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DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES FOR BACKPACKER TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN KOTA KINABALU, SABAH, MALAYSIA

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Abstract

This study investigates the development strategies aimed at enhancing backpacker tourism in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, with a focus on social, environmental, and economic dimensions. This study uses quantitative methods through the distribution of questionnaires to study the behaviour and opinions of backpackers in Kota Kinabalu. This study focuses on respondents at backpacker accommodation and tourist destinations in Kota Kinabalu. A total of 228 backpackers participated in this study. These strategies encompass social development, environmental development, and economic development, and encompass initiatives such as community engagement, environmental conservation, and collaboration with local businesses. Achieving a balance between economic growth and social and environmental sustainability is crucial in maximizing the potential of backpacker tourism. Successful implementation of these strategies necessitates the active involvement of various stakeholders, including government agencies, local communities, and the tourism industry. Integrating these strategies into destination management plans will elevate the backpacker tourism experience and facilitate sustainable growth. Further research and collaboration among stakeholders are imperative to effectively implement these strategies and harness the opportunities presented by backpacker tourism in the region.

Keywords: Backpacker tourism, development strategies, tourism, sustainable tourism, tourism development

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INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry thrives due to diverse cultural traits, natural resources, and vibrant social life. Malaysia's location in Southeast Asia makes it a prime spot for backpackers traveling the region. Backpacker tourism, noted by Ooi and Laing (2010), has grown significantly, offering substantial economic benefits. However, it can also negatively impact local communities and the environment (Sroyetch, 2016; Sudana et al., 2020; Agyeiwaah & Bangwayo-Skeete, 2021). To ensure sustainable growth, destinations should balance economic gains with social and environmental concerns by limiting visitor numbers, promoting responsible tourism, and investing in sustainable infrastructure (Agyeiwaah et al., 2021; Han, 2021; Yusoh et al., 2022).

Regulating backpacker tourism is challenging due to overpopulation, resource exploitation, and other negative impacts on destination communities. To address these issues, destinations must work with local stakeholders to develop sustainable tourism plans that consider both local needs and environmental concerns. Effective management requires engaging residents and businesses to identify and tackle key issues, promoting responsible tourism practices, and supporting local development initiatives that benefit everyone. By adopting these strategies, destinations can manage backpacker tourism sustainably and minimize its adverse effects (Budeanu et al., 2016). This study aims to create a comprehensive inventory of challenges and strategies for backpacker tourism development in Kota Kinabalu.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In tourism studies, backpackers are often overlooked compared to other topics (Cohen, 2003; Maoz, 2007; Richard & Wilson, 2004). Generally, they are budget-conscious travelers who stay longer in destinations than typical tourists, focusing on low-cost, independent travel with minimal accommodations like hostels and camping (Ryan, 2020; Wodarczyk & Cudny, 2022; Jabil et al., 2022). Typically under 40, backpackers have flexible plans and engage more with local social scenes (Pearce, 2009; Richard & Wilson, 2004). Recently, "flashpackers" have emerged as a term for those who spend more on technology and comfort while remaining budget-conscious.

Strategies in Developing Backpacker Tourism

According to Graci and Van Vliet (2020) and Latip et al (2018), managing tourist destinations is challenging due to the negative effects of poor planning and management. To achieve sustainable backpacker tourism, effective strategies must be implemented. These strategies fall into three categories: social development, environmental development, and economic development. This study aims to explore these strategies in detail by reviewing literature and insights from previous research.

Social Development Strategies:

- i. *Long-term planning and capacity building:* This strategy entails creating a detailed tourism plan with extensive training for officials, destination management, and infrastructure support (Hashimoto, 2002; UNWTO, 2006; Graci & Dodds, 2010). By incorporating backpacker tourism into long-term planning, destinations can enhance sustainability, minimize environmental impact, and benefit local communities (Giampiccoli et al., 2020).
- ii. *Collaboration and stakeholder participation:* Collaboration among accommodation operators, low-cost airlines, destination operators, and local communities is essential for improving backpacker travel experiences (Gray & Wood, 1991; Giampiccoli et al., 2020). Engaging these stakeholders in decision-making helps address market interests, environmental concerns, and social development (Selin, 1999; Bramwell & Alletorp, 2001; Bramwell & Lane, 2005; Foggin & Munster, 2003).
- iii. *Training and education:* Effective training and education for key players—government employees, private sector entrepreneurs, and community members—are crucial for promoting sustainable backpacker tourism (Giampiccoli et al., 2020). Collaboration between the government, tourism sector, and educational institutions can improve local education, raise awareness of environmental conservation and waste management, and foster cultural interaction (Graci, 2020).

