Sustainability of Cultural Tourism in Sabah
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Abstract: Malaysia is well known for its diversity and cultural tourism, which serve as the main reason to attract visits from both domestic and international tourists. Sabah, one of its States, also popularly known as “Land Below the Wind”, has unique culture and traditions to offer the tourism industry. However, excessive commercialization of cultural tourism, lack of community involvement and lack of knowledge and understanding of cultural products have put Sabah’s cultural tourism in a questionable position in terms of sustainability. This study identifies the sustainability level of cultural tourism in Sabah using the audit guidelines provided by WTO, the Global Tourism Sustainable Council and the European Commission. We interviewed cultural village operators, the local community, government bodies and observed the cultural attractions. The results showed that sustainability of Sabah cultural tourism products is weak. Evidence indicates the lack of sustainability is attributed to a lack of alignment between the State’s tourism policy and the 10th Malaysian Plan, a lack of economic support and inadequate transparency and implementation at the State government level in supporting cultural tourism.

Keywords: cultural tourism, Sabah, sustainable tourism, tourism impacts

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Introduction

World Tourism Organisation (1985) described cultural tourism as having two separate approaches. Firstly, as an individual’s cultural motivation to pursue culture, art, festivals and event tours as a part of a study (a narrow definition) and secondly; an individual’s need to satisfy their own cultural level and thirst for cultural diversity which contributes to new experiences and knowledge (a wider definition) (Ivanovic, 2008). Introduced in early 2000, cultural tourism has attracted a great number of tourists to Malaysia annually, compelled by the variety of ethnic presences, ranging from different traditional attire, music, dance, handicrafts and architecture that help reflect the heritage and culture of Sabah. Sabah has 32 officially recognised ethnic groups of varied cultural backgrounds and these indigenous people use 55 major languages with over 80 dialects (Herman, 2003). Of these ethnic groups, the Kadazan-dusun comprises 17.8% and they are also hill- and wet-rice cultivators. In addition, Sabah state endeavours to promote cultural tourism in accordance with the Sabah Development Corridor Blueprint 2008-2025 which aims to achieve sustainable tourism through the involvement of local communities (Institute of Development Studies Sabah, 2007). According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2016),
Sabah received 2.55 million visitors in 2015.

Jovicic and Ilic (2010) mentioned that indicators for sustainable cultural tourism are economy, tourist satisfaction, culture, society and ecology. Additionally, Liao and Wang (2011) introduced five sustainable criteria for cultural tourism: Authenticity, commercial development, quality of local life, cultural values and assistance of relevant associations. The World Tourism Organization has foreseen that cultural tourism will be in the top five tourism market segments but further commented that there will be increasing challenges in managing these products. One of the challenges is that the government or tourism board emphasises more on tangible aspects that can bring economic benefits such as promoting the handcrafts and performing arts industries (Regis & Lasimbang, 1996). This development commercialises cultural products for tourists’ consumption, while cultural elements and values are being diminished (Becker, 2015). Another challenge is that local communities are not entirely involved in cultural tourism activities (Paimin et al., 2014). At present, involvement by local communities can range from activities such as guides, homestay services, craft making to retailing local products which create essential inputs to the cultural tourism development. Even though government policy provides support for local community participation, locals are not fully involved in cultural tourism in Sabah due to local beliefs, religion, and economic and traditional factors (Siow et al., 2014). In addition, the lack of in-depth knowledge and attention to certain cultural products by the government, local communities and researchers further hinder the issue of sustainability in Sabah’s cultural tourism (Omar, 2013). As a consequence, there are growing conflicts in managing cultural and heritage tourism by the stakeholders, namely the government, tour operators, cultural managers as well as the local community itself (Ismail et al., 2014) resulting in poor utilisation and realisation of heritage and culture as a tourism resource (Rahman & Sid, 2010). Therefore, in order to achieve the sustainability in cultural tourism, there should be a more comprehensive tourism plan and strategy.

