

## THE ROLE OF BEACH BOYS IN SHAPING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM OPERATIONS: AN EXPLORATION OF THEIR INTERACTIONS, BEHAVIOURS, AND IMPACTS IN COASTAL REGIONS OF SRI LANKA

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**Citation:** Gnanapala, A. (2025). The Role of Beach Boys in Shaping Sustainable Tourism Operations: An Exploration of Their Interactions, Behaviours, and Impacts in Coastal Regions of Sri Lanka. *Analele Universității din Oradea, Seria Geografie*, 35(2), 111-123. <https://doi.org/10.30892/auog.35202-930>

**Abstract:** Beach tourism plays a vital role in the economic development of Sri Lanka's coastal regions. However, the presence and activities of "beach boys" pose both opportunities and challenges to sustainable tourism. This study explores their impact on tourism sustainability through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders and beach boys. Findings reveal that while beach boys are central to the tourism experience, they are often linked with illegal activities, sex tourism, scams, and socio-cultural issues. At the same time, they face challenges such as social stigmatization and lack of formal support. The study recommends capacity-building, regulatory frameworks, and formal integration into tourism operations to reduce negative impacts and enhance their positive role. A balanced approach is essential to promote sustainable tourism practices while encouraging community involvement. The research offers valuable insights into managing informal tourism actors within coastal destinations and aligning their contributions with broader sustainability goals.

**Keywords:** Beach boys; Impacts; Issues and Challenges; Sustainability; Tourism

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### INTRODUCTION

A key challenge in Sri Lanka's coastal tourism is the emergence of "beach boys," a group of young men from coastal communities who engage with tourists as informal guides and facilitators. The origins of beach boys in Sri Lankan tourism are uncertain, but they are typically young males aged who provide services ranging from organizing boat rides and entertainment to offering more controversial services, such as transactional relationships with tourists (Miller, 2011). Some beach boys are described as dressing flashily, often wearing gold chains and living lavish lifestyles. The interaction between beach boys and tourists, particularly Western women, has raised

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public health and ethical concerns. Some tourists, single women in particular, engage in casual relationships with beach boys, with many such encounters driven by financial motives. While some beach boys operate openly as sex workers, others aim to build relationships in hopes of financial gain (Oppermann, 1988; Baumeister, & Vohs, 2004). Critics argue that these behaviors contribute to the spread of drugs, sexually transmitted diseases, and a deterioration of traditional cultural values, creating a negative image of Sri Lanka as an unsustainable tourist destination (Miller, 2011; Herold, Garcia, & DeMoya, 2001; Arachchi, 2011; Samarathunga, 2018).

Despite these concerns, there is ongoing debate about the impact of beach boys on the tourism sector. Some researchers emphasize the potential harm they pose to Sri Lanka's image due to their involvement in informal and, at times, illicit activities (Fernando & Shariff, 2013; Arachchi, 2011). Conversely, others argue that beach boys contribute to the vibrancy of the beaches and may even attract certain tourists seeking personalized local experiences (Miller, 2011; Brown, 1992). Due to socio-cultural and economic factors, beach boys have become key players in the informal tourism sector, and a significant number of tourists visit Sri Lanka due to connections they have established with them (Perera, 2007). Consequently, addressing the role of beach boys in Sri Lanka's tourism industry is complex, necessitating a nuanced approach that considers both their contribution and the challenges they bring to sustainable tourism development.

### **PROBLEM BACKGROUND**

Beach boys, known by various names around the world, play a recognizable yet often controversial role in tourism. These individuals are commonly found in beach resorts, where they interact closely with tourists and shape the tourism experience in both direct and indirect ways. Despite their widespread presence, the term "beach boys" frequently carries a negative connotation. According to Venables (2009), this term is often used in a derogatory way, casting beach boys in a negative light. In Sri Lanka, discussions about beach boys have frequently centered on the negative impacts associated with their activities. These young men, typically operating outside formal employment structures, work as informal tourism service providers and often engage with tourists at various levels. Their role can range from serving as unofficial tour guides and organizing local excursions to establishing relationships with tourists, some of which may result in financial or other personal gains. This study seeks to investigate the multifaceted impacts of beach boys on sustainable tourism operations in Sri Lanka's coastal regions, focusing on both positive contributions and challenges posed by their presence.

