

TOURISM AS A DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY IN RURAL AREAS ADJACENT TO THE CROCKER RANGE NATIONAL PARK, SABAH, MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the economic, social and ecological viability of nature tourism development in the rural areas bordering the Crocker Range National Park, Malaysia. Analyses of the potential market for nature-related tourism and the tourism interests and perceptions among the communities here were carried. Our data revealed that the level of interest in eco-tourism is high among the people living around the CRNP and this is related to the high market demand from tourists. Local visitors and tourists are found to be aware of the nature attractions and other tourism assets prevailing in the forest areas of the CRNP and are willing to pay for participation in nature-related activities. This can be seen as a tremendous opportunity for the people here to generate additional income from promoting and organising nature-related activities for both local and foreign tourists.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism has been a part of the political agenda in Malaysia since 1987 when the Federal Government decided to develop tourism into a major economic sector. A main objective of this policy is to achieve economic growth and employment in the rural areas through development of tourism industry. In this process, "nature tourism" has been forwarded as one of the main focus areas in the tourism policy of the Sabah State Government (Ministry of Tourism Development, Environment, Science and Technology 1996). The underlying idea of nature tourism is to protect and conserve natural resources while providing a stable and lasting income from tourism. The creation of national parks is seen as a logical point of departure in development of this type of tourism. Two distinct approaches to nature tourism in Sabah can be distinguished: "The Home-stay Programme" - which is an official Sabah Government scheme - and "Ecotourism". The idea of the Homestay Programme is to accommodate tourists in a village with a local family, thus allowing the tourist to learn about local life, culture, and nature. Ecotourism is a novel approach to tourism, which has attracted much attention in recent international tourism debates (McCool 1995).

To date, much debate still surround the precise definition of the terminology "ecotourism" and the types of activities it encompasses. Nevertheless, the main features of ecotourism can be summarised as tourism with minimal physical and social impact on the visited area alongside significant economic participation by local residents (Wunder 1996). No official agenda for implementing ecotourism exists in Sabah. Western tourists are generally considered to be the main target group of both the Homestay Programme and ecotourism, as Asian tourists generally are not considered to be the main target group for nature tourism (King 1999). If present tourism patterns in Sabah are examined, it is noticeable that the

amounts of Western tourists spending time in Sabah are quite low compared to the amounts of tourists from Asia. Western tourists comprise only 10% of the total number of tourists whereas tourists from neighbouring countries comprise 75% (King 1999). This pattern holds true for receipts from tourism where western tourists only comprised 15% of total Malaysian tourism receipts in 1995 (Sadi and Bartels 1997).

The present study explores the economic, social and ecological viability of nature tourism development in the rural areas bordering the Crocker Range National Park (CRNP). This is accomplished through an analysis of the potential market for tourism in the study area, coupled with an analysis of local tourism interests and perceptions.

STUDY AREA

Crocker Range National Park (CRNP), covering a unique lowland and montane primary rainforest, was established in 1984 to maintain the high biodiversity of the forest and to secure stable and safe water distribution to the adjacent areas. Within the nearest future the state government is planning to develop the park for tourist purposes. In the forests of the CRNP, past practices of wildlife hunting has reduced the presence of larger mammals but the Park still harbours a large diversity of unique faunal and floral species that can be viewed as invaluable assets for nature tourism. Our study focused on a small village called Patau located 5 kilometres outside the CRNP in the upper part of the Tambunan district. The village has approximately 600 inhabitants, and agriculture is the main source of income.

METHODS

As there are presently only negligible tourism activities in the study area, the focus of the present study is on the *potential* demand and supply of tourism activities. The demand side was investigated through a questionnaire survey consisting of a total of 36 questionnaires directed towards understanding the demand for nature-related activities among Western tourists. The supply side was investigated through 13 interviews with key informants from the village of Patau on the issues of tourism development in the village and through 16 interviews with local farmers on the issues of income and employment. The study also took into account the views of 10 governmental officials and representatives from the tourism industry. With a few exceptions, a semi-structured interview format was applied. The study was conducted during the course of three weeks in October 1999.

