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## **ECOTOURISM ACTIVITIES, HOMESTAY RECOVERY PLAN AND STRATEGY INDICATORS IN POST COVID-19 KUNDASANG, SABAH, MALAYSIA**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this article is to discuss strategies and recovery plans for community-based ecotourism and homestays following the Covid-19 pandemic Movement Control Order (MCO), particularly in Kampung Mesilou, Kundasang, Sabah. The spread of the Covid-19 virus has had a significant impact, particularly on the tourism industry in Malaysia and, more specifically, on the ecotourism sector in the state of Sabah. The implementation of MCO in Malaysia, which aims to restrict population movement, has had a negative impact on the tourism sector, as all of them were ordered to halt operations completely. As a result, the question of the strategies and recovery plans implemented by ecotourism and homestay operators to restore the ecotourism sector, particularly in Kampung Mesilou, arises. Therefore, the main research approach in this study is qualitative and based on primary data. The primary data used were the results of in-field informant interviews, which were supplemented by secondary data from journal articles. The study's findings revealed that after the government announced the relaxation of the MCO, the communities in the area took the initiative to re-promote their ecotourism activities widely through social media, etc. One of the entrepreneurs' strategies for attracting tourists in their shorter and medium plans is the addition of new ecotourism products and the improvement of the quality of homestay facilities recently.

**Keywords:** Recovery Plan and Strategy, Movement Control Order (MCO), Covid-19 Pandemic, Ecotourism, Homestay

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In the earlier phase, the spread of the Covid-19 epidemic, which has received worldwide attention, has made this a major issue on social media. Every day, the number of cases reported by the Malaysian Ministry of Health (KKM) causes public concern in the community. The spot in Malaysia detected the spread of this epidemic in January 2020. At this phase, however, the Malaysian government allowed the economy to continue operating normally. Because of the global spread of this epidemic, the World Health Organization (WHO) has classified it as a pandemic, which is defined as the spread of a new disease throughout the world (WHO, 2022). The spread of this pandemic appears to be difficult for any country around the world to contain because it has spread across borders so quickly.

Then, in Malaysia, the spread of the covid-19 pandemic compelled the government to impose the first phase of the Movement Control Order (MCO) for 14 days beginning on 18th March 2020 and ending 31st March 2020. However, this 14-day MCO period is insufficient to control the spread of the pandemic (Daily News, 2021). The implementation of this MCO is intended to encourage people to stay at home in order to break the chain of the covid-19 pandemic. All sectors, including tourism, have been closed as a result of this implementation until a date to be announced by the government. Nonetheless, the MCO will be implemented in stages until the government decides to issue a Movement Control Order (MCO) from 10 June to 31 August 2020. Through this PKPP, the tourism sector will benefit from the Malaysian Homestay Experience Program, under which the government has issued instructions requiring operators to prepare protocols in homestay premises that cover disease surveillance and prevention of infectious diseases in accordance with the Malaysian Government Ministry standards. Certain activities are not permitted by the government. Activities involving mass gathering and physical contact are among them, as are lodging rooms in the homestay owner's house, sports, and recreational activities in the swimming pool, and buffet-style restaurants and cafes (Arts and Culture Sector, 2020).

The government's efforts have paid off, as the MCO has been declared throughout Malaysia. The number of reported cases is also decreasing. Meanwhile, economic recovery is required because tourism activities have suffered significant losses (Kroll et.al, 1990). This recovery must be carried out on a small or large scale in order to re-stimulate the country's economic growth. In general, if a community-generating activity is discontinued, overall socioeconomic-cultural movement is constrained. The community cannot enjoy the same level of comfort as before. Post-covid-19 tourism activities must be restored or renewed in order to attract tourists to Kundasang, Sabah. Tourism recovery can be complementary to maintaining jobs, intelligence, and economic

well-being (Anas, Hussin & Afrizal, 2018). Therefore, the effects of disasters, how emergency planning can mitigate disaster effects, and how to restore the industry after a disaster occur must be taken into serious consideration (Ahmad Rasmi Al-Battat & Ahmad Puan Mat Som, 2014).

