

Community-based Ecotourism: A New Proposition for Sustainable Development and Environmental Conservation in Malaysia

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Abstract: Community-based ecotourism is one of the most dynamic sectors of Malaysian tourism industry. The destination involved remote traditional communities where national parks, game reserves and other protected areas served as the background setting for such activities. Its principle is focused upon the benefits of tourism attained by local population and the environment while minimizing negative impacts. By empowering the locals with own governance and management partnerships within the area, community based ecotourism may reduce economic leakages, minimize negative impacts and concentrate the benefits locally. This study will discussed the key management issues of community-based tourism: government supports, sustainable use of local resources, participation of stakeholders, fair benefits sharing, strengthening of local institutions, linkages with regional and national levels and training. African and Asian experiences in these areas are highlighted.

Key words: Local community, local institution, economic benefit, conservation of resources, government support

INTRODUCTION

Conservation can be combined with measures to meet short-term economic needs. In long-term perspective, development must be sustainable and conservation is the determining factor. Development based on conservation principles that uses resources in a sustainable manner will ensure the long-term viability and growth of any society. Sustainable development of forest resources can lead to economic growth, improved living standards and employment opportunities and increase the well being of the communities living adjacent to these resources. This type of development entails non-consumptive use of protected areas including ecotourism activities.

Proper planning and management of *in situ* ecotourism can be used as a tool to foster conservation and at the same time develop rural, remote and poor communities in a sustainable manner. However, local people, for whom this sustainable development is intended, will obtain optimum benefits only when they become an integral part of the process. In order to ensure the success of sustainable development, ecotourism projects should be of a community-based initiative where business enterprises are owned and managed by the community. Higher intensities of participation provide widespread economic benefits and decision-making power to the communities. Economic benefits could acts as incentive for local participants to conserve the natural and cultural resources on they depended on.

This study discusses the key management issues of community based tourism such as government support, sustainable use of local resource, participation of stakeholders, fair benefit sharing, strengthening of local institutions, linkages with regional and national levels and training. African and Asian experiences in this area are highlighted and could be adapted to Malaysian conditions.

The linkage: community ecotourism and sustainable development: Misleading perception by many people toward nature and ecotourism can be widespread. Here, the differences between ecotourism and nature tourism are that, ecotourism applies about a set of values when compared to the activities of nature travel. It is a responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well being of local people^[1]. In other words, any ecotourism projects should provide widespread economic benefits as an incentives for participants and the means to conserve the resources on which income generation depends^[2]. In addition it shall be profitable, can sustain itself and able to improve the life of local people. Ecotourism involves goods and services to be purchased locally and support for home businesses. This is in line with the definition of sustainable tourism as leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems^[3].

Ecotourism if well planned and managed will be a sustainable tourism. Under ideal circumstances the entire focus of an ecotourism operation is one of ensuring sustainability^[4]. Ideally, ecotourism would ensure that the infrastructure and the activities of the tourists are planned to have low impact. All potential impacts are monitored and adjustments are made to the businesses in order to ensure that it operates within the carrying capacity of both the natural and cultural environments. It would ensure that local people are trained and employed and local materials and services are used. Income that is generated will support the protection of resources upon which the ecotourism operation is based. It would ensure that every visitor gained an insight into the natural resources and would encourage a sense of ownership or responsibility in the visitors, which they would take home^[4].

In most cases, ecotourism is driven by foreign ownership or private sector that does not contribute much to the community itself. Community involvement is only discussed in superficial terms but the primary goal is to make a profit by such commercial entities. Indeed, it caused displacement, increased costs, economic leakages, loss of access to resources and socio-cultural disruption among the locals. Thus, for sustainable tourism development to occur, four conditions must be met; a) local community member must participate in the planning and development process; b) education of the host population, development the industry and visitors must occur; c) the quality of wildlife habitat, use of energy and the micro-climate must be understood and respected; d) investment of alternative modes of transportation^[5]. Economic benefits will be accrued to the local community when local ownerships and their participation are at significant levels. A higher local ownership and entrepreneurial involvement will provide a greater sense of economic stability and a feeling of not being ignored by the venture.