The aim of this research is to identify the level of sustainability in cultural tourism in Sabah, particularly the Monsopiad Cultural Village and the Mari-Mari Cultural Village. In order to achieve that, the current situation of Sabah’s cultural tourism is examined pertaining to government policies, local participation and their viewpoints as well as tourists’ satisfaction. These are compared with the guidelines provided by WTO, Global Tourism Sustainable Council and European Commission. This research also focuses on broader sustainability aspects of Sabah’s cultural tourism by looking into six areas, which are social, economic, environmental, educational, human resources and policy developments.

**Literature Review**

**Defining Cultural Tourism**

Cultural tourism is defined as involvement in a local community, either partly or wholly, with the best interests of the local lifestyle, historical sites, arts, performances, rituals, and religion (Reisinger, 1994; Lord, 1999; Sudipta & Sarat, 2010; Ismagilova et al., 2014). The concept of cultural tourism has a long history and it is strongly argued that the Grand Tour is the root of the terminology (Christou, 2005; Chaney, 2014). The Grand Tour was a custom for young European men to travel for educational purposes; however, today it has changed into a trend for people to experience different cultures (Richards, 2011; Chaney, 2014). In the Malaysian context, cultural tourism has existed since the 1960s, where tour groups have visited Iban tribes of Malaysia by going on river safari cruises (Smith, 2009) and since then, cultural tourism in Malaysia has gained popularity among tourists to experience authentic traditional arts, music and architectures available for tourist consumption (Ismail et al., 2014).

**Need for Sustainable Cultural Tourism**

Without any contribution to the preservation of cultural tourism and the destination itself, it gradually loses its primary characteristics of authenticity and unique values (Choi & Sirakaya, 2006). The Global Code of Ethics for Tourism further illustrated that cultural tourism needs to be fully in compliance with sustainability (Manning, 1996). Hence, the need of new sustainable planning and management for those non-renewable cultural places
gained prominence (Du Cros, 2001) and numerous guidelines for sustainable tourism were developed to preserve these non-renewable resources.

Sustainability is not a new paradigm in many industries since it is often seen as a key to organizational survival. In the tourism industry, sustainability is defined by Brundtland Commission in Our Common Future as the “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987) and this definition is further developed into principles for sustainability development in 1992 at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and, subsequently, the Rio + 20 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2012). These serve as the operational principles in the concept of sustainability development and its application. It provides a framework for balancing the present tourists’ and host-regions’ demands, while providing protection and enhancement for future opportunities.

Researchers have generated multiple perspectives to facilitate this understanding, and subsequently measuring sustainable development. According to Buckley (2012), a universal conceptualisation and measurement of sustainability is yet to be found. However, Cernat and Gourdon (2012) have developed sustainability indicators for specific geographical areas which are based on the Sustainable Tourism Benchmarking Tool (STBT) that focussed on tourism assets, tourism activity, tourism-related linkages, environmental and social sustainability, overall infrastructure, and attractiveness. Whereas, Ko (2005) introduced two tourism sustainability assessment indicators based on the Barometer Tourism Sustainability (BTS) model which represents a comprehensive level of tourism sustainability in a given destination, combining human and natural indicators into an index of sustainable tourism development. The MOEBA of tourism sustainability indicators (ATSI) model is introduced to complement the BTS. Other authors like Cottrell et al. (2013) and Bramwell et al. (1996) emphasised the multidimensional approach by looking into economic, social and environmental, institutional, political, managerial and institutional forces. At the institutional level, international organisations such as the United Nations and UNWTO – World Tourism Organisation, defines sustainable tourism as based on three principle aspects: environmental, socio-cultural and economic (Farsari, 2012).

Another attempt used to measure the level of sustainability in cultural tourism is the checklist approach. This is the monitoring approach system of sustainability indicators developed by the World Tourism Organisation (2004) and the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (2012). Galtung (1980) described the checklist approach as a method that reduces errors, along with analysing the business environment at a micro level. In addition, a checklist approach is also not just responsible for the planning of sustainability evaluations, but also helps with discussions and generating ideas on key issues, along with comparing the current sustainable evaluations and determining whether the goals set have been met. This indicator set was specifically designed to understand the critical indicator that risks a particular destination and reduce the risks by identifying key information for decision making (Sirakaya et al., 2001).

