

# Ecotourism in Malaysia: Perspectives of Tourists and Residents

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## **Ecotourism in Malaysia: Perspectives of Tourists and Residents**

Malaysia is strategically located in Southeast Asia maintaining both land and maritime borders with eight nations. Located in the tropics, Malaysia is one of only seventeen countries classified as megadiverse; it is “one of the most botanically diverse countries in the world” (Daud, n.d.). “It is a melting pot of different cultures, religions and ethnicities,” with natural attractions “from white sand beaches and coral reefs, to rainforests and mountains” (Plecher, 2019). Malaysia has a diverse population of approximately 32 million people, consisting of “Malays, Chinese, Indians and various Indigenous people,” which leads to religious, social and cultural diversity (Daud, n.d.). Since Malaysia’s independence in 1957, it has maintained one of the strongest economies in Asia, based mainly on exploiting its natural resources. Tourism is now the “third biggest contributor to Malaysia’s GDP, after manufacturing and commodities” (Plecher, 2019). In 2018, roughly 26 million persons visited Malaysia as tourists, which contributed roughly six percent of the total GDP. One of the largest subsets of the tourism industry is ecotourism. Kiper (2013) defines ecotourism as “an alternative tourism,” that involves “visiting natural areas in order to learn, to study, or to carry out environmentally friendly activities, that is, a tourism based on the nature experience, which enables the economic and social development of local communities.” Ecotourists themselves aim to reduce their impact on their surroundings while partaking in activities that both immerse themselves in nature and promote environmental conservation. Most ecotourists want to connect with and protect the environment while exploring its ecological beauty. Malaysia has adapted to this type of tourism by developing ecotourism attractions such as walking wooden bridge trails through jungles and snorkeling boat tours to swim with endangered sea turtles. As small communities in Malaysia develop such attractions, ecotourists are drawn to them. However, according to Kiper (2013),

“ecotourism has the potential to seriously impact local communities, largely due to the tendency of ecotourists to have a greater interest in the culture and nature of the areas they visit”. The Malaysian government claims to regulate tourism to protect the country’s ecology. Many question their promotion of ecotourism and lack of conservation policy because of the negative social, cultural and economic impacts on local communities. Ecotourism is a response to environmental sustainability values, but even to its advocates, the Malaysian government’s ecotourism motives are predominately economic at the expense of the environment.

### **Review of Research**

Other countries, such as China and India, are known for their rich biodiversity, pristine environments, and diverse social, religious and linguistic groups. This cultural diversity is attracting more and more tourists (Muthulingam & Gopalsamy, 2013). Today, most national parks and other ecotourism sites are under increasing pressure from their respective government agencies to expand urban-type infrastructure to support the ecotourism industry (Huang et al., 2008). A study completed by Huang (2008) found that although these countries are seeing impressive economic gains, “managers are challenged by resource overuse and misuse of forest parks” and struggle to “articulate what purpose or role a park is to fulfill” (Huang et al., 2008). They recognize that this overuse will be damaging and unsustainable to the ecological integrity (Muthulingam & Gopalsamy, 2013). China’s protected areas have suffered from “inadequate resource management, overcrowding and deterioration of the park environment” (Huang et al., 2008). The management systems in China and India’s protected areas are “contributing to the deterioration of park environments” because they are governed by several agencies which introduces competition in order to obtain profits from the tourists. These ecological challenges

resulting from overpopulation of tourists in national park areas “requires relevant government agencies to place higher priority on the protection of park environments” (Huang et al., 2008). Currently there is no federal legislation in China that discusses the protection of forest parks and the environment in this context.

### **Malaysian Government Perspective**

Malaysia has much to offer both international and domestic tourists. Its diverse cultures and pristine environment are lucrative tourist attractions. The Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism (MOCAT) is responsible for formulating strategic policy, while, Tourism Malaysia, a federal statutory body, “is involved in marketing and promoting tourism products” (Daud, n.d.). In 1995, an ecotourism policy was drafted, expanding on the 1992 Malaysian Tourism Policy, which focused “on ecotourism as a niche market rather than grouping it within the broader mass tourism market” (Daud, n.d.). The Eleventh Malaysia Plan, released in 2015, discusses Malaysia’s future national ecotourism plans, between the years of 2016 and 2020, in the subsection ‘Expanding Modern Services’. This subsection states the government’s ecotourism goal to “position Malaysia as a premier ecotourism destination by leveraging biodiversity assets with increased branding and promotion” (Malaysia & Malaysia, 2015). This plan promises to strengthen “experience-enriching elements, such as tourism facilities, interpretive centers, safety measures, and communications” (Malaysia & Malaysia, 2015). The federal and state governments, however, provide minimal guidance for private sector companies on how “to develop infrastructure facilities at various ecotourism destinations” to fulfil these initiatives (Daud, n.d.). Almost all ecotourism policies discussed in this plan “support the government’s strategy to use the ecotourism industry as a catalyst for economic development” however,

without underlying policy to enforce environmental protective actions the Malaysian ecology will suffer (Daud, n.d.).