By exploring the economic, social, and cultural effects of beach boys, this research aims to understand their influence on the overall sustainability of coastal tourism. Additionally, the study will examine the specific issues and challenges associated with beach boys in Sri Lanka, such as their integration into the informal tourism sector, interactions with tourists, and the potential social and economic consequences of their activities. Through this analysis, the research aims to provide insights into how beach boys contribute to and impact sustainable tourism in Sri Lanka's coastal areas, while also identifying strategies that can help mitigate any adverse effects and support a balanced approach to tourism development.

Based on this background the objective of this study is to explore the influence of beach boys on the sustainability of tourism operations in coastal areas, focusing on their roles, behaviors, and interactions with tourists and local communities. This chapter begins by discussing the problem background, focusing on the impact of beach boys on the sustainability of the tourism industry. It then provides a comprehensive review of the existing literature to highlight the current knowledge and perspectives on this issue. The subsequent section outlines the research methodologies employed, followed by an in-depth presentation of the study's findings and a detailed discussion. The chapter concludes with key insights and implications drawn from the research.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### BEACH BOYS

Beach boys are not only common in Sri Lanka but also operate all over the beach tourism destinations. As Jamison (1999) highlighted, beach boys exist in every corner of the world under different names. Beach boys can be found around the world, and they are addressed differently: in Italy, they are called "Papagalli", in Vienna "Praterbuben", in Germany "Bauernfaenger", in Dominican Republic "sanky panky", (Venables, 2009; Herold, Garcia, & DeMoya, 2001; Cabezas, 2004; Sanchez, et al., 2001), Gambia "bumster" (Brown, 1992; Nyanzi, Rosenberg-Jallow, Bah, & Nyanzi, 2005); in Senegal "coteman" (Venables, 2009). In Sri Lanka, they are colloquially known as "beach boys," a term that reflects their primary setting the beach and the nature of their activities, which often include guiding tourists, organizing entertainment, and engaging in informal services.

As Cabezas (2004) stated, the term beach boy refers to young men who work near or on beaches, typically tourist beaches, and offer sexual services in exchange for payment. These young men may also function as unauthorized tourist guides and may not all identify as beach boys. Beach boys may also be working in restaurants, hotels, guest houses, divine centers, and boat-related tourism businesses. Presently, beach boys themselves and a few other people call them beach operators or beach facilitators.

Beach boys are rendering their services at most of the beach resorts around the globe. They are generally young men whose age is more or less than 17 and 30 years, and offering various informal services to the tourists. Nowadays, they provide different services for the guests such as arranging excursion tours, safari tours, village tours, arranging accommodation facilities, and many more. These beach boys typically approach the tourists at the beach and negotiate with their businesses. They ask the guests whether they want to explore the nightlife, go for a trip or excursion, or visit their rural settings and their lifestyles.

The different researchers have discussed the involvement of beach boys in sex tourism practices (Samarathunga, 2018; Herold et al., 2001; Bozicevic et al., 2020; Jenkins et al., 2021). Traditionally, many motives influenced vacations in other countries, such as nature, adventure, cultural & religious activity, education, sports & recreation, and visiting friends and relatives (Kozak & Rimmington, 2000). The term sex has become one of the purposes for people to move from tourist origins to destinations.

### BEACH BOYS AND THE SUSTAINABILITY OF BEACH TOURISM

Beach boys are widespread in beach tourism. They can be found in most beach tourism destinations worldwide except some beaches with strict rules and regulations, cultural and ethical restrictions, and naturally created conditions. They are generally young men making a living by providing various informal services to tourists. Beach boys are also a part of the area's community and play a significant role in beach tourism. The beach boys provide different services such as guide services, organizing excursions and tourists, linking other stakeholders as a middleman, serving as lifeguards, bodyguards, surfing and diving instructors, entertainers, drugs and prostitutes, sex workers, etc. (Samarathunga, 2018; Herold, Garcia, & DeMoya, 2001). Beach boys are a small number of people who engage in activities informally, sometimes illegally with the tourists who stay at the beach; however, they are significant in the informal sector tourism of beach tourism in any destination (Wijethunga & Jayarathna, 2020).

There are many arguments about beach boys in terms of their behaviour and impacts on the industry. Most of the researchers have defined and discussed beach boys in negative contexts such as the media of spreading drugs, in tourism destinations (Samarathunga, 2018; Herold, Garcia, & DeMoya, 2001; Bozicevic, Manathunge, Beneragama, & Gadjaweera, 2020; **Jenskin et al., 2021**). However, some argue that beach boys have a positive impact and could be an attraction on the beaches to attract tourists, especially the females, most of the time repeat visitors. In contemporary beach tourism operations, the beach boys have become an inevitable party since they mainly play the dominant role in the informal sector. Also, the Beach Boys become one of the attractions, and a significant number of tourists' patronage every destination to get their services and associations.

