



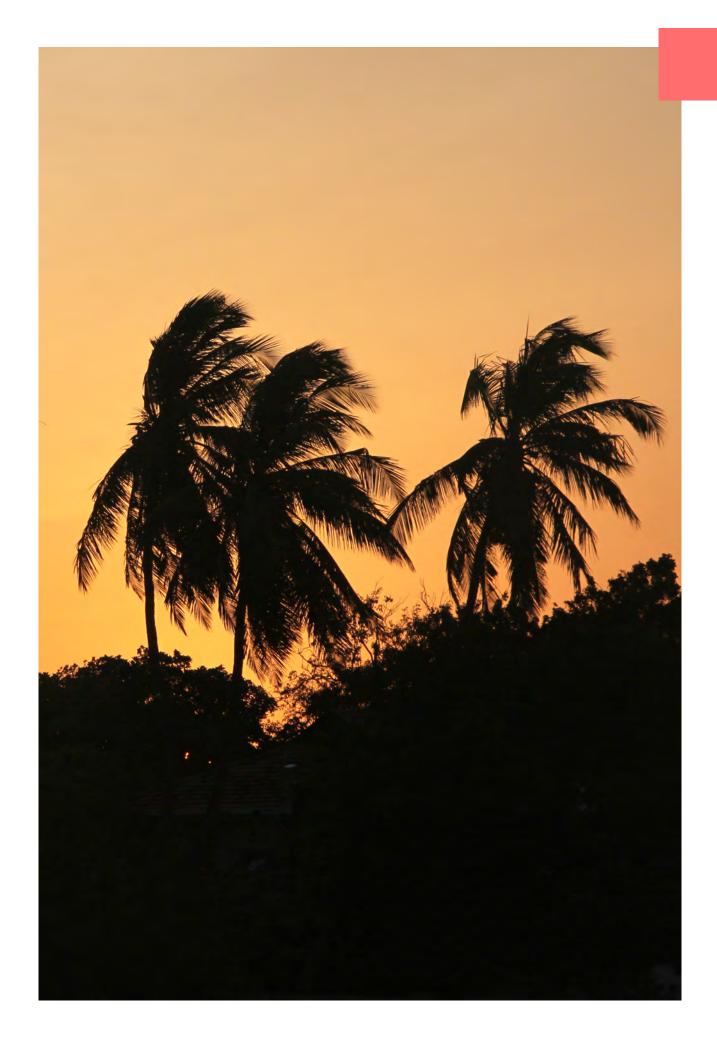
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Mannar District Community Tourism Strategy 2014 - 2022

1. Introduction

Mannar - a new tourist destination 1.1

As the popularity of Sri Lanka increases and tourists make return visits to the island, fresh and unique destinations are required to cater for the ever-changing desires of tourists. A responsive industry will cater for new and emerging tourist client groups like flashpackers, glamstrutters, volunturers and wildlifers. (please find definitions of terms on pg. 7)

The advantage of Mannar District, remaining largely undiscovered and undeveloped as an alternative tourist destination, is that it can more readily respond to new market demand and novel client groups compared with more established operators.

A responsive industry will also explore the potential of existing untapped tourism opportunities such as the market for devout pilgrims. In 2013 alone, 2 million domestic and foreign visitors made a pilgrimage to Madhu Church and 1 million to Thirukketheeswaram, one of the holiest and ancient of Hindu kovils in Sri Lanka.

Satisfied and enthusiastic visitors will bring new awareness back home and encourage friends to share their experiences, providing ongoing business for Mannar District. They will not only learn about Mannar but also how to help retain the character of the place while deepening their own travel experience. Local people then start to measure tourism success not by sheer numbers of visitors but by their length of stay, money spent and quality of experience.

Ensuring holistic benefits - economic, social, environmental

There are sound economic, social and environmental benefits for establishing Mannar District as an alternative tourist experience and destination.

In economic terms, tourism businesses ensure that they will employ and train local people, buy local supplies, use local services, attract "in country" and overseas investment, and as a result, stimulate a stagnant local economy.