In measuring the sustainability of cultural tourism in Sabah, the checklist approach is adopted. This approach stresses the importance of a comprehensive understanding of numerous dimensions. The checklist approach allows for further strategic planning to enhance the sustainability of cultural tourism by means of improving the quality of the tourism products.

The need for sustainable cultural tourism has become more crucial and various sustainable measurement methods and approaches have been developed in different contexts to ensure its suitability and accuracy in measuring the level of sustainability.

This research examines the environmental indicators, economic indicators, social indicators, policy and regulation indicators, along with educational indicators. AbbasiDorcheh and Mohamed (2013) suggested that environmental indicators affect the sustainability of cultural tourism due to the fact that they encompass the protection of the natural ecosystem, the treatment of waste management, the management of the visual impact of infrastructure along with facilities and many others. In terms of economic indicators, Blancas et al. (2011) suggested that economic indicators should look into economic benefits that are brought to the host community and destination through cultural tourism, as well as how able the destination is to sustain tourist satisfaction, the seasonality of tourism activities, along with cultural routes and institutional regulations. Social indicators cover areas such as the conservation of cultural heritage, local public safety, the general quality of life within Sabah
through cultural tourism, the social carrying capacity of Sabah and the safeguarding of cultural identity within the local community (Richards, 2011). Lastly, policies and regulation checklists ensure that individuals or agencies are able to abide with a certain kind of behaviour and also limit their level of discretion pertaining to how they operate in the sustainability of cultural tourism (Miller, 2001).

**Methodology**

**Research Approach**

A qualitative approach is preferable if one is to examine human behaviour, their feelings and personalities (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Maanen, 1983) as well as phenomenon like trends and practices (Mangan et al., 2004). Research activities were carried out in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. Interview sessions were carried out with the cultural village operators (Monsopiad Cultural Village and Mari-Mari Cultural Village), lecturers from the Tourism Faculty of the University Malaysia Sabah, officers from the Sabah Tourism Board and local residents. All interviews were carried out in the English language with private and public institutions and Bahasa Malaysia was used to interview any local residents who are unable to converse in English language. Translation of the questions and respondent’s answers from English to Bahasa Malaysia were carried out to ensure data consistency. Site observations and several interpretation methods were used in this research, namely observation, photos, documentation.

**Measurement Development**

In order to measure the level of sustainability of Sabah cultural tourism, a checklist approach was adopted and the areas of assessment are listed as follows:

**Planning and Education**

This measurement is to assess the existence of an adequate fee structure (admission price), a master plan for sustainable cultural tourism and a code of ethics planned in cultural tourism destinations. The aim is to help mitigate the issues that affect sustainability in cultural tourism and educate not only local people but also tourists in terms of cultural preservation (Salazar, 2010). Adequate planning and education are essential in cultural tourism in terms of intangible values that could enhance the quality of the cultural experience among tourists.

**Policy and Regulations**

This study assesses the current government and operator’s policies and regulations that control the development of sites and its effort to ensure sustainability in cultural tourism. This study is important to develop a well-established institutional framework that includes integrated planning and legislation, proactive policy processes and effective government structures to attain long-term sustainable cultural heritage tourism (Cui, 2008).

**Human Resources**

In terms of human resources, this study examines the level of the local community’s involvement in job positions within the study area. The local communities’ role and participation are essentially important in developing sustainable cultural tourism, which should benefit local residents, conserve their authentic culture and educate both travellers and local communities (Ko, 2005).
Economic Indicators

This study evaluates the social economy of the local communities by looking into total revenue from cultural tourism in Sabah and the proportion allocated to those local communities. The economic indicators such as total revenue generated by the industry, job creation for local people and tourists’ expenditure are closely in relation to the sustainability of cultural tourism; and lack of attention to economic management would possibly affect the sustainability of the industry (Garrod & Fyall, 2000).

Social Indicators

This study assesses the impact of cultural tourism on local communities and their opinions by looking into balance of positive and negative impacts. In order to achieve the sustainability of cultural tourism, it needs to maintain and strengthen the quality of the local communities’ lifestyle which includes social structure, access to amenities, support systems and resources and avoid any types of social degradation or exploitation (UNWTO, 2016). Hence, it is important to measure the impacts and there should be a harmonious coordination between all parties who are involved in the industry such as local authorities, tour operators, site managers and travellers.