Environmental Development Strategies:

- i. *Conservation and preservation:* Sustainable backpacker tourism necessitates the protection and conservation of the natural environment (Giampiccoli et al., 2020). Strategies such as promoting responsible tourism practices, limiting the number of backpackers in sensitive areas, and investing in infrastructure that supports sustainable tourism development contribute to environmental preservation (Agyeiwaah et al., 2021; Han, 2021).
- ii. *Waste management and resource efficiency:* Effective waste management systems, including recycling initiatives and reducing resource consumption, are crucial for minimizing the environmental footprint of backpacker tourism (Giampiccoli et al., 2020). Implementing sustainable waste management practices and raising awareness among backpackers about the importance of responsible waste disposal contribute to environmental development (Graci, 2020).

Economic Development Strategies:

- i. *Economic diversification:* Expanding tourism products beyond backpacker accommodation can boost destination economies (Giampiccoli et al., 2020). Promoting local entrepreneurship and supporting small and medium-sized enterprises can enhance economic benefits from backpacker tourism.
- ii. *Community empowerment and inclusive growth:* Economic development strategies should involve local communities to ensure active participation and fair benefit distribution (Giampiccoli et al., 2020). Community-based tourism, cultural exchange, and support for local businesses promote inclusive growth and socio-economic empowerment.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, the researcher used a quantitative method because it is suitable and able to answer the research objective regarding the behavior and opinions of backpackers in Kota Kinabalu. This study was conducted in the city of Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, which has an area of approximately 351 square kilometres. Specifically, the study was conducted in the area around budget hotels and tourist attractions in the Kota Kinabalu area. (Figure 1).

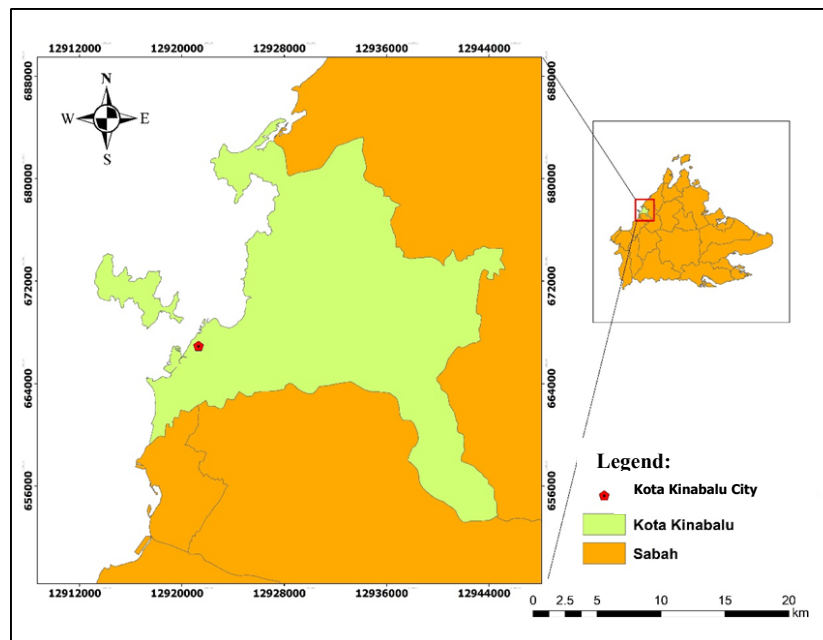


Figure 1: Map of Study Area
Source: Researcher (2023).

