Tourism in Protected Areas: Constraints and Challenges*

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The importance of protected areas in tourism and their contribution to the economy and regional development of a country has been well-documented. However, the size of protected areas is shrinking due to demand of development as the number of visitors continues to increase and the adverse impacts on the environment continues to deteriorate. Hence, the success in managing tourism in protected areas is dependent upon many factors and is often influenced by several external factors. As the literature argues that there are often gaps in the capability to effectively manage parks and protected areas, this paper attempts to explore constraints and challenges in developing tourism in protected areas in developing countries particularly in Malaysia.

Key words: protected areas, tourism, development and management

Introduction

Protected areas are characterised by their natural and cultural resources, support infrastructure and visitor services (Machlis and Tichnell, 1985) and are regarded as an important tool for conservation of wildlife and landscape (Bishop et al., 1997). Almost all countries in the world have established their own national parks and other forms of protected areas to ensure long term protection of the natural resources. Dixon and Sherman (1990) recognise the importance of protected areas in tourism and their contribution to the economy and regional development of a country. In many countries, national parks are the focus of international tourism and have played a significant role as tourist attractions. In some other countries, they are the foundation of small but often important tourism industries (Butler and Boyd, 2002).

The World Conservation Union, through the Commission on National Parks and Protected Areas, has classified protected areas into six categories: Ia - strict nature reserves, Ib - wilderness areas, II - national parks, III - natural monument, IV - habitat and species management areas, V - protected landscape/seascape, and VI - managed resource protected area (IUCN, 1994). The concept of managing protected areas is based on their management objectives and categories (see Table 1), and the priority of objectives will determine the different types or categories of protected areas.

The earliest protected areas in Peninsular Malaysia were game reserves, when in 1903; the Chior Game Reserve was established as the first protected area in Malaya to protect

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a herd of seladang (gaur) (Aiken, 1994). Conservation was the main priority when national parks were established, and early efforts of conservation in Peninsular Malaysia were mainly related to the protection of wildlife especially birds and mammals (Amat and Osman, 2001). Over the years, these priorities have shifted into the conservation of ecosystem or biodiversity and the assimilation of local communities in park management.

### Table 1 Matrix of Management Objectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Management Objectives</th>
<th>Categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scientific research</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilderness protection</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preserve species and genetic diversity</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintain environmental services</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protection of species features</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourism and recreation</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainable use of resources</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintenance of cultural/traditional attributes</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: IUCN (1994)*

**Key:**  
1 Primary objective  
2 Secondary objective  
3 Acceptable objective  
4 Not applicable

In Malaysia, the ownership and management of protected areas are the direct responsibility of the federal or state government. There exist several legislative instruments that provide facilities to create protected areas and to gazette parks in Malaysia. National parks are under the jurisdiction of the federal government while various states, under the Malaysian constitution, have jurisdiction over land and forests. State governments are often reluctant to have national parks because the process involves surrendering state land to the federal government.

In general, Malaysia has 54 protected areas of more than 1,000 hectares, totalling 1,485 million hectares or about 4.5 per cent of the country’s land surface. They include 28 strict nature reserves (inaccessible to tourism activity), 16 national parks or their state-level equivalents, nine managed nature reserves or wildlife sanctuaries and one protected landscape (WWFM, 1996a). Recent statistics reveal that nature-based activities are the fastest growing tourism product in Malaysia, and it is estimated that 10 per cent of Malaysia’s tourism revenue in 2000 originated from ecotourism (Hashim, 1998). To attract and sustain this growth, the National Ecotourism Plan (NEP) was drafted in 1996 to assist the federal and state governments in developing Malaysia’s ecotourism potential. The Plan is intended to serve both as an appropriate instrument within the overall sustainable development of Malaysia and the economy as a whole, and as an effective tool for conservation of natural and cultural heritage of the country. Due to proximity of most ecotourism sites to rural areas, the Rural Tourism Master Plan was subsequently drafted in 2001 to complement strategies in NEP.
Constraints and Challenges of Ecotourism/Tourism in Protected Areas