There are many stakeholders involved in tourism operations in beach destinations such as hoteliers, tourist shops, guest houses entertainment-providing firms, travel agencies, etc. Beach Boys affect those parties directly or indirectly. So those parties perceive beach boys differently. In this study, the researcher will pay attention to the impacts of beach boys on different parties involved in the tourism industry. Beach boys are directly and indirectly involved in the tourism activities happening in the coastal areas. Beach boys can be seen in the whole coastal belt and they have dominated those areas. According to the researcher's observation beach boys do not allow native young males who are coming from other areas to work as beach boys. They are very much fluent in foreign languages. Conflicts may arise among beach boys when attracting tourists.

Tourism developments in coastal areas directly influence the socio, cultural, economic, and natural environment of the areas. If tourism development is sustainable, it will affect positively both the local community and the tourists. Otherwise, tourism development will deteriorate the living conditions of the local community on the coastline (Markovic, Satta, Skaricic, & Trumbic, 2009).

The growth of tourism in some coastal areas has reached its peak in recent decades and most tourism researchers are highlighting it as over-tourism (Milano, Cheer, & Novelli, 2019; Seraphin, Sheeran, & Pilato, 2018). The economic significance of coastal tourism is unquestionable; however, there is accurate and comprehensive data on the economic contribution of coastal tourism contribution to the economy as a whole (Ryan, & Hall, 2001).

Sri Lanka's coastal regions possess significant potential for socio-cultural and environmentally sensitive economic development, driven by the area's rich natural beauty, unique ecosystems, and vibrant cultural heritage. These regions offer diverse opportunities for sustainable tourism, which, if well-managed, can provide substantial economic benefits to local communities while preserving cultural values and environmental integrity. However, unchecked tourism growth can lead to the degradation of these valuable resources, undermining the very attractions that draw visitors. Studies have shown that when tourism development prioritizes economic gain over environmental and cultural preservation, it can result in adverse outcomes such as pollution, habitat destruction, and cultural commodification. This not only threatens local biodiversity but also risks eroding the socio-cultural fabric of the communities involved, ultimately nullifying the long-term benefits of tourism (Gössling, 2017; Seraphin, Sheeran, & Pilato, 2018). It is therefore essential for Sri Lanka to adopt sustainable tourism practices that balance economic interests with the need to protect cultural and environmental assets, ensuring the sector's resilience and continued contribution to national and local well-being.

Research has increasingly shown that tourism in many coastal regions has reached critical levels, often described as "over-tourism," where the negative impacts of tourism growth begin to outweigh its economic benefits. This phenomenon, observed in coastal destinations globally, results in environmental degradation, overcrowding, and disruption to local communities and their socio-cultural practices. Studies highlight that such excessive tourism pressure can ultimately reduce the attractiveness and sustainability of these areas as travel destinations if not managed effectively (Gnanapala & Karumathilake, 2016; Milano, Cheer, & Novelli, 2019; Seraphin, Sheeran, & Pilato, 2018).

Beach boys are frequently associated with coastal tourism, and numerous studies have examined their roles and impacts on the sustainability of beach tourism (Bozicevic et al., 2020; Cohen, 1988; Forsythe et al., 1988; Weniger et al., (1991). Beach boys are frequently associated with coastal tourism, and their impact on tourism sustainability has been widely studied. Research often addresses the dynamics of beach tourism, focusing on social interactions and relationships that shape the experience of popular coastal destinations. Literature highlights both the roles beach boys play within tourism and the associated socio-cultural and health implications. These insights provide valuable context for understanding how their presence influences tourism sustainability in coastal areas. Much of the literature highlights the relationships between beach boys and female tourists, often framed within the context of sex tourism or romance tourism (Bozicevic, Manathunge, Beneragama, & Gadjawera, 2020; Cohen, 1988). Early discussions in tourism studies identified the

involvement of beach boys as a significant issue, with researchers raising concerns about their engagement in unethical practices and potential harm to local cultural and social values. Prostitution and sex tourism emerged as prominent areas of concern, particularly in light of heightened awareness around HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) in the 1980s. This awareness spurred extensive research on health risks associated with tourism interactions, with substantial studies exploring these dynamics and their impacts (Bozicevic, Manathunge, Beneragama, & Gadjaweera, 2020; Cohen, 1988; Forsythe, Hasbún, & Butler de Lister, 1998; Weniger et al., 1991).

