# A Review on Ecotourism Practices in Other Countries and Malaysia (Borneo)

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## ABSTRACT

Ecotourism is an industry that is gaining popularity in 1990s, and until now to find the best model that is suitable for this industry and business sustainability is yet to be determined. Like it or not, it is rather difficult to sustain the environment, flora and fauna, and cultures, while trying to promote ecotourism. As such, this paper discusses ecotourism practices by a few countries and its implication towards social, economic and environmental sustainability. Recommendations are forwarded to suggest some ways business sustainability, in relation to ecotourism, could be fostered via preservation of cultures, environments, and economic activities of the natives that are affected by ecotourism industry whether it is in Malaysia, Brunei and other countries.

*Keywords: sustainability, economy, cultures, values, social-ills, ecotourism, Malaysia, Borneo, environments, social, natives, business sustainability*

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

In the late 1990s, ecotourism has become a trend in countries such as Africa and developing countries. However in Borneo or Malaysia specifically, ecotourism industry is beginning to experience growth as the demand from foreigners are increasing (Hitchner et. al, 2009). Ecotourism industry is becoming more attractive to tourists who are living in metropolitan cities or developed countries such as America, European countries, Japan and other developed countries. Some tourists prefer to experience the adventures, challenges, fauna and flora offer by ecotourism industries. This type of tourism industry will only be possible with the existence of the indigenous people who are still living in their own natural environment. Once the wave of development strikes in these places, all the ecological behaviour of the flora and fauna will be disrupted, and forces these communities to be relocated to some other place.

The main aim of ecotourism is to offer an alternative source of income to the natives and indirectly give them new hope to survive. Simultaneously, the natives are accessible to the outside world through the building of roads, and other types of amenities that is impossible and unaffordable to them (McAlpin, 2007; Walpole, Goodwin & Ward, 2001). This is a new avenue for the natives to get better education for themselves and their children, and indirectly, exposes them to the outside world. Indirectly, the natives might be highly dependent on new technologies and high-technology gadgets that are deemed unthinkable for them. Thus, modernization of this native people is becoming prevalent, and the future generation might lose some of the values, cultures and survival skills that have been practiced by their ancestors (Hitchner et. al, 2009). This might lead to the death of ecotourism industry in that particular country, or might be an enhanced version of ecotourism experience, with a mixture of modernization and natural way of living, or a blend of culture and living experience to be offered to the tourist.

Ecotourism industry allows the natives to share their survival skills, cultures and values to visitors or tourists from other parts of the world. While trying to promote the wilderness, uniqueness of the flora and fauna, and cultures, this industry has indirectly destroyed the natural habitat of these people. The issues of culture and social ills are becoming a norm in most parts of the world that are engaged in ecotourism industry. The tourist especially lonely males or females flirting with the locals, and who are engaged in some kind of short term relationships that have slowly destroyed the cultural values of those societies (Sustainable Tourism, 2002; Hitchner et. al, 2009; Ellen & Berstein, 1994).

However, there are also tourists, who are educated, and elderly, who enjoy the entertainment as well as the learning experience that they gained from the ecotourism experiences offer by the industry (Chen & Ma, 2007).

This paper discusses ecotourism practices by a few countries and its implication towards the social, economic and environments sustainability. Recommendations are forwarded to suggest on ways business sustainability in relation to ecotourism can be fostered via preservation of the cultures, environments, and economic activities of the natives that are affected by ecotourism industry whether it is in Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei or other countries.

## 2.0 ECOTOURISM

### Definition: Ecotourism

Ecotourism is defined as 'responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well being of local people' as quoted from The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) (Singh, Slotkin & Vamosi, 2007). From a sustainable perspective, ecotourism can be defined as a tourism that promotes and acts as a catalyst for environmental protection and tries to find a balance between the five main factors of the ecotourism diamond sustainable model, which are economic development, environmental protection, cultural protection, social development and political development (Gouvea, Kassicieh, Figueira, & Suframa, 2008). Ecotourism can also be defined from an economic perspective, that entails attracting tourist to a natural environment that are unique and accessible via improving nature conservation through education that leads to a changing of attitude, amongst local people and government, which includes providing employment and entrepreneurial opportunities for local people (Herbig & O'Hara, 1997).