Environmental Indicators

This study assesses the level of preservation and damage in cultural heritage sites or villages in Sabah. Environmental indicators affect the sustainability of cultural tourism due to the fact that they encompass the protection of the natural ecosystem, the management of the visual impact on infrastructure along with facilities and many others (Abbasi Dorcheh & Mohamed, 2013).

Sampling Plan

The nature of this study requires data to be obtained from experts and experienced personnel who are familiar with cultural tourism and the overall economic status of the State. This ensures accurate and reliable sources of insights and information. Hence, respondents were selected and data were gathered during a field trip to Kota Kinabalu city centre, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah from 15th to 18th May, 2016.

Respondents

The respondents selected consisted of two groups; Professional and non-professional. Professional respondents were six professional individuals who are experts in cultural tourism. They were the cultural village operators, academicians, and tour operators. For non-professional respondents, they were eleven tourists who were experiencing cultural tourism or had already experienced cultural tourism in Sabah. Six local respondents were native residents and employees at both cultural villages. They were selected to understand their perceptions with regards to cultural tourism in Sabah, based on their own experiences and daily lives. This research used a semi-structured interview whereby the main questions provided were based on the study’s research questions, and follow-up inquiries would be carried out within the scope of the study.

The Delphi technique were used for the professional respondents who were selected as expert panels for sustainable cultural tourism areas. The method is to gain a holistic understanding of sustainable cultural tourism development and issues in Sabah from people who have a greater overall knowledge of cultural tourism in Sabah. In-depth and semi-structured interviews were applied throughout the studies.

Data Validity

The triangulation method was applied in this study, by combining multiple methods to facilitate better understanding about a phenomenon. This minimises the weakness of a single method through providing cross-validity within several types of data (Patton, 2001). Two forms of triangulation methods were used in this study: Data triangulation, and theory triangulation.
For data triangulations, the validity of the results gathered from interviews with the expert panels, tourists and the local residents were crosschecked by comparing them with supporting secondary sources (checklists, journals, policies, and regulations - specifically in the context of Sabah Tourism Development Master Plan). Moreover, the final content analysis of the data would be derived after discussion between five investigators/members.

Theory triangulation was used in this research, by involving various individuals and groups from different backgrounds and disciplines (Decrop, 1999). This method is to validate the information collected pertaining to sustainable cultural tourism in Sabah.

Findings and Discussion

The primary purpose of this study is to measure the sustainability of cultural sites in Sabah. Six sustainable-indicator dimensions - planning/educational, policies/regulations, human resources, economic, social and environmental - were used as the basis of the study. Earlier research used multiple approaches to review sustainability. Cernat and Gourdon (2012) and Ko (2005) used the STBT and BTS index indicators respectively in measuring tourism sustainability in a specific destination. However, this study focuses on measuring the level of sustainability based on the six indicators mentioned earlier which necessitate the use of the checklist approach developed by UNWTO and WTO.

Planning and Education

The measurement of this indicator is based on the 1) Adequate fee structure 2) Funding related to safety, security and health and 3) Code of ethics in the cultural sites. Based on the site observation, there is an appropriate fee structure (admission price) for visitors in both the Monsopiad cultural village and the Mari-Mari cultural village. There are numerous online websites which also feature adequate fee structures for both of the cultural villages. This showed that the cultural villages are disseminating well-planned information to their respective stakeholders, especially tourists.

The presence of adequate fee structures signifies a professional and systematic form of planning which the organisation would utilize for future developments (Salazar, 2010). Having a systematic form of planning is an essential element in achieving long-term sustainability in tourism.

In the area of funding related to safety, security and health, findings showed that there is no specific funding by the government for these criteria to the general public but rather the organisation utilises the Niche (VIP market) strategy to implement audits ‘only when necessary’. It is supported by a previous study which also showed there is lack of funding in terms of safety, security and health by the government (Jayaraman et. al., 2010).

