



## ECOTOURISM IN NATIONAL PARK: FOUNDATIONS FOR ECOTOURISM BEST PRACTICE IN TAMAN NEGARA NATIONAL PARK, MALAYSIA

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### **Abstract**

Protected areas including national parks are visited by tourists seeking natural and remote recreational experiences. Rapid tourism development in these settings provides opportunities for locals to involve themselves as ecotourism operators and related services. The sustainability of the industry is in question resulting from increasing trend in tourists' arrival and successive pressures on environmental and local resources. As such, in order to address the issues it calls for the best practice management approach guided under principles of Rio Declaration on Environment and Development. One of its principles stated that tourism in national park has to recognize the primary purpose of its establishment, i.e. to conserve biological diversities, sustainable use of natural resources and fair and equitable sharing of benefits among the local communities. A study was conducted in Taman Negara Pahang to evaluate the feedback from the operators on the ecotourism best practice based on four core dimensions of ecotourism including the environment, education, economics and social components. The study shown that the respondents who participated in ecotourism and related activities have increased in their average income of 46 % over the last 10 years, from RM599.00 (US\$ 171) in 1992 to RM1296.00 (US\$ 370) in 2002. Results from the study recognized that best practice is well understood and to be adopted in due process. A large majority of ecotourism operators (> 90%) supported this conception, including the ecotourism certification program (91.4%). They were also very supportive on the needs for successive conservation approaches to protect the environment (Means > 1.2). Output from factor analysis confirmed that the best practice in ecotourism covers the components of environmental conservation which include conservation awareness, conservation education and behavior and conservation ethics. These factors could later form a condition enabling the ecotourism best practice to offer safety to environmental and local resources.

**Key words:** *National park, environmental conservation, ecotourism, local operators, best practice*

### **Introduction**

Ecotourism connotes biological diversity conservation. Issues have cropped up in many parks about safeguarding the resources integrity which the industry relied on. With increasing trend in tourists' arrival and pressures on environmental and local resources, the sustainability of the activity is in question. There is need to sustain this industry by adopting effective ecotourism concept through conservation initiatives by both players in the administration and services. In protected areas, the biodiversity of flora and fauna has to be protected due to their immense values to people. Natural resources are used directly or indirectly by people who live within and surrounding the settings. Hence, protected areas have complex relationships with the local communities that any activities in the area would leave impacts on both conservation and community (Schelhas *et al.*, 2002). Most likely however, such resources are later offered or sell to people outside the areas in order for the locals to generate or to add more to their basic incomes (Eagles and McCool, 2002).

When an area becomes popular with increasing visitors arrival, pressures to the resources in due times will increase. The growth in visitation and overuse of its resources could lead to negative or adverse impacts where such opportunities could be lost forever or

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become unsustainable. Globally, there has been pressure to adopt best practice of tourism in protected areas. This move is to ensure sustainable development required under the multilateral environmental agreements reflecting global regime for ecotourism. The guiding principles for travel and tourism are therefore specified under the Rio Declaration at the United Nations Environment and Development (UNCED). One of its principles stated that tourism in protected areas as in national parks need to recognize the primary purpose of its establishment, i.e. to conserve biological diversities, sustainable use of natural resources and fair and equitable sharing of benefits among the local communities. In addition, this move is also to increase the level of awareness upon the biodiversity conservation and its components which is still at low level among the users.

### **Regional and Local Issues**

In Malaysia's "public park" or protected areas, only the government based agencies such as the Wildlife and National Parks Department (DWNP), State Forestry or Wildlife Departments, State Corporations are involved in the management. Ecotourism planning were mainly top down in their approaches using the concept of "we are the expert" and with few participation from other stakeholders or local people. As an outcome, there found to be some weaknesses in the delivery of services and protection of the resources. Based on the National Ecotourism Plan by Tourism Ministry of Malaysia (MOCAT, 1995), said that the development of ecotourism include involving local communities in the planning and development, and delivering of the services where the benefits would be kept at local, promote environmental ethics, conservation education and in-depth knowledge on the part of manager and participants. This approach can be considered as ecotourism best practice where it involved participatory management with the local communities' institutions (Abdullah *et al.*, 2006). Hence, best practice in its simplified form is said to be approaches leading to wide participation from various stakeholders resulting in improvement in operational performance and effectiveness, service delivery and awarding of certification programs (Wight, 1999; Payne, 2001).