Social benefits can be achieved through maximising the local population's participation and involvement in decision-making. Wellbeing becomes contingent on the need to understand and respect prevailing traditions and customs so that local people are esteemed and not offended or marginalized.

A green inheritance for future generations is safeguarded by maintaining or enhancing biodiversity and managing development and tourist numbers within acceptable resource limits so as to minimise any detrimental effects on the environment.

1.3 A people-centred strategy

Mannar's Tourism Strategy was developed over a two year period with input from numerous Mannar residents, officials and technical officers. Commenced in late 2011 during the Mannarin Marumalarchi (Renaissance of Mannar) 2022 community visioning program (MM22), the strategy was people-inspired, outlined strong views about the role of tourism in their lives and how it should serve and not override them.

The Mannar Chamber of Commerce Industry and Agriculture, with support from Diaspora Lanka (Australia), oversaw the ongoing development of the strategy, bringing it into line with the Government of Sri Lanka's 2011-2016 Tourism Development Strategy and more clearly articulating a series of projects to stimulate communitybased, sustainable and cultural sensitive-tourism in Mannar District. The strategy was based on a set of well-defined values.

Definition of Terms

Flashpacker: "affluent backpackers" with more disposable income; choose to use public transport and stay at inexpensive lodging; remain longer than conventional tourists; interested in meeting the locals as well as seeing the sights; typically associated with young adults with fewer obligations and thus more time to travel.

Glamstrutters: "professional baby-boomer globetrotters" with independent children and established careers; they want to inject some "off the beaten track" adventure into their lives for shorter periods of time, albeit with an element of luxury and needing to be served and spoilt, as part of the package.

Volunturers: "professional passionate 'do good-ers" of both young and more advancing years, who wish to contribute their skills to make a difference, gain experience in the development sector to advance their careers, or to rekindle the 'soul' in their professional life; and for a duration of between 1 to 6 months.

Wildlifers: "eco-sensitive wildlife lovers" who want to explore the world of flora and fauna in their natural habitat; for a week or two, either as individuals or in groups eg bird watching societies.



Strong values base

Residents verbalized a set of values which they hoped would govern all tourism activity:

- Affirmation of Mannar's uniqueness, cultural diversity and rich cultural heritage;
- Utilization of local resources landscapes, products, human resources;
- Eco-sensitive development;
- Affordable and readably accessible services for tourists;
- Low cost tourist investment opportunities for local people;
- Local economic benefit and employment.

Underpinning Mannar's approach to sustainable community-based tourism is social development through employment creation, income redistribution and poverty alleviation. Other positive impacts include tourism as a force for peace, improving and strengthening communities and reinvigorating civic participation.

- A force for peace travelling connects people, fosters cross-cultural awareness and exchange between hosts and guests and 'in country' and diaspora populations. It increases mutual understanding and respect of cultural diversity, and affirms the place of ancient wisdom in present-day life.
- Strengthens communities a community's way of life is revitalized, refreshing local events and festivals, reducing emigration from regional areas through tourism-related job creation and stimulating local economic development.
- Local improvements the creation of additional community facilities and services leading to higher living standards, upgraded infrastructure, health and transports improvements, new sport and recreational facilities, restaurants and public spaces.
- Valued culture and traditions preserving and promoting cultural and historical traditions, contributing to the conservation and sustainable management of natural resources; protecting local heritage and a renaissance in native cultures, cultural arts and crafts.
- Civic involvement and pride involving local communities in sustainable tourism development and operation through stimulating a feeling of pride in local and national heritage and raising local awareness of the financial value of natural and cultural sites.







2. Key objectives and activities

Five key objectives for tourism development in Mannar District were articulated and a suite of projects from substantial to modest was also proposed that would affirm Mannar's uniqueness, honour its rich cultural heritage, and bring increased sources of wealth to the people and businesses there. The objectives and recommended activities follow:

- 1. Transform Mannar District into an attractive, eco-sensitive and unique tourist destination;
- 2. Develop tourism-related urban infrastructure;
- 3. Increase tourism-related business development and employment;
- 4. Attract new and emerging tourist groups to Mannar;
- 5. Enhance industry professionalism through tourist information, accommodation and services.

