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Ecotourism: A New Phenomena
THE BUSINESS OF ECOTOURISM: A NEW PHENOMENA TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT

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The world's oldest tropical rainforest beckons in Malaysia. Preserved to stay the way nature intended it to be for you to explore and enjoy. It is a haven for hundreds of species of wildlife, exotic birds, fishes and plants. Warm weather, increasing efforts of conservation and natural beauty spots make Malaysian an ideal destination for ecotourism.

Three fifths of Malaysia is covered by tropical rainforests (198,259 sq km) which is the breeding ground for exotic, rare and protected flora and fauna. Adventures ranging from challenging jungle treks to leisurely swims in natural pools and waterfalls to the adrenaline-pumping thrill of climbing mountains to a sedate walk in the jungles and cave explorations are among the activities offered all throughout Malaysia.

Malaysia has plenty of natural attractions to satisfy even the most discerning of adventure seekers. With the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean lapping its shores, there is an enormous variety of flora, fauna and marine life to be enjoyed. Nature-based tourism has become a major enterprise in the last decade and Malaysia's natural attractions have been carefully developed. Several pristine rain forest areas have now been turned into national parks to ensure long-term conservation of the rich biodiversity of plant, insect and animal life.

Tourism now is one of the world's largest industries; it is increasingly confronted with arguments about its sustainability and compatibility with environmental protection and community development. Tourism can be a potent force for economic and social good, creating employment and wealth, and widening our understanding of other societies. The practical element of sustainable tourism, which involves moving from theoretical constructs to application in particular situations, has spurred a number of initiatives to define, to encourage and to monitor sustainability. These approaches to application can be divided into three groups: principle-based, managerial and scientific.

Principle-based approaches in sustainable tourism require all activities, regardless of their scale, to respect the principles and to follow guidelines or codes of conduct where they exist. While principles are the foundational statements of belief about what tourism should be, guidelines indicate expectations about behaviour and codes of conduct set out specific actions that should be taken to comply with the principles.

Managerial initiatives comprise those that focus upon standards of practice, which, if followed, will assure achievement of sustainable tourism goals. The focal point of all managerial initiatives is the individual organization, which is expected to manage its environmental impact throughout all of its activities. The scientific approach would include new innovations and technological approach in encouraging sustainable management.

Environment is the travel industry's base product. While many tourism promotion efforts banner the climate, sun, warmth, and sand of particular destinations, tourism's dependency on environments, in particular, nature-dominated environments, does not appear to be well understood within the tourism and recreation industry. The importance of the environment in attracting vacation travel is significant.

ECOTOURISM FUNDAMENTALS

As the tourism industry evolved further, a new type of tourism, “ecotourism”, has emerged and is making its mark in Malaysia. The debate to what is real ecotourism continues to be discussed in many forums all over the world. Ecotourism evolved from nature tourism, which can be defined as ecologically sustainable tourism with a primary focus on experiencing natural areas.

Using the same definition, ecotourism can be defined as ecologically sustainable tourism with a primary focus on experiencing natural areas that fosters environmental and cultural understanding application and conservation.

In 1993, Hector Ceballos-Lascurain from Mexico, widely acknowledged as the “father of ecotourism”, defined it as
environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features - both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low negative visitor impacts, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations. In short, ecotourism is responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of the local community.

Similar to the fact that tourism is only a part of the whole which is sustainable development, ecotourism is only part of the whole which is sustainable tourism. However, ecotourism's influence is having far reaching impacts toward extending principles of sustainability into other forms of tourism. It does this by supporting principles which contribute to integrating social, economic, and environmental goals.

1. MONITORING OF THE VISITATION LEVEL AND CARRYING CAPACITY

Tools for monitoring of visitation stress levels at prime sites need to be in place according to the concept of carrying capacity. This can only be done by a coordinated effort at the local or regional level. The carrying capacity of an area or site has three dimensions:

a. Quality of the visitor experience
This level of carrying capacity embodies the relation between the tourists themselves and it has strong implications for their willingness to pay.

b. Social carrying capacity
Is the interplay between the host population and visitors? It is quite a subjective consideration from the community as a whole. Experience has shown, if locals are integrated positively and voluntarily in tourism service provision, the willingness to receive visitors increases. This is why it is beneficial for the travel and tourism industry to buy services and goods as local as possible.

c. Ecological carrying capacity
Is the relation between the tourists and the environment itself? This is a non-negotiable dimension of the concept of carrying capacity that can be determined by researchers. The monitoring of visitation levels need to be coordinated by the local system of authorities, landowners, businesses, NGOs etc. A task force may be needed to undertake this work.

2. BENEFITTING THE LOCAL PEOPLE

The second common denominator is that local people should not be excluded from the opportunity to benefit from tourism. Nor should the tourism development be imposed on them. Local people are persons living in or in the immediate surroundings of the tourist areas. There are two approaches to engage local people in the tourism industry:

a. “Hire the natives approach” which recommends tour operators to hire the services of local people, buying their services and products as much as possible.

b. “Empowerment approach” which advocates that local people should be given the opportunity to be engaged commercially and directly in the operations.

Appropriate support structures need to be built so that local people, living in areas of tourism interest, easily can access information on how tourism operates and as a consequence can decide to invest their time and money part time or full time basis to offer tourism services.

3. CROSS-SECTORAL INTERPLAY

The third common denominator is collaboration between various interest groups at the local and national level for sound use of open access resources such as cultural and natural landscapes, as well as protected areas. There is an urgent need to have a common understanding of the problems and opportunities of tourism dynamics between the government and private sector, as well as the various non-governmental organisations, before sensitive areas are being promoted for commercialisation for tourism use.

4. APPROPRIATE PRICING STRATEGIES

According to the Agenda 21 the environmental costs should be built in to the prices of goods and services. However, such mechanisms do not exist today. Gross pricing policy need to be established to facilitate a more fluid collaboration between local companies, distributors and all market players.

5. RESPONSIBLE MARKETING

Well motivated visitors that arrive in the host destination with the appropriate expectations on the travel experiences that actually can be delivered is a very important issue and a prime concern for sustainability. It is required to work jointly so as to better harmonise the expectations of tourists to what actually can be delivered. All these five systematic level issues need to be dealt with simultaneously at the local or regional level. The work will mature over time and it will develop differently and at a different pace depending on the host area. It need to be allowed to be site-specific. It is proposed that a task force is invited to be formed locally to address these issues, and to monitor these over time.

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