In 2018, Sabah Tourism Board recorded 1,361,567 foreign tourists, with 113,043 from Europe, America, and Oceania. Based on Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size table, 383 respondents were recommended. However, due to the Movement Control Order (MCO) starting March 18, 2020 in Malaysia, which restricted international travel, the sample size was adjusted to 228 travelers, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Sample size of study

Details	Sample (Number of people)
The number of tourists coming to Sabah in 2018	1,261,567
The number of tourists from the European Continent, America and Oceania	113,043
The total number of study samples should be before the MCO is implemented	383
The total number of study samples studied	228

Source: Researcher (2023).

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

This section discusses the findings of the study regarding the challenges faced by backpackers during travel and the development strategy for backpacker tourism in Kota Kinabalu.

Social Development Strategies

The importance of social development in backpacker tourism cannot be overstated. In Kota Kinabalu, a city known for its diverse and exciting outdoor activities, it is crucial that we consider the ways in which we can improve the quality of the backpacker tourism industry for both visitors and the local community. One way to do this is by implementing a series of social development strategies, as outlined in Figure 2.

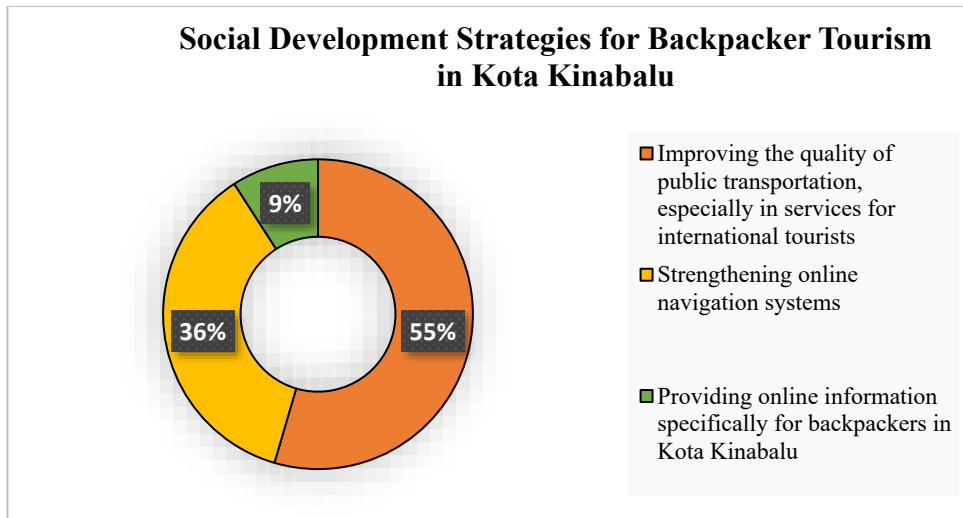


Figure 2: Social Development Strategies for Backpacker Tourism Development in Kota Kinabalu

Source: Researcher (2023)

According to Figure 2, three social development recommendations were made by respondents in a recent field study. 55 percent respondents suggested that the quality of public transportation, specifically in terms of services for international backpackers, should be improved in Kota Kinabalu. Additionally, 36 percent respondents recommended to strengthen online navigation systems. Nine percent respondents recommend providing online information specifically for backpackers in Kota Kinabalu. These findings suggest that there is a need for targeted efforts to address the specific needs and preferences of backpackers in Kota Kinabalu.

Improving the quality of public transportation, especially in services for international tourists

Improving transportation for backpacker tourism in Kota Kinabalu requires long-term planning to enhance convenience and attractiveness. Backpackers need affordable, convenient options (Pearce, 1990; Brooks & Hannam, 2016; Dayour et al., 2016). Upgrading the transportation network, providing clear route and schedule information, maintaining clean vehicles, and offering services like guided tours and airport transfers can make Kota Kinabalu more appealing. Collaborating with local tour operators and businesses to create package deals and seamless itineraries, implementing safety features, discount programs, and training locals as drivers or guides will boost social development and enhance interactions between backpackers and the community.