In the case of local communities ecotourism services operators need to be assessed on their environmental awareness and nature skill level when they enter into the industry. It is therefore vital to understand the locals' viewpoints upon the biodiversity and its conservation needs. As in Taman Negara Pahang, ecotourism industry and local community involvement in tourism entrepreneurships and related activities can be a good example for the country. This park is a well known protected area visited by Malaysian and foreign tourists who sought nature experience and local cultures. The rapid development on ecotourism in Taman Negara Pahang provide opportunities for locals to involve themselves as ecotourism operators and related businesses by providing services to visitors.

A study was conducted in Kuala Tahan, Taman Negara Pahang main visitors' complex to understand the issues which can affect the health of the resources and the well-being of local communities. It tried to understand how the parks and local institutions feel and opinionated about the resource conservation of the park.

### **Methodology**

A study was conducted in Kuala Tahan, Taman Negara Pahang throughout the month of June, 2003 to evaluate the feedback from ecotourism operators on conservation awareness and the potential of adopting best practice in ecotourism. A field survey using structured questionnaire and interview were administered to 150 operators which include local tourist guides, boat operators, resort's recreation staff, local chalets and restaurant operators.

### **Findings and Discussions**

Awareness and sensitivity of the environmental resources health and its conservation needs to be upheld to sustain ecotourism activities. The study found that based on socio-

economic benefits, the respondents have shown an increased in income among those who participated in ecotourism activities with monthly income of RM1296 (USD370) in 2002 when compared to less than RM599 (USD171) in 1992, an increase of 46% over a period of 10 years. The output from dichotomous analysis (“Yes” or “No” responses) on questions about the environment condition, environment education, economics sustainability and social dimensions, the operators have shown a high agreement on their importance (all responses showed more than 90% agreement). On the responses of operators sensitivity on best practice, a large majority (>90%) agreed on conservation issues and best practice in combination with the ecotourism certification program (91.4%).

In addition, the operators seemed to be of very supportive upon notion of the ecotourism best practice which addressed the environmental safety done through conservation approaches (mean of 1.0 to 1.5 based on scale 1 = very important to 5 = least important).

By using factor analyses on ecotourism best practices to be adopted by the local operators, 14 items were listed for the respondents to rate them (scale 1 = very important to 5 = least important). Results showed that data from rotated factor matrix recognized four commonalities or groups of common variables. The factors dimensions possessed intra-related characteristics (explained 20.8% of the variance); Once grouped these factors were accordingly named which were (1) conservation awareness, (2) conservation education, (3) conservation behavior, (4) conservation ethics.

Factors dimensions and items	Factor Loading	Eigenvalue (Variance)
Conservation Awareness Opportunities for visitors to learn local culture Opportunities for local involvement in business Water treatment without chemicals Indigenous and local are equal Visitors promote conservation	0.63 0.62 0.57 0.56 0.55	8.76 (20.85)
Conservation education Information on trail condition Operators promotes recycle programs Quality interpretation program referred to specialists	0.75 0.74	2.70 (6.04)
Conservation Behavior Behavior operators on visitors and natural areas Behavior visitor on visited areas	0.66 0.56	2.30 (5.37)
Conservation ethics Proceed with recycle programs Noise of engine used not exceed sound environment Activity not reduce quality environment Eco-labelling	0.80 0.52 0.51 0.50	1.92 (4.72)

Note: Extraction method: Principle axis factoring

Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization

Table 1. Summary of factor analysis on component of best practice in ecotourism



## Conclusion

Most local ecotourism operators accepted the idea on the conservation approaches in ecotourism best practice in Taman Negara. They are aware that by adopting the best practice by positioning it in high precedence would an excellent initiative to protect the natural resources which the activity is highly depended on. In precedence, ecotourism operators also realized that the sensitivity and fragileness of the environment that need to be effectively protected. It can be said that the villagers' income that depended directly on the park health are on the rise, higher than the other neighboring villagers. Ecotourism is therefore promised to provide beneficial income opportunities to the locals especially the tourism operators. Importantly, the level of understanding towards four factors of best practice, i.e. respect or compliance leading to conditions of the environment, education, economics sustainability and social values are the four factors dimension to be upheld. As for best practices, the operators claimed that four main factors have to be adopted in line with ecotourism sustainable development of the industry. These include the four dimensions of conservation processes including awareness, education, conservation behavior and ethics upon the environment.

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