In general, the local communities living near ecotourism sites typically have incomes lower than the national average, and they have limited options for economic activities because they are often financially neglected and poorly managed. Relations between development and environment are complicated by this rural poverty and the general absence of environmental awareness. As a result, incidence of resource exploitation is observed because demands by the urban population for medicinal and horticultural plants are high, prompting local communities to collect them for immediate financial gain (Amat, 2002). They engage in consumptive activities that offer tangible products. Sherman and Dixon (1991, p. 95) suggest a list of ‘consumptive benefits’ derived from timber, non-timber products (for examples, edible plants, herbs, medicines, rattan, building materials, rubber) and wildlife products. As compared to indigenous people who treat the forest as a resource provider, most of the local communities treat the forest as a commodity provider (Amat, 2002). Local communities generally live within the periphery of protected or forested areas, while indigenous communities live within the forested areas.

If poverty is to be reduced, ecotourism must represent a viable economic alternative, so that local people can participate in chalet operation, homestay programme, food, handicraft and transport businesses, and local community organisations can act as concessionaires for these support services. For example, local people can become effective nature guides if they receive adequate training since they have good and practical local knowledge. Essentially, when local people can meet many of the needs of tourists themselves, they are more likely to retain some control over tourism. Controlling one’s own enterprise is a positive step in the direction of self-determination for people otherwise dependent on the tourism industry for menial jobs or handouts, and is more likely to lead to self-fulfilment (Singh et al., 2003).

In Malaysia, participation by non-governmental organisations in ecotourism is limited, but several state, regional and national trade organisations and tourist guides’ associations are beginning to explore ecotourism opportunities and provide training. In terms of community involvement in ecotourism, there are only a few examples, particularly in Kinabalu Park, where local residents from nearby villages receive financial spin-offs from park operations and are involved in guiding and staffing. In many other sites, the local community is only a passive component of the tourism product and excluded from tourism development. Where local residents are involved in ecotourism, there tends to be a shortage of training and management opportunities for them (WWFM, 1996). In Taman Negara, for example, a high percentage of staff (except those in the lower ranking) were from outside the territory (i.e. from Kuantan and as far as Kuala Lumpur) (Khalifah, 1997). Employment fluctuates due to seasonality, and it is difficult to retain staff and build their skills. It is also difficult to attract well-qualified staff from urban areas because the location is relatively remote (Amat, 2002).

Another development issue is whether there will be sufficient demand for ecotourism services to make the investment profitable. There is ever increasing pressure on parks to show direct economic benefits in order to justify their existence, and developing an area solely on a tourism basis is a risky proposition. There are several factors that affect the number of visitors to an ecotourism site such as seasonal variations, natural hazards (flood and drought) and accessibility (Amat, 2002). In Malaysia, rainfall or dry season is the result of regular variation in climatic conditions, and the impact of seasonal demand variation is one of the operational concerns of tourism interests in both the public and private sectors (Baum and Lundtorp, 2001). In addition, many ecotourism areas in Malaysia are considered not appealing as tourist destinations, and it is impossible to observe large mammals due to the
heavily dense forests, unlike wildlife safaris in Africa. As a result, the tourism facilities will be underused for a significant period of the year and are subject to vandalism, and eventually are abandoned by tourists. These areas are being left as ‘no-man's land’, without a caretaker, especially when there are several agencies involved in the management of the protected areas. They face overlapping and various administrative issues and problems such as inconsistency of policies and lack of coordination among the agencies (Mohamed and Hussin, 2003). Efficiency might be improved if these government agencies were encouraged to cooperate in their development efforts. Considerable money in many cases is wasted on overlapping and parallel projects, so that in theory such cooperative efforts would mean less money spent and more funds available for other purposes (Spann, 1979).

