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RESEARCH NOTE



Exploring the regenerative potential for community-based ecotourism in the Niah National Park in Sarawak, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Regenerative tourism has recently gained much attention, joining other regenerative ideas like regenerative agriculture, regenerative design, and regenerative development. It promotes value-driven approaches that prioritise community-based tourism development and aims to enhance local well-being by fostering alternative pathways. Concerns regarding the future of the tourism sector as well as its contribution to community empowerment have increased in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly in the case of tourism-dependent and developing economies. In the context of the Niah National Park in Sarawak, Malaysia, this research note critically reflects on past and current development approaches and discusses regenerative tourism potentials.

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Community-based tourism; regenerative tourism; alternative development; Indigenous peoples; human-nature relationship

Introduction

The sustainable development paradigm has increasingly been questioned as to whether it can accommodate contemporary economic, social, and environmental challenges. These discourses have led to the emergence of regenerative notions that emphasise the interdependent relationship between human society and the natural environment (Gibbons et al., 2020; Matunga et al., 2020). At the same time, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and the enforced pause on international travel and global mobility, concerns about the future of the tourism sector and its contribution to community development have increased, particularly for tourism-dependent and developing economies (Carr, 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Movono et al., 2023).

Distinguished from the conventional tourism development paradigm, which is profit and volume-driven, regenerative tourism aims to be value-driven and to prioritise a destination's environmental and community needs. A prime focus on profit with limited concerns for longer-term environmental impacts and potential negative effects on communities is no longer seen as a generally acceptable model for tourism development. It is anticipated that regenerative tourism can rectify these shortcomings, though implementing its principles into practice might be a long-term transformation process.

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This approach not only allows tourists to experience a thriving host community but has also the potential to become a viable approach to transform the sector in better reflecting the respective local environmental context and community aspirations.

The world's unsustainable development path requires an urgent shift towards more eco-centric development perspectives, a route which has been inspired by the notion of sustainable development and its, albeit often failing, implementation efforts in the field of tourism management over the past three decades (Hughes et al., 2015; World Commission on Economic Development, 1987). Consequently, it has been proposed that future tourism development perspectives should not be limited to the goal of minimise negative impacts but should aim to create regenerative opportunities that prioritise the host communities (Becken & Kaur, 2022; McEnhill et al., 2020; Suárez-Rojas et al., 2023).

This research note critically reflects on past and current development approaches and discusses opportunities for future tourism development in line with regenerative principles. The case study of Niah National Park in Sarawak, Malaysia provides the backdrop for a discussion on how such approaches can potentially contribute to better a community's future and to enable social-ecological development. Based on an analysis of secondary data sources, it portrays the relatively new concept of regenerative tourism as vehicle for communities to realise social and economic empowerment.

Alternative development pathways of tourism

The massive interruption to global tourism in wake of the Covid-19 pandemic has presented the industry with a chance to stop and re-evaluate its growth-driven development path and re-focus on activities that improve destination communities' wellbeing (Carr, 2020; Movono et al., 2023). At the same time, it has been highlighted that the tourism industry needs to resist the temptation of purely volume-driven growth (Cave & Dredge, 2020; Higham et al., 2022) as the conventional growth-focused tourism paradigm has led to an unequal distribution of income and the over-exploitation of natural resources, both of which have exacerbated socio-economic vulnerability and ecological crises (Cave & Dredge, 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). These developments brought into sharp relief the need for alternative approaches in a post-Covid era that are more rooted in local contexts and value strongly the role of the host community. Since the late 1970s, alternative development approaches have emerged to contrast and critique top-down patterns of modernisation. In light of the works of Chambers (1984) and Escobar (1992), voices disagreeing with neoliberal ideologies have become louder and more prominent calling for greater emancipation of traditionally marginalised and disenfranchised communities. Attention has increasingly focused on community-based tourism development that is small-scale and 'bottom-up', which aims to improve a host community's socio-economic status. It aspires to replace the tourism industry's traditional growth-focused development pattern with a more diversified economic structure that encourages inclusive socio-economic practices to nurture communities (Cave & Dredge, 2020; Matunga et al., 2020).