“We usually do inspections internally, but occasionally we invite the authority as well. Most of the time when we invite them is when we have VIP guests visiting the village. For example, recently there were the Commonwealth Parliamentary speakers who came to visit us here, 186 delegates, so the government officials had to come and make sure that the premises are secure enough.’ (Sales Manager of Mari-Mari Cultural Village)

Choi and Sirakaya (2006) stated that sustainable tourism at a local community level should at least have a development-control policy, a natural-environment-related policy, and a security and visitor-safety policy. Additionally, in developing countries, local governments do not have policies and regulations related to these criteria. However, United Nation (2014) described the lack of government support as one of the barriers to sustainable development. Therefore, funding from government is required for safety and security in order to maintain and improve the condition of cultural heritage sites in Sabah.

In terms of a code of ethics for the cultural sites, the interview demonstrated that there is inadequate provision by relevant stakeholders. As stated by Sha Sha (2016, personal communication, 15 May), there are no policies and planning enforced by the government on cultural sites. In addition, it is further supported by a previous study that the policies on cultural tourism by the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Environment Sabah are too general, emphasising sustainable tourism development but lacking specific regulations and executions
(Omar, 2013). The cultural villages have their own codes of ethics for cultural sites. These codes of ethics have been developed to guide tourists while they are in the cultural villages. From what has been observed at the Mari-Mari cultural village, they limit tours and cultural dance performances to three times a day to minimise tourism impacts on locals. The same applies to the Monsopiad cultural village. During our observation, there was a certain written code of ethics enforced by the cultural villages such as respect for locals, no photos or videos without registration and costume restrictions.

‘No, the government is not involved with the funding, policies, planning and development on the cultural sites because this is a privately owned NGO. For rules and regulations, since we are privately owned, we plan everything by ourselves.’ (Owner of the Monsopiad Cultural Village).

Based on the above findings, the imbalance in planning codes of ethics between all levels of governance can deter the long-term sustainability of cultural tourism in Sabah as the government do not have clear guidelines to assist cultural villages to develop their codes of ethics, thus, a non-standardised code of ethics may result in different levels of sustainability in different cultural villages. A code of ethical practice is one of the most important areas in cultural tourism to minimise the negative impacts of tourism on locals. This ensures that local hosts will be the permanent beneficiaries rather than victims of tourism (Cole, 2007). However, an absence of those concerns may trigger the possible conflicts on local communities due to the misbehaviour of visitors. Hence, there should be an intervention in the form of a code of ethics by the government to regulate this issue for cultural tourism sustainability (World Tourism Organization, 2005).

**Policy and regulation**

This indicator focuses on the government policies and regulations which control the development of cultural sites. The respondents’ feedback showed there exist regulations but there is a lack of execution and appropriate guidelines that is suitable for Sabah. Cultural sites are vulnerable and due to this reason, there should be a good legal system to ensure the preservation of sites from both man-made and natural threats and to overcome the challenges of sustainability. Ritchie and Crouch (2003) mentioned that this kind of challenge falls under integrated destination management or planning and it is generally receiving a lack of support or coordination amongst the several government and non-government agencies. Similarly, another researcher demonstrated that in Malaysia, there are currently issues of regulations because cultural sites are managed by different stakeholders. Maintaining the sites in a sustainable way needs reliable cooperation between parties, all of which require consistent guidelines (Ismail et al., 2014). Hence, to overcome challenges of both man-made and natural threats, Sabah needs better executions of regulations with harmonious coordination amongst federal government, state government and non-governmental agencies.

‘One of the main challenges is the policy. However, in general, policy is not an issue. They make fine master plan for the tourism. The issue is always the execution. They have good plan but whether it can happen, that is the issue.’ (Industry expert & adjunct professor in UMS & Owner of Borneo Eco Tour)

‘No, the government is not involved with the funding, policies, planning and development on the cultural sites because this is a privately owned. For rules and regulations, since we are privately owned, we plan everything by ourselves.’ (Owner of the Monsopiad Cultural Village)

‘At the moment, we do follow sustainable guideline by UNWTO and GSTC. But it is challenging because it is not in context of Asian countries. So we will have meeting next month and try to review those guidelines to meet Sabah’s situation.’ (Industry expert & adjunct professor in UMS & Owner of Borneo Eco Tour)