Although Malaysia's government's MCO produced results, it still has a significant impact on the national economy, particularly the tourism sector, which plays an important role in increasing national income. Thus, the tourism sector requires a post-covid-19 study of indicator plans and strategies to restore tourism activities in the country.

## **RESEARCH LOCATION**

Kundasang region is a tourist destination that attracts both domestic and international visitors to Sabah. It has hilly terrain and could be used as a tourist attraction. The Kundasang region has several unique characteristics in terms of function and location on the Sabah geographical scale (Ramzah Dambul, 2010). Tourist attractions include Rabbit Village, Mesilou Cats Village, and Strawberry Farm. Furthermore, Kundasang, which is about 1.5 kilometers from Pekan Ranau, is also known as "Vegetable Town," where the primary economic source of the Kundasang community is the cultivation of upland vegetables. This is due to the relatively cold weather in comparison to other parts of Sabah.

Besides the cold climate in the Mount Kinabalu area, especially in the morning, Kundasang's attraction can be also based on the uniqueness of the flora and fauna, and its friendly local community is the Dusun ethnic group. The community's friendly treatment encourages tourists to return to Kundasang. Although there are numerous reasons for tourists to visit, natural resources remain the primary focus of visitors.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

The research methodology employed in this study is a qualitative approach based on primary and secondary data. The plan and strategy indicators in Kundasang were discovered using a qualitative approach. The qualitative approach is more comprehensive, explaining and interpreting the data obtained in greater depth (Sarah, 2013). A qualitative approach based on in-depth interviews is broad, open, unstructured, and not necessarily fixed (Kamarul Azmi Jasmi, 2012). An interview is a method of data collection that involves face-to-face interaction. In the meantime, secondary data from written sources such as scholarly books, journal articles, and newspapers are widely used as references, comparisons, and expressions to strengthen views and interpretations of the subject under study (Mohd Yusuf Ibrahim, 1997). The government-enforced Movement Control Order (MCO) in all Malaysian states has played an important role in slowing the

spread of the pandemic Covid 19 virus where all economic sectors, including tourism, have had to temporarily halt operations. Therefore, the fieldwork for data collection of this study was implemented during the post-Covid 19 MCO phases in December 2021 and beyond.

## **MAIN CONCEPTS DEFINITION**

### **Ecotourism Activity**

According to Zhao and Jiao (2019), ecotourism is an activity that can accommodate many tourists in a specific area that is exposed to the environment. This ability can thus not only meet the needs of tourists but can also benefit the tourism industry and serve as a form of awareness for tourists as members of the community to protect the environment together. This situation will also reduce the negative environmental effects because the ecotourism system is an indicator of the carrying capacity of the environment that was built based on calculations based on the main principles of this system (Zhao & Jiao, 2019).

Following that, the findings of the study conducted by Liu and Li (2020) stated that ecotourism activities are a type of management that is actively developing in order to successfully involve various parties. According to Access (2019), the concept of ecotourism is generally an influence of modernization and globalization that transparently impacts the shift of social and cultural values, resulting in slow changes in identity and cultural authenticity in a concentrated area. Ecotourism is also regarded as one of the most critical tools for achieving sustainability (Salman & Mohamad, 2020).

Syafiqah & Rosazman (2021) stated that the involvement of rural communities in ecotourism activities is the primary factor for the development of rural tourism. Community involvement in ecotourism activities is viewed as a highly effective alternative, particularly in terms of economic activity and new job creation. According to them, the participation of community members has demonstrated a role that is seen as one of the motivating factors. (Syafiqah & Rosazman, 2021). This is supported by Cole's (1995) study, which explains that community members' involvement has several internal factors that can be used in development programs. Among them are raising awareness of the benefits of ecotourism activities as well as the community's social needs.

