

## **Developing a Sustainable Nation Brand: A Study of Sri Lanka.**

### **Abstract**

This study examines the degree to which the Earth Lung Project, a carbon mitigation initiative in Sri Lanka has developed a coherent nation brand. Findings indicate that a shared sense of national identity amongst all stakeholder groups is critical in the development of a national brand. However, whilst concern for the environment was found to be an embedded aspect of national identity within Sri Lanka, conflicting stakeholder perspectives reveal a lack of belief amongst private sector stakeholders in the ELP. Thus there are doubts over the degree to which the ELP is currently capable of generating a sustainable national brand.

**Keywords** brand identity, national identity, stakeholder theory

### **Introduction**

Climate change is not an abstract concept for tourism; the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO, 2008) reported that it is a phenomenon that already affects many destinations. The predicted impacts of climate change, such as: temperature increases, sea level rises, reduction of glaciers, changes to precipitation patterns and increased extreme weather events will become more evident, resulting in the deterioration of the natural environment in some tourism destinations (IPPC, 2013). Tourism islands in the Indian Ocean have been highlighted as a particular type of destination that will be adversely affected by climate change (Hoti et al., 2005 and Harrison and Schipani, 2007). The impacts of climate change (both direct and indirect) will diminish the 'pull factors' that influence the tourists' destination selection criteria and increase the nation's vulnerability to the impacts of climate change.

Policy makers within the tourism sector need to find ways of improving destination competitiveness, whilst at the same time responding to the risks associated with climate change impacts. An example of a tourism initiative designed to mitigate the impacts of climate change is the Earth Lung Project (ELP), developed by the tourism stakeholders within Sri Lanka. This project is focused on responding to the uncertainties brought about climate change, improving the sustainability of the tourist sector and, in line with the UN guidelines on how a well-designed and managed tourism strategy can make a significant contribution to sustainable development within a country (UN, 2012:9).

A dominant theme in tourism literature is the need for stakeholder involvement in nation branding as a means of establishing a sustainable approach to tourism management (Waligo, Clarke and Hawkins, 2013). It is well-documented that a failure to involve relevant stakeholders in the development and implementation of tourism initiatives results in a lack of understanding and shared commitment to sustainable tourism strategy (Dodds, 2007; Fyall and Garrod, 2005; Hall, 2000). However, what has not been fully recognised within the literature is the how a shared sense of national identity is central to the development of strong and sustainable nation brand. Thus the aims of this paper are; to explore the extent to which there is a shared sense of national identity amongst tourism stakeholders within Sri Lanka and, to what degree this reflective of a sustainable nation brand within a sustainable tourism strategy.

The purpose of this paper is to address a gap in tourism literature. Focusing on Sri Lanka, an island which, despite having a rich cultural and natural heritage, has failed to fully involve stakeholders in the development of tourism and thus has not realised the associated economic benefits. In so doing, this paper not only contributes to the relatively scant literature on tourism development in Sri Lanka, but also explicates the role national

identity plays in stakeholder engagement and, in turn, the development of a sustainable tourism nation brand.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### **Rebranding a Nation**

Nation branding entails the application of branding techniques developed in mainstream marketing literature to the branding of a nation, state or country. The interest in nation branding is evident from Gertner's (2011) research on the proliferation of nations and regions adopting marketing and branding concepts and tools to attract investors and visitors. Further evidence can be seen in the popularity of Anholt's Nation Brand Index, the growing number of articles in the area and the range of countries engaging in re-branding activities, despite its cost, inherent difficulties and there being no guarantee of success (Szondi, 2010). According to the literature (e.g. Anholt, 2007; Dinnie, 2008; Tasdci & Gartner, 2009), it is clear that nations use branding in an effort to; benefit from a distinct or unique reputation as a tourism destination; encourage confidence for foreign direct investment and; to enhance perceptions of the country as a provider of quality products and services. Whilst the latter may relate to the country of origin effects as a product manufacturer, in this case it can be understood to represent the perception of the tourism product within the generating region.

