ECOTOURISM

By Vikneswaran Nair* M.Sc. and Mohamed Daud** Ph.D.,P.Eng

The ecotourism concept emphasises the maximisation of the ecological interest areas, which include marine parks and islands, national parks, recreational forest reserves, and other forests, mangrove sites, limestone hills and cave sites, river, waterfalls and other areas. This aspect, while having vast potential for further development and exploitation, has not received adequate attention in Malaysia. All ecotourism sites must be planned, guided and exploited in a monitored and controlled manner.

Effective and efficient sustainable management programme is critical if ecotourism is to go to make the change in making this world a better place for the present and future generations. The management programme should ideally focus on training, conservation contribution programs and also local employment and jobs programs. Each programme can be defined in terms of the guidelines, objectives, techniques and visitor benefit.

TRAINING
Guideline:
◆ Give managers, staff and contract employees access to programs that will upgrade their ability to communicate with and manage clients in sensitive natural and cultural settings.

Objectives:
◆ Offer meaningful opportunities for staff and contract employees to work within a sustainable economy.

Techniques:
◆ Establish clear guidelines for staff regarding opportunities and company support available for training, via internal training programs (natural and cultural history) and via training programs available locally (language skills and first aid, accounting, mechanics).
◆ Establish an operator’s consortium for training.
◆ Establish a relationship with a local educational facility and work to integrate needed training components into the curriculum.
◆ Work with nongovernmental organizations to establish an ecotourism training program.

Visitor Benefits:
◆ Opportunity to contribute to a local sustainable economy that offers local people opportunities to be employed in increasingly responsible positions.

CONSERVATION CONTRIBUTION PROGRAMS
Guideline:
◆ Be a contributor to the conservation of the regions being visited.

Objectives:
◆ Put tourism-generated revenues into the hands of local environmental organizations and protected area management agencies for conservation initiatives.
◆ Ensure that tourism revenues cover the costs for the management of tourism on wild lands and protected areas.
◆ Help parks and protected areas generate revenue, thereby providing economic impetus to a conservation agenda on the national level in destination countries.

Techniques:
◆ Provide corporate contributions to local non-profit conservation initiatives and protected areas through direct corporate donations, partnerships, technical assistance, education programs, publicity, facilitation, direct staff involvement, and becoming involved in joint initiatives.
◆ Facilitate visitor contributions to local conservation initiatives during the trip
◆ Facilitate visitor contributions to local conservation initiatives after the trip. Encourage writing to government and corporate organizations whose policies are damaging to the environment.

Visitor Benefits:
◆ A better understanding of how tourism can be a net contributor to the conservation of cultures and environment visited.
◆ A chance to be a part of the effort to conserve a beloved place on a long-term basis and preserve biological diversity and cultural heritage worldwide.

LOCAL EMPLOYMENT & JOBS PROGRAMS
Guideline:
◆ Provide competitive, local employment in all aspects of business operations.
Objectives:
- Make ecotourism beneficial to local communities by providing jobs that are not destructive to the environment to local people.
- Provide local people with a full range of opportunities beyond the service employment sector.

Techniques:
- Hire locally owned businesses including transport, accommodation and restaurants.
- Buy local supplies from food and craft vendors and avoid all products made from endangered or threatened species.
- Hire local office and field staff. Pay competitive wages, above minimum wage for the region, and offer acceptable benefits.
- Contribute to community enterprises and development efforts that support a wide variety of local residents, with special sensitivity to indigenous groups.

Visitor Benefits:
- Opportunity to contribute to a sustainable market economy.
- Awareness that the choices visitors make affects the lives and livelihoods of others.

SUSTAINABLE TOURISM, NATURE-BASED TOURISM OR ECOTOURISM?
There is considerable confusion amongst the terms sustainable tourism, nature-based tourism and ecotourism. All three terms are neither synonymous nor mutually exclusive. All tourism comprises either mass tourism or alternative tourism. The former is characterised by large numbers of people seeking replication of their own culture in institutionalised settings with little cultural or environmental interaction in authentic settings.

Alternative tourism, however, is usually taken to mean alternative forms of tourism which place emphasis on greater contact and understanding between hosts and guests as well as between tourists and the environment. One type of alternative tourism is natural area tourism which is tourism in natural settings. Examples can include nature-based tourism and adventure tourism. Ecotourism is a subset of natural area tourism and may combine elements of both nature-based tourism and adventure travel. However, it is also characterised by a number of other features notably its educative element and conservation-supporting practice.

ESSENTIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF ECOTOURISM

Ecotourism comprises a number of interrelated components all of which should be present for authentic ecotourism to occur. There are five key principles which are fundamental to ecotourism. They are that ecotourism is nature-based, ecologically sustainable, environmentally educative, locally beneficial and generates tourist satisfaction. The first three characteristics are considered to be essential for a product to be considered "ecotourism" while the last two characteristics are viewed as being desirable for all forms of tourism.

1. Nature-Based
Ecotourism is based on the natural environment with a focus on its biological, physical and cultural features. Ecotourism occurs in, and depends on, a natural setting and may include cultural elements where they occur in a natural setting. The conservation of the natural resource is essential to the planning, development and management of ecotourism.

2. Ecologically Sustainable
All tourism should be sustainable - economically, socially and environmentally. Ecotourism is ecologically sustainable tourism undertaken in a natural setting. The challenge to ecotourism in any country or region is to develop its tourism capacity and the quality of its products without adversely affecting the environment that maintains and nurtures it.

3. Environmentally Educative
The educative characteristic of ecotourism is a key element which distinguishes it from other forms of nature-based tourism. Environmental education and interpretation are important tools in creating an enjoyable and meaningful ecotourism experience. Ecotourism attracts people who wish to interact with the environment in order to develop their knowledge, awareness and appreciation of it.

By extension, ecotourism should ideally lead to positive action for the environment by fostering enhanced conservation awareness. Ecotourism education can influence tourist, community and industry behaviour and assist in the longer term sustainability of tourist activity in natural areas. Education can also be useful as a management tool for natural areas.

4. Locally Beneficial
The involvement of local communities not only benefits the community and the environment but also improves the quality of the tourist experience. Local communities can become involved in ecotourism operations, and in the provision of knowledge, services, facilities and products. These benefits should outweigh the cost of ecotourism to the host community and environment. Ecotourism can also generate income for resource conservation management in addition to social and cultural benefits.

5. Tourist Satisfaction
Satisfaction of visitors with the ecotourism experience is essential to long term viability of the ecotourism industry. Included in this concept is the importance of visitor safety in regard to political stability. Information provided about ecotourism opportunities should accurately represent the opportunities offered at particular ecotourism destinations. The ecotourism experience should match or exceed the realistic expectations of the visitor. Client services and satisfaction should be second only to the conservation and protection of what they visit.

In planning for and managing ecotourism, it is also important to be aware of a number of different styles of ecotourism. They may vary considerably in regard to a range of factors including:
- the types of natural settings they require,
- the extent of direct contact and involvement with the natural environment,
- the group sizes involved,
- the use and extent of personal interaction with tour guides,
- the reliance on mechanised means of transport and supporting infrastructure, and
- the types of visitor satisfaction and experience realised.