Especially in the context of remote and rural destinations in developing countries, empowerment of the local community should be prioritised, endorsing grassroots participation and place-based development. The Scheyvens framework (1999) with its four

dimensions of empowerment and disempowerment (economic, social, political and psychological) offers a pathway of how communities could play an active role in tourism. In detail, tourism must bring long-lasting economic benefits to the local people in the form of additional income that supports livelihoods. It is critical to recognise communities for their unique cultural and natural resources that enable the offering of authentic and place-specific experiences. Meanwhile, the community's social cohesion should be maintained, and the viewpoints of different groups be heard. Scheyvens and van der Watt (2021) further developed this empowerment framework by acknowledging the importance of environmental and cultural dimensions. By fostering communications between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures, tourism can, for example, be the conduit of cultural exchange (Smith, 2021; Travesi, 2018) as long as equitable consultation with the community is ensured.

In this light, Indigenous communities can play an important role in regenerative tourism discourse. Research indicates that profit-driven tourism development is inadequate to ensure Indigenous wellbeing (Douglas & Douglas, 1999; Harris, 2009; Tang & Tan, 2015). First Nation Peoples' connection to their land places a particular emphasis on tourism operations in harmony with the natural environment (Gan, 2022). Tourism that adopts regenerative approaches promotes knowledge and value co-creation by weaving scientific methods with Indigenous principles. Thus, giving back to the host community as well as preserving, respecting, and implementing Indigenous value systems are crucial tenets of regenerative tourism development.

The settings of regenerative tourism in Niah National Park

Situated 70 km south-west of Miri in the north-east of Sarawak (Malaysia), the Niah National Park offers spectacular rugged natural attractions, and is set to officially become a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2024 (Ling, 2023). The national park, established in 1974 and now managed by the Sarawak Forestry Corporation, spans across more than 3000 hectares (Sarawak Forestry Corporation, 2022). Holding evidence of one of the earliest civilisations in the region, it is home to some of the most significant archaeological sites in Southeast Asia (UNESCO, 2021). Apart from tourism, the Niah Caves also play a significant role in the local economy through the traditional practice of small-scale bird (swiftlet) nest and bat guano collection (Figure 1).

Some recreational products are already on offer in the park, such as jungle walks, wildlife observations, Iban longhouse homestays and cave adventures. The park has two walking tracks, the most well-known is a three-kilometre boardwalk path to the Niah Great Cave Complex. The other path leads north to south through the rainforest along Gunung Subis' western flank. Although little is known about the caves themselves, some distinctive tropical karst features have been found and it is a well-liked spot for birdwatchers (Figure 2).

Niah Caves is a sacred natural site for a number of local and Indigenous communities. The two primary Indigenous populations residing close to the park are the Iban community at Patrick Libau and the Penan community at Kampong Tanjung Belipat, who both are descendants of the region's most likely original inhabitants. The Penans were traditionally nomadic, but over the past decades have mostly settled in villages. They have been living in the Malay-style villages since their adoption of Islam. On the other

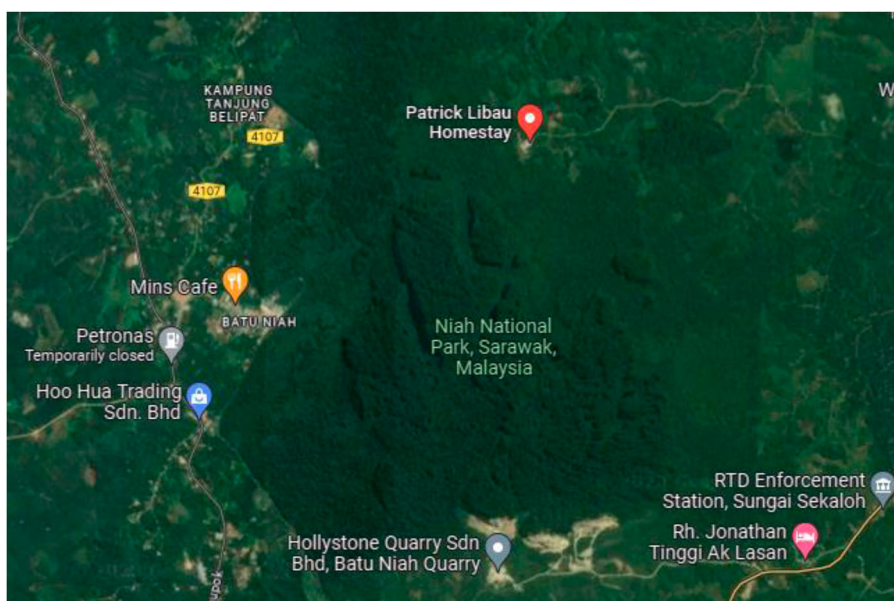


Figure 1. Map of Niah National Park, with locations of Rumah Patrick Libau longhouse and Kampung Tanjung Belipat village. Source: Google Maps.

hand, the people who occupy Rumah Patrick Libau are Ibans who migrated to the area around the Niah Caves in the 1900s (Padoch & Vayda, 1982).

