Vic Nair: "Golf course development is now emerging as a major environmental issue in Asia"

The ECOCLUB Interview with
Dr Vikneswaran Nair
President, Asia-Pacific Council on Hotel, Restaurant & Institutional Education (APacCHRIE)
Index of Interviews

A graduate of University Putra Malaysia (UPM), Dr. Vikneswaran (Vic) Nair completed his Ph.D. in Systems Engineering with his research on developing an expert system for ecotourism accreditation and rating for Peninsular Malaysia. At present, he heads the Centre for Research and Development at Taylor’s University College Malaysia and a Senior Lecturer at the Taylor’s School of Hospitality and Tourism. Dr. Vic Nair has more than 12 years experience in the field of application of Information & Communication Technology in Hospitality & Tourism, Sustainable Tourism, Ecotourism Management and Environmental Management. He is also an adjunct lecturer for many public universities in Malaysia, and also has conducted guest lectures on responsible tourism and ecotourism management for the graduate programme at the University of Toulouse, France, Rikkyo University, Japan and Institute for Tourism Studies (IFT), Macau.

A seasoned researcher and consultant with more than 100 publications to his credit, he was accorded the Merit Award for Academic Leadership and Accomplishment as the Outstanding Young Malaysian of the Year organised by Junior Chambers International, for his contribution to the ecotourism industry of Malaysia in 2006 and other awards including Taylor’s Chairman’s Staff Excellence Award for Academic Excellence (2002) & Research Excellence (2007) and Best Paper Award for Tourism Research in the Malaysia’s Third National Tourism Educators Conference (2004).

ABOUT TAYLOR’S UNIVERSITY COLLEGE MALAYSIA

Since its establishment in 1969, Taylor’s University College Malaysia (Web: http://www.taylors.edu.my) has expanded from its main location in Subang Jaya, to include four additional campuses extending throughout the area surrounding its main campus including Taylor’s College School of Hospitality and Tourism (TCHT). With over twenty years of experience, TCHT today is one of South East Asia’s largest and most established hospitality and tourism management colleges providing quality education and training to thousands of students. In 2007, TCHT clinched the prestigious Hospitality Asia Platinum Awards (HAPA) for Hospitality School of the Year 2007-2008 (Malaysia Series). The school offers industry-acclaimed diplomas, higher diplomas, degrees and professional Master Degree from the Academie de Toulouse and University of Toulouse in France.


12/08/2008
(The Interview follows:)

**ECOCLUB.com: How did you end up discovering and specialising in Ecotourism as an Academic, and how has your understanding evolved over the recent years?**

**Vic Nair:** It is by accident that I ventured into the world of ecotourism. I have always had the passion for ecology and environment even when I was young. I have always enjoyed roughing out in the nature, doing jungle trekking, camping at the beachfront and other nature based tourism activities. Upon completing my Bachelor Degree in Horticulture, I spend 2 years in the plantations in Batang Berjuntai. In 1996, I was offered by University Putra Malaysia to carry out a research to design an expert system to manage the terrestrial vegetation impact in carrying out the Environmental Impact Assessment.

Upon graduation in 1998, I was offered a job in Taylor’s School of Hospitality and Tourism. Thus, Taylor’s College was indeed my eye opener to the magnificent world of Tourism. Thus, I continued my PhD thereafter in developing another expert system for rating the ecotourism industry of Malaysia. With my strong ecological background, I had little trouble to complete my PhD in 2003. Hence, I was involved in many researches and consultancy work in the field of tourism and have published many articles and papers in many forums nationally and internationally. Subsequently my interest and understanding evolved from nature tourism to sustainable tourism to responsible tourism.

**ECOCLUB.com: You have also extensively studied Ecotourism Certification & Rating. What is your overall evaluation of its usefulness and implementability in Malaysia, compared to other countries in the Asia-Pacific region?**

**Vic Nair:** There are approximately about 500 potential or existing ecotourism sites in Malaysia as reported by WWF in their report for the National Ecotourism Plan in 1996. In addition, there are many agencies managing ecotourism in Malaysia which make the coordination and standardisation of all the code of practices a challenge.

