FOR NATURE LOVERS

Discover the world of ecotourism.

Malaysia records more than 10 million tourist arrivals annually, 10% of whom are nature lovers or eco-tourists. The ecotourism concept emphasises the maximisation of ecological interest areas, which includes agricultural areas, regimented forests, and the vast areas under the natural habitat for other development and economic benefits.

Ecotourism is responsible travel to natural areas that conserve the environment and sustain the well being of local people. While having vast potential for further development and exploitation, ecotourism has not received adequate attention in Malaysia.

The prospective tourists have the right to know in advance what they expect to get from an ecotourism site before they actually visit the site. It is important that the present state of use of tourist areas are evaluated and rated. At the same time, resource assessment in terms of importance and attractiveness should also be implemented.

There are a growing number of organisations that believe it is time to objectively evaluate eco-tourism suppliers and 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 indeed, over 100 eco labels for tourism and hospitality providers, mainly developed in the nineties, with many of them overlapping in sectors and scope. Ecotourism activities often have the potential to place the health and safety of tourists at considerable risks. Health, safety and risk management are vital considerations in all ecotourism sites.

Of late, the consequences of bad management of ecotourism sites in Malaysia have been catching the headlines in the local dailies. Local scientists have dis-

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covered that the level of bacteria in Tasik Chini is very high - 56 times above normal. And they have also found E Coli and Salmonella in the polluted lake.

Then we have the fading fireflies of Kampung Kuantan, in serious danger of becoming extinct due to the pollution.

One of the country's world-renowned marine dive sites just off
Tropical rainforest and rocks on the Rejang River in Sarawak.

Pulau Tioman is set to be destroyed to make way for a RM40-million marina project despite objections from environment authorities.

The world of ecotourism will crumble at this pace if there is no proper enforcement. Tourists need to be aware of the eco-sites that they are visiting.

MAKING THE RIGHT CHOICE

Part of making informed travel choices is knowing where to look. No matter what your passion or purpose, the world of ecotourism offers exciting destinations, stimulating tours and comfortable accommodations that benefit you, the local people and the planet.

Although only Australia (Australian Tourism Operators or Ecotourism Association of Australia) and Costa Rica currently certify eco-lodges and tours, The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) and other international organisations have developed fact sheets for travellers along with environmental, conservation and cultural guidelines for eco-lodges and tours. Eco-travellers can use these and other publications to help make the most informed travel choices.

Discover the world of ecotourism and change the way you experience travel. In most ecotourism sites, it would take a long trip to reach your destination. But when you arrive at your lodge, you are warmly greeted by your local host, who escorts you to your private bungalow beneath the palm trees. Constructed with minimal impact on the surrounding environment, using indigenous materials and low-impact technologies, your retreat is as close to nature as you can get.

Meals are superb - fresh produce, meats and seafood supplied by local farmers and fishermen - and the helpfulness of your hosts and the services of local guides are outstanding. In fact, your lodge is one of the highlights of your journey.

Remember that your choice of accommodation can make a big difference not only to how much you enjoy your trip, but also to the local community and the environment.

HOW TO CHOOSE AN ECO-TOUR OPERATOR

You have an enormous effect on the travel industry through the choices you make. This decision-making process is essential because an eco-tour operator can aid in the protection of the host countries' natural and cultural environments.

At present, no industry-accepted rating of eco-tour operators exists. Therefore, it is necessary to undertake some research to discover which eco-tour operator most suits your individual needs and demands, has the least amount of negative impact on the host population and environment, and maximises the amount of money that goes directly to the local community and the conservation of natural resources.

Choosing an eco-tour operator can be viewed as an exciting and enjoyable challenge that adds to the enjoyment of the whole travel experience. Essentially, the more you put in, the more you will get.

Pre-tour information should be available from eco-tour operators. This is an ideal source of information that should accurately describe the vacation being offered and indicates the responsible behaviour to be adopted by both the tour operator and the traveller.

Travel agents can be a good source of information and will aid you in matching your needs with the best eco-tour operator. Direct research may be the best approach. Contact the eco-tour operator and ask relevant questions (examples provided below).

Further research of ecotourism topics can be undertaken to extend your understanding. Various fact sheets, information packages and publications are available from The International

A GOOD ECO-LODGE SHOULD:

- Provide comfortable rooms and common areas that reflect local designs and heritage.
- Offer a natural setting that has been carefully preserved and containing indigenous landscaping.
- Use local, sustainably harvested and/or recycled building materials.
- Purchase foodstuffs from local farmers and ranchers.
- Use environmentally sensitive, renewable energy, water and waste disposal systems.
- Offer excellent opportunities for interaction with local owners, managers, staff and guides.
Ecotourism Society (TIES), the International Ecotourism Club, ECOCLUB.COM and locally from the Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) Ecotourism Network (Expert System Research Group) [http://esrg.eng.upm.edu.my].

**QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER**

Q. Does the eco-tour operator employ trained naturalists who can translate complex scientific information into simple, everyday, understandable language?

A. Learning about complicated ecological interactions between plant and animal life can be made into an enjoyable educational experience, which is an integral part of the ecotourism product.