Furthermore, Norazlin et al (2020) stated that the involvement of the local community through promotion and activities carried out in ecotourism activities can stimulate the arrival of many tourists to the destination area. Tourist packages such as caterers, homestays, and camping activities, climbing, and word-of-mouth promotion or social media can all help to attract many visitors. Thus, one of the initiatives to advance the ecotourism industry is community involvement (Norazlin, 2020).

### **Recovery Plan for Homestay**

The homestay program in Malaysia is regarded as the greatest means to convey a Malay or indigenous heritage culture, particularly the way of life in a cosy, quiet village apart from congested roads, loud neighbours, and polluted air. Tourists want to know about interesting places that are nearby, therefore attractiveness to the environment also plays a significant role. However, the success of a homestay is largely dependent on the neighbourhood's quality. This is seen as the leadership and skill that the rural tourist industry possesses. How can homestay management be carried out successfully without high-quality training and education unless the rural tourism community already has the necessary skills to handle the homestay organisation on its own? (Tengku Noraisyah Binti Tengku Zahar, 2013).

According to studies on the success of the homestay programme in Kampung Relau, Kedah (Che Ani Mad, 2004), both the program's special participants and the local population gain from it. This study benefits both the participants specifically and the larger community in general. The results of this study are also summarised, showing that the local community has benefited in five ways: economically, conveniently, economically, by developing a spirit of cooperation among neighbours, and by enhancing their capacity for personal growth.

### **Strategic Indicators**

A good strategic indicator should be clear and concise. It should focus on a single issue that provides relevant information on a situation; particularly information that provides the strategic insight required for effective planning and sound decision-making. Good indicators are also defined by the feasibility of collecting meaningful and credible data for them. In addition, good indicators should actually – and accurately – measure what they claim to measure. If it is not feasible to collect data for an indicator, or the data that can be collected are not meaningful, the indicator will have little or no utility (David Pencheon, 2010).

Many studies have been conducted on various themes related to environmental and socioeconomic indicators, such as urban form, urban climate, air pollution, environmental study, urban growth, urban forest, and urban infrastructure. It is difficult to capture the alternative approach to understanding the relationship between the environment and socioeconomic indicators (Chrysoulakis et al., 2014). Each city has unique socioeconomic and physical characteristics and conditions that should be reflected in scientific analysis and climate policy formulation (Lee & Painter, 2015). As a result, governing parties such as local experts, local governments, and policymakers should work with local communities to understand the challenges and solutions to specific climatic problems.

Indicators are long-term, proxy, or indexes that are used to understand, quantify, and report on the effects of changes in a specific event or set of circumstances (Kenney et al., 2012). Furthermore, this is a size that has been assigned to several people to solve a problem that cannot be solved with a single size or procedure (Keeney & Gregory, 2005). In other words, indicators derived from research conducted in Kg. Mesilou and used for improvement analysis based on space and requirements are closely related. In addition, to predict the future, indicators must be relevant to the surrounding environment, as well as the need to identify potential hazards (Illyani Ibrahim, Azizan Abu Samah, & M. Zainora Asmawi, 2017).

### **Post-pandemic Covid-19**

The SARS-CoV-2 virus is the infectious disease that is causing the global spread of the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19), according to the World Health Organization (WHO). The COVID-19 outbreak was deemed a public health emergency of worldwide concern by the WHO on January 30, 2020. The possibility for the virus to spread to nations with less developed healthcare systems, which will be less equipped to contain the outbreak, is WHO's a top concern (East et al., 2019). The largest infectious illness outbreak to ever affect Malaysia is the COVID-19 pandemic. The Malaysian government has implemented the Movement Control Order (MCO) for all communities to stop the spread of COVID-19.