At national level, the main government bodies relevant to ecotourism are the Ministry of Tourism, Tourism Malaysia (Malaysia’s tourism promotion arm), Ministry of Agriculture, including the Department of Fisheries (for Marine Parks), Department of Agriculture (for agro tourism which is related to ecotourism) and Department of Irrigation and Drainage (for river management). Within Peninsular Malaysia, other very important government bodies over seeing ecotourism resources and service provisions are the Department of Wildlife and National Parks (for national parks, wildlife reserves and sanctuaries and protection of wildlife), the Forestry Department with the constituent state forestry departments (for recreational forest), the State Governments (eco-sites within the boundaries of a state), the Economic Planning Unit and State Economic Planning Units, other departments and agencies such as the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, Veterinary Services Department, Forest Research Institute of Malaysia, the Malaysian Fisheries Development Board and universities.

Thus, with some many National Tourism Organisations (NTO) involved in managing ecotourism, a standardised certification and rating become more and more important in Malaysia compared to other Asia Pacific region where the NTO structure is not so complicated.

Therefore, it can be said that the main problems in the current practice of ensuring sustainable development of the ecotourism industry in Malaysia are: lack of effective and proper approaches for efficient sustainable management practice of the ecotourism site, lack of enforcement in ensuring the ecosystem is sustained; insufficient environmental cum ecological expertise that incorporates the fundamental of safety, health and environment; lack of consistent approaches in implementing a mitigation measures and in satisfying the requirement of national environmental regulatory authorities; the large number of small organisations involved in tourism and their related fields make the effort to collect data from them both costly and time-consuming, resulting in unreliable and incomplete ecotourism databases.

Hence, a reliable and consistent rating system and database system is required to ensure the sustainability of these ecotourism sites, which can be used for intelligent decision-making. A systematic rating system is developed to maintain a certain level of standards.

In order to make ecotourism development sustainable with minimum impact on the nature, it is important that all ecotourism sites are evaluated and rated in terms of importance and attractiveness. Nonetheless, with the complex bureaucracy and the organization of the NTO in Malaysia, the implementability of this certification and rating is dictated by the political party in power and the Minister who manages his/her Ministry for a period of 4-5 years before being replaced with another Minister who has his or her own vision during the period of
his/her term as a Minister.

Thus, the industry suffers. Since completion of my study in developing an ecotourism rating system for Peninsular Malaysia in 2003, five years later today, there is still no concerted effort done to check and balance the fragile ecotourism industry in Malaysia. A comprehensive National Ecotourism Plan that was prepared by WWF in consultation with the ecotourism guru, Architect Hector Ceballos-Lascurain for the Ministry of Tourism, Malaysia in 1996 was not utilized to the maximum to effectively manage the ecotourism industry in Malaysia. Today, the Ministry of Tourism is inviting potential consultants and academicians to re-work on the National Ecotourism Plan. What will happen after this report is completed is everybody’s guess.

**ECOCLUB.com:** What are the main challenges for Tourism and the Ecotourism movement in Malaysia today, and how suitable and 'eco' are related current state and federal government policies?

**Vic Nair:** The current Government policies, both the State and the Federal, need to further holistically focus on the impact of over-development on ecotourism destinations. 50 years ago Malaysia was a destination of eco-paradise with beautiful and coral rich beaches and one of the world’s oldest tropical rain forests. The diversity of its flora and fauna is a result of undisturbed evolution over 130 million years.

Malaysia has plenty of natural attractions to satisfy even the most discerning of adventure seekers. With the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean lapping its shores, there is an enormous variety of flora, fauna and marine life to be enjoyed. Ecotourism has become a major enterprise in Malaysia in the last decade. Several pristine rain forest areas have now, been turned into national parks and recreational parks. Total Protected Areas in the Peninsular Malaysia has dwindled with the major areas still in the Borneo Island of the Eastern Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak). Sadly, now even this part of Malaysia is projected for development under the Sarawak Corridor of Renewable Energy (SCORE) and Sabah Development Corridor (SDC) which was announce by the Prime Minister of Malaysia early this year. It is everybody’s hope that the development in this eco-paradise destinations will be done carefully and not solely for commercial purpose.

In a market driven environment, what the ecotourism industry in Malaysia needs and the public must demand is a ruler for measuring the impact of tourism on natural resources. Ensuring that nature-based tourism and ecotourism establishes and maintains high standards will be a challenge for all parties. The management of sensitive ecosystem in the ecotourism context can one 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 larger numbers and stay longer because there are more things to see and do and at the same time be contended that the sustainability of the site has been 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.

