A Study of Tour Operators’ Motivation and Views on Responsible Rural Tourism Development in Sabah, Malaysia

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Abstract: All aspects of sustainability have been widely discussed by researchers and tourism stakeholders for about three decades. The paper presents exploratory research that explores and identifies motivations of tour operators in responding to responsible rural tourism development as well as the challenges and barriers faced by tour operators. This paper also proposes a theoretical framework which is built upon the motivation factors using the push and pull theory to present the initiatives of tour operators in the practice of responsible tourism development in rural destinations.

Key words: Responsible tourism development, tour operators, motivation, challenges


Introduction

Responsible tourism is not a new tourism market segment, but rather a niche one. Existing responsible tourism product segments include nature-based tourism, cultural tourism (with community-based tourism), volunteer tourism and educational tourism, backpackers and youth, adventure tourism and high-end tourism, all of which have adopted strong ethical and social responsible concepts. Predominantly, common practices of responsible tour operators include resource-saving initiatives at destination facilities. As a topic, responsible tourism has been conspicuously discussed by researchers. Moreover, the topic has drawn the attention of tourism stakeholders of both developed and developing countries (Khairat & Maher, 2012). The tour operator is an intermediary between the supply and demand sides through which customers’ preferences reach the producer, and services reach the market (Budeanu, 2005). However, tour operators often believe that host governments have a major responsibility to ensure sustainable destination development (Curtin & Busby, 1999). On the other hand, many tour operators normally proclaim that they are involved in responsible destination development as they serve all destinations without restrictions; hence it would appear that there is a lack of information on responsible destination development from the perspective of tour operators. An understanding of responsible tourism destination development is important to facilitate enhancing or improving the sustainability status of a tourism destinations by tourism stakeholders.

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This paper highlights the motivators that are likely to trigger tour operators into initiating responsible tourism practices.

The push and pull theory is often used to identify the motivation of tourists to visit destinations (Mohamad & Jamil, 2012; Kozak, 2002; Kay, 2003; Grimm & Needham, 2012; Kim & Prideaux, 2005; Oh, Uysal & Weaver, 1995; Goossens, 2000; Gnoth, 1997; Lee, Guillet, Law & Leung, 2012; Shi, Cole & Chancellor, 2012). Exploratory research has been conducted by Bin & Lijuan (2007) on the push-pull motivational factors that influence scientific and technological innovation of a tourist enterprise (STITE). The research focused on tourist enterprises, including travel agencies, hotels and scenic areas, which could be driven inevitably by motivational factors either forward or in the opposite direction on the basis of the push-pull theory.

However, there has been very little research on tour operators’ motivation using the push and pull motivation theory in responsible tourism development. Therefore, this paper aims to build a theoretical framework on the initiatives to enhance responsible performance from the tour operators’ point of view by using push and pull motivation theory. The barriers and challenges faced by tour operators have been generally discussed by several researchers (Budeanu, 2009; Chan, 2010; Khairat & Maher, 2012; Curtin & Busby, 1999). This study explores the barriers and challenges that hinder tour operators from moving sustainability issues forward. The purpose of this paper is to propose a conceptual research framework to explore the motivation factors for a tour operator to practise responsible tourism development; it also explores the barriers and challenges faced by tour operators in practising responsible destination development.

Literature Review

Responsible Tourism

Responsible tourism has been defined as “tourism that promotes responsibility to the environment through sustainable use of its resources; responsibility to involve local communities in the tourism industry; responsibility for the safety and security of visitors and responsible government, employees, employers, unions and local communities” (Department of Environment and Tourism, 1996). Responsible tourism has also been simply defined as “tourism that creates better places for people to live in, and better places to visit” (Responsible Tourism Policy for the City of Cape Town, 2009). The Centre for Responsible Travel (2009) defines responsible tourism as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the welfare of local people” and which is grounded in environmental and social principles and good practices consisting of strong ethical values (Chan, 2010).

Responsible tourism emerges from a question that is frequently asked by researchers which is ‘who should be responsible for mitigating impact’ (Miller, 2001; Sin, 2010; Budeanu, 2005; Frey & George, 2010). The Cape Town conference on Responsible Tourism in Destinations held on August 2002 recognised that responsible tourism takes many forms and that different destinations and stakeholders will have different priorities. Thus local policies and guidelines will need to be developed through multi-stakeholder processes in order to develop responsible tourism in destinations. A responsible tourism approach aims to achieve the three principal outcomes of sustainable development which are economic growth,
environmental integrity and social justice (Responsible Tourism Policy for the City of Cape Town, 2009).