The ecotourism industry is one of the leading service industries for developing nations. It has high potential to improve their economies through ancillary value added from tourism products, goods and services. In recent decades, “millions of Ringgits have been pumped into the advertisement and tourism campaigns to promote Malaysia” and build the infrastructure necessary to support it (Weng, 2009). The government lacks concern for the “increased pressures of development that would ultimately” negatively impact the environment and natural treasures (Weng, 2009). This negative impact occurs when the level of environmental use is greater than its ability to cope, also known as Carrying Capacity. The development of marinas on Malaysian islands can cause sedimentation and current changes, which can harm coral reefs (Ferdhaus, n.d.). Local citizens on the islands of Tioman and Redang have participated in protests against the rapid infrastructure development, such as airports and jetties, that are ruining their islands (Weng, 2009). These islands will soon lose their pristine qualities and become solely cultural, shopping and sport attractions if no action is taken (Weng, 2009). The Malaysian government needs to “change their obsession with arrivals and receipt numbers and start focusing on protecting the natural” environment before it is destroyed (Weng, 2009). There is a pressing need to implement regulation and policy that will help the government strike a balance between environmental conservation and economic gains (Mohamad et al., 2017). The authorities need to act fast to come up with effective management plans to save the natural attractions. These plans should be accompanied by involvement from local citizens, proper enforcement and full implementation. Without action from the federal and state governments, these islands will soon lose their pristine environmental qualities.

## **Ecotourists' Perspective**

The Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism in Malaysia (MOCAT) defines ecotourism as “environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature, that promotes conservation, has low visitor impact and provides the beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations” (Yacob, 2010). This definition shares similar attributes with The International Ecotourism Society (TIES), definition of ecotourism: “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the welfare of local people” (“TIES Overview,” n.d.). There is little definition consistency, however, most researchers agree that “ecotourism is a responsible form of visiting unspoiled nature that adheres to a common set of principles (e.g., it must conserve the environment, promote a sustainable use of resources and provide economic benefit to the locals” (Yusof et al., 2011). A study was completed by Dekhili & Achabou in 2015 to understand how ecotourists define ecotourism. Concern for the environment accounted for “88% of all ideas regarding the concept’s definition”. Most respondents “associate ecotourism with overall protection of the environment, with respect for the planet operating at every stage of the trip” (Dekhili & Achabou, 2015). One stated ecotourism is “tourism that’s good for the environment, it doesn’t harm nature in the places we visit” (Dekhili & Achabou, 2015). Another study was completed in Lower Kinabatangan, Sabah in 2007, with the same goal. In general, the respondents “recognition of the primacy of nature and the environment emerged clearly from the responses” (Chan & Baum, 2007). One respondent said: “I expect to experience and see the wildlife in nature, the clean environment, and the preserved forest” (Chan & Baum, 2007). Most ecotourists interpret their ecotourism practices “in association with nature and the environment,” no matter

year or location of travel (Chan & Baum, 2007). Ecotourism requires clean and preserved environments for it to be considered ecotourism.

Ecotourists expect educated resource management techniques be used to maintain the environment they visit. Ecotourists recognize that they have responsibilities to uphold and expect the same from ecotourism destination administration. Yacob (2010), presented interviews with 298 ecotourists who visited the Redang Island Marine Parks (RIMP) in Malaysia, an ecotourism site maintained by the national and local governments in Malaysia. After visiting the park, most tourists agreed that the ecotourism resource management needed improvement. Results showed that 71% of respondents agreed “that change will improve accessibility to the RIMP, 57% of respondents agree that changes will give more efficiency in ecological management,” and 55% of respondents agree that “changes could reduce the level of congestion in recreational activities” (Yacob, 2010). Of the surveyed ecotourists, 69% believe that the RIMP management “should provide a better-integrated management plan” and 45% support increasing the current conservation charge to enter the park (Yacob, 2010). The ecotourists’ perception of the issues they experienced at the Redang Island Marine Parks can be used as a basis for what the new management plan will need to cover. A new management approach will only be successful “if the dialogue between managers and stakeholders, supporting and sharing decisions is encouraged” (Yacob, 2010). In an interview with traders on Pangkor Island, improvement of infrastructure to support the ecotourists is needed. A fish trader, Rasdi Ibrahim, said: “the Manjung Municipal Council and Marine Department should look into upgrading basic infrastructure around the island such as the jetty” (*The Star Online*, n.d.). Ibrahim also pointed out that there were areas “around the jetty complex, which are left unused and can be turned into rest areas or for other purposes” (*The Star Online*, n.d.). A bank employee, Khairi Nazreen

Ibrahim, from Kuala Lumpur, was also interviewed by The Star Online. He said: “the ferry services could be improved with newer and cleaner ferries.” The Malaysian government needs to improve communication with ecotourism park administration to improve ecological management techniques and infrastructure to support the ecotourists.

