E-RATING FOR ECO-TOURISM

By Dr Vikneswaran Nair & Prof Dr Ir Mohamed Daud

The past decade has seen the Malaysian eco-tourism industry experiencing a process of reformation in implementation of best practice.

This reflects the commitment by the Malaysian eco-tourism industry to achieve the highest standards as well as an evolution of environmental management and performance standards required by regulating government agencies, including protected area managers.

Nevertheless, more stringent control and consistent approaches are required in ensuring that a proper code of practice is being followed if the future generation is able to enjoy the natural resources as what we are enjoying today.

Minimum operating standards required of eco-tourism operators are increasing and will continue to do so.

The Orchid Classification Scheme of the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism was formulated to accommodate those hotels that do not meet the requirements or criteria for any star rating. Besides, hotels, the scheme also classifies hostels, beds & breakfasts, inns, boarding houses, rest houses and eco-lodges.

The Orchid rating is awarded to tourist accommodation premises with basic facilities, which include good, safe and clean accommodation and friendly hospitable atmosphere as per the following criteria set:
1. Cleanliness and hygiene standards.
2. Building safety and guest security.
3. Facilities and services.
4. Bedroom requirements.
5. Staffing.

The rating is only applicable to premises with at least 10 lettable rooms. Guests staying in premises awarded with Orchid rating can be assured of satisfaction and value for money.

Over and above the minimum operating requirements, operations demonstrate varying levels of adherence to eco-tourism principles and standards, and these differences are reflected by attainment of different levels of accreditation and certification.

In 1996, the Malaysian National Eco-tourism Plan, prepared by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), Malaysia, compiled a diagnostic list of eco-tourism sites. The diagnostic factors used to classify eco-tourism sites are based on the following:
2. Accessibility and existing facilities.
3. Flagship potential.
4. Development led by.
5. Type of attractions and activities.
6. Staff manning the site.
7. Rehabilitation and recovery needs.
8. Gross carrying capacity.

There are a growing number of organisations that believe it is time to objectively evaluate eco-tourism destinations.

Eco-labelling has emerged to give the tourism business an eco-logo or eco-seal of recognition for their environmental friendly approaches in running the business.

There are over 100 eco-labels for tourism hospitality mainly developed in the nineties, with many of them overlapping in sectors and scope. Some of the more common eco-labels include:
2. Destination 21, Denmark.
3. ECOTEL, USA.
5. Green Keys, France.
6. Kiskeya Alternative Tourism, Dominican Republic/Haiti.
7. Nature & Ecotourism Accreditation Programme Australia (NEAP). Agenda 21 for the travel and tourism industry puts the environment as the major concern towards sustainable development. But yet, eco-tourism activities often have the potential to place the health and safety of tourists at considerable risk.

Health, safety and risk management are vital considerations in all eco-tourism sites. Careful management and planning can reduce the chances of negative outcomes.

Nevertheless, with poor enforcement, the number of eco-tourism sites with health, safety and risk management measures taken into consideration are indeed questionable.

Among the main problems in the current practice in ensuring sustainable development of the eco-tourism industry in Malaysia are:
• lack of effective and efficient sustainable management practice of the eco-tourism site.
• lack of enforcement in ensuring the eco-system is sustained.
• insufficient environmental cum ecological expertise that incor-

A standardised rating system for eco-tourism sites can make truly sustainable tourism a reality.

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The scope of the tourism industry, including eco-tourism, is very wide. Their operational environment is very unstable and sensitive, and requires very high degree of electronic communication. A knowledge-based system is essential in order to be able to manage large databases of information that is required for decision making.

A knowledge-based system program is a programme based on knowledge. An expert system is an example of this knowledge-based system. An expert system is a computer programme that represents and reasons with knowledge of some specialist subject with a view to solving problems or giving advice. It is an intelligent computer programme that uses knowledge and inference procedures to solve problems that are difficult for human to solve. Basically it is a computer programme designed to model the problem solving ability of a human expert.

Some of the main features of an expert system are as follows:
- Simulates human reasoning.
- Reasons over representations of human knowledge.
- System distinguishes knowledge base and inference engine.
- Solves problems by using heuristic or approximate methods.
- Tackles problems of realistic complexity.
- Must exhibit high performance.
- Must explain and justify solutions and lines of reasoning.

An expert system with an internet capability, for rating of eco-tourism sites, in Malaysia can be developed with specific objectives:
- To extract the opinions of the human experts in the eco-tourism fields (domain experts), existing statistics and literature and field survey of people's perception in order to produce a set of rules to enable the expert system to make intelligent decisions in rating an eco-tourism site, and
- To create an eco-tourism database in an information sharing platform.

With an expert system, e-rating can be done on all eco-tourism sites in Malaysia. Three groups of people can rate eco-tourism sites, namely:
- Visitors to the site,
- Operators or the party that is responsible in running and managing the site, and
- Appointed auditors to check and balance the input.

A database of eco-tourism sites in Malaysia, complete with the type of services and attractions available at the sites, can be made available together with a list of accommodation available near an eco-tourism site.

Eventually, the entire Malaysian eco-tourism sites should be recorded in this eco-tourism e-rating. It is hoped that with the full enforcement and acceptance of a standardised rating system, the possibility of truly sustainable tourism can be a reality.

(from pg 70)

A SILVER LINING

2004, as hotel and tourism project operators will receive pioneer status and investment tax allowance up to 100%.

Those companies that invest in areas such as expansion, modernisation and renovation will enjoy a second round of pioneer status whereby the income tax exemption would be increased to 100% from its previous level of 85%.

Furthermore, hotel and tourism project operators can claim an investment tax allowance of up to 100%, compared with 80% previously. Other incentives include a proposal to encourage hotels to cooperate in setting up tourism information centres at all entry points, including airports and major railway stations to enable tourists to make hotel reservations upon arrival.

The Malaysian Tourism Promotion Board (MTPB) will be restructured to undertake a more systematic and effective marketing and communications programmes.

To set off the 'Malaysia, Truly Asia' campaign, which not only represented the country's multi-ethnic, multicultural society, the government will provide micro-credit facilities to enable traders to replace their stalls with stainless steel pushcarts, colourful canopies and proper tables and chairs similar to that of Bentong Walk, Bangsar Baru and Mont' Kiara, a popular tourist haunt.