The lack of government support of the cultural villages has a negative impact on the sustainable growth of cultural tourism in Sabah. The findings of the research conducted were not aligned with the Tourism Policies set forth in the 10th Malaysian Plan for 2011 to 2015, that aims to promote heritage and cultural tourism as niche products for the next decade (The 10th Malaysia Plan, 2011). Casado-Asensio and Steurer (2014) explained that if there is a lack of communication and implementation of policies, locals feel misgoverned from the perspective of a lack in transparency. The government should revisit their policies and implementations to ensure the execution is carried out as promised (McConnell, 2010).
Human resources

“Our village is owned by the 8th decendent of the Monsopiad family. They are proud of their own unique culture and it has a long history (300 years). They want to keep it as their own family business and their opinion take important role in development and regulations for this sites.” (owner of Monsopiad Cultural Village)

As quoted above there is high level of involvement in tourism planning by local communities in the development of cultural tourism in Sabah. This was supported by a previous study which showed that when local communities are involved in the decision-making process for tourism development, a high level of empowerment could be mobilised, and this leads to greater cultural tourism sustainability (May-Ling et al., 2014). In addition, Mancini et al. (2003) suggested that in order to pursue sustainability, tourism plans for a hospitality destination needs to be designed by planners who have reasonable and updated knowledge about the region, in this case, local communities. Therefore, participation of local communities in tourism planning is a positive sign for long-term sustainability and a positive force for changes and development of cultural tourism (Claiborne, 2010).

Economic indicators

“I don’t know that much about cultural tourism for the whole of Sabah but I can see that in this village, most employees are able to work, get married and money is sufficient enough too for their whole family. Generally, it sustains my family”(Locals resident 1,2,4,5).

“We (Monsopiad Cultural Village) provide salary, health benefits and employee provident fund. It is for some local employees but not for whole community.”(owner of Monsopiad Cultural Village)

Cultural tourism NGOs in Sabah are showing efforts in supporting and planning to ameliorate the standard of living through providing job opportunities and selling handicraft items to the tourists. These efforts can contribute to sustainability in the long run as the locals are able to be self-sustainable. However, without government support economically, an inefficient level of sustainability in cultural tourism may result as private sites normally have limited financial resources to plan and implement future projects. As economic welfare has a substantial impact on compensation and the lives of employees, the government needs to cooperate with NGOS to underpin their competitive advantages and develop sustainable cultural activities based on current economic core competence. It is also supported by previous studies showing that local communities should gain adequate financial benefits for all the stakeholders in order to enhance their commitment and bolster the sustainable development in the long run (Sharpley & Telfer, 2008).

(a) Employment generated by cultural tourism

“Currently all our tour guides are local people...most of the tour guides are Kadazan Dusun people. Most of the dancers are part timers, from other places.”(Tour guide in Mari Mari Cultural Village)

“We give job opportunities to the people from the surrounding areas...In total, we have about 160 employees, 100 from the administration side all the way down to the employees that perform the acts for the tourists. We have about 50 employees working in the cultural village and about 10 of them are local employees.”(Managing Director in Mari Mari Cultural Village)

“All staff in this cultural village are local and they are all of Kadazan origin”(local employee in Monsophiad Cultural Village)

Although findings indicate that there are jobs provided for locals, the number of jobs are insufficient. According to Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2016, the population in Sabah is about 3.72 million. While employment is offered, the number of positions is limited. Furthermore, being unemployed brings insecurity in sustaining the local community lifestyle (Schwarzer et al., 1993). Therefore, it is believed that cultural tourism in Sabah should provide sufficient job opportunities for locals, so they can attain a sustainable tourism industry in the State.
Usages of incentives for local communities

“There are also plans for this village to share its resources for locals to set up a paddy field and rent it to them to tend and harvest crops to utilize the empty lands not used... They can teach visitors how to do farming in a traditional way and the revenue generated will be also allocated for them” (Owner of Monsopiad Cultural Village)