2.1 Transform Mannar District into an attractive, eco-sensitive and unique tourist destination – enabling self-determined cultural development in the district

Recommended activities:

- 2.1.1 Establishment of the Mannar Tourism Committee
- 2.1.2 Negotiation with the military to vacate prime tourist sites
- 2.1.3 Regular engagement with the local community as "partners in tourism".

2.2 Develop tourism related urban infrastructure – undertaking the big-ticket items as a platform for tourism development

Recommended activities:

- 2.2.1 Redevelopment of the Mannar Town foreshore precinct
- 2.2.2 Construction of a modern transport hub
- 2.2.3 Rehabilitating Mannar's kulams (ponds) as recreational open spaces
- 2.2.4 Renovation of the Portuguese/Dutch fort
- 2.2.5 Development of a nature park development near the causeway
- 2.2.6 Establishment of tourist information centres.

2.3 Increase tourism-related business development and employment

- developing specific sectors of the economy that can be interlinked with the tourism sector (eg food, handicrafts, transport, IT, business)

Recommended activities:

- 2.3.1 Value addition through "branding Mannar products"
- 2.3.2 SME capacity building to factor in tourist needs and expectations
- 2.3.3 Incorporation of computer technology and IT systems into tourism operations
- 2.3.4 Enhancement of food and beverage products and services
- 2.3.5 Enhanced design element in local handicrafts
- 2.3.6 Develop a bohemian precinct for foreign tourists.

Attract new and emerging tourist groups to Mannar – increasing market share of tourism through developing new tourism products

Recommended activities:

- 2.4.1 Creation of a range of tours to suit diverse tourist interests
- 2.4.2 Cultural immersion through Village Stay accommodation
- 2.4.3 Mapping of a baobab historical trail
- 2.4.4 Commencing a boat ride service
- 2.4.5 Improving beaches as a tourism drawcard
- 2.4.6 Creation of a bird watching tour package.

Enhance industry professionalism through tourist information, accommodation and services - maximising local revenue of tourism investments

Recommended activities:

- 2.5.1 Compilation, printing and 'onlineing' of tourist information
- 2.5.2 Production of hardcopy and online guest house directory
- 2.5.3 Gathering oral histories of Mannar's significant people and places
- 2.5.4 Upskilling locals to be tourist guides
- 2.5.5 Improvement of guest house facilities and services.

3. Tourism projects

To meet the objectives of the Mannar Community Tourism Strategy, a suite of projects are proposed and outlined below.

3.1 Transform Mannar District into an attractive, eco-sensitive and unique tourist destination

3.1.1 Mannar Tourism Committee

A formal committee is established to plan, monitor and evaluate tourism related development in Mannar District and chaired by the Government Agent (GA). The committee will work within the guidelines set by Government's tourism strategy 2011-2016 and pay particular attention to achieving people-centred, backwardly integrated and sustainable tourism outcomes. An outcome will be a tourism masterplan or strategic directions document developed with tourism sector input, and also inclusive of strategies to conserve specific coastal and inland landscapes or habitats.



3.1.2 Negotiations with the military

Mannar District is emerging from a brutal decadeslong civil war and it is reasonable for there to be a military presence as the nation transitions from conflict to peace. The visibility of military forces, however, is an undesirable spectacle for fun-loving tourists. The Tourism Committee will negotiate with the Ministry of Defence to maintain a low profile in tourist-concentrated precincts and relocate its buildings and facilities away from high tourist areas.



3.1.3 Engagement with community

Regular community consultations are built into the strategy design with community members having the status of key stakeholders in tourism. Their ideas, aspirations and feedback will be sought through interviews, focus groups and public meetings to achieve people-centred tourism outcomes.



3.2 Develop tourism related urban infrastructure

3.2.1 Mannar Town Foreshore Development **Project**

The entrance across the waters to Mannar town is unattractive and gives a displeasing first impression of a potentially breath-taking vista. While the natural fundamentals of lapping water, swaying palms, historic fort and fishing boats is present, there is no proper urban design for this central area. Buildings back onto the water and have the appearance of 'survival' architecture devoid of a sense of pride. A specially designed foreshore precinct of attractive cafes, treelined boardwalks, views of fishermen bringing in their catch and a modern fish market, will transform this area into a tourist-attractive precinct.



