



ECOTOURISM PLANNING: WHO IS REALLY RESPONSIBLE?

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Abstract

The potential of tourism as a generator of hospitality industry, employment and income is leading many states in Malaysia to pay increasing attention to this sector. While mass tourism continues to make the headlines, 'new tourism' like ecotourism and agrotourism is fast becoming the buzzword of this new millennium. Joining the ranks of states promoting ecotourism is Kelantan, the focus of this paper. The notion that tourism is the panacea of economic problems is debatable. As illustrated by various examples in this paper, tourism, if not properly planned and managed can create chaos and leave negative impact on nature. This paper also focuses on the issue of laws and policies that govern the use of eco-resources found in Southern Kelantan (Kelantan Selatan), which are believed to contribute to the degradation of the resources.

Keywords: Ecotourism, Products, Law and Policies, Tourism Planning

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is the second most important sector for the Malaysian economy. Malaysian tourism enjoyed an impressive average growth of 9.26% between 1981 and 2000. The number of international arrivals to Malaysia showed a significant growth in 1990. Malaysia, in 1990 recorded 54% increase in tourist arrivals from the previous year. This tremendous increase was due to the Visit Malaysia Year promotional blitz throughout the world. After taking a dip in 1997 and 1998, Malaysian tourism sector recovered with a 53% increase in international arrivals. Despite the scare created by the September 11, 2001 attack on the United States and global economic downturn, over 12.7 million tourists visited Malaysia last year, generating over RM 24 billion revenue to the economy, an increase of RM7 billion compared to the income in 2000. Major tourist markets for Malaysia have been the neighboring ASEAN nations

especially Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand, and Brunei. Other foreign markets include Hong Kong, Japan, China, and Australia. The main destinations within the country are the major cities of Kuala Lumpur, Malacca, Penang and Johore Bahru with Langkawi, Kuching and Tioman becoming new destinations. In line with the nature theme promoted by Tourism Malaysia worldwide, alternative tourism concepts like ecotourism and agrotourism are regarded as important and potential niche areas to be explored by various state and local authorities in Malaysia.

Malaysia has 54 protected areas of more than 1,000 hectares, totaling 1,483,000 ha. Or about 4.5 % of the land surface of the country. They include 28 districts of nature reserves, where 90,070 hectares are not opened to tourism activity (Norizan, 2000). Among main national parks and protected areas are: Bako National Park, Crocker Range Park, Endau Rompin, Gunung Mulu National Park, Kenong Rimba Park, Kinabalu national park, Kuala Gula Bird Sanctuary, Niah National Park, Rantau Abang Turtle hatchery, Sepilok Orang Utan Sanctuary, Taman Negara and Tunku Abdul Rahman National park.

WWF Malaysia estimates that Malaysia gains RM 655 million per year from ecotourism. This figure, however, is rather small compared to the estimated RM24 billion of tourism brings into the economy (Badaruddin, 2002). Ecotourism was initially defined by Ceballos-Lascurain (1988) as the travels to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these areas. This definition is further expanded by Ziffer (1989) who suggests ecotourism as: 'a form of tourism inspired primarily by the natural history of an area, including its indigenous cultures. The ecotourist visits relatively undeveloped areas in the spirit of appreciation, participation, and sensitivity. The ecotourist practices a non-consumptive use of wildlife and natural resources and contributes to the visited area through labor or financial means aimed at directly benefiting the conservation of the site and the economic well being of the local residents.