Strengthening online navigation systems

Enhancing backpacker tourism in Kota Kinabalu requires collaboration with stakeholders to improve online navigation systems, ensure accurate location information, and provide transportation details. Key strategies include partnering with online platforms, implementing wayfinding tools, and creating virtual experiences. A reliable navigation system displaying correct tourist destination locations is essential (Yao et al., 2020). Regular monitoring of location pin accuracy is crucial for backpackers' navigation. Strengthening online navigation, updating transportation info on websites and apps, and collaborating with local businesses for virtual experiences can boost tourism in the region.

Providing online information specifically for backpackers in Kota Kinabalu

The provision of online information targeting backpackers or budget travellers is vital for promoting travel in destination areas. Gomes (2019) emphasizes the importance of online information for backpackers, allowing them to plan trips independently. In Kota Kinabalu, however, most online information is in Malay, making it less accessible to international travellers. Additionally, the information often lacks clarity on fees, activities, and cultural aspects. Some attractive destinations only have a social media presence. To address these gaps, a dedicated website or section within an existing tourism website should be established for backpackers. This platform should provide details on affordable accommodations, budget-friendly activities, and attractions. Collaborating with local businesses to offer discounts and featuring reviews from past backpackers can boost tourism and foster sustainable development in Kota Kinabalu.

Environmental Development

To attract backpackers to Kota Kinabalu, we need to consider the environment. Protecting the natural resources and unique environment of the city is important. Figure 3 shows how often respondents suggested environmental development strategies for backpacker tourism in the area.

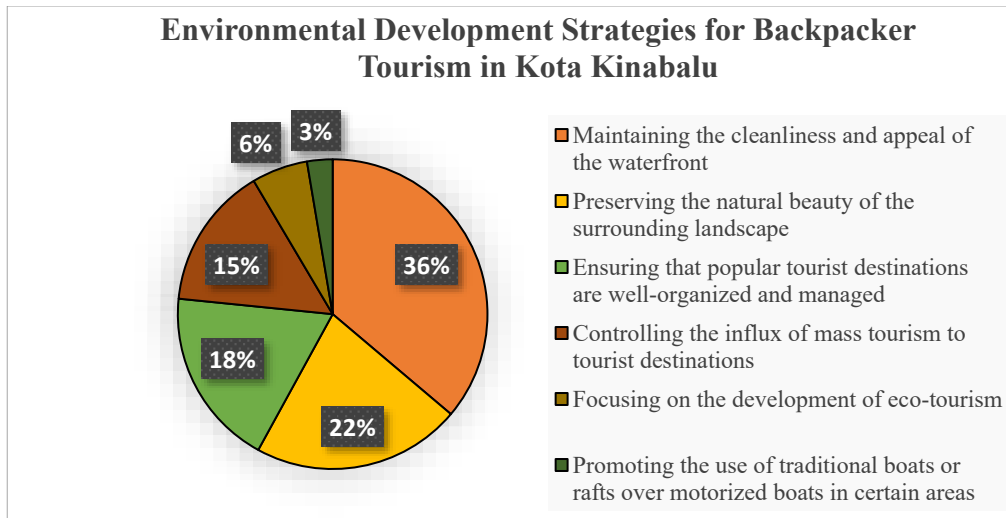


Figure 3: Environmental Development Strategies for Backpacker Tourism in Kota Kinabalu

Source: Researcher (2023).

Figure 3 shows six recommendations for environmental development in the development of backpacker tourism in Kota Kinabalu. 36 percent respondents recommended maintaining the cleanliness and appeal of the waterfront, while 22 percent respondents recommended preserving the natural beauty of the surrounding landscape. 18 percent respondents recommended ensuring that popular tourist destinations are well-organized and managed. Furthermore, 15 percent recommended controlling the influx of mass tourism to tourist destinations and six percent respondents recommended focusing on the development of eco-tourism in Kota Kinabalu. Finally, 3 percent respondents recommended promoting the use of traditional boats or rafts over motorized boats in certain areas in Kota Kinabalu.

