

Managing Ecotourism Business in Rural Malaysia: Challenges & Issues

Vikneswaran Nair¹

¹Centre for Research & Innovation in Tourism (CRiT),
School of Hospitality, Tourism & Culinary Arts, Taylor's University

INTRODUCTION

There is a new wave of tourists who are saying “no” to mass tourism, irresponsible operators and resorts that are destroying the local environment. These tourists want real quality experience. They want to know that the shower they are taking is not depriving a village of water. They want to know that the hotel they are staying at is not robbing the locals of their livelihood. They want to also know that their very presence is not offending the local communities. Travel is about relaxation, rejuvenation, adventure, fulfilment, playfulness and sharing experiences rather than just ‘places and things’. It certainly is not about being cooped up in a tourist compound. This is what “Responsible Tourism” (RT) is all about. RT is the way forward to conserve the fragile ecotourism resources today for the generations to come.

In the Asia-Pacific region, there is an increased interest in developing ecotourism as it is one of the forms of tourism that is closely associated with good environmental practices. The phenomenon of global warming is on the agenda in many forums across the

world including in Malaysia, raising much interest in the environment. Nonetheless, there also seems to be a spin-off from the discussions in the form of ecotourism business and initiatives in the region with many countries embracing the concept of RT.

Thus, this article presents the view point of the researcher who has more than 20 years’ of local and international experience working and carrying out research on sustainable ecotourism management. The viewpoint will be elaborated based on seven (7) debatable statements of the issues that are engulfing the ecotourism industry in Malaysia.

DEBATABLE ISSUES

Issue #1: Responsible tourism is the way forward for sustainable ecotourism management.

In essence, Responsible Tourism (RT) provides quality travel experience that promotes conservation of the natural environment and offers opportunities and benefits for local communities. Ideally, RT is tourism operations that are managed in such a way that they

Correspondence: vicky.nair@taylors.edu.my

preserve the local environment and culture so that it can continue to deliver the benefits for years to come.

The tourism industry's interest in appearing to be "green" or "sustainable" has increased exponentially over the past year. Although tourism is a profitable business (if managed well), the industry is taking its toll on the environment (not to mention the social impact on the local communities). For many people today, going on a 'green-holiday' is an increasingly central feature of the travel patterns that have spread across the globe. Has the tourism industry's growth throughout the years created an increasing amount of stress on the environment? Is "eco-tourism" and "green-tourism" considered sustainable or as being responsible? Is this niche tourism (opposite of mass tourism) doing more harm than good?

Green tourism is indeed the fastest growing sub-sector of the tourism industry. Similarly, ecotourism is becoming the fastest growing form of tourism in Malaysia, currently making up about 10% of the country's tourism revenue. Nonetheless, there are well-founded concerns that green-washing is instead slowly shadowing the ecotourism industry whereby this concept of responsible tourism seems to be lacking in adequate scientific foundations, and is not viable as a solution to the global environmental problem.

In Malaysia, the prefix, "eco" which represents "being green" or "environmentally friendly" may sound benign but there seems to be an over-use of these terms to denote the idea of being 'hip', 'cool' and 'friendly' to the environment. This can lead some tourism businesses to use this label as a marketing tool, merely paying lip service to environmentalism by declaring they are green with no action taken to ensure they are. It is undeniable that green travel has gone from being a trend for the more well-informed traveller to being part of mainstream consumer and corporate culture. Thus, certification and rating of ecotourism sites is critical for the tourist to be able to gauge destinations that are practising green-washing.

Issue #2: The overall evaluation of genuine ecotourism certification/rating is important to implement in Malaysia.

There are approximately about 500 potential or existing ecotourism sites in Malaysia as reported by World Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF) in their report for the National Ecotourism Plan in 1996. Although this plan is obsolete, there are no further updates on the plan. Currently, the Ministry of Tourism and Culture, Malaysia, has awarded a tender to update the current National Ecotourism Plan. Thus, the true status of genuine ecotourism sites in Malaysia is unknown.