TOURISM: THE MAJOR PLAYERS

As in other countries new to tourism, the Malaysian Government carries the task of initiating tourist development. The Malaysian government does not only provide the much needed tourist infrastructure but also spends a great amount of money for promotional purposes. Among programs hosted by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (MCAT) are the year-round promotions (with cooperation of the local governments), the development of medium cost hotels throughout

Malaysia (i.e. the Seri Malaysia Hotel Chain), and specific local product development such as heritage trails and tourism signboards throughout the country. As shown in Figure 1, there are many ministries and departments involved in the planning and management of ecotourism in this country. Besides the Federal Ministries, Unit Perancang Ekonomi Negeri (State Economic Planning Unit) carries the task of planning tourism projects at the state level, together with other agencies like Jabatan Perancang Bandar dan Desa (Urban and Regional Planning Department), Kraftangan Malaysia and the Department of Wildlife Protection & National Park (Perhilitan). At the local level, the role of maintaining tourist sites fall within the jurisdiction of respective local authorities and district offices.

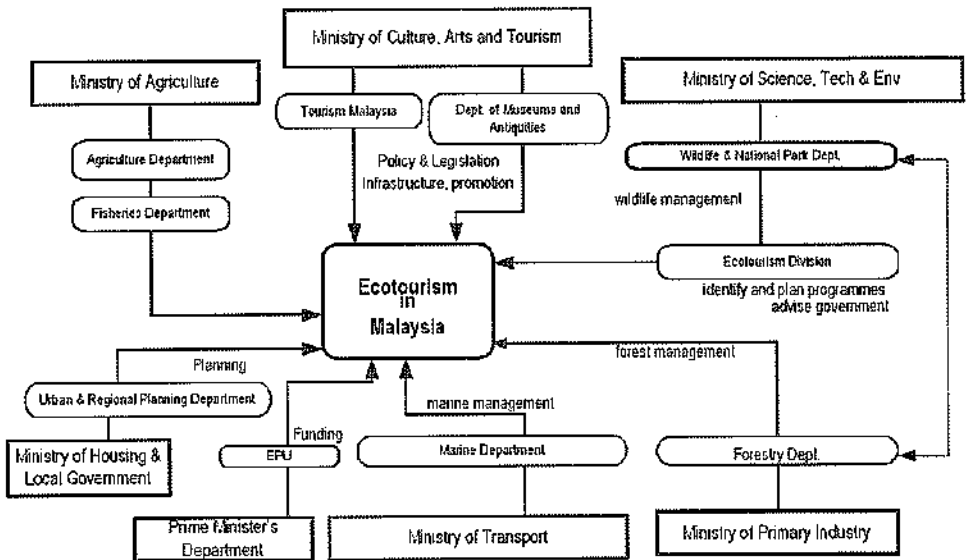


FIGURE 1: Major authorities in ecotourism planning
Source: Badaruddin (2002)

While a significant amount of budget has been allocated for tourist infrastructure development, the allocation for maintenance and management purposes is often lacking (See RM7 allocation in Table 1 for instance). The Federal Government, in many cases, would allocate funds to start a tourism development project, but state governments are expected to fork out the necessary fund to run and maintain the project. In many instances, the failure of the state governments to secure adequate budget for the maintenance of the places has resulted in the deterioration of the places, and the quality of experience supposed to be enjoyed by the visitors.

TABLE 1:
Allocation for Tourism development, 1996-2005 (RM million)

Programme	RM 7 [1996-2000]	RM8 [2001-2005]
National Heritage/Historical Preservation	56.0	125
Accommodation	49.0	35.5
Beautification/Cleanliness & Environmental Protection	89.2	295.3
Facilities & Infrastructure	333.5	473.6
Others	75.8	79.6
Total:	605.5	1009.0

Source: The Eighth Malaysia Plan.

This paper is based on a recently completed research, funded by the Intensive Research Priority Area (IRPA) short-term grant, conducted in selected ecotourism sites in Southern Kelantan (hereafter will be referred as *Kelantan Selatan*) (Figure 2). It will focus on the issue of lacking integrated approach in developing tourist products as well as consequent impacts from the legal tussles found among authorities governing places of interests.