**Sustainable Tourism Development**

According to the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe (1995), sustainable tourism development pertains to all forms of development and management of tourism activities that respect the environment, protect long-term natural and cultural resources, and are socially and economically acceptable and equitable. Sustainable tourism development not only focuses on the environment but also means being energy-efficient and climate-sound (e.g. by using renewable energy), consuming less water, minimising waste, conserving biodiversity, cultural heritage and traditional values, supporting intercultural understanding and tolerance, generating local income and integrating local communities with a view to improving livelihoods and reducing poverty (Pratt, Rivera & Bien, 2011). Essentially, sustainable tourism development is developing the tourism industry on all domains while maintaining destination long-term viability. Undoubtedly, it is very difficult to find the balance along the tourism development and the environment continuum (Curtin & Busby, 1999) because tourism is a complex, consumptive and mass industry involving other industries such as hotels, restaurants, transportation.

Tourism involves a wide range of related parties or stakeholders from almost every domain who have different interests. Thus, to achieve sustainable tourism is an extremely complex and complicated task and it is therefore essential to derive support, commitment, participation, cooperation and collaboration among the stakeholders (Risteski, Koccevski & Arnadov, 2012). Yet, sustainability needs to be considered in planning tourism development and the decision should be balanced between national and local needs, the private and public sectors, the local communities, tourists and the mass media, amongst others (Risteski et al., 2012). The tourism industry also embraces sectors and services that mostly work discreetly and individually in pursuing their interest and agendas (Carey, Gountas & Gilbert, 1997).

Risteski et al. (2012) listed three initiatives that needs to be taken into account for achieving proper sustainable tourism development which includes industrial initiatives, influencing consumer behaviour to promote sustainability, and developing broad-based sustainable development through tourism, while preserving the integrity of local cultures, the environment and community development. The key principles of sustainable tourism development are widely discussed in a report from the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED)(1987). In general, the main elements of sustainable tourism development are inter-generational equity, social justice and poverty alleviation, public commitment, environmental protection and economic development, while dealing cautiously with risk and uncertainty (McKercher, 2003). The sustainable tourism criterion takes into account both the preservation of the tourist destination and the capacity to satisfy tourists (Chan, 2010).

**The Role of Tour Operators**

It is undeniable that tour operators play a crucial role in the tourism industry. They act as intermediaries who can influence the supply chain as suppliers often have no alternative marketing and distribution channels (Carey et al., 1997; Zhang, Song & Huang, 2009; Wijk & Persoon, 2006; Budeanu, 2009; Sigala, 2008) and tour operators are able to affect the consumer’s choice...
of destination and several other successive decisions such as accommodation (Bastakis, Buhalis & Butler, 2004; Wijk & Persoon, 2006). Responsible destination development needs support from destination management and tourists, and tour operators have a higher level of influence on the demand compared to the destination’s own marketing (Carey et al., 1997).

However, several studies report that tour operators are more likely to place responsibility for developing responsible destination on host destination authorities (Budeanu, 2005, Curtin & Busby, 1999; Wijk & Persoon, 2006; Carey et al., 1997). Nevertheless, Siti-Nabiha et al. (2008) highlighted that strategies to achieve responsible destination need to be integrated with the wider approach of responsible development strategy with effective multi-stakeholder participation. Krippendorf (2012) argues that everybody would move heaven and earth and use well contrived methods to gain more business and a larger share of the market, especially tour operators whose first priority is to stay in business (Carey et al., 1997), and that holiday producers were not charitable institutions but commercial undertakings (Krippendorf, 2012). Based on this point of view, it can be concluded that tour operators, especially mass market operators, tend to focus more on gaining massive profit in the short term rather than the long term development of a destination.