**ECOCLUB.com:** Observing Malaysia today, it is hard to see any signs that over a generation ago, there was major intercultural / intercommunal friction. Has Tourism played any part in terms of better understanding & integration between Malaysian communities, and what about indigenous people?

**Vic Nair:** Tourism may have played their part in bridging the understanding of the multiculture, which is the selling point of Malaysia. The “Malaysia Truly Asia”, tagline that was adopted by the country for the last so many years, indeed portray the unique culture and the harmonious living among the three distinct people of Asia, the Malays (Muslims), the Chinese and the Indians. These three populations put together, the Malays (comprising Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei), the Indians (Malaysia, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Pakistan) and Chinese (Malaysia, China and almost all of North and East Asia), will make up almost 75 percent of the world population. Thus, Malaysia is indeed a melting pot or sample of what Asia has to offer. Thus, tourism in Malaysia has certainly capitalized on this unique advantage in terms of better understanding and integration. In a multiracial country like Malaysia, certainly there are bound to be some intercultural and intercommunal friction but it is within the control and tolerance of the country.

Similarly, tourism has certainly opened the doors for the indigenous people especially in Sabah and Sarawak. Nonetheless, the benefits that tourism brings in alleviating poverty among these indigenous communities are still questionable. Many of them continue to live in their natural environment which is getting scarce day by day with deforestation for development, plantation expansion, etc. The Sarawak Corridor of Renewable Energy (SCORE) and Sabah Development Corridor (SDC) will further displace these communities if the development is not done with these communities in mind.
ECOCLUB.com: Among other things, you have working experience of oil palm & rubber estates, which have been blamed for deforestation in many other parts of the world. So, do you see Ecotourism as a realistic alternative to plantations and forestry in Malaysia, or merely as an add-on?

Vic Nair: I do not see Ecotourism as a realistic alternative to plantations and forestry in Malaysia. Malaysia is one of the largest producers of natural rubber and palm oil in the world. Despite having been industry for so many years, Malaysia still face the problem of poor management practice in land clearing. Although, incidence of slash burning is under control in Malaysia in comparison to Indonesia, problem of haze still persist.

Although the total size of rubber plantations in Malaysia has dwindled over the last decade, oil palm, which is the backbone of the plantation industry today in Malaysia, has expanded its cultivation from 54,000 hectares in 1960 to 4.17 million hectares as at May 2007. Hence, this represents nearly a 70-fold increase in size in the last four and a half decades. Palm oil cultivation occupies 66% out of the 6.3 million hectares of total agricultural land.

Deforestation for oil palms and rubber estates is a problem in Eastern Malaysia (Sabah & Sarawak). With oil palm and rubber still fetching good price at the market, ecotourism will never be a good alternative to plantations and forestry in Malaysia. Instead, the plantation industry in Malaysia must ensure the practice of sound environmental measures by ensuring zero burning, good agricultural practices and the use of biological agents to reduce pests and effluents.

On the other hand, in Peninsular Malaysia the damage done to ecosystem in irrevocable. One just needs to look at the birds eye view as your plane glide down to the Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA). Massive land clearing, erosion and destruction of the flora and fauna, is evident. Nevertheless, there seem to be some commitment off late from Malaysia’s palm oil industry. Approximately US$7 million wildlife conservation fund was recently launched. The revolving fund would for start help fund a survey on Sabah’s orang utan population that is disappearing fast due to deforestation. Indeed the fund is one the many examples of corporate social responsibility and environmental care by the palm oil industry.

Today, palm oil cultivation in Malaysia is strictly regulated and only land designated for agricultural purposes are utilized. In addition, research has also indicated that in a number of oil palm plantations in Sabah, greater biodiversity in plantations attracts animals and birds. Thus, there are some form of add-on that ecotourism can bring to these plantations.

ECOCLUB.com: You were also once involved with sales and marketing of fertilisers and agrochemicals for golf courses. Are the growing golf & luxury tourism developments in Malaysia compatible with Ecotourism in your view? Are golf developers really sincere about greening their act, or is it a ruse to expand in sensitive ecosystems?