“In terms of allocating some of our revenue to the local community, we do CSR activities and also employ local people. We give job opportunities to the people from the surrounding areas... In terms of surrounding infrastructures, what I can say is that the roads are well maintained after this cultural village has been growing.” (Sales Manager of Mari Mari Cultural Village)

The summary of the findings suggests that there is lack monetary and non-monetary support for the local communities as they are not sufficiently benefitted and it may bring crucial impacts to the local communities. In addition, based on the observation and previous statistic data, tourist arrivals in the cultural village have increased, but there was no sign of increment in the benefits towards the local communities. This could be a threat to the sustainability of cultural tourism in the long run. It is found that when people are not provided with a sufficient amount of benefit to sustain their livelihood, this will influence the mental and physical well-being of the community (Dooley & Catalano, 1988, Feather, 1997).

According to Choi and Sirakaya (2005), to sustain cultural tourism, factors such as economic benefits, planning, community participation and protection of community resources are required. Furthermore, Wunder (2000) found that the lack of incentives leads to thefts of equipment shown in the case studies of five cultural villages. Therefore, it is suggested that cultural tourism in Sabah needs to provide sufficient monetary and non-monetary incentives so that it can help to sustain the culture and wellbeing of local communities in the long run. The provision of such benefits is likely to generate local employees who see tourism and related activities not just as economic avenues but also see themselves as guardians of local culture and values.

“So far, we don’t have any request for additional benefits but people who are involved with the cultural village should have interest in culture instead of hoping for benefits.” (Monsopiad Cultural Village local employee)

Additionally, statements made by the locals indicate that most of the job opportunities created by cultural tourism is occupied solely by the indigenous locals who are related to each other, and whose cultures are showcased at the sites. The increase in job opportunities is a contribution to a nation’s economy, and an indication of life quality’s improvement (Andereck et al., 2005).

Social indicators

Locals attitude towards the number of visitors

“Local people want more tourists. The Kadazan tribe has a phrase called the ‘Tagong’ which signifies where there is noise, there is joy much like the concept of ‘housewarming’. For them, this music means bringing money and all the good things. It won’t affect their life, since there are only four performances a day.” (Owner of the Monsopiad Cultural Village)

“Currently, we are satisfied with the numbers but definitely more is better.” (Monsopiad Cultural Village local employee)

Based on the interviews, the locals do not seem to have an issue with increased number of tourists visiting Sabah and further expect more arrivals. Currently, Sabah cultural tourism is not preoccupied with visitor numbers because they have not reached the carrying capacity of the destination. Previous studies by Belisle and Hoy (1980) suggested that locals in less developed destinations are more likely to have a positive perception of the impacts of tourism in the involvement and development stages of the tourism area life cycle. Further, Jopp et al. (2010) suggested that the closer a destination reaches its carrying capacity; there are high chances of not being sustainable as more lands are cultivated to cope with more visitor numbers. The increase in visitor numbers in some instances will have a negative impact on the ecosystem in the area and also an interference in the daily lives of the locals that are not associated with the tourism industry (Lin & Mao, 2015; Pagano, 2012; Smith, 2012).
Therefore, cultural tourism in Sabah should still be mindful of future impacts resulting from increasing visitor numbers to ensure long-term sustainability of its cultural tourism.

(b) Complaints by locals about cultural tourism

“So far, no locals have complaints towards the cultural village because they are all very supportive of the activities that are being offered here.” (UMS Sabah, Mosopiad Cultural Village, Borneo Eco Tour, Binod, Malay- Murut ethnic)

“Sometimes we have tourists that visit my local village in Kota Marudu and they will live in the village sometimes up to one month, and when I ask them why they are visiting the village, it is because they want to know what is our real culture, what we eat, what we wear, what we do on a daily basis, if we are living in a tree or not. So the tourists eat what we normally eat, cooking in the traditional way that we do by using wood. My grandmother really enjoyed visitors coming into our village and showing our cultures so they can learn.” (Julez Mansor, Kota Marudu locals, Kadazandusun).

This result indicates that there are no negative impacts by cultural tourism activities on the local community, which bode well with the inspiration of sustainable tourism. As stated by Durovic and Lovrentjev (2014) when there are minimum complaints from local communities and when both the local community and their culture as a whole benefit from tourism, it can contribute to harmonious sustainability in cultural tourism.