Maintaining the cleanliness and appeal of the waterfront

Maintaining a clean waterfront is essential for sustainable backpacker tourism in Kota Kinabalu. Increased litter and poor waste management in nearby islands like Pulau Gaya and Pulau Sepanggar degrade coastal areas. Local authorities' efforts have been inadequate, negatively impacting residents and tourists (Berita Harian, 24 December 2016). The Kota Kinabalu City Council should engage private companies in waterfront cleaning through tenders and run awareness campaigns for island residents. A consistent focus on environmental conservation is needed to tackle marine litter and sustain a tourist-friendly environment.

Preserving the natural beauty of the surrounding landscape

Preserving Kota Kinabalu's natural beauty is vital for sustainable backpacker tourism. Overdevelopment and poor land use threaten this appeal. To address this, enforce land use regulations, promote eco-tourism, and educate tourists and locals on conservation. Limiting construction, land reclamation, and encouraging volunteer waterfront clean-ups can also help maintain the landscape (Canteiro et al., 2018; Hjalager & Kwiatkowski, 2019). Prioritizing environmental preservation will sustain Kota Kinabalu's allure for nature-loving backpackers.

Ensuring that popular tourist destinations are well-organized and managed

Effective maintenance and good governance are crucial for managing backpacker tourism destinations. Continuous maintenance ensures visitor satisfaction (Mahendrawati & Mahaputra, 2018; Pestana et al., 2020). A comprehensive plan involving the local community is needed to address backpacker needs, including crowd management, amenities, and community impact. Good governance ensures stakeholder interests and provides necessary infrastructure and services. Promoting sustainable tourism practices is essential to minimize environmental and social impacts, maintaining the destination's long-term appeal (Mahendrawati & Mahaputra, 2018). Implementing these measures can help destinations like Kota Kinabalu effectively support backpacker tourism and benefit the local community.

Controlling the influx of mass tourism to tourist destinations

Mass tourism at destinations like the Great Wall of China and Santorini, Greece, has led to issues such as congestion and capacity overload (Dodds & Butler, 2019; Jacobsen et al., 2019). Kota Kinabalu's Waterfront and Tunku Abdul Rahman Marine Park also face sustainability challenges due to high tourism levels. To mitigate these issues, strategies like visitor caps, reservation systems, promoting alternative destinations, sustainable practices, tourist taxes, and off-peak travel incentives are recommended (Dodds & Butler, 2019). It's essential to balance the interests of both the local community and tourists to ensure long-term sustainability (Dodds & Butler, 2019).

Focusing on the development of eco-tourism

Eco-tourism offers a promising strategy for sustainable backpacker tourism in Kota Kinabalu, addressing the challenges of mass tourism while minimizing environmental and community impacts (Manoj et al., 2020; Respati et al., 2017). Key actions include promoting sustainable practices like waste reduction and supporting local businesses, investing in eco-friendly infrastructure and transportation for backpackers, educating them on eco-tourism and sustainability, and involving the local community in planning to ensure their interests are considered. These strategies can help Kota Kinabalu preserve its natural and

cultural assets, providing an authentic and sustainable experience for backpackers (Dodds & Butler, 2019; Jacobsen et al., 2019; Coccossis & Mexa, 2017).

Promoting the use of traditional boats or rafts over motorized boats in certain areas

Promoting traditional boats or rafts instead of motorized ones in Kota Kinabalu can reduce tourism's environmental impact and support local communities. Traditional boats are eco-friendly, avoiding emissions and noise pollution, which helps protect delicate habitats and wildlife (Pestana et al., 2020). They also enhance the authenticity of the travel experience and support local craftsmanship, fostering cultural appreciation and community support (Jacobsen et al., 2019; Pestana et al., 2020). To encourage this shift, local communities should receive training and resources for boat tours, and marketing should highlight the benefits of supporting local communities and the environment (Manoj et al., 2020; Pestana et al., 2020). This approach promotes sustainable tourism, strengthens community resilience, and offers backpacker tourists a memorable experience.

Economic Development

Economic development is crucial for tourist destinations, as it boosts job opportunities and income through meeting stakeholders' needs. Figure 4 shows the frequency of respondents' suggestions for economic development strategies for backpacker tourism in Kota Kinabalu.