Equally however, nation branding can also be used for political purposes or diplomacy (Gudjonsson 2005). In the case of Sri Lanka, it could be argued that drivers behind the ELP are more than simply income generation through tourism, although this clearly is a desired outcome. Re-branding via the ELP also helps policy makers to draw global

attention to national environmental issues, the cessation of the civil war and hence increase political influence internationally. Thus the construction of national identity and associated brand relies on the emphasis on what Halbwach (1985) calls ‘collective memory’ (in De Cillia, Reisigl and Wodak (1999) expressed through socio-political and historical structures as well as through and stories of ‘national history’ as told by national citizens.

Whilst a full review of nation branding theory is outside the scope of this paper, it is important to offer a number of critical comments at this stage. An initial observation is that there appears to be no single accepted definition of nation branding (Szondi, 2010). Thus it is not surprising that there is overlap and some confusion between the related areas of place branding, destination branding and location branding (e.g. Kerr, 2006; Kavaratzis, 2005). Whilst these areas may share common themes and issues, the focal point differs. So destination branding, whilst still a complex activity, has a more clearly defined focus and boundaries around a specific resort, and is predominately driven by a tourism agenda. It is argued that nation branding is the more complex area since it is on a far larger scale and will thus inevitably involve more stakeholders with their diverse agendas. For the purposes of this study, Dinne’s (2008:15) definition of nation branding is adopted, namely; “the unique, multi-dimensional blend of elements that provide the nation with culturally grounded differentiation and relevance for all of its target audiences”. This definition is advocated since it highlights three features important to this study, namely; complexity in being multi-dimensional, cultural relevance of the nation brand, and target audiences (both internal and external to the nation) who bring with them differing perceptions, experiences and motives.

There is no single accepted model of nation branding, perhaps due to the complexity of the process, differing experiences of nation branding in practice, and the range of motives driving nation branding activities. However, Dinnie (2008) suggests a standard strategy approach be applied to nation branding. This commences with strategic analysis, an external and internal analysis to assess the nation's current position. The second stage of strategic planning involved establishing goals for the strategic direction of the nation brand. A final stage of strategic implementation relates to the implementation, monitoring and control of the desired brand identity. Looking at the processes adopted by other authors, they often follow a similar overall process, but focus on particular aspects. For example, Gudjonsson (2005) explores influences on nation branding, relating this to the case of Iceland, and emphasises the need to identify weaknesses and communication channels in a nation's image, i.e. the audit aspect of Dinnie's (2008) process. However, there is consensus amongst many authors that the key to the establishing a sustainable tourism strategy is through greater involvement of key stakeholders in nation brand development (Waligo et al. 2013).

### **Stakeholder Involvement**

Osei & Gbadamosi's (2011) study of re-branding in Africa starts with an assessment of the current brand perception, followed by institutionalisation of the branding function with the aim of selling the desired brand image to stakeholders which is then supported by the development and implementation of integrated marketing communications activities. This is very similar to Dinnie's (2008) approach, but in this case emphasises

the role of stakeholders in the implementation process in order to achieve a sustainable brand. The importance of wide stakeholder involvement is similarly evident in Lodge's (2002) evaluation of the re-branding programmes of New Zealand and Ontario, with the 'corporate mind' or a strong, unifying leadership seen as crucial to successful re-branding.

Numerous authors (e.g. de Chernatony, 2008; Szondi, 2010, Kemp et al, 2012) highlight the importance of involving all stakeholders, yet there is; 'a shortage of empirical studies involved with the reality of place branding among different stakeholders' (García, Gómez & Molina, 2012:646). Stakeholder Theory, as developed by Freeman (1984) holds; 'A stakeholder in an organization is (by definition) any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives' (1984: 46 in Mitchell, Agle & Wood, 1997: 856). Therefore, an individual or group is considered to be a stakeholder if they have a legitimate interest or stake in aspects of any organisations' activities in that community and has the power to affect that performance (Sautter and Leisen, 1997). Thus inhabitants of a country are held to have a stake and indeed, a mutual dependency or social exchange, with organisations operating within that environment (Cai, 2009). There are argued to be three main dimensions of Stakeholder Theory; an instrumental focus, a descriptive element and a normative aspect (Mainardes, Alves and Raposo, 2011).