Environmental indicators

“Since long time ago, this area used to be heavily forested and in order to cater to the tourists, we have expanded the area and cut trees in order to build new facilities and increase mobility for visitors to portray a more attractive environment. We are also planning rebuild the shed and have requested sponsorship from the government.” (Kim, Monsopiad Cultural Village local employee)

“Comparing the sites infrastructure now and then, it is difficult to maintain since the structure is becoming more and more fragile and the materials are hard to be found such as the leaves on the roof which is considered one of the challenges faced by our management.” (local employee)

The challenges and threats for the environment come along with the decision to compromise as any development will lead to the changes in local natural ecosystem, local cultural heritage sites and landmarks in Sabah. There needs to be continuous control to avoid the threats to the identity of cultural heritage sites (Telfer & Sharpley, 2007).

“No. No sign. Tour guide told us what to do and don’t do. But it is necessary to have signage I feel.” (Visitors 1,2,4,7,9,11 in Mari-Mari Cultural Village)

“I think there are quiet enough signages for such a small cultural village that I visited. There are 1 signage nearby the main entrance as well as 1 more at the reservation, and there are two or three more so I think it is enough.” (Visitors 3,4,6,10 in Monsopiad Cultural Village)

The finding on the inconsistent number of signage in cultural sites in Sabah can be a disadvantage when trying to achieve a high level of sustainability. The sustainable cultural tourism guidelines suggest that there should be an adequate number of signage throughout the cultural sites and it should be written in at least two or more languages to ensure people are conforming with the expectations of the sites (Tinto, 2011). The availability of noticeable signage is important for the sustainability of cultural sites as it can inform visitors of the necessary information needed for a harmonious visit (Hardy & Beeton, 2001). These signs inform visitors of cultural dos and don’ts, taboos, restrictions and etc.

Conclusion and Managerial Implications

The objective of this research is to identify the level of sustainability in Sabah’s cultural tourism by looking into six sustainable indicators based on the combination checklist by WTO, Global Tourism Sustainable Council and the European Commission. Under the six main indicators - Policy/education, planning/education, human resources,
The Sustainability of Cultural Tourism in Sabah

The results showed that out of fourteen sub-indicators, five are under a safe zone to pursue sustainability while eight need improvement due to certain challenges and barriers and one indicator is absent in the strategy. Results showed that Sabah still needs strong collaboration and communication among the government, cultural village operators, tour guides and local communities to tackle existing issues and challenges in a strategic way so they can achieve sustainable development.

One limitation of the study is the lack of data collected due to temporal and financial constraints. The field-trip was carried out from the 15th of May to the 18th of May, 2016. A longer period of time is required to gather more samples for data analysis. Even though there are four cultural villages in Sabah Borneo Cultural Village (Papar), KDCA cultural village (Penampang), Monsopiad Cultural Village (Penampang) and Mari-Mari Cultural Village (Inanam) - we could only gain access to those located in the city. Others are situated several hours away from Kota Kinabalu. The inclusion of the other two cultural villages would have provided more comprehensive knowledge which represents all the cultural villages in Sabah. Falk and Guenther (2006) commented that to provide a good foundation for generalization, representative data should be gathered from a large population. Future research should improve on this aspect.

This research has positive managerial implications on cultural tourism in Sabah due to the fact that it analyses the strategic gaps in the industry and identifies its negative impacts. Despite managerial issues, such as lack of support, absence of strategy and lack of communication, local communities are still supportive in cultural tourism activities and show welcoming behaviours to tourists. NGOs’ efforts and support do contribute significantly towards a better sustainability of cultural tourism in Sabah. For future improvement, the government should be mindful of the discovered weaknesses in policy, regulation, execution and monitoring.

As for the NGOs and the cultural village operators, these findings provide an understanding of the tourist product expectation from cultural tourism which are able to provide guides in sustainability practices to ensure cultural villages and practices can be maintained for future generation. The results of this research can further benefit the cultural villages, owners, managers, tour operators and the government in developing better collaborative strategies and policies to ensure greater sustainability of cultural tourism in Sabah.

References


