

Benefits of Ecotourism for Local Communities

The travel and tourism industry is one of the fastest growing industries in the services sector. The industry, which encompasses transportation, accommodation, food and beverage, and recreation and entertainment, is currently the second largest GDP contributing industry for Malaysia. According to official statistics, travel and tourism contributed to nearly RM30 billion in total receipts in 2004, an increase of over RM 8 billion from the previous year. Total arrivals also reached a record high of 15.7 million compared with 10.6 million in 2003.

There is no doubt that travel and tourism industry plays a major role in generating foreign exchange income, creating new employment and also stimulating economic development. The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), in its latest Tourism Satellite Accounting (TSA) research, expects the country's travel and tourism to generate approximately RM109 billion in economic activity for 2005, higher than the RM79 and RM94 billion estimated for 2003 and 2004, respectively. In terms of employment, the travel and tourism industry is expected to generate over 560,000 jobs, an increase of over 60, 000 jobs compared with the previous year. Meanwhile, contribution to total GDP is expected to be approximately RM25 billion, or 5.3 per cent, compared with RM21.9 billion in the previous year.

Despite encountering challenges such as occurrences of war and conflict, terrorism, natural disasters and health epidemic, the travel and tourism industry will remain a significant income earner and driver of growth for the country. Looking back, the rapid development of the travel and tourism industry is ascribed to the variety of new products that were actively pursued by the government since the formulation of the Malaysian Tourism Policy back in 1992. Of the product development priorities underlined in the policy, ecotourism was identified as one form of tourism to be expanded and sustained.

Ecotourism as explained by the International Ecotourism Society (TIES) covers all travels to natural areas that conserves the environment, contributing at the same time to the welfare of the local society. The United Nations, upon recognizing the importance of ecotourism, had declared 2002 as the International Year of Ecotourism (IYE). The widespread interest in ecotourism among tourism players is due to its direct linkage to the greater prospects for sound and sustainable tourism development with strong possibilities for appropriate local participation and shared responsibility for preserving the environment, cultural heritage and people's way of life.

With acknowledgement that ecotourism will expand at a faster rate than other tourism products, the commitment to develop ecotourism in Malaysia was endorsed in the drawing up of the National Ecotourism Master Plan in 1996 by the World Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF). The plan was to provide a general framework in assisting the government in developing the country's ecotourism potential. Under the plan, the definition of ecotourism follows that of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which defines ecotourism as responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas in order to enjoy and appreciate nature that conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of local people. Among the areas that have been targeted for ecotourism development included marine parks and islands, national parks and reserves, mangroves, recreational forests, limestone hills and caves, rivers, waterfalls and lakes, beaches and mountains. Of these areas, ten special sites were highlighted for ecotourism based on their biological diversity. Since then, successive Malaysia Plans (7MP and 8MP) have identified new project sites for ecotourism.

Besides protecting the environment, ecotourism can also help transform local communities in a positive manner. In fact, it has been argued that local community participation or community-based ecotourism is the essence of ecotourism sustainability. Even the National Ecotourism Plan has acknowledged the participation of the local community for the development and sustainability of ecotourism. Since the local communities are the direct recipients from ecotourism, it is only relevant that local communities play an active role in the planning, development and management process.

The benefits of ecotourism for local communities can be broadly categorized as economic, socio-cultural and physical. The most direct economic benefits are the improvements in employment and income. The National Ecotourism Plan recognises that local communities living at ecotourism site have generally low incomes. Hence, ecotourism provides a viable economic option for such communities. Before ecotourism gained popularity, the extraction of natural resources for the purpose of economic development such as forest logging, mining and land clearing for agricultural were the only sources of income for these communities. However, these activities will eventually lead to environmental damage and ecological imbalances. Ecotourism, on the other hand, encourages responsible travel to natural areas that safeguards the integrity of the ecosystem and produces economic benefits for the local communities that can encourage conservation. Thus, ecotourism is a more sustainable development strategy, protecting the ecosystem and at the same time serving as an income and also employment provider for the local community.

With regards to socio-cultural benefits, since ecotourists are travellers seeking unique and authentic travel experiences, there is an added incentive for local communities to retain their traditional heritage and lifestyles for long-term viability. These include the preservations of religious architecture and symbols, rituals and ceremonies, arts and crafts, and even music and dance. Finally, the most direct physical benefits will be the conservation of the environment. Conservation will help prevent inappropriate development and practice that will lead to degradation of habitats and landscapes, depletion of natural resources and contribute to waste and pollution.

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