

## **Towards ASEAN Integration 2015: Where is the Future of Tourism Research?**

Tan Sri Ajit Singh

*Former Secretary-General of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)*

*Keynote speech by Tan Sri Ajit Singh at the signing ceremony for the founding of the ASEAN Tourism Research Association (ATRA) at Taylor's University, Malaysia (29 November 2013).*

For the first time, the United Nations (UN) declared 1967 to be the International Tourism Year (ITY) with the theme 'Tourism Passport to Peace'. It is fortuitous that this was the year that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was born. However, while the founding fathers were indeed preoccupied with peace and stability in the region and setting out modest goals for growth, social progress and development, tourism was far from their minds. In fact 5 years on, during the UN Study Team on Asian Economic Cooperation, it was not even included as a subject for the consideration by the Team.

Tourism's status as a poor cousin of trade was again reflected in 1976, that is nearly 9 years after ASEAN's foundation, when a sub-committee on tourism was established to guide the committee on Trade and Tourism. Another reason could be that ASEAN countries were still trying to figure out how to fit tourism into their national goals and priorities as they were still unclear about its impact on national production & income.

The other reason could be that with the unification of North and South Vietnam, many neighboring countries were facing a serious problem caused by the influx of refugees from Vietnam with all its unsettling effects and international ramifications.

But what was the effect of this on the tourism in the region? According to the UN Statistical Year Book for 1982 ASEAN had less than 2% of the world's total tourism receipts valued at US \$ 20 billion in 1970. In 1975 the receipts from tourists was still less than less than 2 % of the world's US \$ 44 billion. But in 1982, ASEAN's share of the total arrivals had gone up to nearly 23% of the world's total of US \$ 95 billion, surpassing all the other regions.

Fast forward to the present day and the situation has changed dramatically. Tourism is no longer the poorer cousin that it was. It is now considered an essential ingredient for economic planning purposes and could only be ignored at one's own peril. The international tourist arrivals worldwide have succeeded the 1 billion mark for the first time in 2012 and ASEAN has been recording an average of 8.3 % growth for 2005-2012, the highest in the world with South Asia at 8.2%. The tourist arrivals stood at 84.6 billion with tourism receipts at 91.7 billion. Malaysia is the 10th in the top 10 countries with 25 million arrivals. In the absolute terms, Thailand had 16% increase on 2011, Cambodia 24%, Vietnam 14% and Myanmar 52%!

Even though ASEAN as a whole has done well, it has to be pointed out that Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia received 55% of tourist arrivals for the region; and Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia 69% of the total arrival receipts. This itself shows that disparities do exist and that much remains to be done to close the gap among the countries.

Presenting these statistics, the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) states holidays, recreational and leisure accounted for 52% of the arrivals, 14 % for business

purposes and 27% for other purposes (such as visiting friends and relatives). The remaining 7% was not specified.

What this shows very graphically is that no country or region can afford to ignore this incredible phenomenon which involved US \$ 1000 billion (1 Trillion) in receipts around the world. The visitors apparently spent on accommodation, food, drink, local transport, entertainment and shopping. This of course would have implications for all industries in the supply chain, for production, employment, human capital development, because of payment and growth.

There would also be ramifications on the policy and structural issues. ASEAN has already put in place the plan of action in ASEAN Cooperation on Tourism (1998), the ASEAN Strategic Plan 2011-2015 and a number of other declarations or agreements. Taken together they do indicate that ASEAN is very aware of the various issues relating to sustainable tourism and sustainable development. The recent World Economic Forum Report on ASEAN Travel & Tourism Competitiveness is a good document which examines in detail various aspect of the industry and has made some interesting observations. It would be well worth of time to look at its views, comments & recommendations closely.

It is also necessary to have all the stakeholders, the academia, the civil society and the media involved at various steps of the consecutive planning and implementation stages of the various plans of ASEAN.

One glaring defect that I see clearly in all strategic action plans and declarations is that not sufficient attention has been paid to research on various topics being addressed in these documents. If at all, it is identified in passing with phrases like 'a need for the research planning' without much thought given to what it actually implies.

This is where I see that this very commendable initiative taken by Taylor's University will become increasingly relevant and important as it provides an avenue for the policy makers and planners to seek expert opinion and advice on issues in which expertise is needed.

ASEAN has no budget at all for research unlike the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries or the European Union (EU) which can draw from their budgets with these funds being made available to these organizations. They are able to do research and thus give considered and well thought out opinions and policy papers. This is a major handicap in ASEAN.

What is being done here in the private sector – in this case a private university – taking the initiative to start a collaborative effort with other universities in ASEAN to form a research association, namely, the ASEAN Tourism Research Association (ATRA). ATRA is ready to assist ASEAN in fulfilling its objective & goals for the good of the tourism sector. Taylor's University, which has some experience in this field, is ready to commit its own research and funds, so on not to burden ASEAN in anyway. It is a very good example of public and private partnership, especially in view that the Ministry of Tourism & Culture have called the private sector to actively participate in the implementation of their various programmes.

To my mind, this is the first of such initiative we are undertaking in ASEAN – that the private sector is coming forward to assist ASEAN without a seeking funding of any kind. The fruits of its labour and those of the other Universities which will be part of ATRA will not only be relied by the government but also by other stakeholders. It is a new beginning, treading a new path. In ASEAN anything new is always treated with caution but the time has come for ASEAN to get out of its time warp and embrace such initiatives wholeheartedly.