As individual perceptions vary, stakeholders will inevitably hold diverse and potentially conflicting views, driven by their own particular objectives, motives and by their social identities, one source of which is nationality (Crane and Ruebottom, 2012). To illustrate, a local host community want an improved quality of life that can be gained through the

provision of a tourism product that satisfies the needs of the tourist. Local tourist businesses might be interested in resources maximisation and ensuing profitability. The policy makers may wish to maintain the quality of the environment so they can continue to attract tourist in future marketing campaigns. These three differing stakeholder groups will each have their own objectives and motives, which may be conflicting, and hence create tensions between stakeholders. In short, stakeholders can facilitate or inhibit the development of a sustainable brand (Bornhorst, Ritchie and Sheehan, 2010).

Involving stakeholders in the early stages of the nation branding process, that of auditing the current position, is helpful in generating a richer insights. However, in the later stages of the process, the selected nation identity is unlikely to appeal equally to all stakeholders and 'selling' the brand may require significant internal communications with key stakeholders within the nation. To illustrate, with reference to destination branding, Tasci & Gartner (2009:158), identify the need to "hear the voices of all stakeholders" by adopting a democratic, inclusive approach yet to then speak with a single voice to communicate a uniform message. This single voice, in contrast, requires an autocratic approach. Nations are complex social entities, which, particularly in contrast to destination branding, will involve a greater number of stakeholders and a more diverse group of stakeholders. The practicality of hearing all stakeholder voices is questionable. Over and above this, clear tensions in the process of building nation identity are evident; it requires in turn both a democratic and autocratic approach which may present challenges for those seeking to pull together and gain support from stakeholder groups.

Looking at the role of identity in nation branding highlights that building nation brands are about much more than the co-ordination of communications activities surrounding the brand. O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy (2000:56) propose that the concept of a nation "consists of a people inhabiting a fixed territory, sharing key elements of a common culture (values beliefs, norms, institutions) and possessing a sense of common interests". Thus it is not possible to build a sustainable nation brand without taking into account national identity. However, there are likely to be multiple meanings or interpretations of the nation brand both within the country and in the eyes of the numerous target audiences. O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy (2000:58) go on to suggest that "a nation conveys a range of meanings: the debris of history and the contemporary. It is multi-layered, composed of folk images, historic images, and media history, whilst the contemporary media image creates a condensed snapshot". As Anholt (2010:9) states, "it is principally deeds which create public perceptions, not words and pictures". So developing a coherent sustainable brand strategy, as opposed to a merely a short-term PR exercise, will involve the balancing of complex, competing or opposing perspectives, to develop a brand image that can be delivered by the nation, that is supported by the members of that nation, and that is credible in the eyes of external target audiences.

An alternative process is advocated by Kotler & Gertner (2002). Whilst superficially sharing commonality in regard to the rationale, initial audit stage, and the importance of shared involvement, for example, the resulting process focuses heavily on brand management techniques and in particular image-management. Consideration is given to this process for managing the brand as it specifically incorporates the identification of



“some industries, personalities, natural landmarks and historical events” (Kotler & Gertner (2002: 259) which can be used as the basis for the building of a strong brand and story-telling in relation to this brand. This emphasis on sharing stories about national identity is consistent De Cillia et al’s (1999) assertion that such discourses help construct national identities. This particular process is of interest since it can be applied effectively to ELP with the brand image emphasising the tangible aspects (virgin rain forest) and intangible (the concept of the earth’s lungs) which are central to the nation brand for Sri Lanka. The ELP in essence highlights the importance of the green forest, a clean and unpolluted country, which seem to be important to the Sri Lankan national identity and the development of the nation brand.

Since the starting point of nation branding is an gaining an understanding of the shared values, attitudes and beliefs of stakeholders that shape national identity, then this literature offers a range of perspectives to inform the analysis.