Vic Nair: As a Horticulturist (my first degree), I was introduced to the world of landscaping and golf course design in the early 1990s. Quite often we hear about the Environmentally Friendly Golf Course, Environmentally Sensitive Gold Course Design, etc. There are also many golf courses that claim the following:

"This 36-hole golf course was formed on 750 acres of land of which 147 acres were wetlands that formed a part of the fragile ecosystem... incorporated these areas into the course architecture in order to protect the wetlands and the unique wildlife habitat."

Golf course development is now emerging as a major environmental issue in Asia. The problem may not seem so acute in Malaysia. Nonetheless, because of the maintenance of large, closely trimmed grassy areas is more difficult and environmentally hazardous in tropical areas which are home to greater numbers of pests, diseases and weeds, the problem of environmental damage is there.

In a small drought prone destination like Langkawi, one of the major tourist destination in Malaysia, there are water demand for about 2 million tourists and 4 golf courses. With a population of about 820,000 people, the fishing villagers and farmers of Langkawi are in the mercy of golf developers who are not sincere in greening their act or even creating employment to the local communities. They are more interested to expand in sensitive ecosystems.

As a result, after losing their farms, many of these villagers end up as cheap labourers on their very own lands. Working on these golf courses represents a drastic change from their once independent and self-reliant way of life. All too often, this kind of change leads to the collapse of whole rural communities. Those who are not

employed by golf courses move to big cities, contributing to the urban problems of slums, traffic congestion and pollution.

Thus, golf course should not venture into eco-sensitive sites and do more damage then the short term commercial benefit to a few.

**ECOCLUB.com:** In your College, from your students, as well as from your contacts with Tourism Academics around the world as Head of CHRIE in Asia-Pacific, do you observe a falling, steady, or increased interest in Ecotourism and environmental issues? And how satisfied are you with the level of research in Ecotourism?

**Vic Nair:** Across Asia-Pacific, there is certainly an increase interest in Ecotourism and Environmental issues. With the Global Warming phenomena that seem to be the main agenda in many forums across the world including Malaysia, environmental interest has steadily increased in the region. Nonetheless, there seem to be spin off to ecotourism in the region at present with many countries moving into the concept of “Responsible Tourism”.

According to Wild Asia, a non-government organization based in Kuala Lumpur who have been advocating this concept, there is a new wave of tourists who 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. That 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. Travel is about relaxation, rejuvenation, adventure, fulfillment, playfulness and sharing experiences rather than just ‘places and things’. It certainly is not about being cooped up in a tourist compound! This is what “Responsible Tourism” or “RT” is all about.

RT in essence provides quality travel experience that promotes conservation of natural environment and offer opportunities and benefits for local communities. RT in ideal is tourism operations that are managed in such a way that they preserve the local environment and culture so that it can continue to deliver the benefits for years to come.

Thus, more applied and fundamental research is required to study the implementability of good practices of ecotourism or responsible tourism. Currently, most research in this region seems to stay as a research with no practical use or benefit. Institutions like Taylor’s College and even CHRIE, can play a distinctive role in molding the future graduates that are going to dictate the industry, with qualities that are essential to the survival of mankind in this globalised age.

**ECOCLUB.com:** You are attending all sorts of Tourism-related conferences all over the world, ranging from purely academic to business ones. How useful are they really, beyond networking, in advancing theory, policy & practice? And are Academics adequately listened to?

**Vic Nair:** Attending conferences and seminars all over the world is an important aspect of all academicians. Besides networking, it is really a one-stop point for researchers to exchange notes and argue on their findings which eventually will be picked up by policy makers, entrepreneurs, funding bodies, etc. Thus, academicians have to be conscious to the happenings in the industry in order to develop both the basic and applied research. Armed with this knowledge, academicians are able to educate the youths of the world to take their productive place as leaders in the global community.

Thus, a tenured academian must be able to speak his/her thoughts without being oppressed or judgmental of his/her critical thoughts. Sadly, this is still lacking in many countries around the globe including Malaysia, where academicians are bound by the political power house that dictates what should be said and not question their constructive criticism.

**ECOCLUB.com:** Are Malaysian Tourism graduates easily absorbed into the ‘job market’ compared to other disciplines or has there been saturation? What are the hot topics within Tourism?

**Vic Nair:** The Malaysian tourism graduates are easily absorbed into the ‘job market’ especially those trained from reputable hospitality and tourism universities like Taylor’s College, where practical exposure, management and entrepreneurial skills are blended to fit to the industry requirement.