In managing visitors, park management should be cautioned against attracting the wrong groups of visitors and the provision of inappropriate activities. There is also a tendency to develop inappropriate facilities or attractions to attract visitors to maximise economic benefits. Such development will eventually lead to mass tourism and exceed carrying capacity, which are in conflict with the primary objectives of conservation and ecotourism development. In the case of the Galapagos Islands, the number of foreign arrivals exceeded four times the recommended carrying capacity (Honey, 1999). The island’s ecology is the victim, with agriculture expanding due to in-migration of communities from the mainland and the extinction of twelve native plants (Steele, 1995). While the number of visitors has increased, the types of visitors were ‘diluted’ (becoming softer) by less serious and less curious visitors.

Therefore, when promoting ecotourism, a stronger focus on domestic market than the international market is more favourable, from an economic point of view (Stephan, 2000). An ecotourism project, that meets the requirements of the international markets, tends to be based on heavy capital investment. Investing to attract foreign visitors can be risky as it is vulnerable to product substitution and strong competition. While foreign visitors can provide the required hard currency, domestic visitors can help prevent the out flow of foreign exchange (Amat, 2002). In Malaysia, one constraint on ecotourism is the dominance of the ASEAN tourist markets (75 per cent), given that intraregional markets have less proclivity to partake in ecotourism than arrivals from metropolitan regions (EIU, 1994).

In relation to the above, the management and protection of visitors and the provision of services represent a major segment of a park’s budget. The park’s success in managing the protected areas is dependent upon four factors: a) the quality of the resources; b) professionalism in all aspects of the park business; c) an active and appreciative public; and d) partnership with the private sector. However, there are often gaps in the capability to effectively manage parks in Malaysia, and staff development and external technical assistance may be required to bridge such gaps (Amat, 2002).

Research Methodology

Primary data for this research was obtained at two selected ecotourism sites, namely the Perlis State Park (PSP) in Wang Kelian, Perlis and the proposed State Eco-park in Ulu Muda, Kedah. Both ecosites were selected because they not only have superb natural assets, but also they are ranked among the ten very special places for Malaysian ecotourism out of 52 project suggestions identified in the Plan. As the study aims to discover and critically analyse development and management issues of both areas, in-depth interviews were conducted among officers from government agencies and non-governmental organisations, managers and staff of park operations and local people. The respondents are selected from a combination of criteria and snowball sampling to include people with experience of the phenomena being studied, on the assumption that ‘one wants to discover, understand, gain
insight; therefore, one needs to select a sample from which one can learn the most’ (Merriam, 1988, p. 48). The researcher uses his knowledge to determine who or what study units are the most appropriate for inclusion in the study based on the potential study units’ knowledge base or closeness of fit to criteria associated with the study’s focus (Jennings, 2001).

Findings of Research

In the initial stage, there have been some disputes over the main objectives in the establishment of PSP, with regards to conservation versus tourism values. The non-governmental organisations are more concerned with the preservation of the scientific and intrinsic value of the park, while the state government appears to be more interested in selling the tourism values. This situation has prompted the Perlis State Forestry Department (PSFD) to examine its role in managing the limited natural resources and, simultaneously, generate income for the state government in a sustainable manner. The establishment of PSP reflects the symbiosis and harmonious relationship between environment and tourism, and it is also in line with the state government’s strategy to eradicate poverty through tourism development.

In a related development, strong public opposition and concern from non-governmental organisations have prompted the federal government to overturn the state government’s proposal to introduce heli-logging in the Ulu Muda area. In fact, the public fear that heli-logging will further aggravate the current situation when the area is experiencing drought, and the Muda dam recorded its lowest water level in the last five years. The conflict between potential economic gains from tourism and heli-logging activities and forest conservation clearly reflects that ecotourism operates along one continuum, as described by Orams (1995). At one extreme, exploitive ecotourism results in damage to the host environment while more responsible ecotourism contributes to the health of the host environment. Being a relatively poor state in Malaysia, Kedah could have potentially earned RM52 million per year from heli-logging. But, the potential costs outweigh the benefits as heli-logging has potential impacts on water catchments areas, wildlife roaming areas, and implications for Malaysia’s efforts towards timber certification.

