establish a Shared Vision**
☑ **Set Clear Objectives**
☑ **Develop Management Policies**

A **shared vision** aligns stakeholders toward common goals and prevents conflicts. One or several workshops (ideally in presence rather than online) should be arranged to involve all key stakeholders to collaboratively draft a vision statement and identify long-term priorities, such as balancing conservation with economic benefits, target groups, and the image a destination would like to communicate as a brand in tourism.

Based on the vision, **strategic objectives** should be defined to achieve the mission. These could address resource protection, visitor satisfaction, and community benefits. Note that short-term targets such as "increase in visitor numbers by xy% in five years" are not suitable strategic objectives, as the latter should support reaching the vision for the destination, i.e., achieving a desirable state in the future.

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[10] The "other" category only applies to the Pinnawala Elephant Orphanage, which is man-made but has "natural" assets as key attractors.

> **Visioning process**
>
> *The process of developing a vision is as important as the vision itself!* Stakeholders need to feel they have ownership over how tourism should develop in their site, otherwise, they will not work accordingly to get it done.
>
> The following approach has proved useful as **general visioning process**:
>
> - Establish a **timeline**. Generally, a 20 years horizon is often recommended, since it is long enough to allow for the sort of progress that can result in the sort of major change that a vision statement describes, but is not too long that it becomes so far in the future that the vision (and the path of achieving it) becomes very distant and intangible.
> - Identify current **barriers and challenges** to tourism development. This is ideally done as a brainstorming exercise in groups, where stakeholders should collect everything that comes to their mind. The identified challenges should then be categorized/clustered, and prioritized collectively.
> - Create **draft vision statements** (again, in groups, for larger workshops): In consideration of the identified challenges/barriers, stakeholders should develop a vision statement that reflects a view of the basin after the removal (complete/partial) of these barriers. They should also elaborate a brief explanation/justification of the vision (e.g., how it covers the removal of the barriers).
> - Agree **final vision statement**: draft vision statement(s) should be discussed in the plenary, to collectively finalize the vision.
> - Elaborate **strategic objectives**: based on the agreed vision statement, strategic objectives should be derived that are required to achieve the mission. It is important that a vision statement without associated strategic objectives has little practical value, which is why the two elements should always be developed together.

As next step, policies that reflect the strategic objectives should be developed by the stakeholders taking the lead in tourism development in their sites (ideally, a DMO or a Tourism Management Committee), e.g., zoning, codes of conduct, clear permit procedures, resource management guidelines, etc. Thereby, existing legal frameworks, traditions, or customary practices (national and local) need to be taken into account.

4.4 Develop a Visitor Management Plan
☑ **Visitor Flow and Capacity Management**
☑ **Infrastructure Planning**
☑ **Service & Experience Enhancement**

This stage involves the collaborative development of a **Visitor Management Plan**, including specific strategies and concrete actions, followed by the establishment of clear implementation and monitoring frameworks. This is where the theoretical vision is translated into concrete steps. Ideally, stakeholders should work together to devise specific strategies, such as developing new tourism products, improving infrastructure, enhancing marketing efforts, or implementing sustainable practices. Each strategy should have clearly defined actions, assigned responsibilities, timelines, and

required resources. For example, if a strategy is to promote eco-tourism, actions might include developing nature trails, training local guides, and creating awareness campaigns.

Finally, a robust monitoring and evaluation framework needs to be established, outlining **key performance indicators (KPIs)** to track progress against the set objectives. Regular review meetings with stakeholders are essential to assess the plan's effectiveness, identify any challenges, and make necessary adjustments, ensuring the DMP remains dynamic and responsive to evolving circumstances.

Effective plans manage both **visitor flows** and **site infrastructure**. Site carrying capacity thresholds should be established based on best practice approaches. Visitor management strategies, such as (re) distribution, education and marketing, or, where required, visitation caps and restrictions, should be applied to avoid crowding and unsustainable pressure on sensitive natural and cultural environments.