The rate of infection has dropped as a result of the government's efforts to lower the rate of Covid-19 infections, including the MCO and the distribution of vaccines to the public in this nation. It can be claimed that the nation is currently moving toward an endemic phase, which is the period following COVID-19. Malaysia is finally moving towards a post-pandemic Covid-19 direction where all sectors carry out strategies and steps to restore the country's economy, social system, and politics after two years of dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, which has claimed many lives and affected the country's economic sector (Hmetro, 2022). Through the Ministry of Finance and the Economic Action Council (MTE), several prompt actions were taken to address economic difficulties right away. The National Security Council (MKN) is crucial in striking a balance between life and life. Standard operating procedures (SOP) must be followed, according to MKN. The cabinet meets once a week to monitor or decides on every significant related issue in the post-pandemic Covid-19 phases (BHarian, 2021). Therefore, during the post-pandemic Covid-19 phase, the ecotourism activities, and homestay programme in Kundasang, Sabah started to welcome domestic and international visitors cheerfully.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The data collection findings indicate that several areas need to be improved in order to revitalise the ecotourism and homestay sectors in Kampung Mesilou, Kundasang, Sabah. Improvements to infrastructure, amenities, the addition of ecotourism-related products, and media promotion are the four primary elements that the local community and other stakeholders must put into action. The four main components will then be further divided into sub-items and evaluated using the ratio of the primary field informants' responses.

### Profile of the main informants

To gather information about the recovery plan and strategy to revive tourism in the area, a total of 10 informants were questioned. Because they were picked based on their position in the Kampung Mesilou tourism organisation and village organisation, the informant pool was narrowed down.

**Table 1: Main Informants Profile**

Informants	Gender	Age	Role
1	Male	42	Head of Village
2	Male	38	MPKK
3	Male	24	Maragang Hill Secretary
4	Male	38	Maragang Hill (Publicity and Multimedia Manager)
5	Male	53	Homestay Owner
6	Male	55	Homestay Owner
7	Male	46	Homestay Owner
8	Male	48	Homestay Owner
9	Women	64	Homestay Owner
10	Women	56	Homestay Owner

**Table 2: Infrastructure Indicators, Recovery Plan and Strategy**

Indicator Item and Strategy	Sub-Item	Ratio Indicator (Answer By 10 Main Informants through In-depth-Interview)
Improving Infrastructure	Improving Road	<b>8:10</b>
	Water Pipe Installation	<b>5:10</b>
	Water Filtration Plant	<b>5:10</b>
	Clean Water Supply	<b>6:10</b>

According to Table 2 above, the primary recovery plan in the effort to revive the ecotourism and homestay activities in Kampung Mesilou in the post-pandemic Covid-19 period involves infrastructure amenities. Interviews with 10

main informants indicated that improving infrastructures such as roads (7:10) and clean water supply (6:10) are better strategies to increase tourist arrival in Mesilou village.

### **Improving Roads**

To make it simpler for road users, especially visitors who travel to tourist regions, improving roads is a comprehensive step. This is so that traffic congestion, which is frequently one of the primary issues when tourists are crowded in Kampung Mesilou, can be solved by the requirement for an efficient route. Eight of the ten informants who were interviewed agreed that Kampung Mesilou's roads needed to be repaired in order to better serve both tourists and locals.

*For the village, because of the road congestion here, this is one of the challenges right now, we can't deny it right now. If it's just the weekend, it's a nightmare, and if I'm on my own, I have my own opinion, and one of the issues is the road. Because the road has a lot of damage here and there, even the car wants to run over and can't because when he sees a pothole, he stops and that's it.*

*(Informant 1, Head of Village, 42)*

*The road from Mesilou village to Kundasang town can get very crowded at peak times, especially during school holidays. The traffic congestion can last for hours at times. So, if you see a long line of cars on the hill, avoid going to town.*

*(Informant 2, MPKK,38; 4 November 2021)*

Additionally, the villages had to utilise their own initiative to find a solution, which included building alternate roads to promote ecotourism activities and reduce users' time. For the convenience of all road users, community members also did repair damaged roads themselves.

### **Improving the Clean Water Supply**

A clean water supply is a crucial amenity for the locals, especially for those who run ecotourism operations and homestays because this is a fundamental amenity for the comfort of visiting tourists. But Mesilou village continues to rely on the gravity water pipe system until today (hill water). The improvement of the



village's clean water supply is one of the major recovery plans and strategies in the effort to rebuild the ecotourism business in the area.