TOURISM IN KELANTAN SELATAN

Tourism has been an important sector to many states in Malaysia, including Kelantan. The arrivals of tourists in the state for the past few years have been encouraging. In 1999 for example, there was 2.53 million tourists visited the state, generating over RM766 million to the state economy. Most of the visitors (84%) were domestic travelers (especially from nearby states of Trengganu and Pahang), while the rest were international visitors. The majority of the international visitors come from the neighboring Thailand.

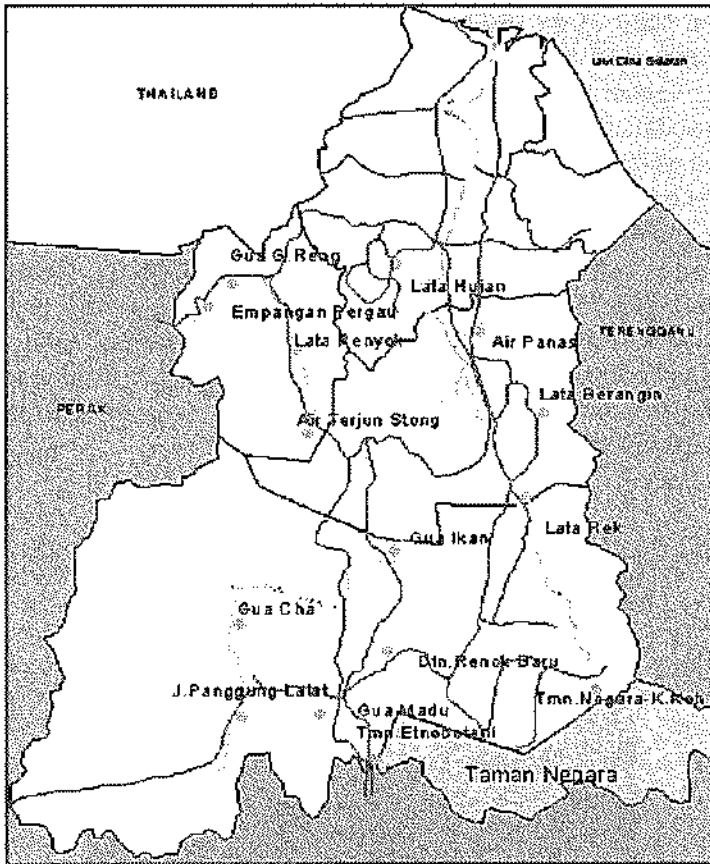


FIGURE 2: Major tourist attractions in Kelantan Selatan

Kelantan is proud of its traditional Malay culture and villages as well as the abundant natural resources found throughout the state. Despite comments that tourism and Islam will not see eye-to-eye, Kelantan regards tourism to be an important sector. Islamic tourism concepts have been promulgated widely, and have been instilled in many aspects of the tourism business. A good example of the implementation of this concept can be observed in Hotel Ansar, in Kota Bharu. According to Wan Mohamad (1998), besides developing Kelantan's tourism based on Islamic principles, the state intends to make the activities of musafir, rehlah, siyahah, hijrah, ziarah, and riadah to be educational as well as to have visitors appreciate the gift of Allah (swt). Tourism, according to him, must protect, conserve, and retain the natural

environment. Most of the tourist attractions in Kelantan Selatan covered in this research is managed by the Lembaga Kemajuan Kelantan Selatan (Kesedar), a federal government agency, established in 1978. As shown in Table 2, besides Kesedar, there are a number of other government agencies—both federal and state—that claim authority over the sites. Despite the fact that there should be many agencies taking care of the places, visits to the sites revealed that most of them are in very disturbing conditions (See Figure 3 and 4) (Abdul Aziz & Badaruddin, 2002). Some are left deserted and putrid. This lead us to the two main focuses of this paper namely: (1) The fact that there are various authorities with various (and sometimes conflicting) laws and regulations complicate the management of a tourist area; (2) The conflicts and unclear regulations may result in the degradation of quality experience tourism supposed to offer.