Beach boys' involvement and their role have changed/evolved during the past few decades, they work as sex workers, robbers, drug dealers, beach helpers, facilitators, etc. Most of the literature has discussed the beach boys in negative contexts and society and media also discussed the negative aspects of them mostly. However, later they identified the blame that they were having.

Venable (2009), conducted a study on Senegalese beach boys, describing them as young, unemployed men involved in beach tourism. The study highlighted that these individuals offer both sexual and non-sexual services to tourists, while also seeking opportunities to migrate with the support of foreign tourists, particularly female tourists, as a means to improve their lives (Venable, 2009). Similarly, Nyanzi et al. (2005) studied beach boys, known as Bumsters, in Gambia, focusing on their interactions with white women. Their research emphasized that beach boys engage in a variety of sexual activities with foreign tourists, ranging from commercial and non-commercial engagements to voluntary and socially imposed interactions. These encounters can be individual or peer-driven, and include both heterosexual and homosexual engagements, with varying degrees of casualness and regularity (Nyanzi, Rosenberg-Jallow, Bah, & Nyanzi, 2005).

Dahles and Bras (1999), conducted a comparative study on beach boys and street guides in two tourist destinations in Indonesia. The study revealed that small-scale tourism entrepreneurs act as "romantic entrepreneurs" by attempting to develop intimate relationships with female tourists to gain benefits and improve their living conditions. The researchers also found that beach boys try to start their own businesses with the financial support of female foreign tourists, while street tour guides try to migrate with the help of female tourists to achieve a more comfortable life.

Herold et al. (2001), conducted a research study on the Caribbean Islands to investigate the connection between female tourists and beach boys. They also looked into whether this connection was categorized as romance tourism or sex tourism. The study also pointed out that beach boys were engaging in various sex roles particularly homosexual activities with male tourists. Additionally, the beach boys were described as young men who interacted with Western tourists. They often engaged in informal tourist 'hustles,' lived or grew up in beach communities, and were involved in activities such as sex tourism and the provision of drugs.

Beddoe (1998) highlighted that beach boys were earlier adapted to the hippie culture and provided goods and services demanded by the market, however, now they have become culture brokers and engage in sex and child sex tourism for economic gain. They also have engaged in child prostitution or prostitution, and further, motivate low-income families to give up their young children to go with tourists for financial and other gains.

Miller (2011) defined the beach boys in Sri Lanka as young men who have voluntarily serviced as child prostitutes in their childhood and later became service providers in the informal tourism sector, working as a social group helping out each other. Miller further stated that beach boys have sex with tourists for monetary gains and this is the only way they can get the benefits of tourism, however, they are rejected by the local community highlighting them as social deviants.

In Sri Lanka, the phenomenon of beach boys, similar to those found in other parts of the world, has gained considerable attention due to its complex interplay with tourism and local socio-economic conditions. Beach boys, typically young men, often from lower-income rural areas, engage with foreign tourists—mainly women—by offering a combination of services that range from acting as informal tour guides to providing sexual services. These young men, aged between 18 and 30, often see tourism as an opportunity to improve their socio-economic standing, sometimes through both legal and illegal means.



The beach boys in Sri Lanka, especially along popular tourist destinations such as Hikkaduwa, Unawatuna, and Negombo, are known for their interactions with tourists, often targeting vulnerable individuals, particularly female travelers. As highlighted by Ratnapala (1984), these interactions often involve not just informal guidance but also more transactional exchanges, which may include sexual activities in exchange for money, gifts, or other material benefits. They operate in a somewhat blurred moral and legal space, with some engaging in commercial sexual activities while others participate in non-commercial relationships, depending on their personal motivations and the social circumstances surrounding the tourist's visit.

Research by scholars like Nyanzi et al. (2005) on the phenomenon of "beach boys" or "bumsters" in West Africa offers a comparable perspective. It notes that these young men often enter into both voluntary and socially imposed sexual relationships with tourists. The relationships range from one-time encounters to more regular engagements, and can be heterosexual or homosexual in nature. These activities are driven by the perceived opportunity to gain monetary or material rewards, as well as the potential for migration opportunities or a better standard of living (Nyanzi, Rosenberg-Jallow, Bah, & Nyanzi, 2005).