To get a relatively varied sample of western tourists, the respondents were sampled according to age, sex and from a selection of focal localities (Kota Kinabalu back-packer lodges, Kinabalu Park's visitor-centre, and Sabah Museum). Apart from the intentional focus on Western tourists, there was a possible bias in the sampling of respondents, as only tourists already engaged in tourism activities in Sabah were interviewed. Potential "would-be" nature tourists, not presently visiting Sabah, were not included in the sample. This, however, should not bear adversely to the validity of the data with respect to tourism demand, but merely suggested that our present data represented a conservative estimate of the potential demand for nature tourism in the CRNP vicinity. The questionnaires included ranking exercises and

open-ended hypothetical willingness-to-pay questions. A review of the underlying problems associated with the hypothetical question of willingness-to-pay was previously discussed by Freeman (1993). Although the socio-economic characteristics of the villagers of Patau were probably not very different from other similar villages in the Tambunan district, it should be kept in mind that results pertaining to local perceptions on and plans that were afoot for tourism were only applicable here, not necessarily true to all agriculturally-based villages adjacent to the CRNP. Interviews with key informants from otherwise similar villages indicated that both social cohesion and actual plans on tourism were relatively less developed in these villages.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demand for nature tourism

The purpose of the questionnaire survey was to identify preferences for different types of tourist activities and accommodation. The average length of stay in Sabah for respondents was 14.9 days, which was notably more than the officially estimated average of 7.1 days (Ministry of Tourism, Development, Environment, Science and Technology 2000). This difference was most probably attributable to a shorter average stay of the large number of Southeast Asian short-stay visitors, as is the case in the rest of Malaysia (Sadi and Bartels 1997). The average per-diem expenditure of the respondents (RM229) was quite close to the officially estimated average of RM237 (Ministry of Tourism, Development, Environment, Science and Technology 2000). This suggested that our sample of Western tourists could be regarded as fairly representative.

When asked to rank what kind of experiences the tourists preferred during their stay, nature ranked as the most important (73% of respondents) with local culture as number two (53% of respondents ranking culture as most important or second in importance). The other possible options were sun and swimming, gastronomy, adventure, and sports. A total of 92% of the respondents were planning to visit one or more national parks during their stay in Sabah. Crocker Range National Park was known by 58% of the tourists. This provided an indication that a high percentage of the Western tourists visiting Sabah could be viewed as “nature tourists” or potential “nature tourists”.

Most respondents (57%) generally preferred to stay in hotels. 32% in hostels, and 10% in private accommodation. The tourists were also asked to state their preferences for accommodation in the case of visiting a rainforest site with a distance of two hours from the nearest city. The preferred length of the stay in such an area was 1-3 nights; 15% of respondents would prefer to stay in the city; 50% at a nearby tourist resort, 35% in a village close to the rainforest with little privacy and no access to bathing facilities. This indicated that facilities such as bath and privacy were important considerations that tourist took, even for short stays. There existed also a considerable demand for simple accommodation in the villages.

As some tourist activities included in the questionnaire were mutually exclusive, it was not meaningful to calculate an aggregate willingness-to-pay measure by summing willingness-to-pay measures for each individual tourism activity. Nevertheless, it was clear from our

hypothetical willingness-to-pay survey that respondents generally were willing to pay considerable amounts for tourism activities in the tropical rainforest of the CRNP (Table 1).

Table 1. Average willingness-to-pay for tourism activities.

Option	Average willingness-to-pay (RM)	Remarks
Guided daytrip to national Park	108	21 bids >0, 2 zero-bids, 13 NA*
One night stay at rainforest lodge including traditional dinner	248	22 bids >0, zero-bid, 13 NA*
Local accommodation near the rainforest for one week	417	17 bids >0, 18 NA*
Local handicrafts (small size)	40	17 bids >0, 1 zero-bid, 17 NA*
Entrance fee to national park	26	24 bids >0, 11 NA*
Entrance fee to a cultural /historical museum	15	21 bids >0, 2 zero-bids, 12 NA*
A local guide for one day	67	22 bids >0, 2 zero-bids, 11 NA*

* Some of the not answered (NA) questions can reasonably be considered as zero-bids.

Most importantly, the average willingness-to-pay for a one-night stay at a lodge was very high indeed (RM248 per night), considering the average daily spending of the sample of tourists (RM229). The estimated average willingness-to-pay for local accommodation and local handicrafts should be used with caution due to the particularly low response rates for these questions. Even if the average willingness-to-pay for local accommodation was an upward biased, due to an overrepresentation of the 35% of respondents who preferred this type of accommodation in the pool of positive bids, it was still possible to infer a notable positive demand for this tourism activity. It should be remembered that the quality of goods were not specified when measures for willingness-to-pay were derived in this study. For instance, willingness to pay for entry to a cultural museum would be expected to differ markedly depending on the quality services and attractions offered.

