Ecotourism: a career in responsible tourism

Dr. Vikneswaran Nair, Head of Research & Development and senior lecturer from Taylor’s College reveals what eco-tourism is all about and the opportunities available in the field.

At a glance
The eco-tourism industry in Malaysia needs qualified professionals to understand the fragile environment if the industry is to be sustained in a responsible manner. With eco-tourism regarded as one of the main forms of tourism in Malaysia, there are many career opportunities for those who want to be close to Mother Nature.

Tourism is the world’s fastest growing industry. It generates 1 in 15 jobs worldwide. However, tourism can contribute to both environmental and cultural degradation. As such, the concept of eco-tourism has gained prominence in tropical countries like Malaysia.

The concept of ‘eco-tourism’ (short for ‘ecological tourism’) evolved from nature-based tourism, which can be defined as, ‘ecologically sustainable tourism with a primary focus on experiencing natural areas that fosters environmental and cultural understanding, conservation, education and interpretation of the natural environment’.

Eco-tourism is one of the fastest growing sectors of the tourism industry and is an important form of tourism to nations rich in natural resources like Malaysia. World Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF) Malaysia estimates that Malaysia earns RM655 million per year from eco-tourism.

Eco-tourism appeals mainly to an educated clientele of all ages who generally shun commercial hype but is prepared to pay for informed commentary and a ‘real’ experience. There is often a degree of overlap with adventure tourism. Tourism Malaysia has categorised eco-tourism as part of adventure tourism.
Ecotourism in Malaysia
The tourism industry has become one of the fastest growing and one of the most important industries for Malaysia especially over the past several decades. All the tourism stakeholders in Malaysia have started to realise that uncontrolled development at the expense of natural resources under the guise of tourism development will actually destroy the things that tourists come to see.

Malaysia has failed in the past (and even presently) to effectively manage Mother Nature, with much destruction to the environment. There is still a lack of qualified professionals in ecotourism-related industries who are savvy in their understanding of ecotourism and the very demanding new wave of tourists.

These new wave of tourists, are saying no to mass tourism, irresponsible operators and resorts that are destroying the local environment. These tourists want real quality experience. They want to know that the shower they are taking is not depriving a village of water; the hotel they are staying at is not robbing the locals of their livelihood; or that their very presence is not offending the local communities.

Career opportunities
With ecotourism rapidly growing in Malaysia, there are many career opportunities for those who want to be close to Mother Nature. This is because the industry still lacks qualified workforce to fill the many vacancies in this field.

Graduates can find positions as tourism operators specialising in ecotourism, eco-guides, planners, interpretative centre staff, research officers, etc. These positions potentially lead to careers in ecotourism management. Potential employers include tourist resorts and operators, government agencies and non-government organisations. There is also great scope to start up small businesses.

Studying ecotourism
Most courses in ecotourism are particularly suited to students who are good communicators and organisers, and who have the capacity to deal with a multi-disciplinary approach to the natural world. The need for informed and articulate professionals to service this sector is growing rapidly.

While local guides and trained guides can provide valuable information about the local environment, there is increasing demand for high quality information, at various levels of sophistication, to be provided by people with a more global understanding of their discipline. This knowledge is usually acquired through formal education in an undergraduate or postgraduate programme.

Students will gain access to a varied range of ecotourism-related employment opportunities, and will be qualified to work at the interface of tourism and environmental education, both locally and internationally. The ecotourism programme may equip students to find employment in the traditional tourism industry. However, those graduating will also be in possession of the skills to participate in, or initiate, ecotourism initiatives in the rapidly evolving ecotourism sector outside the arena of mass tourism. Ecotourism specialists help tourists enjoy vacations that offer an experience that protects the environment, supports local communities and respects indigenous cultures.

“Take nothing but photographs. Kill nothing but the time. Leave nothing but your footsteps”

Is it for me?
So, how do you know if you are cut out for this industry? If you have an interest in tourism, travel, recreation, the environment and social-economic aspects, you will succeed in this vocation. A person with good communication skills, strong interest in natural history, outdoor pursuits and good people skills are particularly suited to this study. Students pursuing a degree in this field must also have good analytical and critical thinking skills and also the ability to engage in the cross-disciplinary study of ecotourism.

In short, students who are keen to study ecotourism can enrol into a diploma or degree programme in tourism management and specialise in ecotourism or undertake ecotourism research in their final dissertation or thesis. Another route is to enrol in programmes related to the environment, forest management and even social studies.

More info on ecotourism
For more information on ecotourism, check out the following Websites:
- The International Ecotourism Society (www.ecotourism.org)
- ECOCLUB International Ecotourism Club (www.ecoclub.com)
- National Geographic (www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/sustainable)
- World Tourism Organisation (www.worldtourism.org)

Some of the major ecotourism destinations in Malaysia include: Pulau Langkawi and Gunung Jerai Forest Reserve (Kedah); Batu Ferringhi and Pulau Jerjak (Penang); Ampang Forest Recreation Area and Templer Park (Selangor); Gunung Ledang Forest Reserve and Pulau Harimin (Johor); Pulau Kapas and Kenyir Catchment Reserve (Terenganu); Pulau Sipadan and Abai Mangrove Forest Reserve (Sabah).

Fast fact!
It is estimated that of the 16.4 million tourist arrivals in Malaysia in 2005, over 10% were nature lovers or ecotourists. Malaysia has 54 protected areas of over 1,000 hectares, totalling 1,483,000 hectares (or about 4.5% of the land surface of the country). They include 28 district nature reserves, where 90,070 hectares are not opened to tourism activity. There are only two sites in Malaysia that have been accorded with the United Nation's World Heritage Listing, both of which are top ecotourism sites, namely the Malu National Park in Sarawak and Kinabalu National Park in Sabah. Another popular ecotourism site is Endau Rompin in Johor, which is acknowledged as one of the oldest rainforests in the world. Indeed, the opportunities in this vocation are promising as the ecotourism industry in Malaysia moves into a new era.
Join the industry. See the world!