In the context of Sri Lanka, this phenomenon has raised concerns regarding its impact on the country's image, the exploitation of both locals and tourists, and the sustainability of its tourism industry. According to Aas, Ladkin & Fletcher (2005), while tourism is an essential contributor to the Sri Lankan economy, the involvement of beach boys in the sex trade can lead to reputational damage, especially for a country attempting to position itself as a family-friendly or cultural tourism destination. Moreover, the involvement of young men in such activities also presents serious concerns related to human rights, exploitation, and the erosion of traditional values, which are central to Sri Lanka's cultural identity. The relationship between beach boys and tourists, therefore, poses a challenge to the sustainable development of tourism in Sri Lanka. While these interactions may temporarily benefit some individuals, the long-term social and economic implications are far-reaching, leading to questions about how tourism can be managed in a way that respects the local community and ensures economic benefits are equitably distributed (Hall & Page, 2014). Additionally, the rise of commercial sex work in coastal tourist destinations like those in Sri Lanka complicates the broader efforts to foster responsible and sustainable tourism that respects both cultural values and the well-being of all stakeholders involved.

In conclusion, the dynamics of the beach boys' role in Sri Lanka's tourism sector demand a nuanced approach that considers the socio-economic drivers behind their involvement, the potential harm to Sri Lanka's image, and the need for stronger policies to safeguard both the local population and the tourists who visit the country for leisure. Addressing these issues through sustainable tourism strategies, enhanced regulation, and local community engagement will be essential to mitigating the negative impacts while ensuring the long-term success and ethical management of Sri Lanka's tourism industry.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study explores the influence of beach boys on the sustainability of tourism operations in coastal areas, focusing on their roles, behaviors, impacts and interactions with tourists and local communities. Mainly a qualitative approach was used, including document analysis, semi-structured interviews, personal observations, and secondary data from existing literature. This triangulated approach was adopted to enhance the credibility of the findings, following the guidance of Bowen (2009), Patton (2015), and Creswell & Poth (2018).

## **DATA COLLECTION METHODS**

The study covered major destinations on Sri Lanka's South Coast and East Coast, including Bentota, Galle, Hikkaduwa, Mirissa, Unawatuna, Trincomalee, Passikudah, and Arugam Bay. Sixteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with a variety of stakeholders such as hoteliers, small-scale tourism entrepreneurs, tourist police, government officials, and representatives from

non-governmental and community organizations. This qualitative approach aimed to gain insights into their views on the roles of beach boys and the implications for sustainable tourism development in coastal areas. Participants for the interviews were initially selected through convenience sampling and later expanded using snowball sampling based on recommendations from initial participants. This process also involved further semi-structured interviews with hoteliers and other key stakeholders.

Twelve additional semi-structured interviews were conducted specifically with beach boys to understand their roles in beach tourism, challenges they face, and their expectations from authorities. Interviews were chosen for their effectiveness in capturing meaning beyond mere factual data, allowing a deeper exploration of these participants' perspectives. The beach boys were selected using a snowball sampling method to facilitate access to individuals within this informal sector. Observations were made to validate the statements from stakeholders, enabling a firsthand understanding of the beach boys' activities, tourist responses, and related impacts.

Direct observation was employed to gather primary data and observe the behaviors of beach boys. This allowed the researchers to corroborate the findings obtained from surveys and interviews, providing an additional layer of data verification. By personally visiting popular beach locations along the southern coast, researchers were able to witness how beach boys interacted with tourists, including the techniques they used to approach visitors and how they behaved among themselves.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

The qualitative data from semi-structured interviews were analyzed through content analysis, allowing for a nuanced interpretation of the views expressed by stakeholders. This multi-faceted approach ensured a comprehensive understanding of the role of beach boys in coastal tourism and their influence on sustainable practices, providing valuable insights for stakeholders and policymakers.

## **RESULTS**

The following section will analyze and present the data collected from semi-structured interviews, and personal observations.

### **IMPACTS OF BEACH BOYS ON SRI LANKA SUSTAINABLE COASTAL TOURISM**

Based on the study, it has been identified that beach boys in Sri Lanka engage in a variety of activities targeting foreign tourists. In many cases, they serve as facilitators, enhancing the holiday experience by assisting tourists with activities like souvenir shopping, acting as informal tour guides, connecting with service providers, and more. However, some of their activities, which include socially and culturally unacceptable practices, negatively impact tourist satisfaction. Interestingly, certain tourists are drawn to these less conventional offerings, which may influence their decision to visit Sri Lanka.

The primary reason beach boys engage in these activities is to earn a livelihood. Many have aspirations of traveling abroad, securing foreign employment, marrying a foreign partner, or investing in assets like land or businesses, often hoping for financial support from foreign connections. To achieve this, beach boys put effort into building trust and rapport with tourists, offering assistance and companionship with few boundaries to foster empathy and potential financial support. Initially, many beach boys enter this line of work intending to sell goods or services. However, they soon observe that those who develop close relationships with tourists earn higher incomes and enjoy greater economic stability, leading others to adopt similar roles. Young beach boys are particularly in demand for their energetic and engaging presence, especially among tourists seeking companionship or intimate relationships.

