MOVING TOWARDS AN ENVIRONMENTALLY SUSTAINABLE TOURISM INDUSTRY: DRAWING LESSONS FROM SEYCHELLES, EGYPT, AND MAURITIUS

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Abstract: *Studies showed that the expansion of tourism activities mainly human-related can cause environmental damage if not managed properly. In such a context, the objective of this research is to explore the mechanisms applied by some African countries namely Seychelles, Egypt and Mauritius to maintain an environmentally sustainable tourism. Africa seems to fail to keep up with advanced environmental sustainability practices as noted by the scores on the Travel and Tourism Development Index reports, however, these three benchmarking countries have outperformed most African countries in most tourism aspects. This research adopted a literature review method to generate data to enable a well-informed conclusion. The results showed that the local government financial resources investment in green tourism practises, public-private sector collaborations, inter-governmental partnerships, engagement of international partners and local non-governmental organizations, and establishment of relevant policies and regulations, enforcement of policies, continuously investing in new initiatives, all promote environmental sustainability in tourism. The study further suggests future research prospects that researchers can explore to build more knowledge in this area.*
Keywords: *Environmental Sustainability, Tourism, Egypt, Mauritius, Policies, Strategies, Seychelles*

INTRODUCTION

Accountability regarding the environment is a central requirement for sustainable development as this is rooted across Agenda 2030, and a specific concern of six Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations World Tourism Organisation, 2017). Fulton, Clarke and Alban (2017) define environmental sustainability as the prevention to the maximum practicable degree of irreversible and irretrievable commitment of resources. Natural environment is key for providing an attractive location,

therefore, policies and factors enhancing environmental sustainability are an essential element in ensuring a country's future attractiveness as a tourist destination (World Economic Forum, 2022).

The tourism sector has emerged into an economic giant and a tool for promoting economic prosperity (Rasethuntsa, 2021), for example, countries like Croatia and Montenegro's economies highly depend on the sector (Elton, 2022). Hence, tourism sustainability has turned out to be the main concern for public policymakers across the globe, and presently, there is an urgency for proper management of sustainable tourism development (Khan, Khan, Lim, Tan & Ahmed, 2021). However, this cannot be achieved without taking into consideration the environmental challenges and their global dimension (Zamfir & Corbos, 2015). Today, business models for environmental sustainability have gained increasing attention in the management field and among practitioners and stakeholders (De Giacomo & Bleischwitz, 2020).

Environment-dependent tourism is increasingly viewed as one of the most important resources for the industry; as this resource offers some significant attractions to tourists, hence any harm to the environment would negatively affect tourism in host destinations (Tang, 2015). However, tourism can have an advantageous impact by contributing to an awareness of the need to conserve valuables that help countries to attract tourists, and these might include landscapes and buildings. It is, therefore, important for host countries to safeguard and invest in the improvement of good environmental practices for tourism purposes (Mason, 2009). Correspondingly, the study of Tien-Ming and Homer (2015) has shown that today's tourists are attracted to environmentally sustainable locations and that tourists' commitment towards environmental practices is stronger in such locations. An example of the environmentally sustainable tourism targets for host locations according to Tourism Victoria (2009) could include:

- Lessening of the tourism sector's carbon footprint;
- Achieving the mounting consumer demand for sustainable practices;
- Fast-tracking the business sector's performance through sustainable tourism and promoting the sector through environmental credentials;
- Reducing resource utilisation and the production of waste, and
- Support the tourism industry to adjust to climate change.

Similarly, according to the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (2017), to strengthen tourism's contribution to environmental sustainability, it is important to take action to ensure effective natural resource use and secure and effective management of biodiversity and environment, climate change mitigation and adaptation and expand education related to how

various environmental issues are related to tourism. Schönherr, Peters & Kuščer, (2023) have highlighted that attaining environmentally sustainable tourism is still a challenge. It has been observed that tourism leads to major environmental damage considering the large amounts of energy and water consumption due to the large crowds of visitors, and, as the sector is expanding, the use of energy and water is also expanding, especially in lodging facilities. Also, an expansion of tourism has led to harmful effects on biodiversity, inclusive of coral reefs, coastal wetland, rainforests, arid and semi-arid ecosystems, and mountainous areas. Consequently, inability to integrate environmental matters in destination planning and investment have a damaging impact on nature and lead to reduced value creation potential for both the destination and investors (The United Nations Conference of Trade and Development, 2013).

