

Industry Analysis

Ecotourism in UNESCO World Heritage Sites: Uplifting Communities, Opportunities and Economies

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The theme “Ecotourism in UNESCO World Heritage Sites: Uplifting Communities, Opportunities and Economies” aims to address the challenges and opportunities of World Heritage Sites worldwide in developing and managing ecotourism in a sustainable manner, particularly to realise the socio-economic needs of rural settlements and communities.

Tourism has become one of the world’s largest and fastest growing industries, creating jobs and generating income as well as protecting heritage, cultural and ecotourism sites. As a testament, from 2005 to 2014, the global international tourist arrivals recorded an increase of 40%, from 809 million tourists arrivals in 2005 to 1.13 billion in 2014. The international tourism receipts worldwide grew by 83.2%, from USD 680 billion in 2005 to USD 1.2 trillion in 2014. The tourism sector employed 277 million persons (or 1 in 11 jobs) and contributed 9% of the world’s GDP.

In the case of Malaysia, tourist arrivals grew by 67.1% to reach 27.4 million arrivals in 2014 compared to 16.4 million in 2005. In terms of revenue, tourism receipts grew by 112%, from USD 10.6 billion in 2005 to USD 22.0 billion in 2014. The sector contributed 13.1% to Malaysia’s GDP and employed approximately 2.3 million persons (or 1 in 6 jobs) in 2014. As such, tourism’s contribution to the national economy is more significant in Malaysia compared to the global average.

While the importance of tourism is well established, what is the market size and potential of ecotourism? Globally, ecotourism is an increasingly popular tourism product. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), ecotourism, nature, heritage, cultural and adventure is expected to grow rapidly over the next two decades and global spending will increase at a higher rate than the overall growth of tourism. Based on the estimates of The International Ecotourism Society, ecotourism is projected grow to 25% of the global tourism market within six years and generate USD470 billion in tourist receipts.

As for Malaysia, the data does not cater for a dedicated category on ecotourism. The departing visitor survey, however, provides information on the major activities engaged by tourists visiting Malaysia. In this regard, the survey findings indicated that 30.4% of tourists were engaged in walking/hiking and trekking-related activities, which can be viewed as a proxy to ecotourism. This implies that ecotourism is relatively popular among tourists to Malaysia.

Besides the direct economic benefits, ecotourism assumes a pivotal role in fostering inclusive development and social transformation of a nation. This is in line with our philosophy – tourism protects, preserves, and conserves mother nature, culture and heritage.

I would like to share with all of you the on-going initiatives in developing the ecotourism segment in Malaysia. We have formulated the National Ecotourism Plan (2016-2025) to maximize the potential of ecotourism and ensure sustainability. This Plan also embodies the spirit of the theme, uplifting communities, opportunities and economies. This theme focuses on the outputs, outcomes and benefits of ecotourism, which is the left hand side of the equation. More importantly, the right hand side variables involving the inputs of responsible tourism and sustainable development policy and practice are accorded due priority in the Plan.

In addition, the Eleventh Malaysia Plan (2016-2020), a 5-year development plan, amongst others, is geared towards attracting high-yield tourists to further increase the industry's contribution to the economy. The strategies include upgrading and development of ecotourism infrastructure, enhancement of offerings, capacity building and implementation of sustainable tourism development best practices as well as marketing and promotion. To strengthen our position as one of the leading destinations for ecotourism in the region, measures are being undertaken to position Perhentian Island in Terengganu as a premier tourism eco and adventure destination. Through this latest initiative, we aim to emulate the success of Langkawi Island, which is renowned as an ecotourism, geopark and island tourism destination in the world. In recognition of our ecotourism initiatives, Malaysia was awarded the "Best Eco-Vacation" at the 5th National Geographic Traveler Awards - Top Travel Destinations of 2015 by National Geographic Traveler Magazine.

The UNWTO also acknowledged Malaysia's efforts in promoting community-based tourism through the Malaysian Homestay Experience Programme, which won the Ulysses Award for Innovation in Public Policy and Governance by the UNWTO in 2012. Our Homestay programme is a classic example of a rural ecotourism programme, which empowers the communities to uplift their income and quality of life. This programme allows tourists to live with a local family, thus enabling them to experience their local lifestyle, culture and tradition. In 2014, more than 370,000 tourists participated in the homestay programme, generating USD7.1 million to the rural economy.

The Homestay programme also underlines the importance of conservation and environmental management. The Tree Planting Programme at Homestays is a good example, where visitors are given the opportunity to plant their own tree to mark their visit to that particular Homestay. It also supports the idea of preserving the environment and further beautifying the landscape of the Homestays. To date, more than 16,733 trees have been planted by the homestay visitors.

While we place emphasis on enhancing yield, we must be mindful not to overlook an important stakeholder of tourism – the people. Social inclusion is essential, and we need to strike a good balance between the maximisation of economic returns and social returns. Thus, local involvement, enhancement of local capabilities, sense of belonging and ownership, economic empowerment, and employment opportunities are essential ingredients for developing and managing ecotourism in a sustainable manner to cater to the socio-economic needs of local communities.

It is also important to seek opportunities to create value innovation to enhance the ecotourism experience. For instance, initiatives to improve the training of local and special-interest guides with better product knowledge and communication skills to provide better service to tourists can further enrich the tourist experience and fetch a higher premium. In addition, close collaboration between operators, local communities, NGOS and government and a holistic approach are vital elements to develop and grow thriving and successful ecotourism clusters. Towards this end, the buy-in, support and participation of the entire value chain such

as local communities, industry players and stakeholders have to be mobilized through engagement, public education and awareness programmes as well as effective implementation of the ecotourism plan of action.