### Overview: Tourism Industry in Borneo: Indigenous Tourism a.k.a Ecotourism

In the Ninth Malaysian Plan, one of the niche markets that can be developed further is ecotourism. Malaysia is shaping its "tourism package" with multi-cultural background and rich biodiversity. In Borneo, particularly in Sarawak and Sabah, the government are emphasizing on ecotourism especially at Bako National Park (Sarawak) and Kinabalu Park (Sabah).

Bako National Park covers 2,742 hectares of rugged sand stone peninsula to the east of the Bako River near Kuching, the capital of Sarawak and declared as a protected area since 1st May 1957. It is opened to the public on the 4th May 1957. The park is home to a variety of plant species and vegetation types, and wildlife. The wildlife includes proboscis monkeys, long-tailed macaques, silver leaf monkeys, common monitor lizards, plantain squirrels, bearded pigs, and mouse deer. One of the main aims for Sarawak's Tourism would be to provide a pathway for business success for indigenous cultural tourism attractions, from start-ups to high-level sustainable involvement in the tourism industry (Indigenous Communities, 2007). The main purpose of the initiative would be for the indigenous communities to benefit socially and financially from tourism industry in Sarawak.

In an article by Ellen and Berstein (1994), in Brunei, most of the natives have migrated to the town areas, emptying rural villages, and this has led to a decline in the knowledge of the forest. As such tourist who come are expecting forest trails that are equipped with wooden walkways, picnic sites, areas for outdoor games and observation towers are left disappointed with the lack of knowledge and facilities in the area. The ecotourism spots in Brunei include Sungai Liang, Merimbun, Bukit Shahbandar, Batu Apoi Forest Reserve and other potential ecotourism parks.

### Ecotourism Perspectives: Review from other countries

Earlier researchers found that ecotourism projects might not be able to generate sufficient financial incentives. Other than that, United Nations website on ecotourism in year 2003 showed that ecotourism had created damage to local environments and cultures, economic instability, and increased waste materials as some of the negative side effects from ecotourism activities (McAlpin,

2008). Ecotourism activities and its contribution towards the countries such as Australia, Amazon, Bhutan, Chile, Kenya and Peru are discussed further in the next paragraph.

In Australia, it is believed that ecotourism is able to improve economic and human development within indigenous group's communities. A system has to be established to ensure ecotourism sectors are growing. The consultation and planning processes, the availability of suitable education and training to indigenous business owner-operators and the availability of partnership will allow ecotourism to be a successful endeavor in Australia (Fuller, Caldicott, Cairncross, & Wilde, 2007). Amazon on the other hand, is well-known as the world's largest natural reservoir of biodiversity and accounted for about 2/3 of the world's genetic bank. Hence, ecotourism offers sustainable development strategies into profits and feasible alternative to finance the conservation of ecosystems. Ecotourism is believed to be the solution to protect forests in Amazon from deforestation, and able to create job for more than 27 million Brazillians for ecotourism activities (Gouves, Kassicieh, Figueira & Suframa, 2008; Stronza, 2008). In Bhutan, ecotourism is believed to create gross national happiness that includes primary and secondary domain. The primary domain is on cultural preservation, environmental protection, local income and social harmony. The secondary domain includes biodiversity conservation, modernization, gross national happiness and national economy (Gurung & Scholz, 2008). In Chile and Kenya, the main target for ecotourism is to attract tourists to the reserves and generates income to the local.

Ecotourism in Chile is at Mapu Luhal Network of Indigenous Parks (RML). The main purpose of this project is to increase and diversify per capita income of the indigenous people at the settlement, while preserving the environment and culture by having tourism based on a system of parks, trails, campgrounds, and local services. Through these ecotourism activities, the indigenous people at the settlement obtain road facilities and diverse sources of income (McAlpin, 2008). Above all, the most successful ecotourism industry is Kenya. The country has experienced substantial earning from ecotourism industry as early as in 1987. Furthermore, in early 1990s, Kenya is known as "the world's ecotourism attraction". In year 2007, Kenya has re-emerged as the leader in ecotourism, as such Kenya also known as the oldest and most successful national ecotourism society and a growing community-run ecotourism industry in the world (Honey, 2009). In short, by having a proper policy and standards in the development and sustainability of ecotourism, business activities can self-sustain, and in the end, improve the global perspectives on income generating activities for the country while preserving the environment for future generations (Parks, Parks & Allen, 2009; Higgins & Desbiolles, 2009; Bookbinder, Dinerstein, Rijal, Cauley & Rajouria, 1998).

