Sustainable Ecotourism

The world's oldest rainforested canoe park is in Malaysia for all to explore and enjoy. A haven for hundreds of species of wildlife, exotic birds and plants. Malaysia has plenty of natural attractions to satisfy even the most discerning adventure seekers. Adventure ranging from challenging jungle treks to leisurely swims in natural pools and waterfalls to the adrenaline-pumping thrills of climbing mountains to a seaplane walk in the jungles and cave exploration are among the ecotourism activities that beckon a tourist. Warm weather natural beauty spots and conservation efforts by the government have all combined to make Malaysia an ideal destination for ecotourism. The question is: How well are we managing our ecotourism sites in terms of responsible conservation practices as well as long-term benefits to the resource, industry and the local community?

Ecotourism is being increasingly confronted with arguments about its sustainability and compatibility with environmental protection and community development. What actually constitutes sustainable ecotourism? As the title suggests, two essential components constitute 'sustainable ecotourism':

Ecotourism Defined
As defined by the guru of ecotourism, Caballo Lascurain, ecotourism can be defined as "ecologically sustainable tourism with a primary focus on experiencing natural areas that foster environmental and cultural understanding, appreciation and conservation." It has also been defined as environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features) that promotes conservation, has low negative visitor impact and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations.

Sustainability Defined
We next come to defining the concept of sustainability so as to come to grips with sustainable ecotourism. Sustainable ecotourism involves a challenge to develop quality tourism without adversely affecting the natural and cultural environment that maintains and nurtures them. At the heart of sustainable tourism is a set of implicit values related to integration of economic, social and cultural goals.

The approaches to sustainability may be categorised into three: (i) principle-based, (ii) managerial, and (iii) scientific. Principle-based approaches in sustainable ecotourism require all activities, regardless of their scale, to respect the principles and to follow guidelines or codes of conduct where they exist. While principles are the foundational statements of belief about what ecotourism should be, guidelines indicate expectations about behaviour and codes of conduct set out and specific actions that should be taken to comply with the principles. Meanwhile, managerial initiatives comprise those that focus upon standards of practice, which, if followed, will assure achievement of sustainable tourism goals. The focal point of all managerial initiatives is the individual organization which is expected to manage its environmental impact throughout all of its activities. The scientific approach would include new innovations and technology-driven approaches in encouraging sustainable management.

As can be seen, ecotourism is not a product. Its underlying base is a philosophy that relies on a common understanding by the various stakeholders of the feasibility, opportunity and problems of the tourism industry. Essentially, ecotourism should be based on five basic tenets.

Tenets of Sustainable Ecotourism

1. Monitoring Visitation Level and Carrying Capacity
   Tools for monitoring visitation stress levels at prime sites need to be in place according to the concept of carrying capacity. This can only be done at the local or regional level. The carrying capacity of an area or site has three dimensions.

   (a) Quality of visitor experience
   This level of carrying capacity embodies the relation between the tourists themselves and has strong implications on their willingness to pay.

   (b) Social carrying capacity
   This is the interplay between the host population and visitors. This is a subjective consideration from the community as a whole. Experience has shown that if locals are integrated positively and voluntarily in tourism service provision, the willingness to receive tourists increases. That is why it is beneficial for the travel and tourism industry to buy local goods and services as far as possible.

   (c) Ecological carrying capacity
   This is the relation between the tourists and the environment itself. This is a non-negotiable dimension of the concept of carrying capacity that can be determined by researchers. The monitoring of visitation levels need to be coordinated by the local system of authorities, landowners, businesses, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) etc. A taskforce may be needed to undertake this work.

2. Benefiting the Local People
   The second common denominator is that local people should neither be excluded from the opportunity to benefit from tourism, nor should tourism development be imposed on them. Local people are persons living in or in the immediate surroundings of the tourist areas. There are two approaches to engage local people in the tourism industry:

   (a) "Hire the local people" approach which recommends tourists to hire the services of local people and buy their products and services as far as possible.  
   (b) "Empowerment" approach which advocates that local people should be given the opportunity to be engaged commercially and directly in the operations.
Appropriate support structures need to be built so that local people living in areas of tourism interest can easily access information on how tourism operates and as a consequence decide to invest their time and money on a part-time or full-time basis to offer tourism services.

3 Cross-Sectoral Interplay
The third common denominator is the collaboration between various interest groups at the local and national level for sound use of open access resources such as cultural and natural landscapes as well as protected areas. There is an urgent need to have a common understanding of the problems and opportunities of tourism dynamics between the government and private sector as well as various NGOs before sensitive areas are promoted as commercialised tourist sites.

4 Appropriate Pricing Strategies
According to Agenda 21, the environmental costs of a tourist site should be built into the prices of goods and services. However, such mechanisms do not exist in our country. Gross pricing policy needs to be established to facilitate a more fluid collaboration between local companies, distributors and all market players.

5 Responsible Marketing
Well motivated visitors who arrive in a host destination with the appropriate expectations on travel experiences that can actually be delivered is a very important issue and a prime concern for sustainability. It is required to work jointly so as to better harmonise the expectations of tourists to what actually can be delivered.

All these five systematic level issues need to be dealt with simultaneously at the local or regional level. The work will mature over time and will develop differently at a different pace depending on the host area. This development must be allowed to be site-specific. It is best that a taskforce be formed locally to address these issues and to monitor them over time.