However, as they age, these men find it challenging to maintain the same level of demand. Consequently, older beach boys often shift to other roles, such as selling souvenirs, offering tour guidance, or connecting tourists with service providers. Despite the clear economic opportunities, many beach boys recognize the negative reputation and social stigma attached to their role. Over

time, they have attempted to transition from the stereotyped “beach boy” image to “informal beach operators.” Yet, some persistent challenges continue to undermine the sustainability of tourism in these coastal areas, as unsanctioned and controversial activities occasionally persist.

A secondary trend has emerged where older men, unable to sustain themselves as beach boys, take on intermediary roles. Acting as middlemen, they connect younger men in the community with male tourists and earn a portion of the resulting financial benefits. These elderly men are conscious of their limited economic opportunities and view this intermediary work as a survival strategy, even as they become less visible participants in the tourism sector.

The demographic shift toward budget-conscious travelers has also affected beach boys’ income. With tourists more aware of local pricing, it has become challenging to maintain profit margins. Wealthier tourists tend to avoid public beaches, preferring the privacy and safety of beaches managed by large hotels, which beach boys cannot access. Moreover, tourism industry insiders and media often portray beach boys negatively, further discouraging tourists from interacting with them, even when tourists may need services or products that beach boys can offer.

In response to the challenges faced by beach boys, both government bodies and NGOs have initiated training programs to support and guide them, aiming to integrate their services into the broader tourism framework sustainably. However, beach boys often report that these programs offer little tangible benefit, focusing primarily on guidance rather than concrete economic support or alternative livelihood opportunities. For many, engaging with tourists remains the only viable means of income at these beach destinations.

#### **DARK ROLES OF BEACH BOYS**

This section begins by exploring the dark roles of beach boys and then delves into the issues and challenges associated with their activities in the context of beach tourism. It examines their influence on shaping tourist experiences, as well as the socio-cultural and environmental impacts they create. While beach boys have the potential to enhance tourist satisfaction through personalized services, their unregulated activities frequently result in adverse outcomes.

#### **INVOLVEMENT IN ILLEGAL ACTIVITIES**

Some beach boys engage in illegal activities, including drug trafficking and illegal sales of controlled substances to tourists. These actions not only create security concerns for tourists but also taint the image of Sri Lanka as a safe, family-friendly destination, attracting scrutiny from law enforcement and the tourism sector.

#### **SEX TOURISM AND EXPLOITATION**

A segment of beach boys engages in sex tourism, offering companionship or sexual services to both male and female tourists, which can sometimes lead to exploitation. Younger individuals are particularly vulnerable to being groomed or pressured into such roles, which raises serious ethical and safety issues. This involvement also brings health risks and fuels a harmful cycle of dependency on such services for income.

#### **SOCIAL AND CULTURAL DEGRADATION**

The behaviors associated with the darker side of beach boy culture, such as drug use, transactional relationships, and other socially frowned-upon behaviors, can lead to a degradation of local cultural values. This cultural shift is particularly concerning in smaller, close-knit coastal communities, where beach boys’ activities are seen as influencing local youth and undermining traditional social norms.

#### **CRIME AND VIOLENCE**

With competition high and resources limited, conflicts often arise between beach boys, leading to instances of theft, intimidation, and occasional violence. Tourists who reject or try to avoid interactions with aggressive beach boys may find themselves in uncomfortable or even threatening situations, which can damage the reputation of the destination.



### DECEPTION AND SCAMS TARGETING TOURISTS

Some beach boys engage in deceptive practices, overcharging for services, pressuring tourists to buy fake or low-quality goods, or pretending to offer exclusive tour deals that turn out to be scams. Such practices damage tourists' trust, as well as their perception of local hospitality, contributing to negative reviews and a damaged destination reputation.

### HEALTH RISKS TO LOCALS AND TOURISTS

The involvement of some beach boys in high-risk sexual activities without proper health precautions leads to an increased risk of sexually transmitted infections within both local and tourist populations. This risk poses significant public health concerns, particularly in regions with limited access to healthcare and awareness campaigns.

### MANIPULATION AND DEPENDENCY ON FOREIGN RELATIONSHIPS

Some beach boys build relationships with tourists under the guise of companionship but with the hidden intention of obtaining financial support or other benefits, such as visas or gifts. While not inherently criminal, this creates a cycle of manipulation and dependency that often results in disappointment or even psychological harm for both parties involved.

