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Culture through agriculture: National Agri Tourism Conference 2014

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NATIONAL Agri Tourism Conference 2014 jointly organised by the Department of Agri Business Management of the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences of the Sabaragamuwa University and the National Productivity Secretariat of the Ministry of Productivity was held on 17 and 18 February 2014 at the Sri Lanka foundation in Colombo. This two day conference on Development and promotion of Agri Tourism Education and Industry in Sri Lanka was sponsored by the Asian Productivity Organisation in Tokyo, Japan. Joselito Cruz Bernado Director of the Agriculture Department of the Asian Productivity Organisation (APO) International organisation based in Tokyo, Japan, was the Chief Guest at the event.

In a special note on the conference, Sabaragamuwa University Faculty of Agriculture Sciences Senior Professor of Agri Business Management Prof. Rohana P. Mahaliyanaarachchi stated that the main aim of the conference was to create greater awareness among policy makers, economic planners and key stakeholders in the agriculture and tourism sectors on the concept of Agri tourism as a strategy to create alternative income opportunities for farming communities, develop the alternative tourism sector and as a tool for revitalising the rural economy.

The conference consisted presentations from international and national resource persons, stakeholders' consultation sessions and discussions, presentations by real Agri tourism experiences and finally preparation of action plans for development and promotion of Agri Tourism Education and Industry in Sri Lanka.

The modules covered at the conference included; Government policy and programme on rural tourism in Sri Lanka, global and regional tourism trends and prospects for Agri tourism in Sri Lanka, models of Agri tourism such



The panel at the head table at the conference (from left): National Productivity Secretariat Director Maddumabandara Weerasekera, Sabaragamuwa University Vice Chancellor Prof. Mahinda S. Rupasinghe, Sabaragamuwa University Faculty of Agriculture Sciences Senior Professor of Agri Business Management Prof. Rohana P. Mahaliyanaarachchi, Joselito Cruz Bernado Director of the Agriculture Department of the Asian Productivity Organisation (APO) International organisation based in Tokyo, Japan and Ministry of Agriculture Additional Secretary Dr. D.B.T. Wijeratne

as experiences in other countries in Asia, Agri tourism enterprises in Sri Lanka and their key features and performance, role of stakeholders in development and promotion of Agri tourism, promoting and marketing of Agri tourism and strategies for the development of Agri tourism in Sri Lanka.

Prof. Mahaliyanaarachchi further expressing views stated that following the introduction of a course unit namely, Agricultural Tourism as an optional course for the final year students of the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences of the Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka, the operations of the Agrifac Farm Stay at the 'Farm Bed and Breakfast' basis at the faculty farm was commenced in 2010, and the first batch of students for the Agricultural Tourism course unit was registered accordingly. "Already 85 students who followed the Agricultural Tourism course unit have passed out from the faculty in three batches by now," he added.

Minimise rate of emigration

Bernado speaking at the occasion stated that APO's support to the Conference was part of its program to



Sabaragamuwa University Faculty of Agriculture Sciences Senior Professor of Agri Business Management Prof. Rohana P. Mahaliyanaarachchi speaking at the inauguration of the National Agri Tourism Conference 2014

promote productivity and develop rural enterprises through promotion of Rural Tourism. "Our Rural Tourism Program encompasses Ecotourism and Agrotourism. APO has been promoting the concept of Community-based Rural Tourism, Ecotourism and Agrotourism since 2006 to create employment and sustainable livelihood in rural areas and minimise the rate of emigration of rural population to urban areas," he said.

APO is supporting member countries to revitalise rural communities by creating new enterprises anchored on untapped rural labour and natural resources. It has organised Multi-country Study Missions with participants from all APO member countries on Rural Tourism to Taiwan, Malaysia and Indonesia, in 2006, 2007 and 2008 respectively. Workshops and Training Courses on Agrotourism in Sri Lanka and Malaysia were conducted in 2010 and 2012 and Workshops and Training Courses on Ecotourism in Nepal, Philippines and Fiji were conducted in 2009, 2011 and 2013 respectively.

Aside from the Multi Country OSMs, APO has supported national initiatives in organising national conferences and workshops to facilitate dissemination of knowledge and best practices on a wider scale at national level in Philippines, Vietnam, Nepal, and this year in Sri Lanka and Lao PDR.

"Sri Lanka is endowed with natural resources and unique agriculture landscapes. There are greater potentials for Sri Lanka to be a tourism hub in the region over the next 5-10 years. Furthermore, the rapid economic development of the country will increase the income of the general public which will provide them with capacity to spend for their rest and recreation, especially for those based in the urban areas, to go to enjoy the rustic ambiance and healthy environment in a farm setting. Therefore, this conference is indicative of the great interest stakeholders have on the subject of agrotourism in Sri Lanka," Bernado said.

In the year 2011, Asia and the Pacific had 260 million international tourists, with the highest growth in South Asia and Southeast Asia (+9%). China had come number 01 in the rankings with 57.58 million tourist arrivals, followed by Malaysia with 24.71 million, Hong Kong with 22.32 million, Thailand with 19.10 million, Macau with 12.93 million, Singapore with 10.39 million, South Korea with 9.80 million, Indonesia with 7.65 million, India with 6.29 million and Japan with 6.22 million international tourist arrivals for the year 2011.

Sri Lanka the Treasure Island, the high end monthly international travel and tourism magazine acted the official print media partner of the two day conference.

Dr. D.B.T. Wijeratne - Additional Secretary of the Ministry of Agriculture, Prof. Mahinda S. Rupasinghe - Vice Chancellor of the Sabaragamuwa University, Maddumabandara Weerasekera - Director of the National Productivity Secretariat, P.U. Rathnayake - Director of the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, Dr. Iraj Ratnayake - Senior Lecturer of the Department of Tourism Management at the Sabaragamuwa University, Dr. W.K. Athula Gnanapala - Senior Lecturer in Tourism Management of Sabaragamuwa University, Dr. S.H.P. Malkanthi - Senior Lecturer of Agri Business Management of Sabaragamuwa University, a number of local and international professionals of agri tourism and its operation, Government officials of tourism sector, stakeholders including entrepreneurs of agri tourism around the country and a number of university students also attended the conference.



A part of the professional participants and stakeholders at the National Agri Tourism Conference 2014