### **National Identity**

The national identity literature is diverse (Dinnie, 2002), incorporating aspects such as culture, history, geography, language, architecture, art, literature, music, food and drink. National identity is thus complex and multi-dimensional. In defining the concept of national identity, we draw on the work of Bourdieu (1993) and the notion of *habitus* which can be described as; “a complex set of common ideas, concepts or perception schemes” (De Cillia, Reisigl and Wodak (1999:153). In such *habitus*, there are a set of (more or less, we would argue) shared, emotional attitudes to the nation in which they

inhabit which influences their behaviour and become internalized through ‘national’ socialization.

Applying social constructionist ideas (Gergen, 1999) to the concept of national identity, it is argued that national identity as a social construct will evolve over time, as it continues to draw upon history and traditions that are shared and reinterpreted. Thus national identity is seen to be fluid rather than static, but embedded in the historical cultural specificity of the nation. The concept of a shared national identity is complicated in the case of Sri Lanka by the presence of numerous ethnic groups; Sinhalese 73.8%, Sri Lankan Moors 7.2%, Indian Tamil 4.6%, Sri Lankan Tamil 3.9% and different religious backgrounds Buddhist 69.1%, Muslim 7.6%, Hindu 7.1%, Christian 6.2% (CIA, 2012). Given the variety of different ethnic and religious influences on individual identity, it behoves the researcher to ascertain first the degree to which these belief systems are an imbedded (Kohonen, 2005) source of identity. Through a critical evaluation of individual senses of national identity it may then be possible to explore the extent to which it may be possible to develop a shared sense of national identity and, in turn, a coherent nation brand. Thus the extent to which members of that nation share a national identity is a consideration of this paper.

Reviewing the nation branding literature, and examples of nation branding in practice, highlights a number of challenges for those seeking to rebrand a country. Emerging themes central to this study are; involvement in the rebranding process and embedding individual identities in national identity.

To summarise, our study was both exploratory and descriptive in that we were interested, firstly in the extent to which stakeholders within the Sri Lankan community have an imbedded sense of national identity (Kohonen, 2005; De Cieri et al, 2009) and what values and beliefs were inherent within that identity. Secondly, we wished to explore the meanings and significance these stakeholders attach to the 'nation brand' as represented by the ELP.

There have been limited applications of stakeholder theory to tourism studies (Sheehan and Ritchie, 2005; Jorgensen and Munar, 2009) and thus this study fills a gap in the extant knowledge; extending our understanding of the role that stakeholders play in the development of nation branding. Furthermore, with its emphasis on the mutual dependencies and notions of social exchange inherent in such relationships, it contributes to the literature which stresses the importance of community participation in tourism branding (Cai, 2009).

### **Tourism in Sri Lanka**

Tourism is one of the top six foreign currency earners in Sri Lanka and therefore an important sector for the economy. The natural and cultural heritage product for tourism to utilise includes 8 World Heritage Sites and 14 National Parks. Clearly the civil war has impeded the growth of tourism in Sri Lanka, but with the cessation of the war in 2009 the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA, 2012) is keen to maximise the growth in tourism. In 2011, tourist arrivals exceeded one million for the first time and grew by 17.5% on the previous year (SLTDA, 2012).

### *Background to the Earth Lung Project*

The ELP was conceived by members of the National Tourism Organisation in Sri Lanka, the Sri Lanka Tourist Development Authority with support from academics at the Colombo University. There were two aims to the project, to develop a brand that was ready to use once the civil war ceased and enable tourists to have new associations with Sri Lanka that encouraged them to visit a peaceful country. Secondly, to provide a national response to climate change, tourism officials were becoming increasingly concerned that tourist's awareness of climate change might prevent them from taking long haul flights to Sri Lanka. The basic concept behind the ELP was the forests are the lungs of the earth, breathing in carbon dioxide and emitting oxygen. Sri Lanka has approximately 30 percent forest cover (FDFAOUN, 2010); it can be used to sink the carbon that is used by aircraft, bringing tourists to Sri Lanka. In addition, Sri Lanka has suffered from some deforestation, so tourists will be encouraged to pay into a carbon offset fund and the proceeds of this will be used to purchase, plant and maintain hundreds of thousands of trees. The idea for the Earth Lung brand evolved from public policy planning models and since Sri Lanka is shape like a lung, the brand of the ELP emerged. The motivations behind this project relate to formal attempts to influence the tourists' perceptions of the nation brand; thus the case study of the ELP is an example of nation branding in practice.

