

Ecotourism: Precepts and Critical Success Factors

¹A.C. Er, ¹S. Sivapalan, ¹M.N. Abd. Rahim, ¹M.E. Toriman, ²J.H. Adam and ¹A. Buang

¹School of Social, Development and Environmental Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities,
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

²Faculty of Science and Technology,
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

Abstract: Ecotourism has evolved over the past three decades to emerge as lucrative sector. The main worrying aspect of this growth is that its original precepts of responsible travel, environmental conservation and the enfranchisement of local populations is steadily giving way to predatory economic exploitation, 'green-washing' (superficial environmental management) and the marginalisation of local communities. Given that responsible ecotourism must be done right, this article identifies the critical success factors for the making of healthy ecotourism in Malaysia and compares them with the achievements made in other selected countries. The results showed that three general precepts and critical success factors may be summed up from this particular Malaysian experience. Firstly, ecological integrity of the tourism area that goes beyond green-washing and contributes to minimising the carbon footprint. Secondly, social vitality where local communities are involved not just in the environmental conservation and management of the tourism area but also as direct economic beneficiaries of the tourism enterprise. Finally, economic growth where private and public sectors' participation inputs sophistry and enhancement of the marketing linkages without marginalising local communities. This implies that for tourism to progress responsibly and meaningfully, all stakeholders-the environmentalists, the local communities, the entrepreneurs and the government-need to get their acts together in coordinating and fine-tuning their different but complimentary roles.

Key words: Ecotourism · Precepts · Environmental conservation · Local communities' participation
· Distribution linkages

INTRODUCTION

The genesis of ecotourism may be traced back to the 1980s when environment friendly small operators set as their focus not the maximisation of quick profit but the synergy between business sustainability and environmental protection [1]. These early formative enterprising of sustainable ecotourism led to a market driven take-off in the 1990s. The subsequent commoditisation of ecotourism in the first decade of the 21st century soon saw its exploitation by big businesses with profit maximisation steadily but surely superseding the earlier environmental sustainability motive. This gross economic take over of ecotourism had stirred up critical reactions against it such that today, ecotourism has taken on an ethical façade [2] with

a focus on a more humanistic dimension [3-4]. At the core of this ethical and humanistic turn is the incorporation and integration of local communities and their culture in any ecotourism venture [5-7].

One important thing to note in the course of the ecotourism evolution is the myriad interpretations [8-10] of what ecotourism is or should be. The first definition of ecotourism was the one supposedly coined in 1965 by Claus-Dieter Hetzer who in the 1970s also ran the first ecotours in the Yucatan [11]. In 1983 the definition was extended by Hector Ceballos Lascurain to describe nature-based travel to relatively undisturbed area with education as the main focus [12]. The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) later refined it as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well being of local people" [13]. Then in 1996

Corresponding Author: A.C. Er, School of Social, Development and Environmental Studies,
Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia,
43600 Bangi, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia.
Tel: +603-89213945, E-mails: eveer@ukm.my & erahchoy@yahoo.com.

IUCN (now known as the World Conservation Union) formally defined ecotourism as “environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features-both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low negative visitor impact and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations” [13]. In these latter two definitions, the common denominators are responsible travel, environmental conservation and local populations. These are the basic precepts of ecotourism.

What is raising concern is that these basic precepts of ecotourism have been compromised by some ecotourism operators by just giving them a superficial treatment. This phenomenon is called green-washing. The danger with green-washing is that even though it may be committed by the minority of operators it may nevertheless lead to the undermining of the whole reputation and legitimacy of the ecotourism and other related sectors [14].

This means that responsible ecotourism must be done properly. To contribute to further understanding of this matter, this article identifies the critical success factors for the making of healthy ecotourism in Malaysia and compares them with the achievements made in other selected countries.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The Study Areas: The study areas selected were Kinabalu Park (Mount Kinabalu and Mount Tambuyukon) and Kampung Luanti Baru cum Sungai Moroli in the state of Sabah, Malaysia. They were selected based on the excellent environmental practices adopted and which could be used as benchmarks for successful ecotourism. Sabah Parks, a state conservation body manages Kinabalu Park. Within Kinabalu Park, the main ecotourism assets are Mount Kinabalu, Poring Hot Spring and the lesser known Mount Tambuyukon. Mount Kinabalu, a UNESCO-enlisted site is the highest mountain in South-east Asia. On the other hand, Kampung Luanti Baru is a village dependent on agricultural activities prior to the introduction of ecotourism. Here is found “fish massage” ecotourism where nature-bred fishes are ‘tamed’ to nibble at the feet or body of a person entering into Sungai Moroli.

Data Collection: The research was carried out in two phases, the first phase from 16 February to 21 February

2010 and the second from 6 April to 10 April 2010. It comprised participant observation and focus interviews with 12 of the 36 (or 33 per cent) key stakeholders such as eco-lodge operators, inbound-tour companies, park and related government officers and content analysis of the critical success factors of the ecotourism practiced in the study areas. Additional data gathered from the eco-lodge operators, owners of inbound-tour companies and senior staff and officers of the Kinabalu Park were specifically analysed with respect to the identification of the critical success factors based on an overall consensus.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Success Factor 1: Care for the protected area. Any ecotourism venture must be done right from the beginning and all of the respondents agreed that care for the protected area is an imperative. The situation was similar with that of the Galapagos Islands of Ecuador where the protected area was well regulated and the imposition of a visitor entrance fees had helped the national park to manage the upkeep of the park ecosystem as a world heritage. Just like Galapagos, the Kinabalu Park also also limits visitation to reasonable numbers [1].