**Tour Operators’ Initiatives in Responsible Tourism Development**

Tour operators are increasingly moving towards sustainability (Budeanu, 2009; Khairat & Maher, 2012; Carey et al., 1997; Wijk & Persoon, 2006). Different responsible practices have been implemented by tour operators to sustain the tourism industry (Tepelus, 2005) and this has been done through several areas such as internal management, product development, supply chain management, customer relations and co-operation with destinations (Khairat & Maher, 2012). According to Budeanu (2009), the motivators triggering tourism sustainability can be categorised into two main areas: external drivers and organisational benefits. External drivers to motivate tour operators toward sustainability are suggested by Khairat & Maher (2012) and Budeanu (2009). The push-pull motivation theory applied to this initiative enhances responsible tourism development. Such a theoretical framework is presented in Figure 1. The push-pull motivation theory is generally used to identify tourists’ motivations when designing the destination marketing strategy (Oh et al., 1995; Goossens, 2000). Moreover, authors such as Lee et al. (2012) used the push-pull theory on travel outbound destination selection. But previous research focusing on the push-pull theory on tour operator’s motivations to practise responsible destination development is limited.

Push motivators which trigger tour operators include the avoidance of negative public image and reputation, usually by responding to environmental and social concerns in public (and sometimes becoming an environmental leader) to build a positive public image which is aimed at extending their marketing efforts and obtaining a competitive market advantage. However, the pull force factors that influence tour operators comprise regulations and licenses to operate in destinations, environmental legislation such as elimination of toxic substances from production of electronic goods or restrictions on industrial discharges and emissions to nature, and industry initiatives (such as industry trends, responding to customer demands, product development in response to customers’ preferences for holiday products that integrate quality with sustainability). Another triggering factor is organisational benefits (Budeanu, 2009), which include new skills and competences of staff, legitimisation by third party, enhanced.
product quality, cost savings, increased operational efficiency and business opportunities through design and innovation.

**Challenges and Barriers Faced by Tour Operators**

A review of literature found that the obstacles faced by tour operators in practicing responsible destination development are lack of demand for responsible tourism packages (Khairat & Maher, 2012; Forsyth, 1997; Wijk & Persoon, 2006), high cost of staff development, complexity due to involvement of various parties and partners such as hotels, transportation, and others, the long time frame for performance evaluation (Goh & Yusoff, 2010) and non-standardised strategies due to different regulatory systems in destination countries (Risteski et al., 2012). Challenges and issues in developing responsible tourism destinations have been noted by Chan (2010), who pointed out an existing general lack of understanding of the sustainability level of a tourist destination. Chan (2010) also identified the key attributes in implementing destination competitiveness and sustainability and the marketing of responsible tourism to relevant market segments. WCED (1987) argued that financial resource is the main barrier faced by tour operators due to the high implementation costs of practising responsible tourism destination development; he also revealed that tour operators preferred to create alliances and adopt their own standards of environmental best practices under the guidance of industry associations, without having to invest much.

A previous study has found that a few developed nations pay attention to sustainability by raising awareness, an economical energy consumption pattern, certification schemes, and developing an efficient waste management sector to support the responsible tourism initiative. However, the problem is exacerbated in developing countries which rarely focus on economic empowering opportunities through responsible tourism and are therefore still far below the desired goal of sustainability (Azam & Sarker, 2011). Wahab (1997) indicated that many developing countries generally experience external indebtedness, lack foreign currency earnings, under-utilise some of their natural resources, and have comparatively disadvantageous exports and limited access to development finance; overall they have a poor quality of life. Take the case of Sabah, for instance. The state’s nature-based tourism represents 7% of the total worldwide export of goods and services and its success therefore depends on the conservation of natural landscapes and wildlife, and using ecosystems to promote both human well-being and biodiversity conservation (Christ, Hillel, Matus & Sweeting, 2003).

**Methodology**

**Research Conceptual Framework**

The proposed conceptual framework has been developed to reflect the initiatives of tour operators towards responsible tourism development. Push motivation factors mainly reflect the inherent driving force towards sustainability performance (Bin & Lijuan, 2007) such as the avoidance of negative public image, building a positive public image and becoming an environmental leader. The pull motivation factors show that external forces have important influence over tour operators to execute responsible tourism development, and they include expected regulations, industry initiatives and responding to customer demands, as outlined by Khairat & Maher (2012) and Budeanu (2009). Organisational benefits are also considered as
motivating factor to influence tour operators to sustain their operations; they include new staff skills and competences, legitimisation by third party, enhanced product quality, cost savings, and increased operational efficiency and business opportunities through design and innovation.