## 3.0 BENEFITS AND DAMAGES CAUSED BY ECOTOURISM

### Benefits of Ecotourism

The benefits of ecotourism can be seen from the economic development of a country via foreign exchange activities for less developed countries. It also promotes the protection of biodiversity, job creation, and establishment of local businesses; mainly handicraft industries, and other entrepreneurial activities, especially eco-entrepreneurship. These economic activities allow the flow of foreign currency into the country. Since ecotourism is a labour intensive industry, it allows an effective way of exporting services to developed countries by promoting the protection of biodiversity. Ecotourism has multiplier effects in the generation of direct and indirect jobs, such as creating opportunities for tour operators, lodging and hotels, and restaurants (Hitchner et. al, 2009; Parks, Parks & Allen, 2009; Ohl-Schacherer et. al, 2008).

Ecotourism promotes the establishment of local businesses aim at providing gear supplies and handicrafts for the industry. Furthermore, it creates opportunities for the development of local eco-entrepreneurship that creates the possibility of placing locally produced products and services. Some of these eco-enterprises help to preserve local endangered flora and fauna. Besides, ecotourism also provides the impetus for improving local infrastructure that includes upgrading of roads, airports, telecommunications and ports. Ecotourism also generates additional tax revenues for local community's social development (Walpole, Goodwin & Ward, 2001; Hartshorn, 1995). Ecotourism

demands personnel trainings in a number of ecotourism service related activities that have potential multiplier impacts on other sides of the local economy.

**Damages of Ecotourism**

The damages of ecotourism activities include alteration of local culture and the life style of local population (Stronza, 2008), erosion from new hiking trails, and pollution of the local environment (Nash, 2009; Ellen & Bernstein, 1994). Ecotourism can lead to deforestation due to expansion of local infrastructure and hotel accommodations (Nash, 2009; Taylor, 1997). Other than that, ecotourism may have limited economic impact on the local community. The effect of deforestation might lead to spreading of infectious diseases due to changes of vector habitats that bring people closer to the vectors (Taylor, 1997). The foreign control of ecotourism operations may limit the local economic impact of ecotourism operations that lead to the leakage of foreign currency. Moreover, the reliance on foreign supplies and foreign controlled services may limit the impact of operations (Gouvea, Kassicieh, Figueira & Suframa, 2008).

**4.0 ECOTOURISM DIAMOND SUSTAINABLE MODEL**

There are five main factors of the ecotourism diamond sustainable model, which are economic development, environmental protection, cultural protection, social development and political development. Below are detailed discussions on each factor.

**Economic Development**

Revenues from the ecotourism activities can be reinvested into economic generation activities of the indigenous people, such as for basic infrastructure, security, staff salary and training (Bookbinder, Dinerstein, Rijal, Cauley & Rajouria, 1998). Other than that, locals will be exposed to new job opportunities and thus, able to improve their communication skills, leadership skills, mastery of other languages and enhanced confidence level in interacting with the tourists (Drumm, 2008; Ohl-Schacherer at. al, 2008; Walpole, Goodwin & Ward, 2001). In return, these skills will lead to future monetary gain via tourism activities and other employment opportunities.

**Environmental Protection**

In an article written by Drumm (2008), in order to ensure the sustainability of the nature capital, the author had proposed the "threshold sustainability" concept. Ecuadorian and Peruvian government have adopted this concept, which allows revenues to be reinvested at an adequate level to prevent loss of natural capital. The initiatives include five impact monitoring, basic infrastructure, security, interpretation and information, and staff salaries and training.