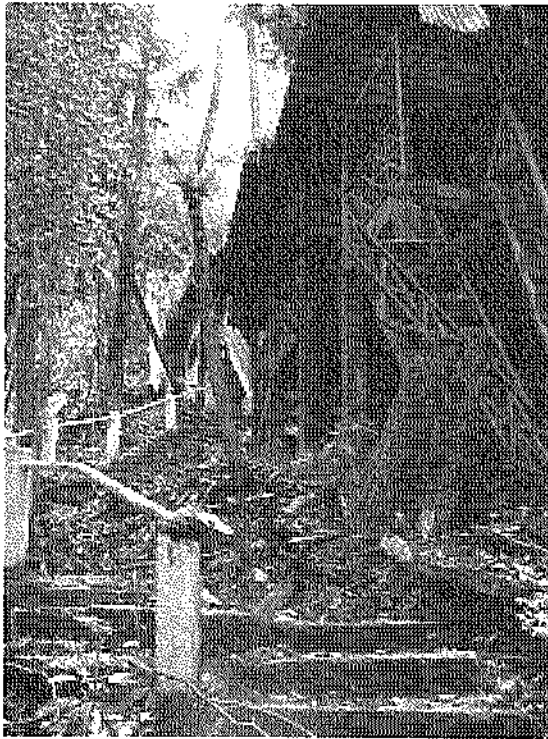


FIGURE 3: Chalets at this hill resort deteriorate without proper maintenance

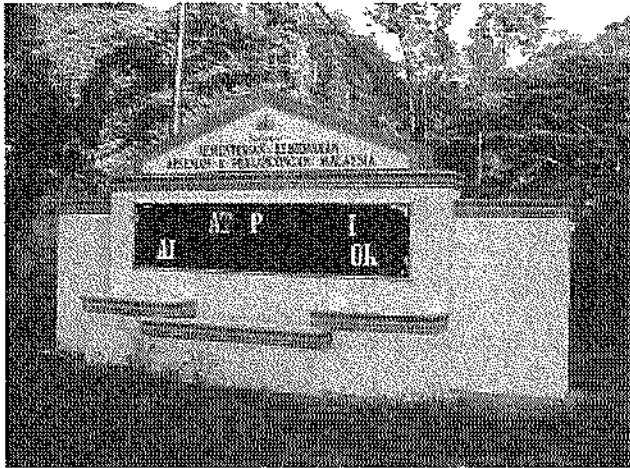


FIGURE 4: This new hot springs rests before receiving visitors

TABLE 1:
Tourist Products of Kelantan Selatan and the Governing Bodies

Tourist Product	Agencies In charge
Ethno botanical Garden Old Chinese Settlement, Pulai	Kesedar & Gua Musang District Council
Gua ChaGua Praling Gua Chawas	Kesedar, Forestry Department & Department of Museum and Antiquities
Kuala Koh Kuala Pertang	Kesedar, Forestry Department & Department of Wildlife Protection and National Park
Panggung Lalat Waterfall	Kesedar, FELCRA & Gua Musang District Council
Gua Ikan	Kesedar & Kuala Krai Selatan District Council
Lata Berangin, Kuala Krai	Tenaga Nasional Bhd., Forestry Dept. & Kesedar
Lata Renyok, Jeli	Kesedar, Jeli District Council, Tenaga Nasional Bhd. & Tourisms Promotion Board
Hot spring Ponds, Batu 14 Jeli	Tourism Promotion Board, Kesedar & Jeli District Council
Stong Hill Waterfall, Kuala Krai	Kelantan SEDC, Kesedar, Forestry Department & Kuala Krai Selatan District Council

Sultan Ismail Bridge, Kuala Krai	Kesedar & Kuala Krai Utara District Council
Gunung Reng, Jeli	Kesedar & Jeli District Council
Gua Madu, Gua Musang	Gua Musang District Council, Kesedar & Forestry Department
Lata Rek, Kuala Krai	Forestry Dept., Kesedar, Kuala Krai Selatan District Council & Tenaga Nasional Bhd.,
Nenggiri River Rafting	Kesedar, Forestry Department, Dept. of <i>Orang Asli</i> & Department of Irrigation and Drainage