Among other options, community-based ecotourism looks to be more appealing. If ecotourism initiatives may provide benefits to people, it must have initiatives aimed to increase local people's involvement in tourism industry^[6]. However, most of the time, managing people are more concerned with the environment. In a more focused scope, Sproule^[7] referred the community-based ecotourism as a classic community-based initiative where ecotourism enterprises are owned and managed by the community. Who emphasized that community-based ecotourism involves conservation, business enterprise and community development. In this situation a community is taking care of their natural resources in order to gain income through operating a tourism

enterprise and using that income to improve their lives. However, for conservation to take place, the benefits received by local must be fairly distributed to all resource users and effective enough to replace their direct income gained from the resources. In addition, the community must realize that the benefits are derived from their dependency on the resource base that should be managed sustainably. In this regard, the local institutions should be strengthened to increase their capacity for collective resource management.

Community-based ecotourism as a tool of sustainable development: Basic reasons for community developments are to provide communities with the necessary resources to enhance their livability, to protect their natural and cultural heritage and to provide economic opportunity. It promotes social development and environmental health to the community through sustainable economic growth. Even though, weaknesses of ecotourism in community development have cropped up, it however has shown prospects in promoting community growth than many other community's approaches. Hence, by facilitating the community themselves to own and operate ecotourism activities in their own homes through community-based initiatives, constraints arising from social discontent, unsustainable utilisation of resources and economic leakages and other related problems could be reduced. The key management issues to be addressed include government supports, sustainable use of local resources, participation of stakeholders in benefit sharing programs, strengthening of local institutions, linkages with regional and national levels, education and training.

Government support: A characteristic of community-based tourism is that it requires a multi institutional support structures in order to succeed and sustain^[8]. Since community based ecotourism is people oriented approach, working towards a fair benefit sharing and uplifting poverty will encourage the government and the community to conserve their natural and cultural resources. As a result it always have positive response from the government. Government agencies usually act as facilitator, coordinator or advisory agency to the local community by establishing local institutions and helping the institutions in term of human resources and capacity building.

The Trophy Hunting Project in Bar Valley, Pakistan, as an example capitalized on the popularity of hunting of Siberian Ibex (*Capra ibex sibirica*) in the area and possibilities of linking ecotourism based on sustainable hunting conservation and community development^[9]. The project runs by a management committee elected from

three villages of Bar Valley that comprise of five hunters and five non-hunters.

The project, although essentially a community based initiative, was supported technically and financially by WWF Pakistan, an NGO and government agency (Forest Department and Wildlife Department). The committee was given US\$ 150 per month to carry out protection duties and other conservation related activities. This provision will be stopped when the project generate income. WWF/Pakistan gives loan of US\$ 8000 for compensation to 240 families for the loss of the wild life meat and encourage them to change to other meat. With their support, the federal and local governments allow the local communities to share in the revenue collected from the natural resource conservation, provided they participate in its protection effort. The revenue generated from trophy hunting would have to go to the government (25%) and to local communities (75%). The local and federal ruling on banning all hunting activities was relaxed and trophy-hunting program was approved and permits were given for ibex hunting in the project area.

In another situation, The Forest Act of 1993 of His Majesty's Government of Nepal established Forest User Groups as independent organization to manage forest areas for their own use and benefits. This legislative provision is applied at The Baghmara Community Forest located in the buffer zone of Royal Chitwan National Park that was a degraded and overgrazed forest^[10]. After intensive rehabilitation process, the forest was officially handed over by the Government authority to the chairman of the Baghmara Community Forest User Group on 1995. The Committee consisted of 19 members with a minimum of three women members. The Baghmara FUG prepares its own operational plan to manage the community forest. The members of the community are allowed to take fuel wood, timbers, fodders and grass from the forest. The forest now housing rhinos, deer, tiger, jackal and several big mammals which are become tourist attractions. With an increased in tourism activities in the community forest, local economic activities flourished in the area supporting the tourism industry which creates job opportunities for the members of the community.

Participation of stakeholders: Community based ecotourism is used to describe a variety of activities that encourage support for a wide range of objectives in economic and social development of communities. In addition, the conservation of resources is also meant for protection for the betterment of the community livelihood^[2]. Community-based ecotourism and tourism in general is a diverse industry. This increases the scope for wider participation, including the participation of the

informal sector. Due to its direct and indirect relationship with other sectors, tourism contributes to 'internally generated development' by stimulating the establishment of other economic activities such as industries, services and so on.