The railway to Mannar served the people from 1914 until all services were halted in June 1990 due to the civil war. Completion of the reconstructed railway to Talaimannar is due for completion by May 2014 and will prompt a hive of activity around the many stations along its route. In Mannar Town a new transport hub is proposed, integrating private and public bus services with the railway network and a new commercial precinct.

3.2.3 Rehabilitation of the kulam (ponds)

Once approximately eighty ponds or kulams adorned the Island. Now only eighteen remain. In the past they were the natural retention point for water during the dry period and a drainage catchment area during the wet. The kulams were also culturally and historically significant and played important roles in the lives of the people. More recently the kulams have been encroached, filled and built upon, thus creating a major issue facing residents, especially the poorest – annual flooding. The remaining kulams will be rehabilitated into attractive green and recreational open spaces where residents can enjoy social and physically healthy pursuits.









3.2.4 Renovation of the Fort

Mannar is blessed with a Portuguese and Dutch inspired fort built at a comfortable human scale at the entrance to the Island. The renovation of this historically significant structure is an important signature element in a new cultural precinct. Archaeological experts from abroad will work with the Department of Archaeology and private sector entrepreneurs to both renovate the building and explore tourism potential for the site, with proposed tourist accommodation and information centre.



3.2.5 Development of a nature park

Across the causeway and before the Japanese built bridge leading to Mannar Town is an area of environmental significance and adjacent to the Vankalai Ramsar-declared wetlands site. Once the home of several species of migratory birds, the area was cleared for national security reasons and also to construct the causeway and bridge. The UDA has detailed designs for a nature park and recreational area for this site and is awaiting suitable funds to implement this project.



3.2.6 Tourist information centres

A coordinated approach to tourism in Mannar will see two major tourism information centres located at Madhu and Mannar Town and served by several other sub-outlets in appropriate areas. The centres will have well informed staff, registers for guesthouses, transport and tour guides, online tourism facilities, capacity to book accommodation, tours and other services and a selection of brochures, maps and historical information.

3.3 Increase tourism-related business development and employment



3.3.1 'Branding Mannar Products'

Mannar District is nationally renowned for many natural products like dry fish, crabs, sea salt, rice and palmayrah products. Traders from elsewhere purchase these items at cheap prices and resell the 'Mannar' branded product elsewhere for vastly increased amounts. The profit and prestige pays no local dividends. Branding Mannar as a unique, attractive destination that possesses quality natural products will do much to establish the identity of this district and boost the profits and self-esteem of its people and businesses.



3.3.2 SME Capacity Building for Tourism

Project

Few Mannar businesses are attuned to tourist desires and expectations. In order for the local economy of Mannar to benefit from tourism, the Mannar Chamber of Commerce proposes to conduct seminars, workshops and training programs to equip SMEs to incorporate 'tourist thinking' into existing and new business products and services.



3.3.3 Tourism IT Capacity Building Project

The IT sector is identified by the Sri Lankan Government as crucial for promoting locations and delivering services within the tourism industry. Local guesthouses, tourism information outlets, village-stay operators and related agents will be IT savvy, take bookings over the internet, maintain their websites and link local information and services to search engines and global tourist websites. Local tourism officers will be equipped with the know-how to present, maintain and link to other databases with comprehensive visitor information to enhance visitor service.

3.3.4 Culinary Enhancement Project

What a welcome change for a Western visitor to choose from a menu card in their own language and be offered a wider variety of culinary delights beyond curry, 'devilled' dishes and fried rice at local cafes or guest houses! The 'same-ness' of menu offerings becomes obvious to the longer-term tourist in Sri Lanka who then clamours for non-chilli items and a break from predictable fare. This project will encourage the chefs of Mannar to be adventurous with the enormous array of natural produce at their disposable, create new signature dishes and develop menu cards for hotels and guesthouses that reflect a new-found culinary boldness.