Despite being a relatively small sized natural reserve, Niah National Park is hosting a growing number of tourists while supporting the livelihood of local communities. The walking paths and an archaeology museum are accessible from the Niah National Park office via a boat service operated by Kampong Tanjung that travels across the Sungai Niah River. Kampong Tanjung also operate river cruises along the western park boundary to offer visitors an opportunity to observe crocodiles in their natural habitat. Visitors can also stay with an Iban family at Rumah Patrick Libau and participate in cultural experiences including the sampling of traditional food and beverages as well as music and dancing while residing in a traditional longhouse. Some community members also work in park maintenance positions at the Sarawak Forestry Corporation, while others run small stores inside the park where tourists can buy refreshments and souvenirs.

Tourism to the area can be seen to foster the communities' economic independence as well as strengthen their sense of self-esteem and self-assurance. However, there is the risk that Indigenous peoples are excluded from development conversations as they usually settle in geographically remote locations and have inadequate skills for doing business and marketing. Moreover, tourism planning and operation largely adopt a traditional top-down approach through institutions, government authorities and organisations that might not have direct roots in the affected community (Falak et al., 2014; Haigh, 2020). There is the common notion that 'experts know best' how to control, monitor and manage the use of resources, while local people have only an inadequate say. Such an approach has turned out to be problematic as it enables development which does not effectively facilitate communities to address their socio-economic needs.

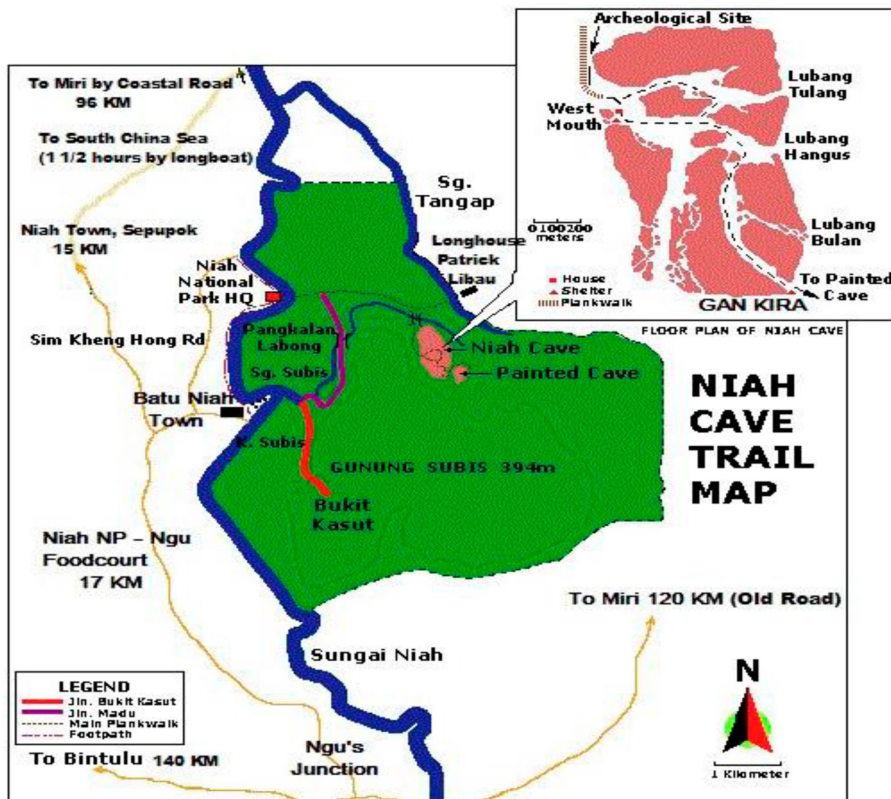


Figure 2. Map of Niah National Park showing the trails within the national park and the cave itself. Source: Niah National Park, <https://niahnationalpark.my/>.