A note on Carrying Capacity

Carrying Capacity (CC) is a concept that is often misunderstood, or used in a confusing manner. Most importantly, CC does not have to a imply a fixed number of persons that are acceptable at a given site at any moment in time. While physical capacity limits do exist (e.g., the maximum number of persons allowed in a building, for safety reasons), in many cases, the impacts of visitors can be actively managed through appropriate strategies. These may include infrastructure enhancements (e.g., paved walkways instead of unpaved trails can accommodate more visitors, without risking erosion), or education (e.g., larger groups of visitors who know how to behave so as not to disturb sensitive wildlife, may cause less damage than smaller numbers of tourists behaving inappropriately).

Therefore, in many cases, it is more promising to take the acceptable impacts from visitors as starting point to derive visitor management strategies, rather than a fixed CC. The **Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC)** approach follows this logic. LAC was originally developed, and is most often used, in the context of protected areas. However, the basic logic can also be applied to sensitive cultural areas. The model was developed in the 1980s, and has served as basis for various refinements.

More information on the LAC approach can be found under the following link: https://responsibletourismpartnership.org/limits-of-acceptable-change/

The original paper outlining the approach can be downloaded here (Stankey, et al., 1985): https://www.fs.usda.gov/rm/pubs_series/int/gtr/int_gtr176.pdf

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Infrastructure improvements could include such different things as construction of accessible pathways (in line with defined visitor management strategies, see above), informational kiosks, public green spaces, or eco-friendly restrooms.

Enhancing services (e.g., visitor centers, interpretation apps, or locally guided tours) often requires building partnerships with local creatives and businesses. Importantly, infrastructure alone does not provide value or high-quality experiences – it always has to be managed appropriately by trained staff. Therefore, **capacity development / trainings** need to be part of any DMP.

4.5 Implement Monitoring and Feedback Systems

☑ **Visitor Monitoring**
☑ **Feedback Mechanisms**

Visitor monitoring is an essential basis for the creation of quality visitor experiences, and for sustainable visitor management at destinations. Without sound data on visitor numbers and trajectories, planning can only be based on (more or less) educated guesses.

Broadly speaking, visitor monitoring is the **systematic process of tracking and analyzing the presence, movement, and behavior of visitors within a defined area** (e.g., a tourist attraction or destination), to enhance security, inform management decisions, and optimize visitor experiences.

Traditional methodological approaches include direct observation, face-to-face surveys or manual registration logs, e.g., from ticket sales. Technological progress has been instrumental for the development of **digital approaches** such as automated counting devices, video surveillance, digital registration logs, or digital (online) surveys.

Most recently, **mobile data** has emerged as an innovative approach for digital visitor monitoring.

All approaches have advantages and disadvantages. While employing human enumerators allows for the combination of visitor censuses and surveys, this approach requires in-depth training, the availability of adequate human resources, and will usually only lead to a relatively small sub-sample of the total population.

Automatic counting machines or cameras are available 24/7, provided that there are no power outages or other technical issues; however, they are less flexible than human enumerators, and installation and operating costs may be significant. They may also be at odds with data privacy guidelines or laws.

All these approaches have in common, that counting is restricted to specific locations. Due to cost-benefit considerations, site managers will often opt to include only the most popular sites in their monitoring system, since it would be too costly to install cameras, or send human enumerators, to sites that are rarely visited. However, such cost-saving measures mean that visitor flows in large parts of destinations may be unknown to managers, hampering the development of adequate (re) distribution strategies.

Mobile data can overcome these shortcomings. With regard to mobile data, two general types can be distinguished:

(a) Data from mobile phone network providers, which includes data from phone users that log in at specific cell towers;
(b) Data from smartphone apps that use GPS and require user consent to do so (e.g., indicate location-based information, such as weather forecasts or restaurant recommendations).

Type (a) is often not geographically exact enough to indicate visitor patterns around attractions or in destinations, since cell phone towers may cover relatively large areas, and it is not possible to indicate specific user locations within these areas. **Smartphone app-based data** (b) however, is very exact (with accurateness of a few meters), thus allowing to identify visitation patterns over large areas. Since most people nowadays own a smartphone, and use it frequently during vacation and leisure time (specifically location services), it is an appropriate tool for visitor monitoring, and the only approach

that can track visitors across larger areas. In terms of costs, mobile location data has become increasingly competitive, and is often cheaper to obtain than data from other sources.

Besides general patterns, such data also allows for **more detailed analyses**, e.g., comparing different seasons, days of the week (e.g., weekends vs. weekdays), time of day (e.g., morning vs. afternoon), influence of external events, such as weather conditions, on visitation patterns, etc.