**Research Approach**

The paper describes an exploratory qualitative research. This method is deemed relevant as little is known about the key motivations and challenges of practising responsible tourism destination development amongst the tour operators. The investigation requires a detailed, clear explanation and description from the tour operators. The use of purposive sampling allows a much deeper understanding as expressive informants were able to describe clearly their personal experience (Williams & Soutar, 2000) and how they were involved in the process of tour operations and tour packages as well as tourist experiences. The data collection involved in-depth interviewing of a total of 21 local tour operators operating in the Kinabalu National Park tour packages.

Data collection was done in two phases. The first phase was a literature review while the second was in-depth interviews with the tour operators. Data was next analysed by transcribing the audio-recorded semi-structured interviews verbatim into typed text, and using CREATIVE method for data analysis. The eight CREATIVE steps of data analysis were: (1) Consider the study’s research questions and purpose statement; (2) Read through the transcripts to gain a holistic sense of the data; (3) Examine the data for information related to the research questions; (4) Assign labels to those units of information that capture the motivation and challenges faced by tour operator; (5) Thematise the data; (6) Interpret the emergent themes as respondents relate to the study’s research questions and purpose statement; (7) Verify the trustworthiness of the findings; and (8) Engage in the writing process to describe the findings (Pitney & Parker, 2009: p. 54).

**Results**

The data recorded from the in-depth interviews with the 21 tour operators were analysed using the CREATIVE steps of analysis. This analysis was concerned with the classification of given and identified drivers triggering responsible tourism among the tour operators based on categories and sub-categories and previous literature as shown in Table 1. These identified categories were: ‘Own Initiative’, ‘In Response to Customer Demand’, ‘Market Trend’, ‘Reduce Environmental Impacts’, ‘Obligation’, ‘Government’s Role’, ‘Positive Image’, and ‘Organisational Benefits’. The challenges and barriers faced by tour operators towards the practice of responsible tourism destination development are shown in Table 2. The analysis and discussion of the data follows.

**Motivation Triggering**

The research question asked of tour operators was: ‘What are the motivation factors that trigger you or your company to practise responsible tourism?’ The motivation factors that triggered interviewees to practise responsible tourism development in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah were based on the the push and pull theory. There were five push motivators and three pull motivators that influenced tour operators. Numerous respondents were motivated by push
motivators, that is, their own initiative. This is what they had to say: “It is our own initiative because Sabah is my hometown” (C3); “own initiative because I am Sabahan, I was born here, live here, and of course I want the place to be clean and sustainable” (C5; C10); “Own motivation to protect the nature in Sabah” (C13); “Personal initiative because I am a Sabahan so I want my the resources to be sustained” (C19); “It is my own initiative to do so, so as transfer the knowledge to the next generation so that our grandchildren can continue to see the nature of Sabah” (C20). Most of the respondents were local residents, thus their passion and initiatives in term of responsible tourism practices were strong.

Wijk & Persoon (2006) argue that the demands of responsible tourism are absent in the market. Tourists are more likely to shop around for the cheapest possible price and consumer loyalty is not entrenched in the tour operating industry (Miller, 2001). However, our study offers different results as voiced by several respondents (C6): “the demands of responsible tourism exist especially among western people, like the Europeans, but people from China or Malaysia, do not seem to care about responsible tourism as they are just on the lookout for low prices”; “...my experience is that tourists from western countries ask about the responsible tourism package, and even want to know the elements included in this package. So from here you can see the western countries are already practising responsible tourism very well. But for us it is still not strong enough” (C17); “...perhaps European tourists but not