Our study indicated that a large segment of the existing Western tourists visiting Sabah were nature tourists. Thus, if tourism were to be promoted and developed in the CRNP vicinity, the Sabah government need not embark on a special marketing programme to promote CRNP to new visitors because demand from the same pool of nature tourists can be relied upon to make this new tourist destination viable. This was supported by our data that more than half of the respondents already knew about the Crocker Range National Park.

Regardless, some crucial issues need to be addressed in relation to making CRNP a tourist destination of huge economic potential. These include providing answers to:

- i) How can tourism in the CRNP vicinity be promoted to fare positively in comparison to other nature-related "sites" in Sabah? and
- ii) How much time should a tourist spend within a given time-budget in competition to other non-nature related tourist activities? To answer these questions, more detailed studies of tourist consumer preferences and the comparative advantages of the CRNP are necessary.

It is clear, however, that there are great potential gains to be derived from the promotion of certain specialised nature attraction such as specific flagship attractions provided by the *Rafflesia*, the biggest flower in the world found here.

Local perceptions of tourism development

A survey on the perceptions of the inhabitants of Patau towards the promotion and development of nature tourism amidst them was carried out. In the process, a thorough knowledge on the general income and employment pattern of the villagers here was obtained. The data generated would be used to assess the potential supply of tourist services by the locals, the capability of these services to meet tourist market demand and the potential economic benefit to be derived from making Patau as a vibrant tourism destination. The primary source of employment in the village of Patau was agriculture. This mainly took the form of lowland wet rice production and upland shifting cultivation of dry rice. It was evident from the interviews that most agricultural production was based on family labour inputs although some organised cooperation between farmers in the form of large working groups (“gotong-royong”) also existed.

Many respondents viewed scarcity of labour as a constraint on further expansion of agricultural production in the area. There was also a serious lack of interest in agricultural activities among their younger generation who seemed to prefer migrating to the urban areas for job opportunities. Agricultural production seemed to a large extent subsistence in nature. A majority of respondents sold their surplus production of vegetables and fruits in the market but kept the rice for their own-consumption. More than half of respondents derived a substantial share of their cash income from off-farm activities and remittances from family members engaged in urban employment.

It was evident that the villagers here possessed little or no experience dealing with any tourist-related activities. Their only knowledge on tourism was their occasional encounter with local picnickers who came to spend their weekend afternoons at the Mahua Waterfall located close to their village. The respondents demonstrated vague ideas on i) the type of services that can be promoted and developed to make Patau a popular tourist destination and ii) the impact tourists might bring to the village economically, culturally and socially. The respondents generally expressed high expectations on plans to develop tourism in their midst because they often viewed tourism as a means of generating additional source of income for the community as a whole. Some perceived development of tourism as a means of reversing the migration educated youths to urban areas. They did not anticipate any immediate labour shortages resulting from the development of tourism industry in their village. Few however expressed caution and concern over possible negative social and ecological impacts the tourism industry might bring such as the liberal exposure to alien cultures of the visiting tourists as well as the adverse effects on the environment and the pristine nature of the CRNP

The Village Council of Patau was already engaged in the development of a tourism plan for Patau. The plan was a component of a more general comprehensive development plan called TOPMAN to be executed by a village cooperative in the near future. The main objective of the plan was to offer alternative livelihood for the people in the community while at the same time elevating the living standard of the people of Patau generally. Among the immediate projects to be implemented under the tourism plan include the development of a cattle ranch,

a guesthouse, a fishpond, and a gallery for exhibitions of local paintings and handicrafts. On a more long-term plan, a nature trail to the Mahua Waterfall will be developed to include facilities such as a tree-top cabin for accommodation, a souvenir shop and a restaurant to attract both local and foreign tourists. Dance performances by the local cultural group were also considered.

Compatibility of tourist demand and local interests

The surprisingly well-developed tourism plan drawn up by the village council of Patau was in stark contrast to the relatively naive perceptions of villagers on the services and activities required to attract tourists to their village. Thus, even with a large tourist demand, there seemed to be a potential risk of mismatching the supply of tourism services with the types of activities that tourists desired. It was clear from our study that there existed noteworthy overlapping in the interests of potential tourists and that of the locals. Because comfort ranked high on the priority list of a Western tourist coming to Sabah, the plan to construct a local guest-house would be a move in the right direction in providing tourists with comfortable accommodation. The level of comfort provided under the Homestay Programme however might not be able to meet the required standard. Western tourists would much prefer the comfortable accommodation facilities provided by well-established government agencies or private companies who would understand their requirement and expectations better. Besides accommodation, there was also a high demand for local tourist guides, handicrafts and cultural performances. For nature lovers, easy access to the pristine forest areas of the CRNP would rank the highest on their preference before visiting this new tourist destination.