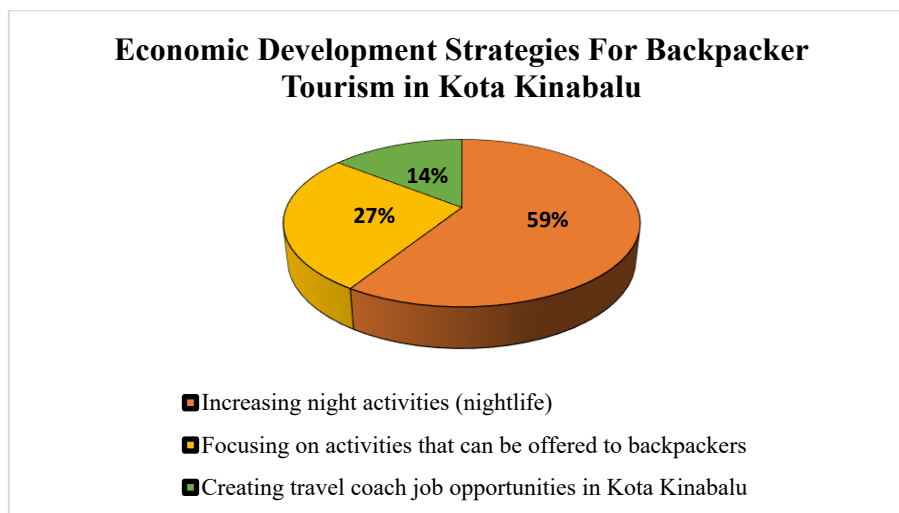


Figure 4: Economic Development Strategies for Backpacker Tourism in Kota Kinabalu
Source: Researcher (2023).

According to Figure 4, respondents suggest five economic development strategies for building backpacker tourism in Kota Kinabalu. 59% of respondents suggest offering more nightlife activities in Kota Kinabalu. Furthermore, 27% of respondents suggest that tourism entrepreneurs focus on activities that can be offered to backpacker tourists. Finally, 14% of respondents suggest that there be more job opportunities as a "travel coach" in Kota Kinabalu.

Increasing night activities (nightlife)

To boost backpacker tourism in Kota Kinabalu, increasing evening activities like Irish-themed bars could be effective. Providing diverse nightlife options such as live music and dancing can attract more backpackers and benefit the local economy (Coccosis & Mexa, 2017). Local entrepreneurs should receive support and resources, including funding, to develop these businesses (Jacobsen et al., 2019). Additionally, enhanced marketing efforts are needed to promote Kota Kinabalu's vibrant nightlife to tourists. These strategies could significantly improve the city's nightlife and support its economic growth.

Focusing on the activities that can be offered to backpacker

One strategy to boost backpacker tourism in Kota Kinabalu is to offer activities that reflect local culture and traditions while appealing to backpackers (Jacobsen et al., 2019). By focusing on outdoor adventures, cultural experiences, and educational tours, the region can increase its appeal and support economic growth (Coccosis & Mexa, 2017). Market research and community involvement are crucial to aligning activities with backpacker preferences and ensuring local economic benefits (Manoj et al., 2020). Additionally, adopting sustainable practices will help mitigate environmental impacts (Respati et al., 2017).

Creating travel coach job opportunities in Kota Kinabalu

To boost economic development in Kota Kinabalu through backpacker tourism, introducing "travel coaches" could be effective. Travel coaches help travelers with itinerary planning and logistics, which could attract more backpackers and create local jobs (Brugulat, 2018). Implementing this strategy requires investing in training programs for locals, in collaboration with educational institutions and tourism organizations. Offering courses on travel planning, customer service, and local culture, as well as internships with local businesses, will prepare residents for travel coach roles. This approach would enhance services for backpackers, improve their experience, and strengthen Kota Kinabalu's reputation.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the development plan for backpacker tourism in Kota Kinabalu aimed to address social, environmental, and economic factors. By focusing on improving transportation, enhancing online resources, preserving the

environment, and promoting economic initiatives, the plan aimed to foster sustainable backpacker tourism growth. The insights from this study provide potential solutions for enhancing backpacker tourism in Kota Kinabalu and contribute to a better understanding of the context of backpacker tourism both locally and globally.

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