Kinabalu National Park’s diverse flora and fauna enchants naturalists and nature lovers.

The majestic Mount Kinabalu with its peak at 4,103 meters (and still growing) is indeed the highest mountain in Southeast Asia. This distinction has earned it considerable attention in myth and legend as well as in geography.

The hundreds of square kilometres encompassed by its slopes, from sea-level to the jagged stone edge marking its summit, form the Kinabalu National Park.

Kinabalu National Park is located at 1,558 metres above sea-level and is approximately two-hour bus ride from Kota Kinabalu. Popular for its cool climate, Kinabalu National Park enchants naturalists with its rich and diverse flora and fauna. Within this area is found some of the richest flora in the world, ranging from lowland dipterocarp forest to the montane oak, rhododendron, and conifer forests of the

By Vikneswaran Nair & Tai Siew Yen, middle altitudes and eventually to the alpine meadows and stunted, windswept bushes of the summit.

The park is also Malaysia’s first World Heritage site designated by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific & Cultural Organisation) in December 2000. The park has become the focus of naturalists and nature lovers because it is one of the world’s most significant biological sites. Two
Kinabalu National Park is home to more than 5,000 species of flora which comprises over 200 families and 1,000 genera. Prime attractions of the park are Mount Kinabalu and Poring Hot Springs.

Gazetted as a protected area, no intense development is allowed in the Kinabalu National Park. Different countries have their own extensive policy of protected areas. The policy depends on the needs and priorities of the nation, the differences in legislative, institutional and financial support in line with the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resource (IUCN). Most of the protected areas in Sabah are multiple-use reserves, general forest reserves, national parks and strict and managed nature reserves.

Kinabalu National Park is home to more than 5,000 species of flora which comprises over 200 families and 1,000 genera. More than half (78 species) of the 135 species of Ficus occurring in Borneo can be found at the site. The world's biggest flower, Rafflesia, one of the rarest and hardest plants to locate, is found in the park. Sabah is fortunate to have the largest concentration of the Rafflesia population. This exotic flower takes up to 15 months to bud but only lasts 7 days in bloom.

The insect-eating Rajah Brooke's pitcher plant, the world's largest pitcher plant (the pitcher plant can hold 3.5 litres of water), is also a resident here. No wonder Kinabalu National Park has continually attracted top naturalists and botanists from all around the world.

Amazingly, Mount Kinabalu is over nine times taller than the Petronas Twin Towers. The local communities, the Kadazans and Dusuns, consider themselves as the guardians of Mount Kinabalu. They believe that it is a resting place for the spirits of their ancestors.

Poring Hot Springs is another popular spot in the park. The sulphured water is believed to be able to soak away the sores, aches of muscles and has curative properties for skin diseases. Generally, the hot spring provides therapeutic bath. The hot springs were first developed by the Japanese during Second World War and today they have been turned into a health spa. The springs are piped into several open-air, Japanese-style baths.

EXPERIENCING THE PARK

Kinabalu National Park is believed to be 1.5 million years old and it covers an area of 754 square kilometres. The three-hour ride traverses the Crocker Range with panoramic views of the surrounding countryside. The park headquarters located at 1,588 metres is well organised with accommodations ranging from hostels to well-appointed chalets.

Daily temperature in the park varies from 20 degrees to 13 degrees at night.

The climb up to Kinabalu is one reason why many visitors come to this national park. Despite its intimidating size, Mount Kinabalu is one of the easiest mountains in the world to climb. No special skills or equipment are needed, and each year thousands of visitors embark on the expedition, which takes two to three days. Accommodation is available all along the climb, with the highest lodging being the Sayat Hut at 3,810 metres.

Though Kinabalu National Park is famed largely for the climb, it is in turn as famous for the beauty of its route as well as the view from the top. Most tours to the national park leaves Kota Kinabalu via the Tuaran highway. The scenic drive to the park is a spectacular trip. In a distance from the ridge top, see an endless expanse of virgin forest. As one climbs from sea-level, the humidity drops and the air is fresh and fragrant with exotic floral aromas. Stay overnight at the Hotel Perkasa just outside the park.

Jungle walks into the temperate forest (altitude 1,560 metres) of the park are led by park officers. The forest trails are graded and the walk may last an hour or two. Lunch is served at a local restaurant.

Visit the exhibit centre and mountain garden to learn more about the natural wonders in the park.
In the early mornings, the rugged Kinabalu peak is often visible. The biodiversity is so rich that the park has been referred as the “richest and most remarkable assemblage of plants in the world.” Here there are over 1,000 species of orchids and 300 species of birds. At a lower elevation, the park provides a different ecosystem. Walk along the forest trails and up into the canopy on a high-suspended walkway. Encounter mountain streams, waterfalls and a variety of bird species.

TOURIST ARRIVAL
The number of foreign tourist visiting Kinabalu National Park reached the peak in the year 2000. There was a drop of 12.28% in 2001, followed by a slight decrease of tourist arrivals again in 2003. Nevertheless, the numbers of foreign visitors are gradually increasing from 2003 onwards (Figure 1).