POWER VERSUS POWER

As depicted in Figure 1, there are overlapping of more than one government agencies entrusted with the administration and management (development, promotion, control etc.) of the places. These overlapping create various administrative issues and problems. One of the issues is who should plan, prepare budget allocation and later, tender the project. Other issues include the inconsistency of policies between the agencies and the lack of coordination between agencies (especially between federal agencies and state agencies), which complicate the implementation of development, and promotional program. These problems have led to some of the areas being left as “no-man’s lands”. Some lack maintenance, supervision of tourist activities and become subject of vandalism, etc. Towards the end, these areas are left without caretaker(s) and eventually abandoned by tourists.

THE TAMAN NEGARA: ONE STATE ONE ENACTMENT

One of the most attractive tourists’ destinations in Kelantan Selatan is Kuala Koh, a part of the National Park (formerly known as King George V National Park). This National Park (Taman Negara) encompasses three states—Pahang, Kelantan, and Trengganu, is gazetted as a wildlife reserve and sanctuary, and is subjected to Wildlife Protection Act (1972). The National Parks Act 1980 (an act for the establishment and the control of National Parks) is not applicable to this National Park (see section 1(2) of the Act). This National Park is subjected to three different statutes: the Taman Negara (Kelantan) Enactment 1938 (for areas located in Kelantan), the Taman Negara (Pahang) Enactment 1939 (for the area located in Pahang), and the Taman Negara (Trengganu) Enactment 1939 (for the area situated in Trengganu).

Besides the flora and fauna and other nature based products, there are also many *Orang Asli* villages found in National Parks, which are subjected to the Aboriginal People Act 1954. Despite the fact that activities like jungle-trekking, animal-watching, visiting the *Orang Asli* (temporary) settlements, and river-cruising (including fishing) have been part and parcels of ecotourism activities in the Taman Negara, visitors need to take extra caution as many of these activities are strictly regulated by the National Park Laws. A recent case of three Japanese tourists who were fined for attempting to smuggle out rare wild orchids of Mulu National Park is a good example of this matter (The Star, April 18 2002). They appealed on ignorance ground, claiming that their act was a sincere mistake and declaring that they did not know that it is an offence (under Sarawak's Wildlife Ordinance, 1998) to buy wild orchids. As usual, the plea of *ignorantia legis neminem excusat* (ignorance of the law excuses no man) is applicable.

PROMOTION VERSUS DISCOURAGEMENT

It is often said that tourists come and destroy the very things that attract them to the destination. This is very true especially in the case of ecotourism. The widespread opening up of natural areas for ecotourism purposes has subjected the areas to various negative impacts. While ecotourism is encouraged—and believed—to be an environmentally sensitive tourism concept, the preparation to receive greater number and various types of tourists into the protected areas is not sufficient. For instance, despite the fact that camping is encouraged in many protected forests and national parks in Malaysia, no proper dumping sites, garbage bins, or even campgrounds are provided for the campers. Many (including the park authority perhaps) may not aware that improper disposal of wastes is an offence under sections 22 and 24 of the Environmental Quality Act 1974 and also an offence under sections 82 and 83 of the National Forest Act 1984 (if it is a permanent forest reserve area). The Nenggiri River cruise that departs from Kuala Betis and ends at Kg. Setar at Gua Musang illustrates further this complication. Even though boats and canoes are available, bamboo rafting is more popular and widely promoted. During an expedition, recreationists can make stops to do bird watching, fishing, or exploring the animal tracks. While this activity sounds ecofriendly and encouraged, the river sometimes meander into permanent forest reserves where any extraction of the forest produce (including bamboo) is strictly prohibited! Bamboos, which are abundantly found on riverbanks guard the river from erosion are protected (by Section 4, Water Act 1920) and Rivers & Drainage Enactment (Kelantan), 1935. The management of rivers on the other hand, falls within the jurisdiction of the Department of Irrigation and Drainage. Therefore, the question remains

whether is it lawful to promote bamboo rafting (as depicted in some tourist brochure) as a 'nature' activity while we know that engaging in such activity will lead to the destruction of the resources.