**Cultural Protection**

In an article written by Ellen and Bernstein (1994), they reported that Bruneians would like to control the types of tourist visiting the country due to their cultural conservatism and sense of self-sufficiency. If possible, they would like to avoid semi nude tourist wandering around the forest when experiencing the ecotourism activities. The main challenge in Brunei would be to balance between the Islamic religious practice and the demands of the economy from ecotourism activities.

**Social Development**

In an EATOF Conference 2007, a paper entitled "*Indigenous Communities: the Way Forward for Sarawak's Tourism Industry",* discusses the need for the local government in getting the indigenous communities to be involved in its development and the management in tourism industry. Opportunities should be created in such a way that communities are exposed to the various business and management skills; and an agent is needed to create the opportunities to complement the cultural and environmental wealth that these communities possess. This statement is also supported by a research conducted by Ohl-Schacherer et. al. (2008), that the locals in Manu National Park, Peru are

able to learn new skills for self-development and future employment opportunities. In Turkey, the Pinarbasi ecotourism centre offers tourist guide training courses to the locals and about 20 of them graduated and are awarded with a certificate (Gunes & Hens, 2007).

**Political Development**

Government should ensure proper regulations, and certified local operators are appointed, to ensure that they are following procedures for environmental protection (Gouvea, Kassicieh, Figueira & Suframa, 2008; Zhang, 2008).

## 5.0 SUSTAINABILITY ISSUES

The sustainability issues that are important for ecotourism industry would be business sustainability, environment sustainability and culture sustainability.

**Business Sustainability**

The business sustainability is only possible when the ecotourism diamond sustainable model, which are economic development, environmental protection, cultural protection, social development and political development are being taken care of. Any deviation from the model might have significant impacts towards the sustainability of ecotourism industry in any particular country. Ecotourism activities can be a threat to the biodiversity, primate habitats, wildlife become scarce, quality of visitor experience will decline, and tourist might choose some other destination due to poor management of the parks (Drumm, 2008; Tinsley & Lynch, 2008). In Malaysia, especially in Sarawak, the state government has made numerous statements supporting the development of ecotourism as a means of income generating activities, as well as an important component of federal and state sustainable forestry policies (Hitchner et. al, 2009).

**Environment Sustainability**

Environmental sustainability will only be possible when nature is not disrupted. Less logging activities, more preservation of the natures, flora and fauna, road as well as facilities should be built in such a way that lessens the impact of deforestation to the land. As supported by Hitchner et. al. (2009) there was a link between sustainable development to environmental conservation in the new ecotourism enterprises, especially in Sarawak and Sabah. Educating the eco-tourists and creating awareness among operators on the negative impacts will help to minimize the damage of ecotourism activities. This will ensure environmental sustainability as well as attract more tourists to sustain ecotourism in the area (Zhang, 2008; Kiss, 2004).

**Culture Sustainability**

The cultural sustainability of then native people will only be possible when the native people experience less culture shock, and are able to adjust and adapt well to the changes that happened in the eco-park. The leader must ensure that all people in the native land should be well informed on how they could sustain or maintain their cultural values while adjusting to the modernization that they are experiencing from the outside world. Most tourists would like to experience the "real" rather than "unreal" ecotourism cultural practices and rituals of indigenous people, which is the main attraction in ecotourism offerings (Stronza, 2008; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2009).

## 6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

There are few recommendations for Borneo countries on how to capitalized on ecotourism activities that includes monitoring and enhancing entrepreneurial activities, developing creativity and innovation in the industry, engaging in ethical and moral conduct, facilitating increasing demand from tourists, developing better government policies and supports, as well as acquiring supports from indigenous groups.

## Entrepreneurial Activities

The entrepreneurial activities include lodging services, food and beverages services, entertainment such as cultural dance, wildlife experience such as jungle tracking, and production of souvenirs for visitors. For example in Turkey, at Kure Mountains National Park, the villagers who are mainly middle aged and older are involved in forestry, agriculture, apiculture, woodcarving, weaving, chestnut farming and tourism. The main attraction of the park is from folkloric values and traditional wooden houses of the locals (Gunes & Hens, 2007). Whereas in Sarawak, the Iban women are able to earn extra income by producing and selling crafts, such as weavings, baskets and women accessories (Yea & Noweg, 2000). As such, ecotourism is a new opportunity for local people because it is seen as an alternative livelihood for the local communities.