One of the actions taken by the government to assist the people of Mesilou village is to provide a new allocation of RM7000-8000 for the village's gravity pipe improvement project. Among the upgrades is the replacement of a leaking water pipe with a new one. Meanwhile, a committee responsible for repairing the gravity water system in the event of damage has been formed at the village level.

*For use with pipes clean water supply. For example, if it has broken down, it is the committee members who work tirelessly to recover the situation.*

*(Informant 2, MPKK, 38; 4 November 2021)*

#### **Provide a Water Filtration and Storage Facility**

The next plan and strategy for the recovery are to provide a filtration plant. There are 5 out of 10 informants agreed that a filtration plant should be provided, and 7 out of 10 informants agreed that a storage tank for clean water supply should be provided. Therefore, the water department has constructed a large filtration plant capable of serving not only Kampung Mesilou but also the entire Kundasang and Ranau. The informant claims that all pipelines that have been installed throughout the Kundasang are as follows.

*After all, a large water plant is currently being built in Ranau by the government, which is in the final phase and wants to be ready soon. Kundasang has seen the installation of all pipelines. There already is. So, whoever creates the new homestay will hopefully have to wait for that.*

*(Informant 1, Head of Village, 42; 4 November 2021)*

#### **Improving Tourist Facilities**

**Table 3:** Tourist's Facilities Indicator, Recovery Plan, and Strategy

<b>Item</b>	<b>Sub-Item</b>	<b>Ratio Indicator (Answer By 10 Main Informants through In-depth-Interview)</b>
Improving Tourist Facilities	Parking Area	<b>6:10</b>
	Signboard	<b>5:10</b>

Ample facilities are critical for facilitating tourist demand, and movement. This is especially important for homestay entrepreneurs. This is since the arrival of tourists during peak times is extremely crowded, and the parking area in Kampung Mesilou is extremely limited. The village entertainment bureau stated that the systematic provision of signs is very helpful for visitors who are unfamiliar with the village. Six informants believe that having a large parking area is important, while five informants believe that signboards should be improved to make it easier for visitors to come to Mesilou village area.

In general, a parking lot serves as a facility that supports the ecotourism activities and movement of an area. This issue can be clearly seen in Kampung Mesilou during school holidays or weekends when the lack of parking becomes a serious issue. Therefore, the addition of the parking area is a very good initiative, especially in the effort to restore the ecotourism activities in the village. In addition, the provision of good and systematic parking facilities is one of the measures to control traffic congestion.

*These tourists can sometimes make things difficult. Commonly, there one person is in the car at the same time and the car could accommodate four people conveniently. Thus, parking is an issue whenever the tourist will park their car somewhere he or she prefers to ensure they are not walking far away from the tourist spot later.*

*(Informant 9, Homestay Owner, 64; 6 November 2021)*

### **Enhancing the Number of Signboards**

One of the initiatives or strategies to restore and improve ecotourism activities around Mesilau Village is the improvement of signage. As mentioned by one of the village Entertainment Bureau Committee stated that the village organisation is working to establish a village entertainment guide and facility.

*Most of the signs here are damaged, so they all need to be replaced, particularly the homestay signboard. Because tourists sometimes have difficulty searching the homestay where they stay.*

*(Informant 8, Homestay Owner, 48; 6 November 2021)*

However, signboards cannot be installed at will; homestay operators who want to put up signboards must first apply for permission from the

Entertainment Bureau Committee. In addition, the village entertainment bureau will create a frame or plan on which large-sized signs with all homestay names and road directions will be placed.

*But we can't just put up a sign advertising our homestay because we need permission from the Entertainment Bureau Committee. This is the person in charge of keeping track of the cheerfulness in the village.*

*(Informant 6, Homestay Owner, 55; 6 November 2021)*

**Table 4:** Eco-tourism Products as Indicator Strategies

Item	Sub-Item	Ratio Answer By 10 Main Informant
Ecotourism Products	Arnab Village	<b>7:10</b>
	Cat Village	<b>6:10</b>
	Mesilou Strawberry Farm	<b>6:10</b>
	Mesilou 3Sixty Peak	<b>7:10</b>

According to table 4, Arnab Village and Mesilou 3sixty Peak are two of the main draws for tourists visiting Mesilou Village, which is one of the new ecotourism products. According to 7 out of 10 respondents in interviews, the new ecotourism attractions are Arnab Village and Mesilou 3sixty Peak.