Nonetheless, as more and more highly qualified and skilled hospitality and tourism staff force are pinched by
the industry in Singapore, Macau and Hong Kong, there is a serious turnover across the industry in Malaysia. As a result, many frontliners in the industry in Malaysia are being managed by immigrants from Indonesia, India, Bangladesh, China, etc.

Thus, there is an imbalance of growth of the academia in relation to what the industry can offer in Malaysia. The Ministry of Tourism in Malaysia is aware of this gap and is current trying to tackle this issue.

**ECOCLUB.com: Finally, which is your favourite ecological / responsible tourism spot or operation in Malaysia, and why?**

**Vic Nair:** Personally, I enjoyed Mulu National Park in Sarawak. Mulu National Park is the largest park in Sarawak, with an area of 544 square kilometres. The Mulu National Park has been designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in November 2000 for its natural beauty and the world’s largest cave system with its amazingly rich bio-diversity.

Out of the 27 caves discovered in Mulu, so far, only four caves are open to the general public, with some others being accessible to groups of experienced adventure cavers. Fortunately, the four "show caves" are a representative sample of the whole cave system, each cave being completely different from the others. The caves – Lang Cave, Clearwater Cave, Deer Cave and Wind Cave – which are easily accessible, are surrounded by natural settings that contain different and beautiful scenic spots that make a visit fulfilling to any tourist.

Mulu has successfully balanced the social inheritance (respect host culture, conserve built and living cultural heritage & promote inter-cultural understanding and tolerance), environment optimisation (optimal use of resources, maintain ecological processes & help conserve natural heritage) and also the economical benefits and opportunities (profits, long-term business viability, provide socio-econ benefits to all stakeholders, support stable employment opportunities and social services & contribution to poverty alleviation), which is critical for a successful ecotourism destination.

**ECOCLUB.com: Any other thoughts?**

**Vic Nair:** As ecotourism becomes increasingly popular, a need has emerged for both industry standards and procedures, and for monitoring compliance with such requirements. Such standards and monitoring procedures can distinguish valid ecotourism projects from other enterprises that have appropriated the ecotourism label without commitment to its principles. Such measurements are also necessary to help honest ecotourism projects critique their performance and move closer to the ideal of sustainability.

Today, a need has emerged for both standards and procedures to monitor compliance with these standards. Client evaluation is a simple procedure available to all ecotourism operations that can serve to both enhance tourist education and provide a simple system of monitoring. As an educational tool it can be used to focus the tourists’ attention upon ecotourism criteria. As a monitoring system it has an advantage over either surveys or on-site investigation because it provides information by observers supplied over an extended period of time.

The management of sensitive ecosystem in the ecotourism context can one 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 larger numbers and stay longer because there are more things to see and do and at the same time be contended that the sustainability of the site has been looked into.

Further, the ecotourist needs to understand the value of participating in this evaluation programme. This requires them being told how the findings will be used and how they will benefit, as well as the environment and local culture, from nature tour operators adhering to management standards and guidelines. One way to accomplish this goal is through an incentive program that encourages nature tour operators, guides, and lodging establishments to participate in the evaluation process.

In conclusion, as the ecotourism industry continues to grow, greater pressure will be placed on nature tour operators, lodging establishments, trade associations and governmental bodies to ensure a high quality tourism experience for its customers, to protect the natural and cultural resources that are utilized, and remain economically sustainable. To accomplish this goal, the ecotourism industry in countries, regions and destination areas are going to have to make tough decisions regarding how they hope to ensure the future of the industry. An underlying tension will always exists among the different ecotourism providers on how to best achieve this goal. The tension is between self-regulation by a business, the collective development and enforcement of objectives and guidelines by an ecotourism association, or through regulation by a
governmental entity.

ECOCLUB.com: Thank you very much!

- Find the complete list of ECOCLUB Interviews here

Disclaimer: Any views expressed in this magazine belong to their respective authors and are not necessarily those of ECOCLUB S.A. Although we try to check all facts, we accept no liability for inaccuracies - which means you should not take any travel or other decisions based only on what you read here. Use of this magazine is covered by the Terms & Conditions of the ECOCLUB.com Website and by your uncommon sense and good humour.

Copyright © 1999-2008 ECOCLUB S.A. All Rights Reserved. Terms of use
Home Ecolodges News Shop Community Chat Library Events Advertise Join Recommend