WHO'S RESPONSIBILITY?

Another point of interests in the study area is Gua Cha, which has the potential to be developed into an archeotourism site. The cave is located in a permanent forest reserves in Kelantan (thus, is subjected to National Forests Act 1984). One of the oldest prehistoric remains were found by Department of Museums and Antiquities, which has been carrying out excavation projects in the area for the past few years. Exercising power vested under the Antiquities Act 1978 and Treasure Trove Act 1957, the findings like human bones, ceramics, tools, utensils, and so on were brought back to the National Museum in Kuala Lumpur. Kesedar, on the other hand, operating under the Kelantan Selatan Development Authority Act 1978, together with the cooperation of Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism (in which the Dept. of Museums and Antiquities is one of its Departments) continues to develop and promote this cave as an archeological and historical tourist attraction. However, if the excavated items were moved to Kuala Lumpur, what are there left on site for the potential visitors to 'enjoy'? The cave provides a camping site with some basic facilities. According to the villagers, at certain times, wild elephants can be found roaming around the area. While this may sound interesting, it can pose danger to the campers. The question here is: who will be held responsible if campers are attacked by the elephants? Perhaps, the default answer is 'none'.

Finally, visitations to the *Orang Asli* settlements and experiencing their lifestyles have now become part and parcels of ecotourism in Kelantan Selatan, as in many areas in other parts of rural Malaysia. There are many aborigine settlements like Pos Brookes, Kuala Betis, Pos Slim, Kampong Pulat and Kampong Wias found in the study area, especially in areas adjacent to the Taman Negara. However, can *Orang Asli* really be a part of tourism products and natural habitats? The aborigines live in reserved areas and they are protected under the Aboriginal Peoples Act (1954). The Act regulates any entering, experiencing, or conducting anything relating to their land, belongings, and the people. Tourists sometime found wondering around, taking pictures of the aborigines, and encroaching into the settlements, without realizing that their conducts and activities are improper or perhaps undesirable to the *Orang Asli* (and can be subjected to Sections 14 and 19 in Aboriginal Peoples Act 1954). The undesirable gazes by the tourists can potentially result in conflicts between the visitors and the host. Despite all these, ecotourists are

encouraged to sample the lifestyle of the aborigines and the settlements are promoted as part of ecotourism products.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Ecotourism can emerge as an important product for Malaysia in general, and for Kelantan Selatan in specific. The area contains tremendous potential to be developed as a nature based destination, considering the various quality natural resources it has to offer. Some of the sites had been developed but due to a range of factors discussed in this paper, failed to survive and abandoned. Some are left unattended and badly managed. Others, including sites recently developed by the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism, have been totally deserted and vandalized. The lack of allocation for maintenance purposes is rather obvious. However, before the resources can be promoted or perhaps revitalized into ecotourism products, several important issues need to be addressed. The study reveals that the sites were improperly planned and integrated. While some of the sites can stand alone as a 'product', many rely on other adjacent sites to justify their existence. Some are just too small or lack amenities to be regarded as ecotourism sites. Thus, it is important that Kesedar integrates or links up compatible locations, turning them into various clusters of attractions based on certain nature-based themes. Basic infrastructure needs to be built or upgraded. A more pressing issue is the overlapping authorities claiming their stakes at the sites, which have complicated development and management of the areas. While attracting international tourists to the area can be rather a challenging task, the relevant authorities should at least start with working hand in hand and at the same time, creating awareness among the local people to help in maintaining the sites.

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