To address similar challenges, host countries must safeguard up to standard environmental practices in tourism (Schönherr, Peters & Kuščer, 2023). In the long run, proper management of the environment forms the natural capital of tourist destinations, and the revenue from tourism activities provide financial returns from investment in capital (United Nations World Tourism Organisation, 2017). Taking steps towards the development of rational and inclusive approaches towards tourism policy-development can assist countries to properly allocate resources across the sector and attain an all-inclusive tourism growth; growth that considers current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, and ensuring that travellers, industry, and host communities' needs are met (Organisation for Economic Co-corporation Development, 2017).

The aim of this study is to explore the mechanisms applied by some African countries to maintain an environmentally sustainable tourism. Africa seem to be lagging in keeping up with advanced environmental sustainability practices as noted from the scores on the Travel and Tourism Development Index report of 2015 to 2022. In this study, Seychelles, Egypt, and Mauritius are used as benchmarking countries as they have outperformed the majority of African countries in tourism operations as noted from the Travel and Tourism Development Index report of 2022 (World Economic Forum, 2016; 2017; 2019; 2022). This study is intended to shed light on advanced environmentally sustainable tourism practices that other African economies can adopt to enhance environmental sustainability in order to promote their tourism performance. Against this background, the study shall therefore answer this research question:

What strategies are Seychelles, Egypt, and Mauritius employing to upsurge environmental sustainability in tourism?

METHODOLOGY

This research mainly adopted a literature-based approach as a data collection mechanism. As noted by Blaikie (2009), there are various means of collecting research data, and these include primary, secondary, and tertiary data methods. Data sets that have already been established and orderly-organized are useful sources of information when dealing with matters in developmental sciences (Greenhoot & Dowsett, 2012). Secondary information can propose policy guidelines and practices, provide evidence of an effect, and thus provide a possibility for creation of fresh ideas and new directions in specific areas (Snyder, 2019).

Methods of collecting data relating to environmental sustainability strategies and policies in this research included exploring information from numeruous sources. These included the use of text books, government reports, local newspapers, government and non government organizations' websites, journal articles, magazines, and private organisations reports among others. Thereafter, an analysis of data was conducted to understand the scope of machanisms implemented by Seychelles, Egypt and Mauritius to promote tourism sustainability. The outcome of these analysis shall provide a road map to assist other African countries in policy development and practice with the intention of enhancing environmental sustainability in tourism.

RESULTS

This section of the study provides a comprehensive literature review on strategies employed by Seychelles, Egypt, and Mauritius to maintain an environmentally sustainable tourism.

Lessons from Seychelles

The government developed The Seychelles Tourism Master Plan: Destination 2023, with the aim of increasing investment in sustainable tourism development among other strategic issues (Katanich, 2020). Having developed prior strategy frameworks targeted for sustainable tourism, for example, the Seychelles Sustainable Tourism Plan 2012-2020, the government is further developing strategic plans to continuously improve sustainable tourism development such as the 2018 approval of the Seychelles Blue Economy Strategic Frameworks and Roadmap which takes Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement into consideration (Lau, 2018). Because the Seychelles prioritizes an environmentally sustainable tourism, this led it to be the first country in the world to include conservation efforts into their constitution, making Seychelles a leader in sustainable tourism (Pure Breaks, 2023).

To promote conservation efforts and to ensure future sustainable tourism, the government of Seychelles recently took an initiative to introduce the Seychelles Tourism Environmental Sustainability Levy targeted to medium sized and large hotels. The basis of this levy is to support environmental conservation and rehabilitation programmes with the aim of protecting the natural environment that attracts numerous tourists yearly (Biodiversity Finance Initiative, 2023). In 2016, the Seychelles completed its debt for nature conservation with The Nature Conservancy, raising funds to buy US$21 million of Seychelles' sovereign debt, and direct the funds to climate change adaptation, sustainable fisheries, and marine conservation projects. As part of the deal, the Seychelles rolled out a comprehensive Marine Spatial Plan. The Seychelles government has successfully demonstrated its global Blue Economy leadership credentials, driving an ambitious agenda to capture sustainable value from its ocean (Lau, 2018).