There are many agencies managing ecotourism in Malaysia, which makes the coordination and standardisation of all the codes of practice a challenge. At the national level, the main government bodies relevant to ecotourism are the Ministry of Tourism and Culture, Tourism Malaysia (Malaysia's tourism promotion arm), Ministry of Agriculture, including the Department of Fisheries (for Marine Parks), Department of Agriculture (for agro tourism which is related to ecotourism) and Department of Irrigation and Drainage (for river management). Within Peninsular Malaysia, other very important government bodies overseeing ecotourism resources and service provisions are the Department of Wildlife and National Parks (for national parks, wildlife reserves and sanctuaries and protection of wildlife), the Forestry Department with the constituent state forestry departments (for recreational forests), the State Governments (eco-sites within the boundaries of a state), the Economic Planning Unit and State Economic Planning Units, other departments and agencies such as the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, Veterinary Services Department, Forest Research Institute of Malaysia, the Malaysian Fisheries Development Board and universities.

Hence, with so many agencies at the national level involved in managing and monitoring the quality of the ecotourism sites, a central and standardised certification or rating

system is more critical for Malaysia, compared to the other countries in Southeast Asia where the management of ecotourism destination is not as complex.

Therefore, it can be said that the main problems in the current practice of ensuring sustainable development of the ecotourism industry in Malaysia are: (a) lack of effective and proper approaches for efficient sustainable management practice of ecotourism sites; (b) lack of enforcement in ensuring the ecosystem is sustained; (c) insufficient environmental cum ecological expertise that incorporates the fundamentals of responsibility and sustainability; (d) lack of consistent approaches in implementing mitigation measures and in satisfying the requirements of national environmental regulatory authorities; and (e) the large number of small organisations involved in tourism and related fields make the effort to collect data from them both costly and time-consuming, resulting in unreliable and incomplete ecotourism databases.

Hence, a reliable and consistent rating system or sustainability barometer is required to ensure the sustainability of these ecotourism sites, which can also be used for intelligent decision-making. A systematic system can be developed to maintain a certain level of standard in these eco-sites.

In order to make ecotourism development sustainable with minimum impact on nature, it is

important that all ecotourism sites are evaluated in terms of importance and attractiveness. Nonetheless, with the complex bureaucracy and the structure of the national tourism organisations in Malaysia, the execution of this certification and rating is dictated by the political party in power and the Minister who manages his or her Ministry for a period of four to five years before being replaced with another Minister who has his or her own vision during the period of his or her term as a Minister.

A comprehensive National Ecotourism Plan that was prepared by WWF in consultation with the ecotourism Guru, Architect Hector Ceballos-Lascurain for the then Ministry of Tourism, Malaysia in 1996 was not utilised to the maximum to effectively manage the ecotourism industry in Malaysia. Currently, the Ministry of Tourism and Culture of Malaysia has already awarded consultants to re-work the National Ecotourism Plan.

With that in mind, Taylor's University, Malaysia, in collaboration with Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia and Universiti Malaysia Sarawak is currently developing a barometer to measure the responsibility and capacity of all rural tourism destinations which also encompass ecotourism sites. This is an important project which is funded under the Long Term Research Grant

Scheme of Ministry of Education, Malaysia. The five-year project (2011-2016) will determine the future of the natural resources in rural Malaysia which are dwindling by the day with uncontrolled development.

Issue #3: There are many challenges for tourism and the ecotourism movement in Malaysia today regarding how suitable current State and Federal Government masterplans are and their connection to 'eco'.

Current State and Federal Government policies need to further holistically focus on the impact of over-development on ecotourism destinations. Fifty years ago, Malaysia was a destination of eco-paradise with beautiful and coral rich beaches and one of the world's oldest tropical rain forests. The diversity of its flora and fauna was a result of undisturbed evolution over 130 million years.

Malaysia has plenty of natural attractions to satisfy even the most discerning of adventure seekers. With the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean lapping its shores, Malaysia has an enormous variety of flora, fauna and marine life to be enjoyed. Ecotourism has become a major enterprise in Malaysia in the last decade. Several pristine rain forest areas have now been turned into national parks and recreational parks. Total Protected Areas in Peninsular Malaysia have dwindled, with the major areas still in East

Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak). Today, even this part of Malaysia is projected for development under the Sarawak Corridor of Renewable Energy (SCORE), Sabah Development Corridor (SDC) and also the Economic Transformation Programme (ETP). Development is essential in any progressive country to increase the quality of life of the community but what is despised is the unsustainable and irresponsible development that is widely affecting the fragile rural eco-sites in the country. It is hoped that the development in these eco-paradise destinations will be carried out carefully and not solely for commercial purpose.