### Table 1. Drivers that triggered responsible tourism among tour operators

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<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Sub-category</th>
<th>Literature</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Own initiative (Push)</td>
<td>Personal initiative (C1, C3, C5, C8, C9, C10, C11, C12, C13, C15, C16, C17, C19, C20)</td>
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<tr>
<td>In response to customer demand (Push)</td>
<td>Tourist demand (C2, C3, C6, C7, C8, C12, C17, C18, C19)</td>
<td>Budeanu, 2009; Khairat &amp; Maher, 2012.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reducing environmental impact (Pull)</td>
<td>Conservation purpose (C1)Awareness of environmental issues (C4, C11, C15)</td>
<td>Khairat &amp; Maher, 2012</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organisational benefits (Push)</td>
<td>Profit (C1, C3, C4, C5, C6, C7, C8, C9, C10, C12, C14, C15, C16, C17, C18, C20, C21)</td>
<td>Miller, 2001; Frey &amp; George, 2010; Budeanu, 2009.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Quality of product (C5, C7, C9, C14, C16, C18, C19, C20, C21)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>New skills (C4, C11, C20)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Competitive advantages (C1, C2, C7 C8, C9, C18, C19)</td>
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<td>Cost saving (C11)</td>
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Table 2. The challenges and barriers faced by tour operators

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Sub-category</th>
<th>Prior Literature</th>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of commitment to responsible tourism (RT) from multi-stakeholder</td>
<td>Tourists, Difficult to educate tourists (C2, C16, C17, C18, C19, C20) Choose a right tour guide (C3) Give advice but still depend on guest demand (C8) Curiosity of tourists (C13)</td>
<td>Li, Wu &amp; Cai, 2008; Frey &amp; George, 2010; Khairat &amp; Maher, 2012; Pereira &amp; Mykletun, 2012; Liew-Tsonis &amp; Cheuk, n.d.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Government, Public facilities not well developed and managed (C6) Weak enforcement of rules and regulations (C8, C17) Financial support from government (C11) Not systematic in management (C12)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Local Community, Local people don’t appreciate the destination (C7, C10, C13) Communication barrier between local community and tourists (C8, C12)</td>
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<td>Low level of RT awareness</td>
<td>Southeast Asian tourists are less aware about RT if compared to Europe market (C1, C17) Tourists from China are not aware about RT (C2) Tourists more concerned about the price compared to RT (C5, C10) Less awareness of RT in tour operator industry and tourists (C6, C13, C14, C21)</td>
<td>Font &amp; Tribe, 2001; Li, Wu &amp; Cai, 2008; Chan, 2010; Khairat &amp; Maher, 2012.</td>
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<td>Intensity of market competition</td>
<td>Outside investors only look for profits (C1, C19) Price war cause to low profit margin (C5, C15) Price war brings negative impact to the environment (C7) Price war decreases the quality of product (C7, C19)</td>
<td>Carey, Gountas &amp; Gilbert, 1997; Curtin &amp; Busby, 1999; Bastakis, Buhalais &amp; Butler, 2004.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Limited availability of green technology</td>
<td>No green heavy transportation (C14, C17, C19)</td>
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<td>Limited resources</td>
<td>Less authority to support RT (C10) Cost of RT is high but financial resources are limited (C11, C21)</td>
<td>Frey &amp; George, 2010.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Population pressure</td>
<td>Overcrowding results in negative impact on the environment (C7, C12) Privatisation hinders a reduction in number of tourists (C17)</td>
<td>Li, Wu &amp; Cai, 2008.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pollution and natural disasters</td>
<td>Pollution events (C15) Landslides (C20)</td>
<td>Liew-Tsonis &amp; Cheuk, n.d.</td>
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<tr>
<td>No of challenges</td>
<td>No challenge (C4, C9)</td>
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The results of the interviews show that most of the respondents agreed that market trend was one of the factors triggering the practice of responsible tourism. “Because of industry trend, you can now see several tour operators use words such as eco-tourism, responsible tourism or sustainable tourism to attract tourists; if we don’t follow this trend, we will be out-dated and how do we compete with others?” (C14); “It is a trend; everyone is practising it so our company just follows.” (C21) This point on market trend was also observed by Budeanu (2009) and Khairat & Maher (2012) who found the industry initiative to be moderately important. Other than these factors, reducing the environmental impact also was one of the motivators for tour operators. “The main motivation is to make sure that the natural beauty of Sabah is maintained, so we try to protect it as much as possible.” (C1); “As to awareness of responsible tourism, I studied in the US before, so I am aware about how important it is to protect the place” (C11); “Awareness created by the owner of the company because he is the president of Kinabatangan – Corridor of Life Tourism Operators Association, Sabah (KiTA Association).” (C15) Reducing environmental impacts also assumed moderate importance in the study of Khairat & Maher (2012).