The tourism industry is a fragile one. The drop of international tourist arrivals since 2001 owing to terrorism, SARS, Bird-Flu and Tsunami also resulted in a decrease of international visitors at the park. With an all time increase in tourist arrival to Malaysia in 2004 (Table 1), Kinabalu National Park too enjoyed an increase in foreign visitors to the park.

Tourist arrivals to the country in March 2005 registered 1,499,275 visitors, making it the highest tourist arrivals ever recorded in a month. This is an increase of 11.4% compared to last year’s March figure of 1,274,039 visitors.

Cumulative tourist arrival figures (from January until March 2005) stand at 4,159,857 visitors, a 4.6% increase from last year’s figure of 3,978,214 visitors for the same period.

The tourism industry will continue to work hard to improve tourism performance for the year and all indicators are positive in favour for a better performance this year compared to 2004.

Nonetheless, the number of domestic tourist arrivals at Kinabalu National Park is almost consistent with a slight increase from 2003 onwards. With 5-day week for the civil service, and an increase in international tourist arrival for the first quarter of this year, it is expected that the number of visitors to Kinabalu National Park to hit all time high in 2005.

ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT OF THE PARK
Sabah Parks, which manages the Kinabalu National Park, has successfully promoted the conservation and preservation practices which resulted in the World Heritage listing. The park provides employment for the locals since the closest job opportunity in the city is miles away.

An independent survey done on the tourists' perception towards the performance of the park generally showed a positive result in the good practices and efforts of Kinabalu National Park in protecting the ecosystem.

Nevertheless, the top three serious problems of the park as indicated by majority of the visitors are congestion, followed by dirtiness and vegetation damages. However, the congestion problem could be seasonal especially during festive period which is
the peak season of the park. Congestion problem could be noticed primarily in Poring Hot Springs.

Similar to congestion problem, most tourist are appalled by the rubbish seen in some parts of the park despite having garbage bins around. According to Norliza Nawawi, Assistant Director of Research and Education Division of Sabah Park, another common complaint of visitors is the cleanliness of public toilets, which seems to be a general problem in Malaysia.

Vegetation get damaged as a result of trampling, especially the ground cover layer. Recreational activities and public vehicles are causing immediate and direct impact to the vegetation. Tourist behaviours and frequency of the site being visited are factors that may influence the vegetation.

Most tourists are not aware of the golden rule of ecotourism, “Take only photos, leave only footprints”, which has long been an environmentalist motto. But now, even the footprints are doing more harm to the natural vegetation. Calls are often made to restrict tourism in places where it degrades, or threatens to degrade biodiversity in line with the site’s environmental carrying capacity (the number of visitors and level of use a site can sustain without experiencing irreversible biodiversity impacts). This is true especially during peak period in the Kinabalu National Park.

Using 11-criteria to measure the performance level of Kinabalu National Park in contributing its efforts to preserve and conserve the ecosystem available within the park, the criteria in sequence of highest performance is listed below.

Generally, the performance of Kinabalu National Park seems to be acceptable. Protection of fauna and conservation of flora are rated as the two best performances among all. It is good because these two criteria are rated as the two most significant criteria. At the same time, it shows that the park is serious in maintaining their World Heritage status.

The other two outstanding performances of the park as rated by visitors are appreciation of nature and the environmental friendly approach. These two criteria are closely related to the two best performances criteria of the park. The natural resources are well preserved and conserved with minimum negative impacts that could harm the environment.

Local communities as the main workforce are easily noticeable in the park. The Kadazans and Dusuns are very much involved in different tasks because they have better understanding about the environment. Being in the World Heritage list, the park has to ensure the outstanding ecosystems are protected because the park could face the risk of being deleted from the list if it fails to fulfil the stringent requirements of UNESCO.

Sabah Parks which manages the Kinabalu National Park work closely with related bodies to promote the conservation and preservation of the park.

Through intense promotion by the state, they are able to create awareness of environmental friendly approach among the public.

The last three criteria ranked by the tourist are staff responsibility, enforcement of strict regulations and cooperation of public. These three criteria are considered as external factors that cannot be controlled by the park. The staffs can be trained to have knowledge in protecting the natural resources. They are the ones who decide whether they should perform their jobs in a responsible way.

Enforcement of the regulations is another common problem in Malaysia as far as ecotourism site management is concerned. Enforcement need to be stepped up. Public cooperation received the lowest ranking. This may be due to the difficulty to motivate the public to cooperate with the park management in ensuring the natural resources are not severed. Again, the lack of awareness in taking care of nature is a serious problem in Malaysia.

Indeed, the Kinabalu National Park is the gateway to the top of Borneo. The pioneer World Heritage site in Malaysia is a “must see” for all nature lovers. With good and sound management of the park, there is hope that the future generations will be able to experience this natural phenomenon.

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