Ecotourists demand environmental conservation and sustainability be of high concern for all resorts they visit. Sustainability originates in the sustainable development paradigm, which defines sustainable as “development that meets the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Yusof et al., 2011). In the context of the ecotourism industry in Malaysia, sustainability “is an approach aimed at preserving the environment and culture of the communities that host the tourists, while at the same time fulfilling tourists’ adventurous desires (Yusof et al., 2011). In this way, the ecotourists “impact the natural environment and the tourism experience, while the quality of the experience is affected by the management actions necessary to ameliorate those impacts” (Chin et al., 2000). However, management of ecotourism sites in Malaysia is complicated by the federal government. “There is no single authority empowered to make decisions about the environmental implications of tourism development,” this is up to the state to appoint (Chin et al., 2000). In 2000, Chin completed a study using a questionnaire that was distributed by on-site researches to ecotourists in Bako National Park. All activities participated in by the respondents in Bako National Park related to enjoyment of nature. These include “hiking (76%), sightseeing (72%), observing wildlife (66%), relaxing (61%) and photography (61%)” (Chin et al., 2000). Over “90% of Bako visitors felt that being close to nature and observing nature/wildlife were important” (Chin et al., 2000). However, the environmental impact of the ecotourists was considered a “problem by more than 50% of visitors” (Chin et al., 2000). These “included litter

around the Park (69%), erosion along walk-trails (62%) and damage to natural vegetation (57%)” (Chin et al., 2000). A number of respondents commented on “lack of enforcement of park regulations” as another major impact initially not mentioned (Chin et al., 2000). This suggests that ecotourists visiting Bako National Park believed “environmental conditions were likely to worsen in the future” based on lack of confidence in “the ability of managers to deal with such problems” (Chin et al., 2000). This was also found when a team of researchers distributed a questionnaire to ecotourists at Lake Kenyir. They calculated a tourist’s satisfaction score by finding an experience score and subtracting an expectation score from this value. In general, “the experience mean scores were lower than the expectation scores” (Yusof et al., 2011). Ecotourists recognized an increased need to “improve the quality of sustainable products and services offered at Lake Kenyir” in response to the “huge publicity efforts focused on the ecotourism industry in this country” (Yusof et al., 2011). Ecotourism should “benefit conservation through improved management of visited natural areas and ecosystems” (Bhuiyan, 2011). By not paying attention to the sustainability concerns of ecotourism destination sites, tourists that visit these sites will not be satisfied with their experience. The government is using ecotourism publicity efforts for economic reasons, without spending the time or effort to honor the ecotourists’ values.

### **Local Community Perspective**

Successful ecotourism requires local community participation and support. The “local communities play significant roles in shaping the rural environment, utilizing most of the rural resources for economic gain and are responsible for creating the local culture which becomes the main product” that ecotourism sells (Ismail et al., 2013). Ecotourism promotes environmental protection and economic security in exchange for local support. Local governments expect that

“as tourism activities develop in their areas, communities will come to realize the importance of the tourism network” as ecotourists value engagement with local communities (Ismail et al., 2013). In 2010, researchers surveyed 85 residents of three villages, Kuala Medang in Pahang, Teluk Ketapang in Terengganu and Seterpa in Kelantan, seeking “reasons why respondents participated in the local ecotourism activities” (Proceedings, 2013). They found that 45% wanted to “promote local and traditional cultures” and 16% considered local participation “a vital part of youth development” (Proceedings, 2013). However, most local citizens reported negative social and cultural outcomes. In a study of people on Pangkor Island in Malaysia, researchers quoted the headman of Pangkor Island: “Most parents work as fishermen, so their attention on children development is less... such issues emerged when foreign cultures brought by international visitors seem to permeate into local cultures and lives” (Ismail et al., 2013). He reported that drug abuse among the youth, followed the introduction of ecotourism to their village. A clothing shop manager, Teluk Nipah said: “Their presence (tourists) interfere with the moral value of local teenagers with their bad habits and manners” (Ismail et al., 2013). In ecotourism, ecotourists engage with local populations to learn about their unique culture, however, unwanted influence from the foreign culture results. Nipah also comments on the local economic influences of ecotourism saying that the “cost of living became higher” when the ecotourists started coming to his island (Ismail et al., 2013). The main economic expectation for the residents of Kuala Medang in Pahang, Teluk Ketapang in Terengganu and Seterpa in Kelantan was to “earn extra income” (43%); 21% wanted “to improve” their current “living conditions” (Proceedings, 2013). Many local business owners prefer to hire foreign workers” who speak English, leaving local fishermen jobless (Ismail et al., 2013). Local taxi boat drivers “have to compete with illegal and non-licensed operators” from private enterprises that can charge lower fees (Ismail et al., 2013).