### **Expanding Ecotourism Products**

The Mesilou Volunteer Club Association (MAVOC) has mentioned that one of the recovery plans and strategies in the village is to increase ecotourism activities or products. Following the end of the Movement Control Order (MCO) pandemic Covid-19, efforts were made to restore the monthly income of homestay and ecotourism operators. Strawberry Farm, Cat Village, Rabbit Village, and other tourist attractions are popular with visitors in Mesilou. The MAVOC Secretary stated that:

*: So, this is an idea from Mr. Amrin, the coordinator of Mesilou Atamis Homestay, for us to create more tourist spots or even places that can be visited in Kampung Mesilou because he was challenged by the Minister to create more places or tourist products in Kampung Mesilou. Because in order to attract foreign visitors, we must provide something of value.*

*(Informant 3, Secretary, 24; 7 November 2021)*

The Mesilou Volunteer Club Association's (MAVOC) newly introduced tourism product is the 360 Peak (Wheel Swing 360), which has a height of 32 feet and an attractive 360-degree surrounding view. As a result, the government has been asked to assist the community in promoting homestays and new tourism products, particularly 360 Peak.

*One exists. So far, it has not yet been opened, which is also affiliated with MAVOC and is known as 360 Peak. He usually contributes to the presence of tourists in the village because he lives there.*

*(Informant 1, Head of Village, 42; 4 November 2021)*

#### **Promotion Through the use of mass media and social media**

Promotion is a strategy for increasing tourist arrivals in Kampung Mesilou, particularly for homestay and ecotourism operators. According to table 5, mass media promotion via Facebook is the most popular, with 9 out of 10 respondents agreeing with the indicator.

**Table 5:** Promotion Strategies as Indicator Strategies

<b>Item</b>	<b>Sub-Item</b>	<b>Ratio Answer By 10 Main Informant</b>
Mass Media Promotion	Facebook	<b>9:10</b>
	WhatsApp	<b>6:10</b>
	Instagram	<b>4:10</b>
	YouTube	<b>7:10</b>

The main strategy of homestay and ecotourism operators in Mesilou village is to promote themselves on Facebook, Whatsapp, Instagram, and YouTube. This is because, when the government announced that the Movement Control Order would be lifted and the country's borders would be opened to international tourists, all entrepreneurs actively promoted their establishments.

*...to me, I promote myself on the web, Facebook, and YouTube. I started a YouTube channel and uploaded content about hiking in Maragang Hill. That is how I promote Maragang Hill to outsiders.*

*(Informant 4, Maragang Hill (Publicity and Multimedia), 38; 6 November 2021)*

Furthermore, there is contact with travel agents, and there is a form of collaboration between homestay operators and travel agents who bring tourists to Kampung Mesilou. Furthermore, homestay operators provide tourists with a phone number to contact other homestay operators if the homestay they contact is full. The Homestay Association in Kampung Mesilou is also seeking government assistance in promoting new tourism so that it is known to all tourists who wish to visit.

## **CONCLUSION**

The above discussion has indicated that there are many ways to advance the ecotourism sector through social innovation. The main social innovation was introduced by the local community in Kundasang included enhancing basic infrastructure such as maintaining public roads and clean water supply, and enhancement of new ecotourism products such as hill trekking and introducing 360 Peak (Wheel Swing 360). To plan social innovation efforts sustainably require precise obligations and commitments from all parties and need to be carried out wisely. The result of this study demonstrated that with the recovery of Community Based Ecotourism, it is hoped that the national and state tourism industry of Sabah will continue to grow in terms of sustainability locally and globally.

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