Looking out for Mother Nature

ECOTOURISM, rated the fastest growing segment of tourism in the world, is a complicated and delicate industry. Defined as responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of the local community, ecotourism is about achieving a balance between profit and preservation. This is a difficult task, but absolutely necessary.

In this country there are many cases of either deteriorated and neglected sites or over-developed ones. Concrete and long-term measures need to be taken to rectify the situation.

Various steps have been put forward to the government. The largest and most comprehensive to-date is the National Ecotourism Plan, prepared by the Worldwide Fund for Nature Malaysia (WWF). The federal government adopted the plan in 1999, but nobody seems to know what is being done with it.

Building on the intent (and incorporating part) of the plan, but using an unorthodox approach, EcotourES or ecotourism expert system, a research project using information technology (IT), is currently under way.

Commissioned by the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment (Mocat) and undertaken by Universiti Putra Malaysia, it's the first study in Malaysia that attempts to rate the ecotourism industry based on safety, health and environment.

Three of the researchers are lecturers at UPM, while the fourth, Vickneswaran Nair, is a lecturer at Taylor's College School of Hospitality and Tourism.

The concept
EcotourES, if accepted and implemented by the authorities, would indirectly apply pressure on managers of tourism sites, whether government departments, private corporations or local authorities, to devise effective sustainable tourism practices.

A little like the hotel star-rating system and the ISO certification scheme, it's a step
ecotourism sites, but private companies or NGOs. This is a good point, as many local authorities are inefficient, bureaucratic or unresponsive. From first-hand observations, many sites under their care are in poor condition. An up-to-date ratings system would highlight the incompetent caretakers.

Vickneswaran also suggests changing the current walk-in system to one that requires registration and payment upon entry. “When you pay for a service or product, you value it more,” he reasoned.

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Speaking on the three criteria of health, safety and environment, Dr Abdulliah Mohd of UPM’s Forestry Department said: “Health here involves the practice of determining the conditions of cleanliness and hygiene of the area, facilities and practices in order to avoid disease or infections. Safety involves the management and preventive procedures in relation to hazards both natural and man-made, and risk identification and avoidance. “Environment would cover the biophysical and socio-economic factors and all the conditions, circumstances and influences surrounding and affecting the development of an organism or group of organisms.”

Although this sounds technical, it is quite simple in application and is determined by a total of 57 questions, although an applicant will not normally be made to answer every question.

It’s foreseeable that 95% of ecotourism sites would not get an ECOS rating, at least initially. Some immediately come to mind for failing in safety (Gunung Ledang, Johor), health (garbage lying around at many recreation forests, rivers and beaches), and environment (garbage as well, and destructive construction methods). Some would fail in all three (like the Telaga Tujuh Falls in Langkawi).

**Adoption of EcotourES**

“The system must be adopted by operators and providers of services and resources so that they are able to align their businesses with the new knowledge-based economy, as well as with international compliance requirements. This will be the future trend of tourism,” stressed Abdullah.

There is no point drowning in adverse media reports that affect the tourism industry when elementary requirements like cleanliness and maintenance cannot be taken care of.

About 75% of the 400 sites are run by government agencies, many by the Forestry Department, says Vickneswaran, but there is no system in place to assess tourism sites. There is no sole agency that oversees them.

“The project is now at the validation stage. We are trying to identify some ecotourism sites that would use the prototype to test the sites. Based on their feedback, we would fine-tune the system and then hand it over to the authorities. We hope it would be running by year’s end.

If EcotourES is a success here in the peninsula, the next phase would be to work...
Efficient operation

on Sabah and Sarawak," he added. However, ecotourism sites over in Borneo are usually better run than in the peninsula.

"If the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism agrees to use EcotourES, most probably the current research team from UPM would be assigned to do the auditing and implementation. Hopefully, the ministry would apply EcotourES on future applications for tourism licences."

Said Abdullah, "If properly introduced, EcotourES could result in efficient operations and services. This will lead to customer satisfaction and quality experiences, which would later translate into repeated visits by selected visitors who are willing to pay for the services, setting and products. I have no doubt the system could be well maintained."

There are few examples of such systems anywhere in the world; so if the EcotourES is properly implemented (and maintained), it would be a tremendous success for the country's tourism image and the industry's long-term survival. Hopefully, it will not suffer the same obscure fate as the National Ecotourism Plan.

THE INITIAL study for this research included a literature review of the existing rating systems used in the hospitality sector, namely hotels, food and beverage outlets, and other tourism areas using a rating system. The opinion of domestic and foreign tourists and domain experts (including officers and ecotourism operators) were then taken into consideration to formulate the standards of the ratings system.

The system uses three levels of cumulative rating: the Filtration Module, Basic Compliance Module and Advance Compliance Module, and different weightage is given to different variables in each module. There are a total of 57 questions, and 324 options/answers.

In the Filtration module, which basically sieves out no-hopers, sites are rated according to the level of compliance with the "ecotourism" definition and the existing legislation covering the industry. Calculations are made based on the responses given. If the score is below 75% after the filtration module, the "candidate" goes no further and does not even get an ECOI rating.

The Basic Compliance module rates sites according to its compliance to safety, health, environment and other human-related factors, namely management, socio-economics and aesthetics of the tourism site, qualification of the operator and planning of the site, and permitted and non-permitted activities at the site.

The final level of Advance Compliance rates sites for safety, health and environment as well, but also the tourism impact and the site planning and management in accordance with the different guidelines that encompass each ecosystem.

Testing out the online rating system (which is still under construction), it was obvious that a lot of effort and research has been put into the project. EcotourES is highly specialised and takes into account differing guidelines for: marine parks and islands; national parks, reserves and other forests; mangrove sites; recreational forest reserves; limestone hills and caves; rivers, waterfalls and lakes; beaches; and mountain areas. It has incorporated guidelines for carrying capacity and the limits of acceptable change.

The UPM report states "Whether or not an activity qualifies to be rated as ecotourism depends on the way the activity is carried out, not so much the activity itself. Generally all activities should be low impact, a tool for conservation, involve local communities and fosters sustainable development."

"We realise that the resource-based industry, which includes ecotourism, is at a critical stage. If there is no proper enforcement, future generations will not have our beautiful flora and fauna," said Vickneswaran.

Examples of EcotourES questions: Which of the following best describes your site?
1) Benefits local population; 2) low visitor impact; 3) promotes conservation; 4) cultural-based, etc. And for each answer, there are five answer options: 1) no; 2) unlikely; 3) neutral; 4) perhaps; 5) yes.

Which of the following regulations are you practicing?
1) Environment Quality Act 1974 2) Occupational Safety Health Act 1994 (If "yes", proceed to detailed questions regarding compliance with the acts.)

Which activities are allowed at your site? Forty-six activities are listed, including hunting, fishing, climbing, motorised sports, collecting plants, killing wildlife, rafting, jet-skiing, wildlife observation, nature education, etc.

Which of the following ecotourism value factors in terms of environment is adhered to in your site?
1) Biological diversity is observed; 2) combat coastal erosion; 3) environmental protection; 4) preserve ecological and hydrological integrity; 5) sustainable development; 6) wildlife conservation, etc.

Each question has a "help" section for assistance on answering, as some options may be generic. In addition, practical aspects are also covered. For example, in certain situations, waste bins should be monkey-proof, walking trails should be designed to restrict visitors to a trail using railings/embankments/steps/guide ropes and all waste/litter must be prevented/removed by the visitor, etc.