Initiatives to support environmental sustainability for tourism purposes are not only emanating from the public sector, as the private sector has also taken strides to promote an environmentally sustainable tourism. For example, the Alphonse Island Lodge through the work of Island Conservation Society (ICS) has established a number of programmes to ensure environmental sustainability. These include putting aside a share of their profits from the conversation levy and ensuring that the proceeds from souvenirs purchased from the ICS office offer financial support to the conservation efforts and providing environmental education presentations to guests on a weekly basis (Pure Breaks, 2023). The WiseOcean is a private organization that is also taken initiatives to encourage minors from the age of four to learn about the secrets of the sea, above and beneath the waves, hosting private marine education classes as a commitment to sustainability (Future Tourism, 2023). Although it is noted that smaller accommodation facilities have less environmental impact, their low resource status disallow them to implement a number of green tourism activities as opposed to high scale lodging facilities group who are playing a major role in putting measures to limit their environmental impact such as reducing plastic and energy use (Katanich, 2020).

Further, the government of Seychelles conducts regular studies to ensure proper monitoring of tourists' impact on the environment in areas such as the volume of waste generated by accommodation establishments and the number of cruise ship travelers. The outcome of such studies assists in drawing a roadmap to attain low-impact tourism strategies and policy development (Future Tourism, 2023). Quarterly audit reports carried out for tourism related initiatives, stakeholders 'meetings and workshops, and inter-ministerial committee meetings are some of the strategies in place to

implement green tourism initiatives (Lau, 2018). The Seychelles Tourism Board, Nature Seychelles, and the Public Utilities Corporation are also taking initiatives to educate accommodation facilities on issues regarding importance of conserving and recycling water (Alphonse Island, 2016).

As part of their conservation efforts, the government introduced a temporary ban on the construction of new hotels on protected areas in the three main islands (Katanich, 2020). Similarly, the Cousin Island Special Reserve is an example of a high protected zone where the minimum number of tourists are permitted within certain hours and are prohibited to remove any plant or animal species (Ministry of Fisheries and Blue Economy, 2024). Apart from individual lodging facilities communicating their sustainability efforts to visitors, certain non-governmental organizations are also reaching out to the public about the importance of a responsible lifestyle inclusive of waste management as it is impossible to sensitize tourists themselves. The Pristine Seychelles campaign was also established for all tourism stakeholders to promote tourism sustainability by actively raising awareness among tourists in Seychelles upon their arrival, as it is believed that they will be more conscious about their impact in the destination throughout their stay (One Planet Network, 2019).
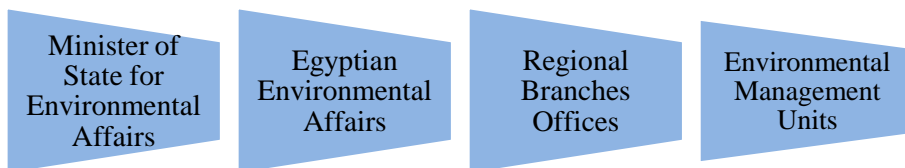
Lessons from Egypt

The Egyptian government has long regarded ecotourism as a national priority, and put emphasis on the development of relevant policies, conservation plans, community support programs to promote tourism sustainability (United States Agency for International Development, 2004). Research recently conducted identified that among sustainability enthusiasts, Egypt ranked the second on the list of similar destinations such as Greece, the United Araba Emirates, Turkey, and Tunisia (Consultancy me.com, 2023). In the context of Egypt, sustainable tourism raises issues relating to programmes and activities being carried out by private organisations and government departments, and the government of Egypt has taken actions to improve sustainability in tourism (Ramzy, 2015). This vision influenced the government to make initiatives such as the Green Tourism Unit which was intended to provide guidance and management tools towards greening tourism. In 2013, the government collaborated with the Egyptian Hotel Association to launch the Green Star Hotel certification programme which recognises green initiatives in the Egyptian hotel sector where over 50 hotels participated (Sustainable Tourism Certification Alliance of Africa, 2018). Furthermore, many resorts in the country respect the sustainable development principles and have designed methods to lessen the impacts of tourism in the environment while offering their clients the best services (Ragheb, 2015).