Q. Does the eco-tour operator show a commitment to local conservation?

A. This can be demonstrated in many ways. An eco-tour operator can actively encourage conservation among local inhabitants through the development of local conservation efforts and projects. Donations to local non-governmental organisations that concentrate on environmental concerns are also a good indicator of commitment.

Q. Do eco-tour operations directly benefit local inhabitants?

A. One of the key components of ecotourism is sustaining the well-being of local people. An eco-tour operator can directly aid the local community by employing local workers, using local produce and utilising locally owned eco-lodges. Communities that benefit from ecotourism practices are more likely to conserve their natural attractions because of the direct gains from doing so.

Q. Does the eco-tour operator have a waste management policy?

A. This can include advocating the use of recycled products and biodegradable materials; advising visitors to minimise the amount of disposable products carried on trips; recycling, reusing and reducing; and making sure that all trash taken into fragile areas is removed after visitation.

Q. How else are the impacts of eco-tour operations minimised?

A. This can include educating the traveller about the best way to minimise their individual impacts: taking particular care to protect fresh water and other limited natural resources; choosing locally owned and/or sustainably managed lodges; avoiding the invasion of a community’s privacy; and adopting a localised policy concerning the viewing of wildlife, these levels are not reached. An eco-tour operator can encourage the monitoring of fragile environ-

Travellers should be sensitive to local customs concerning areas such as culture, religion, photography and tipping.

Q. What training opportunities does the eco-tour operator provide?

A. It is vital that staff members are given access to programmes that will upgrade their communication skills, enabling them to manage clients more effectively in sensitive natural and cultural destinations. A management structure that allows local employees to gain promotion...
within the organisation is particularly beneficial.

Q. Is a personal commitment from the tourist encouraged?
A. Tour operators can aid in the conservation process by encouraging their clientele to get involved. This can include advocating letters of concern to appropriate local authorities if environmental degradation is witnessed, volunteering to work with local conservation projects, participating in local waste clean ups, and donating money to appropriate local non-governmental organisations.

HOW YOU CAN BE AN ECOTOURIST

Culture
Your behaviour on vacation needs to be altered for each different location you visit. Travellers should be sensitive to local customs concerning areas such as culture, religion, photography and tipping.

Financial Benefit
You should try, where possible, to consume local foods and use public or locally owned transport to maximise the amount of financial benefit to the host destination. When buying souvenirs you should consider whether the goods are locally made. Do not purchase goods produced from endangered species.

Local Authorities
Check with local authorities, before visiting natural areas, for site-specific regulations, guidelines, maps etc. Offer to pay for access to these areas, even if a fee is not required, as your contributions will help preserve the natural attraction for future visits.

Fragile Environments
Be prepared. This motto can be applied to a wide range of areas. It is good practice to find out what facilities a destination offers, be it on a day trip hike or a weeklong wildlife observation expedition. Are these facilities environmentally sustainable? It is also useful to take maps and field guides with you on your trip.

Take care when planning a trip to a fragile environment. Take into account the peak times for visitation (season, day in week and time in day). Avoiding these times will increase your enjoyment of the natural attraction and also avoid exceeding the areas carrying capacity.

Adopt low-impact camping and hiking behaviour. These practices protect wildlife habitats and help maintain the quality of experience for others. Take particular care to protect fresh water resources.

Viewing Wildlife
Use binoculars or other optical aids, where possible, when viewing animals in their natural environment. This establishes distance between them and yourself, dramatically reducing your impact.

While viewing wildlife move slowly and quietly. Noises often scare animals unnecessarily. Notice how many more varieties of wildlife you see and hear, and how many types of plants you can observe. Avoid using animal attraction devices. When taking photographs do not encroach on wildlife. Relentlessly following and harassing animals in search of the ultimate photo is unacceptable.

Animals always have the right of way. Different animals require different non-encroachment distances. If in doubt of these distances, ask the local warden specialist.

The Telaga Tujuh Waterfall in Langkawi.

Waste Management
Do not leave any litter. Better still take a bag with you and pick up litter on your visit. If you want to smoke in natural areas take your cigarette butts with you. Leave no trace of your visit and dispose of all trash properly. Try to minimise the amount of disposable products you take with you on vacation. Reduce, Reuse and Recycle.

POPULAR ECOTOURISM SITES IN MALAYSIA
Malaysia is blessed with large tracts of tropical rainforest, reputedly the world's oldest eco-system and richest in bio-diversity. While pursuing economic development, equal emphasis is given to sustainable management through forest conservation and environment protection.

Not surprisingly, Malaysia has one of the best national forest and conservation parks. Among the well-known eco-tourism destinations in Malaysia are Taman Negara, Endau-Rompin, Mulu Caves, Kuala Selangor Nature Park, Templer Park, Pulau Redang, Pulau Langkawi and Pulau Tioman.

(In next issue: Some popular ecotourism destinations in Malaysia)
Bringing in Foreign Investment

A.T. Kearney's advice on attracting more FDI to Malaysia

Budget 2005: Where Business Benefits

Business Abroad: Accessing EU through UK

Logistics: DHL's Innovative Solutions