Training for Sustainable Tourism
If ecotourism is meant to make the world a better place for the present and future generations, there needs to be a focus on conservation training for all levels of employees. Managers, staff as well as contract employees need to be exposed to programmes that will upgrade their ability to communicate with and manage clients in sensitive natural and cultural settings. Some measures that need to be taken are as follows:

1. Establish clear guidelines for staff regarding opportunities and company support available for training via internal training programmes (natural and cultural setting) and via training programmes available locally (language skills and first aid, accounting, mechanics etc.).

2. Establish an operators consortium for training.

3. Establish relations with a local educational facility and work to integrate needed training components into the curriculum.

4. Work with non-governmental organisations to establish an ecotourism training programme.

Concerted training efforts by both the operators and the government should help to create a large pool of local people with the requisite information to be employed in increasingly responsible positions that extend beyond the service employment sector. This should go a long way to make ecotourism beneficial to the local communities.

Benchmarking Tools
An ecotourism certification programme based on internationally accepted certification standards would certainly help mitigate negative environmental and social impacts of the growing mass ecotourism industry which is increasingly affecting developing countries. As the tourism industry in Malaysia becomes more aware of the huge economic benefits of ecotourism, certification via a credible, voluntary independent third party mechanism is vital. Capturing this new, lucrative market presents a window of opportunity for local communities to secure the long-term financial viability of these ecotourism operations.

Two examples of certification-like tools that can create awareness and assist ecotourism operators to move towards sustainability and being responsible is Universiti Putra Malaysia’s Expert Rating System (Nair et al. 2003) that was developed to monitor and rate the ecotourism destinations in Peninsular Malaysia and Wild Asia’s Responsible Tourism checklist criteria. In both these tools, explicit and tacit knowledge is utilised to evaluate the eco-destination objectively. This knowledge-based tool can benefit the ecotourism industry by assisting operators to plan, guide and develop eco-sites in a monitored and controlled manner for effective and efficient management. Use of certification tools should enable the large number of eco-sites in Malaysia to be effectively checked and managed, with good enforcement and scrutiny.

Lincoln’s Silhouette clearly visible at the Deer Cave.

Swarming formations of millions of bats take to the skies every evening.

Conclusion
In a market driven environment, what the ecotourism industry needs and the public must demand is a ruler for measuring the impact of tourism on natural resources. The sustainability debate involves how to pursue the goal and how to measure progress towards the goal. Ensuring that nature based tourism establishes and maintains high standards will be a challenge for all parties. The management of a sensitive ecosystem in the ecotourism context can in a way protect a country’s heritage and make it available for local education and tourism. The investment in such facilities is usually repaid through tourists who come in throngs and stay longer because there are more things to see and do and at the same time be entertained that the sustainability of the site is being looked into. The environment is the resource base for tourism; without protection, the natural attraction that brought the tourist in the first place will be lost.

References

Some of the information contained in this article has been previously used in articles prepared for Business Today.
Malaysian Farm Certification Scheme for Good Agricultural Practices

There is a growing consensus that industrial agriculture has severe shortcomings for the 21st century. Although it has been successful in increasing output over the years, the harm to the environment and public health is increasingly being realised, not just by consumers, but by producers themselves. The sustainability of industrial agriculture is seriously being questioned and we need to seek an alternative approach to the way we produce our food.

The sustainable agriculture initiative is not just an option to industrial agriculture, it is an imperative. It does not mean that we are de-emphasising production in favour of the environment - but protecting the environment is the only way to ensure that future food needs can be met. It also does not mean that we ought to return to past practices - it is the recognition that industrial agriculture must be modified to meet standards of sustainability.

It is widely accepted that the demand for sustainability has been initiated at the general consumer level. Thus producers should be aware of the concept of consumer rights and how consumers view product attributes. This is highlighted in the section following this introduction. This is followed by a short review of Good Agricultural Practices (GAP). The third section then considers the issue of Malaysian Standards, in particular the Malaysian Farm Certification Scheme for GAP.

Consumer Rights and Product Attributes
Issues concerning consumer rights are not exactly new. In a 1962 address to the US Congress, US President Kennedy declared the four basic consumer rights: right to safety, right to be informed, right to choose and the right to be heard. Consumers International, a global federation of consumer organisations, of which Malaysia is a member, has added to these original four another set of consumer rights: right to satisfaction of basic needs, right to redress, right to consumer education and right to a healthy environment.

Higher income, urbanisation, demographic shifts, improved transportation and changing consumer perceptions on quality and safety have contributed to a shift in product quality and ethics in consumption, including a concern for the environment. Consumers are hardly to be blamed as there has been increasing incidents of food contamination, including pesticides and microbial contamination, bird flu outbreaks, mad cow disease, etc.

Not too long ago, discussions among producers and even economists, have focused on the possibility of product quality requirements imposed by importing countries as a form of non-tariff barrier to trade. Rather than dwell on motivations, which are hard to discern, it is more worthwhile to look at these requirements as a natural progression of the greening market system. This is much more evident in recent years as even within the domestic market, consumers are beginning to exert their rights with respect to product quality.

The underlying reason for consumption is that consumer products possess a set of attributes that give utility to consumers. For food products, most are familiar with physical product attributes such as colour, size, taste and texture. Another set of attributes that is valued by consumers refers to the production process itself. These are thus called process attributes. A clear example is the requirement by Muslims as to how the animal is slaughtered. More and more consumers are now interested in how the animals have been treated in the production process. Thus whether the animals are allowed to roam in the free range system or confined to feedlots and cages is important to some consumers. Whether child labour was

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