Feedback mechanisms should also be systematically introduced, and go alongside visitor flow monitoring. Feedback loops could rely on comment boxes, QR codes linking to digital feedback forms, and encouragement of reviews via platforms such as TripAdvisor, or Google.

It is important to analyze the input regularly (ideally, weekly or bi-weekly), address challenges and problems, and also communicate any improvements made in response, fostering a culture of transparency and continuous improvement.

Note that all the feedback mechanisms mentioned above require proactive behavior from visitors, and thus may be biased toward extreme, rather than moderate, ratings. Specifically, online reviewers are more likely to post when their experiences deviate significantly from expectations, meaning they're either very satisfied or dissatisfied. Routine, average experiences are underreported, resulting in a **bias toward extremes**. Therefore, regular face-to-face surveys with true random samples of visitors (e.g., intercepting every n-th visitor that passes a certain location), may also be considered.

4.6   Governance and Management Structure

☑   **Establish Management Body (DMO or Tourism Management Committee)**
☑   **Build Partnerships**

A clear governance model ensures accountability, smooth operations, and **long-term perspectives** in tourism management. For single **attractions**, usually there is an institution in charge, but it is not in all cases actively engaged in tourism management, development and marketing.

For **destinations**, the governance structure is often not formally defined. Importantly, only an institutionalized organization such as a designated destination management organization (**DMO**), or a **Tourism Management Committee** with some decision-making power that is accepted by key stakeholders, can ensure continuous destination management and development beyond initial engagement.

The DMO is an **implementation body** for the tourism strategy, offering political continuity and integrity to the destination development process and serving the interests of the entire value chain. DMOs are formal structures that build on cluster efforts to manage and market the destination.

A key function of a DMO is to **coordinate planning processes** of destination management and marketing strategies, as well as their implementation. Typically, local-level DMOs operate tourism information offices, frequently with a retail shop. Some regional-level DMOs play a significant role in regional promotion and destination management. In some cases, destinations may be covered by several DMOs at various levels, each sharing information with one another for different audiences.

A DMO requires continuous **funding**, permanent staff, and adequate resources to work effectively. Funding sources may include membership dues, hotel taxes, government funding and grants, retail opportunities, online booking commissions, advertising in publications and websites. The exact mix

depends on the destination, with many successful DMOs pursuing **diversified strategies to ensure financial stability and robust marketing**. That said, governmental subsidies, or funding from external donors or sponsors, is indispensable, at least during earlier stages of organizational development.

Therefore, it may be recommendable to **first establish less formalized Tourism Management Committees** at selected sites and destinations with support from key stakeholder groups, such as governmental organizations, international donors, and business associations. The Tourism Management Committee could start implementing defined actions while actively identifying funding sources, and then subsequently be converted into genuine DMOs.

Such a Tourism Management Committee is less formal than a DMO. Membership should be open to all interested stakeholders, which means, that members may leave from time to time, and new members may join. This flexibility can be a strength of a Tourism Management Committee; however, a core group of committed stakeholders is required to sustainably and strategically develop tourism sites, and to subsequently move from planning to action.

It is also important to build **coalitions**, e.g., with local businesses, cultural custodians, and international networks (e.g., UNESCO or the Global Sustainable Tourism Council). Regular coordination meetings and joint projects, such as heritage festivals, help maintain engagement and momentum.

Make use of the momentum created at the national Stakeholder Workshop

In September 2025, in the framework of this project, a national Stakeholder Workshop with representatives of all ten tourism sites was organized in Colombo.

During this workshop, stakeholders actively collaborated to develop ideas and plans to advance sustainable tourism development. At each site, participating stakeholders joined a pledge to form a Tourism Management Committee that shall meet regularly, and plan and implement strategic tourism development actions.

This motivation and future commitment are embodied in the **Statement of Intent** that was supported by all stakeholders from all ten sites.

It is highly recommended to make use of this momentum, and to support the ideas, initiatives and collaborative actions that were developed during the workshop. A tandem project could be envisaged as a follow-up initiative, matching stakeholders from two tourism sites to exchange know-how and experiences, and to co-create solutions for sustainable tourism development at their respective sites.