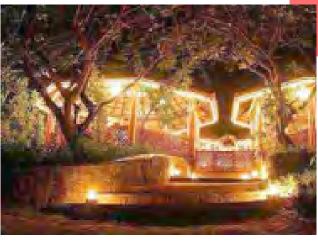
Mannar is famous for its handicrafts and particularly its quality palmyrah products. Women's cooperatives under the Palmyrah Board continue to create a variety of items. For greater industry sustainability, a more modern design element is required as markets and tastes change over time. Quality craftsmanship fused with contemporary design input will ensure attractive and sought-after products.

3.3.6 Bohemian precinct for foreign tourists

Creating an alternative bohemian space for tourists can quickly attract a following. Cafes, galleries, handicraft stores and music venues can add charm and fuse traditional and contemporary cultures, fashioning a unique ambiance for tourists who desire to "go local" yet crave some familiar aspects of their lifestyle. This precinct would also offer up and coming local arts and cultural talent to experiment to an appreciative audience.







3.4 Attract new and emerging tourist groups to Mannar

3.4.1 Tours to suit diverse tourist interests

No one tourist is alike. Tourists hail from varied social and economic backgrounds, have diverse interests and go on holidays with different goals in mind. A range of tourist packages will be developed to meet a wide array of pursuits for in-country and overseas

- Wildlife tourism wildlife and bird-watching, safaris to nature parks, natural landscapes for photographers
- Chill out holidaying beaches, riverside barbecues, swimming, bicycling, boat rides, visiting cultural heritage sites, historic objects and watching cultural shows
- Adventure-based tourism hiking trails, snorkelling,
- Cultural immersion accompanying fishermen on their daily routine, cooking classes, handicraft workshops, performances of singing and dancing, dark tourism (understanding the experience of the war), village-stay, visit local businesses (farm, sea cucumber farm, crab farm), having a meal with a
- Volunteer tourism giving a lesson in English at a school, undertaking a development project, knowledge transfers in various professional disciplines, visiting, donating or becoming a stakeholder in a crab farm, donkey rehabilitation centre or rice mill.









3.4.2 Cultural immersion through Village Stay

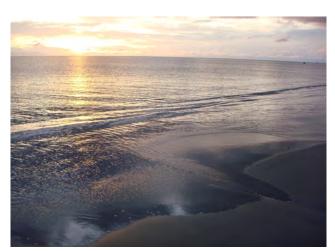
For the tourist with an 'anthropological bent' and desires to experience local culture at close quarters, the Village Stay accommodation option offers the ultimate way to gain a deep and more personalised grasp of the lives of local people. This option will suit those staying for longer periods as project volunteers. In Mannar's villages, accommodation will range from huts to houses. All three of the village stay establishments currently being trialled have proved to be a delightful and enriching experience for host and guest alike. The local person benefits through exposure to a wider world view, an additional income stream, inspiration to improve their living conditions and friends for life!

3.4.3 Biobab Historical Trail Project

Another defining feature of Mannar next to the ponds and donkeys are its historically significant baobab trees some as old as five hundred years. There are 34 biobab trees in existence and this tree needs acknowledging and protecting. The trees will be visually documented, plotted on GPS and suitably signaged. A trail map and guide will be produced to assist tourists uncover a special part of Mannar's environmental heritage.

3.4.4 Boat Ride Service

Mannar District boasts diverse water catchment systems from rivers, tanks and kulams (ponds) to a widespread coastline with islands and coral reefs. Local fisherman with their boats and canoes will offer tourists boat rides in different water setting, giving the service a more personal, local flavour. It also provides an income outside the fishing season. Along the way, shaded woods will make pleasant respite for picnics, BBQs, swimming and relaxing.



3.4.5 Improved beaches – a tourist draw card

Mannar possesses safe and lazy beaches adjoining attractive palmayrah and coconut plantations in proximity to cool fresh-water streams. Shramadana programs will involve local people clearing the beaches of rubbish. They will also be supported to establish food kiosks, change rooms and shower facilities to attract domestic and international visitors.