### **Research Design**

The findings presented in this paper are taken from a wider, interpretivist study of the impacts of climate change within Indian Ocean Island tourism destinations. An

exploratory case study approached from a social constructionist methodology (Gergen, 1999) was employed to enable reflection on the historical and cultural specificity and the role of social processes within Sri Lanka. More specifically, as stakeholder involvement and shared national identity are purported to be central to the development a nation brand (de Chernatony, 2008; Szondi, 2010 and others), this study was designed to explore the extent to which the ELP has engendered a shared sense of national identity amongst tourism stakeholders in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, if this is the case, the aim is to explore the degree to which this sense of identity is reflective of a sustainable nation brand.

#### Data Collection

The individuals invited to take in this study were identified by snowball sampling (ref) via national government representatives. In total, in May 2008 14 semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders from both the public and private sectors to gain an understanding of the meanings and importance attached to national identity, climate change, tourism and the ELP. Questions were designed to elicit the respondents' understanding and awareness of climate change and the consequences of this for their livelihoods as tourism stakeholders. Respondents were encouraged to story their lives giving details of the context and culture which have shaped their sense of national identity and, in turn, their attitudes to the tourism brand. This enabled us to explore our first research aim; to what extent is there a shared sense of national identity amongst tourism stakeholders within Sri Lanka. In the second part of the interview questions were asked about the respondents' perceptions of the ELP as reflective of a sustainable national brand, the process by which the brand was developed and their perceived involvement as tourism stakeholders. This enabled us to answer our second

aim; to what degree is this sense of national identity reflective of a sustainable national brand as espoused by the Earth Lung Project.

The sample consisted of 6 public sector stakeholders included government representatives, local officials involved in the development and implementation of the tourism, climate change and economic policy and 8 private sector respondents representing national hotel groups, tour and transport operators and tourist attractions. A pilot was conducted prior to commencement and this informed the interview protocol. The interviews took place at national government offices in Colombo and at the premises of the tourism business and ranged in duration from one to two hours. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed, having gained informed consent from the participants. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identities of all participants in the study. During the research visit, field notes and observational data was collected to corroborate verbal and documented evidence.

### Data Analysis

With respect to data analysis, a pragmatic and iterative approach (as per Mounce 2002) was taken and a form of grounded theory adopted (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Preliminary codes and themes were identified, such as; living expressions of culture (e.g. traditional costumes, events); forms of linguistic iteration (e.g. stories told about the history including the civil war and traditions) etc. related to a sense of national identity. In terms of notions of a sustainable nation brand and the ELP, codes such as; social benefits; scepticism; preparedness, economic drivers, business rationale and so on were identified. These were then re-focused as comparisons across transcripts highlighted similarities and differences in participants' perceptions of the values underpinning the ELP and the extent to which they perceive these

beliefs are reflective of a shared national identity. The frequency of recurring themes and observations from transcripts were recorded in order to give an indication of the strength of shared feeling, however the focus was also on the discourses and narratives told by participants which offered *thick description* (Geertz 1973) reflecting details of the national culture(s) in which these individuals live.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The ELP was developed by the Sri Lankan Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) and a leading academic in ecotourism. There was no involvement of private sector tourism stakeholders during its fruition, which contravenes the advice of de Chernatony, (2008); Szondi (2010) and Kemp *et al* (2012) who stress the importance of involving all stakeholders. The primary research was conducted 10 months after the launch of the project. At this stage all the respondents were aware of the ELP and there was enormous commitment from the public sector to ensure that it was a success. The National Tourism Organisation suggested that there was little choice; the ELP was an essential stage in the recovery of the tourism industry within Sri Lanka. However, on the private sector side the respondents appeared less convinced. Although all the stakeholders were aware of the ELP, it was not mentioned in the tourism strategic plan at all, so lacked formal endorsement and hence was not integrated into the tourism policy.