In a market driven environment, what the ecotourism industry in Malaysia needs and the public must demand is a ruler for measuring the impact of tourism on natural resources. Ensuring that nature-based tourism and ecotourism establish and maintain high standards will be a challenge for all parties. The management of the sensitive ecosystem in the ecotourism context can one way protect a country's heritage and make it available for local education and tourism. The investment in such facilities is usually repaid through tourists who come in larger numbers and stay longer because there are more things to see and do and at the same time be contented that the sustainability of the site has been considered. The environment is the resource base for tourism; without protection, the natural attraction that

brought the tourist in the first place will be lost.

Issue #4: Ecotourism has played its part in terms of better understanding and integration between Malaysian communities and the indigenous people in rural destinations.

Tourism may have played its part in bridging the understanding of the multi-culture, which is Malaysia's selling point. The tagline "Malaysia Truly Asia" that has been adopted since it was introduced in 1999 in a worldwide marketing campaign, indeed portrays the unique cultures and harmonious living among the three distinct ethnic groups of Asia, i.e. the Malays, the Chinese and the South Asians. These three ethnic groups together, the Malays (of Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei), the South Asians (of Malaysia, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Pakistan) and the Chinese (of Malaysia, China and a large part of North and East Asia), make up almost 75% of the world population. Thus, Malaysia is indeed a melting pot or a sample of what much of Asia has to offer. Thus, tourism in Malaysia has certainly capitalised on this unique advantage in terms of better understanding and integration.

Similarly, tourism has certainly opened the doors for the indigenous people especially in Sabah and Sarawak. Nonetheless, the benefits that tourism brings in alleviating poverty among these indigenous communities can still be increased. Many of them continue

to live in a natural environment which is getting scarcer day by day with deforestation for development and plantation expansion. The Sarawak Corridor of Renewable Energy (SCORE), Sabah Development Corridor (SDC) and the Economic Transformation Programme (ETP) will further displace these communities if the development is not carried out with these communities in mind.

Issue #5: Ecotourism can be a realistic alternative or add-on to plantations and forestry in Malaysia.

Ecotourism may not be a realistic alternative to plantations and forestry in Malaysia. Malaysia is one of the world's largest producers of natural rubber and palm oil. Despite the existence of the industries in Malaysia for so many years, Malaysia still faces the problem of poor management practice in land clearing. Although the incidence of slash-and-burn is under control in Malaysia in comparison to Indonesia, the haze problem still persists.

Although the total size of rubber plantations in Malaysia has dwindled over the last decade, oil palm, which is the backbone of the plantation industry today in Malaysia, expanded from 54,000 hectares in 1960 to 5.1 million hectares as at 2012. Hence, this represents nearly a 70-fold increase in size in the last four and a half decades. Palm oil cultivation occupies 66% of the 6.3 million hectares of total agricultural land.

Deforestation for oil palms and rubber estates is a problem in East Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak). With oil palm and rubber still fetching reasonably good prices (although prices have dropped in recent times) on the market, ecotourism will never be a good alternative to plantations and forestry in Malaysia. Instead, the plantation industry in Malaysia must ensure the practice of sound environmental management by ensuring zero burning, good agricultural practices and the use of biological agents to reduce pests and effluents. The Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) is a non-profit organisation issuing the certificate that validates that the production of palm oil is sustainable. The RSPO certificate is crucial for plantations to export their products to European and other Western countries. Malaysia is subject to RSPO but recently, the Malaysian Palm Oil Association (MPOA) threatened to quit RSPO due to a stalemate in negotiations between the RSPO and Malaysian oil palm growers on a host of contentious issues. Hence, without a win-win solution, these plantations may continue with unsustainable deforestation practices that will destroy the ecotourism potential of some of these sites.