3.4.6 Bird watching tour package

Sri Lanka provides habitat for over 400 bird species. Birding holidays have been popular in many areas from Kitulgala and Sinharaja to Yala and Nuwara Eliya, but what of Mannar with its Ramsar Wetlands status and landing point for over 100 migratory birds? Mannar is an unsung birding paradise boasting many species of owls, terns, gulls, eagles, kites and buzzards. It is timely to put Mannar on the birding circuit with attractive tour packages conducted by local people familiar with birding hotspots. It will boost the local economy and help protect birds, other wildlife and their habitats.

Enhance industry professionalism through tourist information, accommodation and services

3.5.1 Tourist information

There is an urgent need for tourism related information about Mannar as little exists about local sightseeing spots or even a map for visitors to gain their bearings. Information in various forms will be produced in print and online including tourist maps, brochures with places of historical interest, a guesthouse directory, transport hire options, bird-watching guides and sitespecific signage.



3.5.2 Guest house directory

You have to be a local to know where to stay in Mannar. The majority of guest houses do not market their services to those outside the town. A directory of local guest houses - both in print form and online - that promotes each facility, informs the tourist of the services offered and provides an assessment of quality and value for money, would help to build customer confidence in visiting Mannar.



3.5.3 Mannar Oral History Project

Not much of the long and rich history of the district has been recorded and preserved for future generations. The collation of a people's history of Mannar with its many colourful as well as painful episodes will provide the basis of interesting yarns and historical cameos that tour guides will use to breathe life into the places and events of Mannar. Myths, stories and factual events kept hidden in temples, people's memories and in dusty books will be made accessible through a group of local oral history investigators.



3.5.4 Training tourist guides

Mannar does not possess a 'Sigiriya' or a 'Temple of the Tooth' so needs to find other enticing ways to capture tourist interest for a few days, not mere hours. It will be in the small scale, intimate and culturally dense offerings that a niche market is established. Every place has a story and needs a storyteller to unlock its potency. Trained and approved guides sourced from villages, among van drivers and other groups will deliver the real spirit of Mannar to the visitor guides fluent in English, Sinhala and other languages, conscious of cross-cultural issues and passionate towards their stories both ancient and modern.

3.5.5 Guesthouse Improvement Project

It is not only the physical facilities of a guesthouse such as air-conditioning and a clean bathroom which create a pleasant experience for the visitor. equally as important to also meet the emotional needs and expectations of the guest. A manager who is customer-focused, fluent in English or other languages and fulfils a tourist's request, will be much appreciated. The improvement program will assist the guest house owner to critique the condition of the premises, visit well-run establishments in order to experience the difference and to formulate a program of improvement works.





Government's Tourism Strategy 2011-2016 - Linking points to Mannar's Community **Tourism Strategy**

As outlined in the Mahinda Chintana: vision for the future, the Government is committed to a sustainable tourism strategy which protects the environment and generates economic benefit to large cross-sections of society. The Mannar tourism strategy is aligned with the Government's national plans for tourism development and is also in line with the perspectives of the people from Mannar who were consulted widely over this issue (see p14).

Below are extracts from the Government's tourism strategies and targets which most closely link with the Mannar strategy:

- **Diversity tourism** organize adventure tours, improve boat riding, bird watching facilities, improve facilities for exploring magnificent coral reefs, coastal fishing and dolphin and whale watching, promote community-based tourism and linking in with the rural economy, harvesting seasons, wildlife, farming practices, art, culture and religion
- Focus on new markets implement promotion campaigns with the participation of Sri Lankan diaspora and missions abroad
- Develop tourism infrastructure increase accommodation capacity; encourage publicprivate partnerships
- Popularize tourist attraction, events - create a database of tourist attraction and events; promote festivals in Sri Lanka
- Promote domestic tourism provide adequate accommodation facilities at affordable rates; develop all religious places of worship; upgrade historical places; arrange domestic travel packages; promote the setting-up of theme parks
- Enhance industry professionalism license tour guides in order to standardize the service accreditation of travel agents.