Some of the respondents indicated that as tour operators, it was their responsibility to practise responsible tourism: “Tour operators have an obligation to take care of the environment. If the guest destroys the place, in the future what can we offer to others and the next generation?” (C2); “The tour guide has a responsibility and obligation to tell the tourists to protect the place.” (C17) Only one respondent (C10) had this to say: “The government also promotes ecotourism, so we just adapt it.” The results of the study show that one respondent C18 said responsible tourism can build up a positive image in the market but C19 had a different view: “Responsible tourism does not help create a positive image because few people know about this concept; since they don’t know, so they don’t ask for it especially in the case of the Southern Asian market.” Moral obligation was also denoted by Miller (2001) as one of the factors driving environmental responsibility among tour operators.

Many participants agreed that the practice of responsible tourism brings organisational benefits to the business. Profit was the main motivator for the practice of responsible tourism or eco-tourism among tour operators. “The profit is the secondary motivator and if tourism is sustainable, we can give back to the community in terms of greater guest experience. If we continue to practise ecotourism, our tourism industry will continue to stay strong.” (C1) “Profit is needed to support the conservation.” (C15) “Practice of ecotourism will give the product a longer life span and our business can be sustained. Ecotourism brings more profits to our company. It can enhance the quality of the products and this benefits not only us but the whole industry.”(C20) Some respondents responded that “responsible tourism practice can only maintain the quality of the product, but it is impossible to improve the quality of the product because tourists come every day and so a certain amount of destruction is unavoidable.” (C11) A study of sustainable destination development from the tour operator perspective by Curtin & Busby (1999) also concluded that tour operators have moved towards responsible tourism practice mainly because of their desire to increase margins and avoid price-cutting competition.

Other organisational benefits included competitive advantage, cost saving and the acquisition of new skills by staff. “Ecotourism practice is a competitive advantage for our company. Basically if we say we are selling a responsible tourism package, tourists are more likely to buy especially those who know about the demands of responsible tourism and most of these tourists are from Europe, UK, Australians and also Hong Kong and Taiwan particularly those who are educated.” (C8) Market advantage and public relation benefits of being ‘green’ appear to have triggered tour operators toward responsible tourism (Miller, 2001). “As to cost savings, as you can see, my Mongolian yurt was built by using reused materials so
the cost was lower than using new materials. I only spent RM1 million to build it because I used reused materials if not, it may have cost me around RM6 million” and “teach the staff more about responsible tourism, thus indirectly creating awareness for them as well.” (C11) According to Miller (2001), the perceived importance of cost savings over a longer period is balanced against the short-term nature of tourism business operations.

However, two respondents disagreed that organisational benefit was the motivator because the practice of responsible tourism was more dependent on one’s own obligations. They stated that tour operators were not demanding organisational benefits in order to practice responsible tourism development because Sabah is a tourist destination where supply trails demand, which means that supply is limited. Tourists therefore do not care what the tour company practices but rely on what the tour company offers. According to Budeanu (2009), the main challenge in practising responsible tourism lies in having a small organisational benefit but incurring a large cost in providing the service. The categories of drivers triggering tour operators towards the practice of responsible tourism development has already been shown in Table 1.

A few motivation factors that have not emerged from this research include ethical consideration, social network support, and access to loan or business intelligence for a tour operator to practise responsible tourism. However, these factors may have the potential to motivate tour operators to pursue a responsible tourism business. These factors may be important for future research.

Discussion

Challenges and Barriers

Our study findings show that the commitment of multi-stakeholders towards the practice of responsible tourism is low: “It is hard to get support from tourists because they are less aware and there is no demand for responsible tourism.”(C8) The local authority is expected to coordinate and facilitate the participation processes (Siti-Nabiha et al., 2011). However, the results analysed reveal limited cooperation from the government or local authority with tour operators. The lack of stakeholder participation is a major obstacle to sustainable tourism realisation (Waligo, Clarke & Hawkins, 2013). The implementation of responsible tourism is an enormously difficult task to achieve owing to the prevailing socio-economic and political condition in the developing counties unless international organisations encourage and collaborate with governments to implement the principles of sustainable tourism development (Tosun, 2001). In Malaysia, many environmental stakeholders are interested in promoting sustainable tourism in the country but most stakeholders are more likely to work individually instead of together (Siti-Nabiha et al., 2011). This finding is reflected in the statement by tour operators in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah that there is limited cooperation between the local authority and local community.