### *Stakeholder Involvement: the Public Sector*

There was enormous pride in the ELP from the public sector. Public sector respondents were keen to bestow the virtues of the project and consistently referred to Sri Lanka as being very well positioned to take advantage of carbon offsetting as the country has huge

forest coverage and the ELP providing the tourism sector with a different trading platform. These narratives illustrated similar well rehearsed phrases which affirmed the views of De Cilla et al's (1999), that shared discourses need to be consistent and help construct national identities. The ELP appeared to be a project that integrated the public sector stakeholders and provided a platform to demonstrate this. There was a degree of elitism reflected in the public sector narratives that the ELP was not only innovative for the tourism sector, but also made them feel ahead of other areas of government policy. Whilst the picture painted by the public sector tended to be a very positive one, they also recognised that it had not been easy getting the commitment from the private sector as will be outlined in the next section.

#### *Implementation of the Earth Lung Project*

Whilst respondents were keen to discuss the ELP, it was extremely difficult to gain concrete information about the implementation and logistics of the project. This may well be because the ELP was at an embryonic state. The body representing the tourism private sector stakeholders seemed to be aware of this and went as far as suggesting there was a lack of understanding of the ELP within the private sector. No indication was given of future training events or how this problem was to be addressed. Most private sector respondents discussed issues related to the environment and tourism ministries and considered that there was recognition about what needed to happen, but they had reservations about the effectiveness of the SLTDA to implement the ELP. When probed further about the effective implementation of the ELP there was recognition of the power held by the NTO, but most respondents raised questions about the capability of the NTO



to implement the project effectively. None of the respondents established their particular roles in the successful fulfilment of the project, such as the encouraging tourists to buy carbon credits or become involved in tree planting projects. This highlighted a disconnect in the perceptions of the stakeholders, which does not conform to the notion of habitus and a set shared emotional attitude (De Cillia et al (1999)). So whilst there appeared to be recognition of the brand, private sector representatives did not have an emotional connection to the brand and it failed to reflect a shared sense of national identity.

Additionally there was a lack of credibility associated with the project, with no clear direction of what needed to be done to effectively implement the project within the private sector. The private sector respondents tended to be rather sceptical about the project initially, on a few occasions the respondents openly laughed and joked about the ELP. A couple continued to question if anything being organised centrally in Sri Lanka could make a positive impact on improving tourist numbers and the issue of climate change. This expressed the frustration that the private sector seemed to have about the responsiveness of the public sector and the private sectors lack of involvement in the development of a national brand. Other respondents questioned whether Sri Lanka was ready for the ELP and where the money would come from to support the project. These factors combined to emphasise the private sector respondents' lack of confidence in the ability of the public sector to implement and launch the brand successfully. So whilst there was considerable scepticism regarding the implementation of the ELP by the private sector in Sri Lanka, one private sector respondent suggested that there was a mutual dependency between the tourism stakeholders, but this dependency appeared to lack

social interaction (Cai, 2009). There was consensus between both the private and public sector stakeholders that it was a catalyst to raise the profile of Sri Lanka in generating regions and also quell the Western tourist's conscience concerning long haul flights; but the private sectors limited involvement in the development of the brand raised questions about the ELPs longevity.

To summarise, there still seems little evidence of the project being implemented, so tourists are still not able to offset the carbon of the flights they have taken to travel to Sri Lanka. The development of the ELP seems to have been a mechanism for raising awareness of climate change internally within Sri Lanka, with the thrust of the activity being initiated by the public sector stakeholders. The ELP does not seem to demonstrate the balancing of complex, competing and opposing perspectives that Anholt (2010) identifies as key components of a sustainable brand strategy.