The tourism sector has been identified by the Government as one of the key sectors propelling Sri Lanka's economic growth with special emphasis on eco-tourism, leading to a national goal of generating environment friendly and sustainable tourism. Emphasis is placed on preserving the environment and wildlife and at the same time ensuring that a maximum benefit from tourism is transferred to the community.

Other sections relevant to the Mannar tourism strategy:

- The policy of Conservation of Fauna and Flora as Tourist Attraction recommends the establishment of an optimum protected area network in the Northern and Eastern Provinces that conserves biological diversity, protects importantwatershedsandopensupopportunities to facilitate ecotourism development activities.
- The industry is tasked with adding over 22,000 rooms to the current accommodation capacity, and refurbishing current facilities.
- In order to meet human resource building requirements, Sri Lanka Tourism works closely with other interest groups such as: 1) local authorities, 2) local universities, 3) industry partners 4) private sector education institutes, 5) potential training providers in the public and private sectors, and 6) NGOs and CBOs to meet the emerging demand.
- Support of the SME Sector through 'home stay' programs, visits to community-based activities such as farming, fishing, handicrafts, festivals, religious and cultural programs, sports, bird watching, wildlife, etc are being promoted.
- Acknowledgment that the internet is the most effective global communication medium in tourism today and should be widely utilized in tourism marketing.
- Tourism has a multiplying effect, creating employment and distributing wealth through a variety of economic activities predominantly in the SME sector.
- The strategy compels tourism planners and operators to create awareness among the local community about tourism and obtain their support and cooperation for its development.



5. Mannar's tourism strategy - based on extensive community consultation

The following extracts are taken from the Mannarin Marumalarchi 2022 report (2012) and provide a background to the development of a community-based Tourism Strategy for Mannar.

MM2022 - Eco Tourism 5.1

Throughout the visioning process, residents began to see the benefits of tourism for the area and the need to take control of it themselves in order to minimize any adverse effects. They preferred small-scale, culturally sensitive, economically sustainable and eco-friendly approaches to tourism over the 'high end' imposed western resort-styled models. They also talked about a custodial approach to tourism in which they both preserved their heritage and shared their unique local knowledge with others. Of central importance, however, was the need for a military withdrawal especially from public places as this would not be conducive to attracting fun-loving tourists.

They contributed many ideas to encourage tourism in Mannar:

- Construct a modern transport hub for public and private busses and a modernized integrated railway 1. station
- 2. Negotiate the withdrawal of the military from Thalladi camp so it can be converted into a domestic airport
- Develop attractive tourist facilities including good quality tourist standard restaurants, culturally sensitive beach resorts and hotels, a tourist attraction near the bridge, and "star" class hotels
- Upgrade and restore the following tourist attractions and sites Madhu Church, Thiruketheeshvaram Kovil, Silavathurai Sea (pearl diving), Mannar Fort, Arippu Fort, Baobab Tree in Pallaimunai, Puthukudiyiruppu Light House, Thalaimannar Harbour, Thottaveli and the Giant's Tank
- 5. Develop attractive publicity about what Mannar has to offer tourists.

5.2 **Results Based Management**

In the following year a series of workshops were held and a results-based management approach was adopted. A consultant from the World Bank, Ms Visakha Tillekeratne, conducted the workshops over several days with the seven MM22 subcommittees. Below is a précis of that work which became the basis for the articulation of a suite of tourism initiatives, and included:

Fort renovation

1.1 Ensure the Mannar Fort is renovated as an archeologically important tourist attraction

2. **Nature Park Development**

- 2.1 Seek clarification from Department of Wildlife Conservation re under whose jurisdiction this land comes
- 2.2 Design an environmentally sensitive park
- 2.3 Source funds for project

3. Mannar City in Sri Lankan Tourist Guide

3.1 Ensure that Mannar City is included in Tourist Guides found at airports and hotels

Biobab trees

4.1 Protect and maintain the biobab trees as an important tourist attraction

Boat ride service 5.

5.1 Start a boat service using canoes and paddle boats in kulams, water ways, tanks and sea.

The number of proposals expanded over time as a result of additional community consultations.

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