Further, the results of Elzek, Gaafar & Abdelsamie, (2020) highlight that tourism businesses in Egypt invest in energy efficiency, water management, waste management, biological diversity protection, and cultural heritage preservation. These included businesses such as travel agencies, hotels, eco-lodges, airlines, restaurants and diving centers. However, it appeared that eco-lodges are leaders in the application of sustainable tourism investment practices. In pursuit for promoting environmental sustainability in tourism, the Ministry of Environment has further pledged to assist diving facilities to obtain 'Green Fins' mark, which is the first environmental mark in the world in the diving sector and the ministry has also established the guide for best environmental practices in tourists' restaurants (Egypt Today 2023).

Mainstreaming Biodiversity in Egypt's Tourism, a Global Environment Facility funded project implemented by the United Nations Development Programme and the Ministry of Environment was established to offer continuous support to eco-certified tourism organizations to promote environmentally sustainable operations of the tourism industry. The launching of this project enabled the development of the national ecolodge guidelines which serve as an important milestone for the growth of ecotourism and nature-based biodiversity-friendly tourism in Egypt (United Nations Development Programme, 2022). Because Egypt is receiving millions of tourists on a yearly basis, vast attention has been paid towards ensuring an eco-friendly tourism. This resulted in the establishment of 21 protected areas where international donors inclusive of the European Union heavily contributed financial resources to develop these protected areas with the aim of ensuring their environmental sustainability (Frommers, 2023).

Figure 1 demonstrates the structure that the Egyptian governments has utilised to ascertain that environmental policies are implemented.

Figure 1: Structure of the management of the environmental sector in Egypt

Adapted from: Monitoring and Evaluation of International Development (2010)

According to Figure 1, the Minister of State for Environmental Affairs is the overseer of the implementation of environmental policies. The Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency functions as an executive arm of the ministry by setting national policies, coordinating environmental

management activities, and responsible for aspects of the implementation and monitoring of environmental laws. Regional Branch Offices were established as part of the decentralisation strategy. In each of the governorates/provinces, environmental management is mandated to Environmental Management Units situated in the governor's office and funded by the governorate/administrative division of the country (Monitoring and Evaluation of International Development, 2010). In recent years, the Ministry of Environment kickstarted the first national campaign to protect natural reserves and promote an environmentally sustainable tourism entitled 'ECO EGYPT' with the intention of promoting 13 protected areas (Egypt Today, 2023). The eco-tourism agenda in Egypt is actively spearheaded by the collaborations between the Ministry of Environment and Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities (Egypt eVisa, 2023). For example, the two ministries have launched the initiative 'Towards Green Development for the Tourism Sector' in 2020 (Egypt Today, 2023).

Lessons from Mauritius

Mauritius has long supported enforcement of environmental regulations, the Ministry of Environment & National Development Unit (2007), highlighted that to implement the 2007 environmental policy effectively, the following instruments were adopted:

- Voluntary agreements, codes of conduct and practices by active industries committing themselves to improve on environmental practices beyond current legal requirements;
- Commanding obligations to relevant organisations and movement towards decentralising environmental protection activities and providing a good enabling environment for implementation;
- Developing a proper system for inspecting compliance of environmental laws and the development of a monitoring system to audit the effectiveness of policies;
- Develop financing mechanisms aimed at the innovation of clean technology, projects and environmental audits in small businesses;
- Kick-start research relating to safe environmental practices and build supportive structures for projects meant for sustainable development, as well as, programmes intended to improve the capacity of key stakeholders to implement the policies;
- To offer benefits to attract a change of behaviour in producers and consumers and
- To educate the Mauritian citizens about good environmental practices and the importance of environmental protection.