## Creativity and Innovation

The creativity of the natives in producing more products and services for the ecotourism activities in their place is proved able to enhance the income as well as the industry for the community (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2009; Gunes & Hens, 2007; Yea & Noweg, 2000). In an article written by Weaver and Lawton (2007), the authors had discussed a creative way to accommodate ecotourism demand by redesigning zoos to reflect the natural habitat of the animals. In addition, the private land that is converted into protected areas is gaining popularity among ecotourism operator in Australia.

## Ethical and Moral Conduct

The ethical and moral conduct of the visitors needs crucial supervision and attention from all relevant parties that includes leaders of the communities, police and government. In Australia, the term "greenwashing" refers to a third party evaluating whether the operators comply with the code of conduct guidelines as stipulated in the operator certification (Weaver & Lawton, 2007; Higgin-Desbiolles, 2009). By having the "greenwashing" policy in practice, the tourists as well as the ecotourism operators have to comply with the guidelines or else some form of penalty will be imposed to the operators.

## Demand from the tourist

Since the demand from the tourist are increasing, the government as well as the communities need to identify any tourists that might pose a threat to the people and communities that are engaged in ecotourism activities (Ellen & Berstein, 1994; Chen & Ma, 2007).

## Government Policy and Support

Governments should be able to assist the native in engaging into ecotourism by providing special skills and incentives for the native to be engaged in ecotourism industry, as evidenced from other countries such as Kenya, Latin America, and Brazil, in which the main source of income for the country derived from ecotourism industry. The environmental variables do not play a significant role in driving tourism demand, however, the main drive that attracts tourists to ecotourism activities in the country were derived from government investment in travel and tourism. In short, government money is important in facilitating tourism in less developed countries (Chen & Ma, 2007; Gouvea, & Hranaiova, 2004). Government policy and supports are also needed to ensure that ecotourism industries would sustain and be successful in the future (Hitchner et al., 2009; Kiss, 2004).

## NGOs

Non-government organization and environmentalist might assert some pressure towards the regulation of ecotourism initiatives for fear of losing the natural flora and fauna in the country, especially in Borneo or Sarawak. As such, proper plans and initiatives should be shared and communicated to relevant parties especially non-profit organizations (NGOs). The natives as well as local government

should work together with the NGOs, to understand better the needs to preserve the environment, as well as the best practices that could be adopted in promoting ecotourism to tourists while preserving the environment. As supported in an article written by Zhang (2008), the author had discussed on the need of ecotourism operators to improve relationship with the public sector, NGOs, and trading partners for better financial result. In addition, ecotourism companies that are environmentally aware of the situation may gain corporate advantage via enhanced image.

**Support from Indigenous Groups**

The ecotourism industry will not expand and grow if the native people are hesitant about their participation and contribution towards these efforts. The ecotourism industry could only be made possible, if the natives are able to work cohesively and cooperatively in a developmental scheme that will foster their entrepreneurial spirits, creativity and innovation in terms of products and services to be offered to the tourists, preserving the flora and fauna, and sharing the adventures of living in their natural environment.  In addition, the willingness of the natives to share their living styles, culture and their handicraft making to the tourists, is able to attract more visitors to come and experience their cultures and lifestyles. Since most of the natives are not well conversed in English, the willingness and ability of the natives to learn and master the English language will be an added advantage towards the growing demand of ecotourism in any particular settlements.

**7.0 CONCLUSION**

In order to sustain ecotourism industry in Malaysia particularly in Sarawak or Borneo, supports and efforts are needed especially in developing entrepreneurial activities among natives. Besides, there is also the need to instill creativity and innovation among natives in generating income from the ecotourism industry. Government policy, support from indigenous groups and NGOs, and monitoring demand from tourists is non-exceptional as well. Finally yet importantly, ethical and moral conduct among natives and tourist need to be monitored closely in order to curb any social ills that might result from ecotourism activities. By having all initiatives developed properly, the ecotourism industry will be able to be self-sustain and thus, contributes towards the economic and social development whether at the local, state or national level as a whole.

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