### **Shared National Identity**

The research found that there was an aspect of shared national identity embedded in all the tourism stakeholders in their appreciation of, and affinity with, the environment and to a lesser extent their social concerns expressed through the Buddhist concept of nirvana and enlightenment. Whilst there is no exact translation the concept of nirvana, it is suggested to extinguish ignorance, hatred and earthly suffering (Harvey, 1995). This connection to a strong cultural identity was shown when considering the future of tourism in Sri Lanka and overwhelmingly respondents were optimistic due to a common appreciation of the natural and cultural environment. Both public and private sector

respondents provided illustrations of the connectedness and significance of the environment to their religious and social values. This translated into a unanimous concern for the vulnerability of Sri Lanka to the impacts of climate change by all the respondents. However, this awareness did not stimulate coherent engagement in the development of the ELP. This was illustrated by a public sector interviewee who elaborated on the difficulties of selling the concept of the ELP to the private sector. As, although in this study the private sector stakeholders were perceived as being more adaptable in their responses to climate change, it was the National Tourism Organisation that were the catalyst behind the ELP, leaving the private sector stakeholders lacking commitment to the brand.

The research found that whilst a united front was presented publically in supporting the ELP, behind closed doors, during the interviews a divergence of perceptions were expressed, as illustrated above. The public sector considered the ELP essential in order to respond to the Western tourist's guilty conscience of taking a long haul flight, whilst the private sector was blatantly sceptical about the implementation of the project. Thus a concern for the environment was an inherent and shared aspect of national identity amongst stakeholders participating in the research. Yet despite this shared aspect of national identity, the ELP has seemingly failed to unite stakeholders behind the ELP as a national brand.

### **A sustainable national brand?**

Clearly, the ELP provides a mutual dependency (Argyris, 1960; Gouldner, 1960; Blau, 1964) between the stakeholder groups as both the public and private sector stakeholders would need to work collaboratively to ensure effective implementation. Whilst there was common accord to the environmental and social beliefs espoused, this did not transfer through at the practical level in the implementation of the ELP. This lack of trust between the stakeholder groups led to limited engagement and resulted in private sector operators initiating fragmented pockets of good environmental practice. For example, one of the large hotel chains conducted a regular environmental audit at each of their resorts and published the results for guests to review. Consequently, there was a lack of consensus in whether to be optimistic or pessimistic about the future of tourism in Sri Lanka generally and more specifically regarding the ELP.

At this stage, the introduction of the ELP is indicative of responsiveness by SLTDA at an international level with respect to raising awareness of the issue of climate change. However, it is not currently implemented effectively within the country at a ground roots level as the private sector are not effectively engaged in the process, so brand advocacy is very limited. As a result the synergistic effects of responding to climate change and developing an effective nation brand are not being realised. Which begs the question if the ELP is being used for 'green washing' purposes (Whellams and McDonald, 2007) or for true green marketing, which should flow from strong environmental values (El Dief and Font, 2010) which were evident in all tourism stakeholders.

## **Conclusions**

The key lessons that can be learnt from the ELP as an exercise in the development of a sustainable nation brand are clear. Wider support within the stakeholder groups is

required to articulate and then communicate the clear vision of the nation brand with all stakeholders involved in creating the brand. Furthermore, to deliver a sustainable brand requires support from a range of both public and private stakeholder groups, and indeed local population who may not be directly involved in the project but whose support is needed to communicate the brand message. This supports the work of Cai (2009) and Tasci & Gartner (2009: 155) who suggest that one of the most crucial factors to achieve successful destination branding is 'collaboration among stakeholders to assure congruence between brand and the physical and social values of the destination'. Both the collaboration amongst stakeholders and the lack of congruence between national identity and nation brand as represented by the ELP are identified as potential weaknesses. Without a sustainable brand, the economic social and environmental benefits that Sri Lanka is currently deriving from tourism may be lost.

This study provides an insightful case that reinforces the importance of engagement of all stakeholder groups in the development of national brands. It is not without limitations, the case reflects on the situation in one country with context bound cultural and environmental aspects. The study could be replicated in other tourism destinations to examine if different stakeholder engagement is influential in national branding and how stakeholder involvement impacts on the co-creation of nation brands. Future areas for research include how the nation brand is communicated in the generating regions, and comparing this supply side with demand side perspective (tourists).

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