The fact that there was already a high level of interest among local leaders to promote Patau into a tourist destination spoke well for the future of tourism in the area. Indeed local support would be highly pertinent for the short-run viability of such development. In the longer run, sustained and broadly based local participation would be required. To sustain the economic, social and ecological viability of tourism development here, factors such as job opportunities, income generation and incentives for proper natural resource management and environmental conservation must be accorded priority attention.

It was clear from our willingness-to-pay survey that huge income from rentals could be generated from those providing accommodations and transportations. Other tourism related activities could also be expected to contribute significantly in elevating the living standard of the people in Patau who took the opportunity to ride on the wave of tourism industry in their village. This in turn could lessen their dependence on agriculture as a source of income, and hence reduce economic dependence on the natural resource base in the rural areas. A decreased dependence on agriculture would be incompatible with the somewhat strict ecotourism criteria that advocated minimum economic dependence of the villagers on tourism. Strict adherence to such ecotourism-criteria however could result in having to limit the market volume of tourists visiting this new destination and consequently reducing the economic benefit that could have been maximally derived from the tourism activities here. The inherent small scale of the Homestay Programme also suggested that it would only be able to generate modest increases in overall local income, although it was focussing on local participation in cultural and nature-related tourist activities. Both types of tourism could, however, potentially generate some positive economic processes while minimising social and ecological disruption.

The potentially considerable demand for local guides and local handicrafts could directly generate incomes for the local inhabitants directly engaged in these activities. The significant demand for accommodation, cultural arrangements and institutions (e.g. museums) could all either benefit local inhabitants directly through some ownership of the institutions and activities, or perhaps most importantly, indirectly through incomes from increased employment. Also, secondary income growth in the village could be generated if the purchasing power of inhabitants engaged in tourism activities was raised significantly. If tourism activities on the village level were to be managed by village co-operatives, as planned for the village of Patau, the income from tourism would be expected to be distributed somewhat equally; contributing to a strengthening of local social cohesion. Tourism management by village cooperatives need not, however, be the most effective in terms of providing the services demanded by tourists.

If the ecological impacts of tourism should be held to a minimum, local incentives for natural resource management would seem imperative. Local incentives for sustainable resource management could be provided through local participation which could in turn provide stable incomes from tourism activities directly through a sustained natural resource base (Wong 1994; Honey 1999; Lingham 1994; Ministry of Tourism Development, Environment; science and Technology 1997). Conversely, it could be argued that a lower dependency on agriculture as a source of income, in the face of increased income opportunities from tourism, could imply a lower pressure on forest resources. However, this was contingent on sustained availability of labour for tourism services. If agriculture as a source of employment and income declined significantly in importance, a composite risk of economic dependency on tourism, lessened tourist interest in the area (especially if tourists were interested in traditional farming practices), and declining local interest in natural resource management could emerge.

Direct impacts from the presence of tourists should also be considered when evaluating the ecological impacts of tourism. Our study did not consider the potential risk of adverse ecological impacts from tourism on the CRNP.

CONCLUSION

Our study explored the economic, social and ecological viability of nature tourism development in the rural areas bordering the Crocker Range National Park (CRNP) through a survey of local interests as well as of potential tourist demand. We have established that the local level of interest in tourism was unexpectedly high among the people of Patau. This was manifested in an effort to draw up a comprehensive tourism development plan for the village. Our study also revealed a large potential tourist demand for nature tourism and Patau seemed set to play a significant role in the promotion of eco-tourism industry because of its unique location on the edge of the CRNP. Knowledge on the services and activities required to attract tourists to their village however was inadequate among the people of Patau themselves. For the economic viability and sustainability of tourism development here, certain tourist segments could be targeted and attracted to this new destination, especially those interested in the pristine nature and wealth of the tropical rainforests. While local participation would be pertinent in ensuring the economic vigour of any local tourism

industry, caution must also be taken to minimise its adverse impacts on the indigenous people with respect to their cultural and social values. Negative impacts of the ecosystems and local environment could be effectively minimised through the sharing of proceeds from tourism to manage the pristine habitats and conserve all resource-based tourist assets found within the CRNP.

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