Volume 2 of this final report includes a description of a **tourism management tandem project in Germany**, that could serve as a **Best Practice** example for a similar endeavor in Sri Lanka.

4.7 Communication, Marketing and Stakeholder Engagement
☑ **Develop Communication Strategies**
☑ **Ongoing Stakeholder Involvement**

Effective **communication** strategies are essential in attraction and destination management as they influence **how (potential) visitors perceive and engage with a location**. Clear and coordinated messaging allows managing bodies, such as DMOs, to present a cohesive brand image, align stakeholder goals, and support sustainable tourism growth. In an increasingly competitive tourism market, innovative and versatile communication helps destinations stand out, ensuring they remain attractive and relevant to target audiences.

Figure 9: Destination marketing framework. Source: https://destinationthink.com/blog/our-destination-marketing-and-management-model/

Communication goes way beyond advertising – it is the connection between a target audience, i.e., the (potential) visitors, and the experiences a destination provides. According to the model shown in Figure 9, **storytelling** is at the heart of any destination communication strategy. Instead of merely listing features or amenities, destination marketers should craft and share stories, involving real people, cultural highlights, and authentic local experiences, that allow prospective visitors to imagine themselves experiencing the destination, and to establish a deep and unique connection to the destination. Through stories, destinations can create Unique Selling Propositions (USP). If tourists perceive their connection to the destination, and the experiences it offers, as genuine and authentic, they are much more likely to be loyal customers. By contrast, features and amenities such as nice hotels, museums, or landscapes, are interchangeable if they are not connected to stories, as many destinations offer similar assets.

In other words, **through stories, people (target audience) are connected to experiences**.

Storytellers are mediators who turn experiences into stories. Traditionally, a DMO (in the traditional sense of a marketing organization) and tour guides were the main storyteller for a destination. They still play fundamental roles, but, nowadays, all kinds of stakeholders can be storytellers, even tourists themselves (e.g., by sharing contents on social media).

Storytelling takes place at different **levels** and through various **channels**, but should support a consistent image. Channels are the ways and places the stories get told. Channels include WOM, print, tv or online advertising, or social media. On-site channels may also be signposts, interpretation boards, or smartphone apps.

Unique Selling Propositions (USPs) in destination marketing

USPs are critical in destination marketing because they enable a location to stand out in a **crowded marketplace** where many destinations offer similar experiences or rely on generic, interchangeable messaging. A USP highlights the **unique features and benefits** of a destination, setting it apart from competitors. This **distinctiveness** creates a clear, memorable brand identity in the minds of potential visitors.

USPs can tap into the emotional needs and desires of travelers, giving them a compelling reason to visit one location over another. This emotional appeal helps build loyalty and WOM recommendations. Focusing on USP requires **efforts** (because USP have to be identified and agreed on first), and **courage** (one has to defend decisions to not promote certain features, even though they may be attractive *per se*, but maybe not in comparison to the competition).

Instead of trying to appeal to everyone (which leads to generic marketing), a USP helps craft **targeted messages** that appeal directly to visitors whose desires align with what that place uniquely offers.

By contrast, **generic marketing**, often using vague terms such as "beautiful", "relaxing," or "adventurous" without specifics, **fails to make destinations memorable**. When every destination claims to offer the same general experiences, none stand out, leading to *brand invisibility*.

For countries such as **Sri Lanka**, this also implies that individual, local destination marketing should be **coordinated**, so that **internal competition is reduced**, and visitors are encouraged to visit various destinations and attractions.

With the rise of **digital platforms**, DMOs must adapt by integrating **real-time communication channels** and leveraging customer-generated content. Modern examples include the use of **social media** campaigns, such as Instagram hashtags for hidden local gems, or collaborations with travel influencers. These strategies enable destinations to reach diverse audiences, foster engagement, and create more authentic experiences for travelers. However, due to the rise of travel influencers on social media, and the significant increase in paid content, influencers' credibility has become scrutinized.

On-site channels, e.g., physical or digital boards (Figure 10), visitor centers, kiosks, and local signage, play a critical role in supporting communication strategies: They can deliver real-time visitor guidance and engagement, providing immediate, location-based information to visitors, helping them navigate, discover attractions, and find local services. Modern strategies use QR codes, unique URLs, and social

media prompts on boards to channel visitors from offline experiences directly into digital engagements, e.g., to follow official accounts, leave reviews, or book further activities online.