As discussed above, conservation value takes precedence over economic value in heli-logging development in Ulu Muda. In the case of Muda dam, however, tourism value is given less priority because the dam’s water supply is also used for farm irrigation. Low water levels in the dam limit tourist activities because the fastest route to the natural areas, which normally takes less than one hour by boat, has been disrupted. Upgrading old logging tracks is one alternative being considered by the state agency, but one major disadvantage is some local people may use this track to access the forest illegally. This water level affects the tourism industry and resort operators in Ulu Muda and nearby Pedu. Forest conservation is necessary to protect water catchments areas in Ulu Muda, but water levels cannot be maintained at a certain minimum level, for the sake of tourism activities. Wheeller (1995) has questioned the legitimacy of sustainability principles by arguing that there can never be a symbiotic relationship between tourism and the environment. In this case, the commitment of the state government and host communities to the principles of sustainability tends to be conditional on self-interest, in favour of farming activities.

In another development, a new tourist town is presently under construction to replace the existing border market in PSP. According to the findings of this study, the integrated development of the new tourist town is long-awaited and necessary to create a better market environment because the popularity of the market has seen an increase in the amount of rubbish and in the level of unplanned erection of semi-permanent structures that are occupied by the traders. The State Forestry is introducing sustainable development as a concept because the new tourist town will be a clean environment for shopping and recreational
activities. The concentration of market activities in one area is a zoning process, which is essential to control land use and to accommodate different types of tourists. As Veal (2002) point out this is part of the efforts to concentrate high-volume visitation in limited areas in the park, where services can be provided and the impact on the natural environment can be minimised. However, the authority may wish to consider caution with respect to mass tourists moving into pristine areas because the types of tourists that flock to Sunday markets are overwhelmingly classified as mass tourists, not ecotourists.

In relation to the above, tourists to the border market does not integrate well with the park tourists because they generally do not have any interest in nature and conservation. Park tourists, on the other hand, consider the market as a ‘must-see’ attraction. Therefore, environmental education may be important to create nature interest among the mass tourists. Most definitions acknowledge education and interpretation of the natural environment as among the main principles of ecotourism, in order to promote conservation and nature awareness.

There is an increasing pressure for any park to show direct economic benefits, in order to justify its existence. In maximising the economic benefits, the authorities in PSP and Ulu Muda may need to exercise caution with respect to developing additional or unnecessary facilities and attractions because such development may lead to mass tourism and carrying capacity over-limit. Besides zoning, the implementation of other development control mechanisms, such as restrictions on land acquisition, may be required to preserve the natural heritage of both areas. In PSP, the hilly topography of the surroundings will hinder rapid development of the area, and mass tourism is unlikely to be observed in the next ten years. In addition, once gazetted as a state park, a public inquiry is compulsory before removing any parcel of land for development.

In terms of overall management, PSP is state-owned and managed by PSFD; other national parks in the country are federally owned and managed by the Wildlife Protection and National Parks Department. The findings of this study indicate that forestry law covers wider forest issues than wildlife protection law, especially with the enactment of new legislation to strengthen the degree of protection afforded to the park resources (Amat and Osman, 2001). However, park planning and management is relatively new to PSFD because the authority’s role was not directly related to tourism development in the state. Over time, the agency has played an increasing role in developing tourist attractions in its forest because there is a substantial number of a natural attraction suitable for tourism. The main issues facing PSFD budget constraints, limited manpower and under trained staff. Amat (2002) highlights the same matter by arguing that there are gaps in the capability to effectively manage parks in Malaysia. Staff development and external technical assistance are required to bridge the gaps, in addition to ensuring the right quality of resources and professionalism in the park business.

Conclusion

Tourism in protected areas as manifestation of development and conservation must continue to act as test sites for human-environment interactions. However, it is evident from this paper that new strategies have to be employed in order to strike a fair and equitable balance between use and preservation in a world that perpetuates value of human beings at the expense of other life forms, and which continually encroaches upon the earth’s most sensitive and significant regions, through tourism and other land uses.
References