Future tourism development in Niah National Park, in line with regenerative tourism principles, should allow for meaningful participation of community members who are usually seen as the passive ‘recipients’ of development. Such a bottom-up approach, also referred to as ‘development from below’, usually fosters involvement and in turn improves motivation insofar that the community itself has a strong interest in seeing the project succeed and develops a stronger sense of ownership and guardianship (Stewart-Withers et al., 2014). Thus, instead of authorising external organisations and corporations with limited local roots, regenerative development promotes Indigenous autonomous rights and encourages locally self-determined entrepreneurship for tourism businesses (Gerke et al., 2023; Movono et al., 2023). It could be beneficial to consider the local strengths, resources and competences that can be used to drive local development. This concept thus highlights a community’s assets by exploring its potential and capacities based on its unique set of natural, cultural, and social values.

At the same time, the Indigenous communities retain their long-standing relationship with attachments to the place and in doing so foster unique and authentic tourism development. Rethinking tourism along alternative and regenerative development approaches requires the recognition of local knowledge and a concerted effort to steer development towards a responsible and just future. It involves conscious decision-making in every step

based on an evaluation of the possible consequences and what it means for the host community and the natural environment.

A shift in narrative: the regenerative future

For a long time, the sustainable development path has been criticised for promoting continued growth albeit in a more holistic way. Despite its economic contributions, tourism development has too often ignored socio-cultural and ecological impacts and instead has exploited local resources solely for financial gains. In contrast, the interconnectedness of human society and the natural environment is usually highlighted as the core of regenerative tourism thinking.

Drawing from the literature on regenerative tourism and our field notes, some key points are discussed in the following to foster tourism development in Niah National Park which reflects a deeper understanding of people-place relationships.

Tourism can be a double-edged sword for local communities. One of the challenges is that tourism can dominate the development narrative of a destination. This means that not only is the economy too reliant on tourism, but people who do not work in the sector nonetheless experience much of its potential negative impacts. For instance, local and Indigenous peoples tend to have their own ways of living, but often they have no choice but to passively adapt to other lifestyles (Falak et al., 2014; Haigh, 2020). This is not yet the case at Niah National Park, and it is therefore crucial that Indigenous people retain a degree of control over tourism in the face of any future development and, equally important, that communities are able to maintain the transmission of cultural heritage across generations. Thus, it is essential that the Malaysian and Sarawak authorities recognise the rights and wellbeing of the local and Indigenous communities at Niah National Park, as prescribed in the UNESCO World Heritage Convention (UNESCO, 2023). Nevertheless, communities are complex and not necessarily homogenous (Gan, 2022). It is therefore important to carefully plan future development, accompanied by a comprehensive and inclusive consultation process, to avoid potential negative consequences.

Regenerative tourism adopts an eco-centric perspective, emphasising reciprocity as the essence of tourism development that fosters the well-being for all living beings and recognises the importance of biodiversity as vital element for all life on earth (Mathisen et al., 2022). Contemporary discourses are however embedded in an anthropocentric worldview, which treats humans as being separated from the broader environment. In contrast, a regenerative approach recognises the intrinsic value of all forms of life with humans being integral to the location and interconnected with the environment (Alvarez, 2023; Becken & Kaur, 2022). A review of the literature on regenerative tourism has unveiled that most studies in recent years have focused on theoretical and conceptual discussions (Becken & Kaur, 2022; Bellato & Pollock, 2023; Sharma & Tham, 2023). These include multiple themes, for instance, entrepreneurship and tourism business (Gerke et al., 2023), wildlife tourism (Suárez-Rojas et al., 2023) and ecosystem restoration (Alvarez, 2023). However, it seems that numerous discourses on regenerative tourism are predominantly theoretical and visionary, intending to transition these discussions towards an eco-centric perspective. In contrast, there is only a limited number of empirical studies on regenerative tourism which reflect more on

implementation efforts of regenerative tourism. Although, the concept has already been applied in other disciplines, there is a lack of comprehensive directions for its implementation in a tourism context.

It is important to recognise the existing mainstream growth development path, which needs to be gradually and pragmatically transitioned towards a 'regenerative' tourism development approach. Being confronted with such long-term transformation processes, it is crucial that this transition is accompanied by research which identifies good examples of implementation efforts and place-based practical solutions.

In conclusion, in the specific context of Niah National Park in Sarawak, this research note has illustrated past and current development paths and discussed opportunities and challenges to transform the tourism sector. Reflecting on the Niah National Park case example, the importance of community-based tourism as a mechanism to effectively facilitate local and Indigenous participation is highlighted. We hope that this research note will stimulate further research interest in this emerging field and that in the future more empirical data will strengthen the case for regenerative tourism.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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