Figure 10: Interpretative boards at Black Forest National Park, Germany. Photo: Arnegger (2023).

Continuous **stakeholder engagement** is a cornerstone of effective communication strategies because it fosters a shared vision and collaborative action among the diverse parties invested in destination success. Destinations are complex ecosystems comprising various actors, including local communities, businesses (hotels, tour operators, restaurants), government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and visitors themselves. Without consistent and transparent communication, these stakeholders might operate in silos, leading to fragmented efforts, conflicting agendas, and ultimately, a less competitive or sustainable destination. Engaging all these groups ensures that communication flows in multiple directions, allowing for the collection of valuable feedback, the addressing of concerns, and the building of consensus around key initiatives, from marketing campaigns to infrastructure development and sustainability efforts.

By involving stakeholders in the communication process, destination managers can build trust, foster buy-in, and ensure that strategies resonate with the realities and aspirations of those most affected. When stakeholders feel heard and their perspectives are integrated into communication strategies, they become advocates for the destination, amplifying positive messages and contributing to a stronger, more resilient tourism offering.

4.8   Adaptive Management and Continuous Improvement
☑ **Review and Update Plans**
☑ **Crisis and Risk Management**

It is important to note that plans and strategies have to be **updated** regularly. This involves annual management audits, mid-season reviews, etc. Strategies should be updated when new technologies, or new visitation trends, emerge.

Crisis response protocols should be prepared, including rapid visitor evacuation plans, emergency communication systems, and mobile medical kits. Standards should be maintained with reference to local authorities and international bodies, such as the World Health Organization (WHO) or the Red Cross.

4.9   Sustainable Funding and Resource Mobilization
   ☑ **Identify Funding Sources**
   ☑ **Ensure Transparent Financial Management**

Rather than depending on a single funding stream, DMOs should aim to **combine multiple sources**, including government allocations, private sector partnerships, community contributions, and international donors. A **well-structured financial mechanism**, such as a dedicated **Destination Management Fund**, can help ensure transparent governance, efficient allocation of resources, and accountability to all stakeholders involved. This diversification not only reduces vulnerability to market or political changes but also provides a stable foundation for long-term planning and implementation of sustainable tourism initiatives.

> A **Destination Management Fund (DMF)** is a financial mechanism designed to support the sustainable development, promotion, and stewardship of a tourism destination. Typically administered by DMO, the fund **pools resources from various stakeholders** such as local governments, tourism businesses, and sometimes visitor contributions to invest in infrastructure, marketing, environmental conservation, and community engagement. The goal is to ensure that tourism benefits are maximized while minimizing negative impacts on the local culture, environment, and residents.

In addition to securing financial resources, DMOs must actively engage and mobilize **non-financial resources**, such as community participation, technical expertise, and industry collaboration. Strong stakeholder engagement, involving local communities, tourism operators, government agencies, academia, and non-governmental organizations, fosters a sense of shared responsibility and ownership, which in turn strengthens both funding flows and project sustainability. Establishing clear priorities that align tourism growth with environmental conservation and socio-cultural preservation can make the DMO's initiatives more attractive to potential funders, while also ensuring long-term benefits for the destination.

New DMOs should also integrate **capacity-building** and **knowledge-sharing** into their resource mobilization strategies. Building local skills in areas such as sustainable tourism management, financial planning, and digital marketing can both improve operational efficiency and attract support from donors and investors who value sustainability and accountability. Aligning operations with recognized sustainability standards and certification systems can further enhance credibility and open access to emerging opportunities, such as green finance and climate-related funding. By combining diverse revenue sources, strong stakeholder engagement, and a commitment to sustainability, Sri Lanka's

DMOs can create resilient funding models that support their long-term mission of sustainable destination development.

Finally, tourists or tour operators can be **engaged** via "adopt-a-trail" programs, mobile giving apps, or periodic crowdfunding campaigns to support specific projects like restoration or community development. However, it is important to be mindful of **not coming across as overly demanding**.

Financial transparency should be a cornerstone of accountability, especially for outside funding, and it involves providing timely, reliable data, such as audited financial statements and performance metrics, to stakeholders, including governmental organizations, international donors, tourists, investors, and local communities.

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