Tour operators have limited resources and authority to practise responsible tourism and state they are dependent on the government for support and direction. For example C10 said: “We do not have much financial resources and power to do anything in the destinations, to provide facilities such as water cooler to refill water.” Frey & George (2010) also found that despite the general positive attitude towards responsible tourism management, businesses are not investing time and money into changing management practices because of resource constraints that
The relation between humans and animals in food tourism negatively impact the relationship between what enterprises would like to do and what actually is done.

Further, the cost of responsible tourism practice is a major challenge faced by tour operators while a perceived lack of government support serves as a barrier to achieving the goal of responsible tourism (Frey & George, 2010). This situation is also faced by tour operators in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. WCED (1987) argues that financial resource is the main barrier faced by tour operators due to the high implementation cost of responsible tourism practice in destination development. Hence tour operators prefer to create alliances and adopt their own standards of environmental best practice under the guidance of industry associations without having to invest much. Essentially, they neither have slim organisational benefits nor bear the large costs of implementation.

The level of awareness about responsible tourism is less embedded in the residents of Malaysia. There was consensus among nine respondents that Malaysian or Southern Asian tourists are more concerned about price rather than sustainability compared with western tourists. C19 reflected: “There is no point in us promoting responsible tourism because tourists don’t know what it is and they don’t even care about the impacts of tourism on the environment; what they care about is price.” Chan (2010) stated that understanding the sustainability level of a tourist destination and identifying its key attributes, implementing destination competitiveness and sustainability and finally marketing responsible tourism to the relevant market segments are important for promoting responsible tourism.

Population pressure constitutes a major threat to World Heritage Sites (Li, Wu & Cai, 2008). C17 stated that it is hard to set a limit for visitors to tourist destinations because as restaurants and resorts are privatised, they may not agree on a limit to visitors. One other challenge faced by tour operators which limits responsible tourism in Malaysia is the non availability of green transportation. Three respondents stated that “transportation is a major cause of air pollution but we have no choice because Malaysia still does not have green buses. There are ‘green cars’ but it is impossible for us to use cars to transport tourists because we have to fetch one group of tourists from one destination to another destination, and using cars would be costly.” Nowadays, only non-green-buses are available in Sabah, Malaysia because green buses cost a lot. According to Lowe, Aytekin & Gereffi (2009), there are five types of green buses: those using compressed natural gas, all-electric vehicles, hydrogen electric hybrid vehicles, hydrogen fuel cell vehicles, and diesel electric hybrid.

However, two respondents stated that they are not facing any challenges or barriers to practising responsible tourism.

The challenges and barriers to responsible tourism practice areas are as follows: (1) lack of stakeholder participation; (2) responsible tourism awareness; (3) green transportation; and (4) population pressure. The government plays an important role in promoting responsible tourism through awareness campaigns or incentives for tour operators who practice responsible tourism such as eco-awards or green certification. Some respondents stated that these challenges could be resolved if the government plays a more active role in encouraging responsible tourism practice.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper explored the key motivational factors of tour operators in practicing responsible tourism and its challenges and barriers in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. The motivation
of tour operators to practise responsible tourism is conceptualised in the research framework based on the push-pull motivation theory and organization factors. Push-pull motivation theory has been widely applied to the field of tourism but most past studies focused on tourist’s motivation for travelling. This paper argues that the said theory can be applied to tour operators’ motivation, as they play a vital intermediary role between supply and demand and contribute to the success of responsible tourism development. The challenges and barriers faced by tour operators were also examined in this study.

This study proposed a clear picture of the motivation factors driving tour operators to respond to the practice of responsible rural tourism development and the challenges faced by tour operators in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. This should serve as a guideline for new practitioners in the tourism industry. It should also help local authorities in decision making in term of policies and regulations to encourage tour operators move towards responsible tourism development. However, this paper is limited by the sample which solely focused on local tour operators in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. The tourism industry is involved with a wide range of stakeholders and the roles of each group is very significant in the realisation of responsible tourism development such as government, tourists and other small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Therefore, future research should focus on other stakeholders in the tourism industry.

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