### NEGATIVE INFLUENCE ON LOCAL YOUTH

The behaviors exhibited by some beach boys, such as substance use, casual relationships with tourists, and an emphasis on material gains over traditional occupations like fishing, can influence local youth to follow a similar path. This impact erodes traditional livelihoods, creates a dependency on tourists for quick earnings, and steers young people away from more sustainable, long-term careers. Addressing these darker aspects requires a multifaceted approach, including community support programs, stricter regulation, and training for sustainable tourism practices that empower beach boys to play a constructive role in the tourism industry.

### ISSUES AND CHALLENGES FACED BY THE BEACH BOYS

Over time, the perception of beach boys within the local community has undergone a notable transformation. Initially, they were met with significant rejection and disapproval, largely due to their association with negative social impacts. However, in recent years, there has been a shift toward greater recognition and acceptance. This change can be attributed to various factors, including the economic contributions they make to the area, their growing involvement in tourism-related activities, and a broader shift in societal attitudes toward professions linked to tourism. Despite this evolving acceptance, beach boys continue to face numerous challenges while serving tourists and contributing to the development of beach tourism destinations. These challenges include both societal and operational difficulties, as detailed below.

### NEGATIVE STEREOTYPES AND SOCIAL STIGMA

Beach boys in Sri Lanka often face negative perceptions and stigmatization from the local community and even within the tourism industry. Media portrayals and stereotypes frequently paint them as opportunistic or engaged in illicit activities, such as sex work. This stigma impacts their social acceptance and limits opportunities for formal work or career progression within the tourism industry.

### LEGAL AND REGULATORY CONSTRAINTS

While government regulations are in place to create a safe and secure environment for tourists, these regulations can often restrict beach boys' activities. Frequent encounters with law enforcement and restrictions around public beach spaces sometimes limit their ability to engage with tourists freely. As a result, many beach boys operate in a gray area within the informal tourism sector, lacking access to legal support or workplace protections.

### COMPETITION AND DIMINISHING DEMAND FOR SERVICES

With the rise of private beaches managed by large hotels, wealthier tourists have less access to public beaches where beach boys operate. Additionally, budget-conscious tourists are often aware of general pricing and may negotiate for lower costs, squeezing beach boys' income levels. The demand for younger, more energetic beach boys also creates competition, with older beach boys often struggling to secure clients.

### HEALTH AND PERSONAL SAFETY RISKS

Some beach boys engage in risky activities, including sexual work, which exposes them to health risks and personal safety challenges. Limited access to healthcare and awareness around sexual health, combined with a lack of protective resources, makes this a particularly vulnerable area for those involved in such practices. Additionally, confrontations with aggressive tourists or conflict with other beach boys can result in physical harm.

### ECONOMIC INSTABILITY AND SEASONALITY

Beach tourism in Sri Lanka is highly seasonal, with fluctuations in visitor numbers based on global travel trends and weather patterns. This seasonality creates unstable income for beach boys, making it difficult to rely solely on tourism for financial security. During off-peak times, income drastically decreases, putting significant strain on their livelihood.

### LIMITED EDUCATION AND TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

Although education levels have improved among younger beach boys, many still lack formal education and training. This limitation hinders their ability to develop alternative skills, secure jobs outside of tourism, or advance within the tourism sector itself. Training programs offered by government or non-governmental organizations are often limited in scope, leaving many beach boys without practical or financially beneficial skills.

### ABSENCE OF LONG-TERM CAREER DEVELOPMENT PATHS

Beach boys have limited access to structured career paths, making it challenging to build long-term careers within the tourism sector. As they age, their attractiveness and appeal to tourists diminish, reducing earning potential. Many lack opportunities to transition into more stable roles within tourism, which forces older beach boys to work as middlemen or intermediaries, often on low commissions.

### SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

Living under constant economic and social pressure can lead to stress and mental health issues. Many beach boys also face societal rejection, impacting their self-esteem and mental well-being. The transient nature of relationships with tourists can make it difficult to build stable, lasting connections, leading to feelings of isolation.

### DIFFICULTY ADAPTING TO CHANGING TOURIST PREFERENCES

Tourist preferences have shifted over the years, with many now seeking cultural experiences beyond traditional beach offerings. While some beach boys have adapted by acting as local guides or selling souvenirs, others struggle to meet these evolving demands. Without guidance or formal support, adapting to such changes remains a challenge, especially for those who rely on traditional beach-related services.