Success Factor 2: Participation of local communities in ecotourism ventures. There were also support services in the form of high quality guiding services provided by the local people in both study areas and Galapagos. The mountain guides were trained locals who were also tasked with the responsibility of maintaining the ecosystem by keeping hikers to the marked trails and advising them not to throw waste plastic drinking bottles along the trails. In addition, the Kinabalu Park also recruited employees from the surrounding villages and encouraged the participation of locals as food and souvenir vendors in Poring Hot Spring within the park. These measures helped to foster a strong cooperative relationship with the neighbouring villagers who in turn became the eyes and ears of the park authority in countering poaching and forest fires.

Success Factor 3: Adequate support of government agencies. Another critical success factor is the support and necessary expertise provided by relevant government agencies working hand in hand with the local population. The study found that this factor had contributed to the success of the Tagal system of ecosystem management in Kampung Luanti Baru.

The word *Tagal* in the Kadazandusun language means prohibition or forbiddance from exploiting river resources. Prior to the 1960s, inland freshwater fish was plentiful. However, subsequent development had resulted in over-fishing of the Moroli River, the growth of the timber industry and extensive agriculture development leading to soil erosion, pollution and destruction of local fish breeding grounds and habitats [14]. Sungai Moroli (Moroli River) itself was used as a dumping ground by farms, villagers and bypassing motorists. Then in 2002, a dynamic villager by the name of Jeffrin Majangki from Kampung Luanti Baru managed to win the help of the Fishery Department of Sabah in initiating the Tagal system of ecosystem management. In this move, the Fishery Department of Sabah provided advice and assistance in inland fishery management. The first step taken was the clearance of rubbish from the Moroli River. A year later, several species of fish began to appear without re-stocking. The river, which was neglected hitherto, began to heal. Through trial and error, Jeffrin Majangki managed to 'tame' the growing population of fish by developing fish massage or spa which had a curative effect for those who suffered from psoriasis. This eventually led to the development of Tagal fish massage as a form of ecotourism attraction [15].

The subsequent success of this fish massaging activities had led to the opening of a cafeteria cum convenience store which also sold handicrafts made by the villagers and the development of jungle trekking and home-stay programmes. The proceeds from these economic activities were shared with the villagers in one form or another as on the occasion of festivities, death of family members and education of the village children. Such enfranchisement of the local communities guaranteed the villagers' wholehearted support of the *Tagal* system as manifested in their voluntary participation in monitoring, policing and conservation efforts initiated by the authorities.

Success Factor 4: Stakeholders' awareness of the paramount importance of environmental conservation. All respondents showed how keenly aware they were of the paramount importance of environmental conservation if ecotourism was to be done right in the long term. All understood that environmental degradation resulting from the mismanagement of the ecosystem would undermine the very foundation of the ecotourism ventures. Indeed, the vital importance of this success factor cannot be overemphasised given the many costly lessons experienced the world over. For

instance, Mexico and Costa Rica are now experiencing habitat deterioration and its negative impact on the ecosystem [16]. In Nepal, a harmless activity like hiking could be ecologically destructive when the Annapurna Circuit had to be given alternative routes as the original marked trails were worn down by soil erosion and plant damage [17]. Still, in 90 out of 109 countries, coral reefs were damaged by cruise ship anchors, sewage, tourists breaking off chunks of corals as souvenirs and commercial harvesting for sale to tourists [18].

Yet, a major negative ramification of environmentally mismanaged ecotourism was the displacement and exploitation of local populace. East Africa provides a telling example where some 70 percent of national parks and game reserves are on Masai land. These natives lost not just their grazing land but also their cultural way of life. They were not able to secure alternative employment due to their lack of formal education [19] which in turn meant that they were only fit to hold jobs in the lower rungs with low salaries or wages. Displacement and exploitation of local populace is the antithesis of ecotourism as the original precept of ecotourism is to protect and nurture the local community so they may gain the economic control of tourism and its related development.

Success Factor 5: Domestic and international marketing linkages. Another critical success factor highlighted by all the respondents was the establishment of domestic market and international marketing linkages. A vital facilitator for business sustainability in the ecotourism sector is the linkage between an ecotourism venture and the inbound and international outbound tour operators. The results of this study's focus interviews with three out of 15 inbound tour operators in Kota Kinabalu revealed that all inbound tour operators had scheduled eco-tours throughout the year to the various destinations in Sabah. These inbound tour operators also had strong linkages with international outbound tour operators. This had saved the Kinabalu Park ecotourism from suffering the fate of the Siemoy ecotourism in Ecuador which collapsed because of weak linkages with the global marketplace [20].

CONCLUSION

Three general precepts and critical success factors may be summed up from this particular Malaysian experience. Firstly, ecological integrity of the tourism area that goes beyond green-washing and contributes to minimising the carbon footprint. Secondly, social vitality

where local communities are involved not just in the environmental conservation and management of the tourism area but also as direct economic beneficiaries of the tourism enterprise. Finally, economic growth where private and public sectors' participation inputs sophistry and enhancement of the marketing linkages without marginalising local communities. This implies that for tourism to progress responsibly and meaningfully, all stakeholders-the environmentalists, the local communities, the entrepreneurs and the government-need to get their acts together in coordinating and fine-tuning their different but complimentary roles.

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