On the other hand in Peninsular Malaysia, the damage done to the ecosystem is irrevocable. The bird's eye view as the planes land at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) provide evidence of massive

land clearing, erosion and destruction of flora and fauna. Nevertheless, there are some commitments from some responsible companies in Malaysia's palm oil industry. A wildlife conservation fund of approximately USD7million has been launched. The revolving fund will, for a start, help fund a survey on Sabah's Orang Utan population that is disappearing fast due to deforestation. Indeed the fund is one of the many examples of corporate social responsibility and environmental care by the palm oil industry.

Today, palm oil cultivation in Malaysia is strictly regulated and only land designated for agricultural purposes is utilised. In addition, research has also indicated that in a number of oil palm plantations in Sabah, greater biodiversity in plantations attracts animals and birds. Thus, there are some add-ons that ecotourism can bring to these plantations.

Issue #6: There is a rising trend in luxury tourism development which includes golf course development in eco-sensitive destinations. The sincerity of golf course developers about greening their act is sometimes regarded as a deception to expand in a sensitive ecosystem. "Environmentally friendly golf course" and "environmentally sensitive gold course design" are common marketing clichés. Some claim the following:

"This 36-hole golf course was formed on 750 acres of land of which 147 acres

were wetlands that formed a part of the fragile ecosystem . . . incorporated these areas into the course architecture in order to protect the wetlands and the unique wildlife habitat."

Golf course development is now emerging as a major environmental issue in Asia, especially in eco-sensitive destinations. The problem may not seem so acute in Malaysia. Nonetheless, because the maintenance of large, closely trimmed grassy areas is more difficult and environmentally hazardous in tropical areas which are home to greater numbers of pests, diseases and weeds, the problem of environmental damage exists.

In a small drought-prone developed rural destination like Langkawi, a major tourist destination in Malaysia, there is a demand for water by about 3 million tourists and three golf courses. With a population of about 99,000, the fishing villagers and farmers are at the mercy of golf course developers who are not sincere in greening their act or even creating employment for the local community. They are more interested in expanding their business in sensitive ecosystems.

As a result, after losing their farms, many of these villagers end up as cheap labourers on the land they once owned. Working on these golf courses represents a drastic change from their once independent and self-reliant way of life. All too often, this

kind of change leads to the collapse of whole rural communities. Those who are not employed by golf courses move to big cities, contributing to the urban problems of slums, traffic congestion and pollution. Thus, golf course developers should not venture into eco-sensitive sites and do more damage and provide short-term commercial benefit to a few.

Issue #7: There is an increased interest in ecotourism and environmental issues among tourism academics around the world. Nonetheless, the level of research in ecotourism is still lacking.

There has been an increased interest in ecotourism and environmental issues across the Asia-Pacific. With the global warming phenomena being on the agenda in many forums across the world, including Malaysia lately, interest in the environment has steadily increased in the region. The spin-off to this in the region at present seems to be ecotourism, with many countries adopting the concept of “Responsible Tourism” (RT).

Thus, more applied and fundamental research is required to study the ability to implement good practices in ecotourism or responsible tourism. Currently, most research in this region seems to be just research, providing no practical use or benefit. Tourism academics in Malaysia and in the region can play a distinctive role in moulding

future graduates who are going to dictate the industry with qualities that are essential for the survival of mankind in this globalised age.

CONCLUSION

As the ecotourism business becomes increasingly popular, the Government has to react promptly in developing a clear policy with benchmark standards and procedures that can be used for monitoring compliance. Such standards and monitoring procedures can distinguish between valid ecotourism initiatives and other enterprises that have misappropriated the ecotourism label without commitment to its principles. Such measurements are also necessary to help honest ecotourism projects critique their performance and move closer to the ideal of sustainability.

Today, the need for both standards and procedures to monitor compliance with these standards has emerged. Client evaluation is a simple procedure available to all ecotourism operations that can serve to both enhance tourist education and provide a simple system of self-monitoring.

With good policies, the management of sensitive ecosystems in the ecotourism context can protect a country's heritage and make it available for local education and tourism. The investment in such facilities is usually repaid through tourists who come in larger numbers and stay longer because there are more things to see and do