Also, the Environmental Protection Act of 2002 offers protection and guides the proper use of Mauritian natural resources so that they continue to sustain the activities of the citizens (Ministry of Environment Mauritius, 2002). The government of Mauritius is also continuing to develop environmental protection regulations which include minimising mercury pollution in the dentistry sector, environmental protection (banning plastic bags) regulation (Ministry of Social Security, National Solidarity and Environment and Sustainable Development, 2018). To ensure that the green tourism approach is sustainable, hoteliers have taken initiatives to apply numerous mechanisms such as the ban of single-use plastic products inside hotels, wastewater recycling, and even the decrease of buffets in favour of set menus to reduce food waste. Further, others have also initiated environmental projects such as the rehabilitation of mangroves, the protection of sea turtles, or the conservation of underwater areas near resorts, and all this with the involvement of employees and guests. A number of eco-friendly lodging establishments have also been developed, such as eco-lodges to decrease carbon footprint of visitors' stay in Mauritius (Mauritius News & Travel Advice, 2023).

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

From the results, it can be noted that the three benchmarking countries have long established environmental protection policies which are being reviewed continuously. The three countries have invested in a move towards enforcement of environmental policies. Both Seychelles and Egypt seems to be continuously developing strategic frameworks aimed towards the promotion of sustainable tourism practices. This has been noted to be through local inter-governmental and international organisations collaborations, public-business sector partnerships, non-governmental organizations, as well as engagement of the local community in sustainable tourism practices among others.

Engaging international in such initiatives have also resulted in the inflow of financial resources from international partners. Further, engagement of the private sector in enhancing tourism environmental sustainability is also noticed as a weapon that the three benchmarking countries have utilized. This strategy resulted in noticeable engagement of accommodation establishments investing in sustainable practices. It is also worth noting that accommodation establishments seem to be the most business entities investing heavily in environmentally sustainable practices. Establishment of eco-friendly lodging facilities seem to be a common strategy in all the three countries through investment in water, energy and air pollution to ensure green operations.

On the other hand, all the three countries appear to be engaging in information dissemination on safe environmental practices and carries out environmental audits and also seem to be developing voluntary agreements with organisations to conform to legal requirements. A move towards certification in environmental regulations compliance is also noted be a mechanism to persuade compliance. Another strategy that has been used herein is the establishment of a green tourism unit and development of proper tourism governance structure – decentralisation system.

Heavy financial investments from the public sector towards green tourism practises also appears to be a common mechanism applied by these three benchmarking countries, and this ranges towards sectors such as attractions, eateries, lodging facilities, and sporting. The government of Mauritius on the other hand is noted to be availing funding towards environmental research and rewarding adherence to compliance towards safe environmental practices. Governments here-in appears to be using inter-ministerial and non-ministerial collaborations and further involving the industry associations as a tool to promote and communicate tourism sustainability measures. Furthermore, the results indicate that Seychelles unique strategy in promoting an environmentally sustainable tourism was to include conservation efforts in the country's constitution.

CONCLUSION

This study achieved its objective of uncovering the strategies used by Seychelles, Egypt and Mauritius to promote environmental sustainability in the tourism industry. The strategies such as the local government financial resources investment in green tourism practises, public-private sector collaborations, inter-governmental partnerships, engagement of international partners, establishment of relevant policies and regulations, enforcement of policies, continuous investment in new initiatives, and sourcing external funding internationally do promote environmental sustainability in tourism. It Could be established that the participation of both governments, the private sector and non-government organizations are key, though is could also be observed that the government has a larger role to play in this regard and play as a facilitator for collaborations.

Because this study utilised only secondary data to generate information herein, some crucial information could have been omitted due to inaccessibility, therefore, this limitation could have affected the findings of this study and inability to develop well-informed conclusions. Future research could therefore focus on conducting a qualitative study to explore

more in this topic. Future research could also focus on the challenges prohibiting implementation of proper environmental practices in tourism. This research could look into African countries that are weak contenders in the global tourism market as the results of such a study could assist in spotting critical areas that decision- and policy makers should prioritise.

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