### LIMITED SUPPORT FROM TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

Although some training programs are offered by NGOs and government bodies, beach boys often feel that these programs are more advisory than practical, offering limited financial or educational benefits. This lack of actionable support leaves many beach boys without clear pathways to improve their livelihoods or professional standing.

### INCONSISTENT RELATIONSHIPS WITH TOURISTS

Beach boys rely heavily on forming personal relationships with tourists, which can be inconsistent and unpredictable. Building trust with tourists requires time and effort, and competition among beach boys makes it challenging to maintain steady relationships. Additionally, some tourists avoid interactions with beach boys due to negative stereotypes, limiting their chances of forming productive, mutually respectful connections.

Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach that includes improved regulation, career development programs, health and safety awareness, and a societal shift in perception. Through a well-structured support system, beach boys can play a more productive role in sustainable tourism, contributing positively to Sri Lanka's beach tourism landscape.

## CONCLUSIONS

Tourists visiting beach resorts in Sri Lanka seek a diverse range of products and experiences, given the limited time they spend at each destination. The landscape of Sri Lanka's beach tourism has evolved significantly from the 1970s and 1980s when mass tourism dominated, and many visitors opted for all-inclusive package holidays. Today, beach tourism attracts a broader and more varied demographic, including independent travelers, solo adventurers, millennials, and budget-conscious backpackers, each with unique expectations.

In the early years, beach boys often had limited education and came from underprivileged backgrounds, which led them to engage in various questionable practices for survival. However, today's beach boys are generally more educated and knowledgeable, allowing them to establish more positive relationships with tourists. Some young men even balance their roles as beach boys with academic pursuits, eventually advancing to higher education and finding stable careers. Tourism education has also grown, particularly in the southern coastal areas, contributing to more sustainable practices among beach boys compared to past generations.

In recent years, the government has established regulatory bodies to ensure a safe and harassment-free environment for tourists, allowing them to enjoy the beaches with minimal concerns. Changing tourist profiles and motivations have also shaped the industry; while beach tourism was once centered around "sun, sea, sand, and sex," many modern tourists now seek additional cultural and adventure-based experiences. As a result, there is a greater interest in engaging with local communities and experiencing authentic Sri Lankan culture, a demand that is only partially met by large hotels focused solely on traditional beach amenities.

Beach boys have identified and embraced this trend, providing tourists with a bridge to local experiences. Although there may be challenges in meeting these evolving expectations, tourists generally appreciate the efforts beach boys make to satisfy their needs. Today's tourists are also better informed than ever before, researching their destinations through media and social platforms. This awareness has increased their ability to make educated choices about their travel experiences, and tourists are vigilant about potential misrepresentation.

Feedback from tourists on websites and social media, both positive and negative, provides valuable insight to future visitors, as research indicates that dissatisfied tourists are often more vocal. This cycle of shared experiences allows new visitors to access firsthand information from past travelers, often shaping their expectations and decisions.

Simultaneously, local culture in beach areas has shifted gradually, adapting certain values, customs, and behaviors once deemed unacceptable. Enhanced awareness about tourism's benefits and challenges has led to a community mindset that understands tourism as both beneficial and potentially harmful. Like a fire that can cook a meal or burn a house, tourism must be carefully managed for sustainable benefits.

For many beach boys, entering the beach tourism industry initially involves selling goods to tourists for basic survival. However, tourism's seasonal nature and income fluctuations create economic challenges, leading some to seek more lucrative relationships with tourists. Observing friends and relatives who earn more through these connections, younger beach boys may see this path as a quick route to financial stability. They tend to have higher earning potential when young and attractive, but as they age, demand decreases. To adapt, older beach boys often transition to roles like selling souvenirs, providing guided experiences, or working as intermediaries.

Beach boys have the potential to contribute positively to Sri Lanka's tourism industry, often establishing personal connections with foreign tourists who return to the country. They can act as valuable facilitators for beach tourism, but this potential requires a structured approach, with strategies that ensure their involvement aligns with the tourism industry's needs and ethical standards. Without careful planning, unregulated interactions may lead to unintended negative consequences.

To support beach boys in transitioning to more sustainable roles, it is essential to provide awareness, training, and rehabilitation programs. Their personal hygiene, appearance, and dress code

also need to be addressed to create a positive impression. Despite some resistance from beach boys—who fear that changing their appearance may diminish their appeal—these adjustments could enhance their professional image and broaden their role within the tourism sector. With the right support and awareness, beach boys could become key contributors to sustainable tourism in Sri Lanka, bridging the gap between tourists and the vibrant local culture.

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