The ecotourism industry has not provided Pangkor Islanders steady employment or improved livelihoods. The influx of private enterprises and ecotourists have destabilized the local culture and economy, leaving fear for the next generation. Ecotourism is promoted by the Malaysian government to offer cultural and economic benefits, when in reality, both are threatened. Local employment opportunities have dramatically changed and Malaysians are fighting to preserve their culture.

In order for ecotourism to be economically advantageous for the Malaysian government, they need unwavering local participation and understanding. In Lenggong Valley, Malaysia, “97.3% of total business establishments in the five economic sectors” are Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), they have been considered the “backbone for economic development” since 2011 (Rashid et al., 2013). Not only would tourism benefit from the “entrepreneurial activities in the area, but tourism and SMEs would simultaneously benefit each other” (Rashid et al., 2013). In 2012, the Lenggong Valley was declared a UNESCO’s World Heritage Site. The valley was selected “based on its rich paleontological findings that span close to two million years, one of the longest records of early man in a single locality” (Mohamed, n.d.). The Malaysian Government immediately looked to create a strong ecotourism destination brand and capitalize economically on this opportunity. It was critical that the local community’s cultural values be strong and visible so the tourism destinations in Lenggong Valley “will be pegged to the values of local culture and not driven by commercialization” (Mohamed, n.d.). Researchers visited three districts in Lenggong Valley, Lenggong District, Temelong District and Durian Pipit District and interviewed a few notable people. The first local resident said many locals were creating SMEs catering to tourists to increase their standard of living due to the government's effort to push local residents to be entrepreneurs. However, these SMEs were unstable. They were not prepared

to “receive the arrival of tourists in years to come” (Rashid et al., 2013). The values of the local residents did “not seem to coincide with the values that are promoted in getting the valley enlisted as the World Heritage Site” (Rashid et al., 2013). A second respondent highlighted that a large percentage of the “community is still involved in the first-level economic activities which are agriculture and fisheries,” while, others pressured by the government to establish businesses in tourism, are creating SMEs that sell “confectioneries, involve retailing,” and opening restaurants (Rashid et al., 2013). The government realized the economic benefits of encouraging locals to create SMEs, but exploited them in “the wrong way (without proper regulations) and locals hardly have a clue as to how to get involved” (Weng, 2009). Unless politicians and government officials “educate the locals and inject interests, local people’s willingness to participate in ecotourism will be limited” (Weng, 2009). A second study was completed and a disconnect was also evident in many attractions marketed to the visitors such as the caves and natural environment. The archaeological findings were in the many caves in the region, however, they are not the “key reason that have held the fascination of the local community” (Rashid et al., 2013). The local community was more interested in talking about “the myths and folklores that are linked to the caves,” which holds higher significance in their culture (Rashid et al., 2013). They are proud that “the area has many natural attractions such as rivers, waterfalls, hills and forests that are still untouched by modernization,” while the visitors “key intention of visiting Lenggong” is to visit the archaeological sites (Rashid et al., 2013). The respondents’ description of why tourists should visit the Lenggong Valley as a UNESCO Heritage site was based on “what they heard from authoritative sources” (Rashid et al., 2013). Their responses were “cursory, impersonal and lacked passion,” many were not able “to explain what the term actually means” (Rashid et al., 2013). It was clear that the government only had economic interests in the

area and did not take the time to understand what actually makes the Lenggong Valley special to its residents.

## **Conclusion**

Ecotourism has undoubtedly provided an increase in economic stability for the country of Malaysia. After wide marketing and publicity efforts were taken by both the federal and state governments, ecotourists flooded the natural environments that the pristine country had to offer. Local populations were generally surprised by this influx of tourists and the high demand for their goods and services. They were quickly encouraged by both federal and state government to develop small and medium businesses that would support this new industry, however, without adequate direction or support from them. The local residents experienced an increase in livelihood monetarily, however, increased crime and loss of cultural heritage were experienced by many. In addition, the key cultural values promoted by the federal and state governments did not align with that of the locals. The goal of all ecotourists is maintaining cultural livelihood and environmental protection despite slight variations in ecotourism definitions. The aim of the federal and state governments is to increase the number of ecotourists frequenting Malaysia's resorts, however, adequate concern for the environment and the local culture is not being taken. Environment and cultural conservation and protection is overshadowed by the economic opportunity. Without regulation and policy to protect and maintain the local ecology, the Malaysian tourism industry may decline sharply.

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