Due to its nature, community-based ecotourism bring the customer to the product itself, providing considerable opportunities for contacts and linkages. Through contacts with the tourists, members learn new knowledge and experiences, which are quite impossible without tourism activities. Community members with entrepreneurship ability may establish business contacts through tour operators, agents or the tourist themselves in order to start a new business. While, having visitors at their front doors, tourism offer opportunities to the community member especially housewives to participate in the economic activities. It can be pursued through various means such as bed and breakfast, cultural show, souvenir selling, restaurants, general merchant etc at their own home. This vast scope of opportunities offer a higher proportion of tourism benefits go to women as compared to other modern sectors^[6]. As in the case of Taiwan Folk Village, from 470 full time job held by local residents, half the jobs are occupied by women^[11].

As service industry, tourism is a labour intensive and one of the major impacts of tourist development is job creation^[12]. When compared with many other industries, tourism requires employees with relatively low levels of jobs specialization, at least in the initial stage. Since most rural remote areas are characterized by high unemployment, it may be possible to absorb a large proportion of the under utilized work force from this traditional sectors of the economy with a minimum of training requirement. In the context of economic crisis, tourism activity is among the sectors that have best withstood the crisis^[13]. In Umphang community based eco-tourism project in Thailand during peak season, most local farmers act as tourist guides, punters, mahouts, mini-bus drivers, house keepers and cooks, providing additional and important family income^[11].

Study in three villages in Bromo-Tengger-Semeru, Indonesia, indicated that under certain conditions, community-based ecotourism can be directly and indirectly beneficial to people's economic, social and cultural welfare^[14]. It was found that the community with the most active tourism activities, Ngadisari, has remained the principal beneficiary of the direct economic impacts by retaining firm control over ownership of tourism services. This appears to be the key element in ensuring their prosperity. In this village, every single family interviewed was involved in tourism particularly by taking the visitors to the volcano on horses. The villagers owned two third

of 450 horses registered to take part in the tourism activities in addition to 70 jeeps and other businesses such as cafes, restaurants, mobile food-stalls, home stays and traditional dance. The villagers also using natural gas, kerosene or charcoal for source of energy instead of firewood used in other villages.

Fair benefit sharing: The indirect beneficiaries of ecotourism would be the wider community as recipients of community development projects funded by the tourism revenues. In Zambia for example, a Wildlife Conservation Revolving Fund was established to grant local chiefs 40% of the revenue earned from the sale of hunting licenses. This revenue can be used for community projects and has encouraged tribal leaders to become active in anti-poaching activities^[13]. In the case of Bromo-Tengger-Semeru, the Ngadisari village committee funded three young villagers annually to attend a tourism-training course^[14]. The Conservation Development Committee of Ghalekharka-Sikles Area, Nepal, spend 15% of the tourism revenue for nature conservation, 35% for repair and maintenance of tourism facilities and 50% for community development^[16]. In Karen village of Huay Hee of Mae Hong Son town in Thailand, the income from the home stay program, hosts and guides keep 80% of the money paid for their services, while 20% goes into a village fund (15% go to CBST Group Fund and 5% go to Village Fund). While the villagers of Koh Yao Noi in Phang-nga, Thailand, who welcomes about 100 tourists monthly contribute 10% of all the income generated from tourism to a village development fund. The money benefits those villagers in the community who are not involved in tourism^[17].

Sustainable use of local resource: Ecotourism is highly dependent upon natural capital (e.g. wildlife, scenery) and culture. These are assets that own and managed by all community members including the poor, individually or through communal properties, even if they have no financial resources. It creates awareness, self esteem and proud among the community as a whole, as its resources are increasing in value, priceless and become the sole reasons for the visitors to visit their village. This may trigger motivation to the community members to be more responsible and caring towards their resources.

The Trophy Hunting Project at Bar Valley was successfully implemented due to the cooperation of the 41 local hunters who support the program. The community imposed internal system of social punishment to any poachers that violates the rules. Throughout the projects there were only two cases of wildlife poaching took place. In the beginning of 1990 there were 500 animals but the

number grew to more than the earlier count in 1994 and to 900 two years later. The number of animal permitted to be hunted had increased from 5 in 1994 to 60 animals in 1996. The fee for a hunting license is US\$3,000 for international hunter and US\$850 for Pakistani. Due to the success WWF Pakistan received several requests from communities in other valley to assist in setting up similar project in their area^[9].

The Baghmara Community Forest FUG has spent money on habitat management and has hired forest guards for protection activities. They also plan to reduce the threat to the forest from fodder and grazing activities through improved breeding, creation of grazing areas and encouragement of feedlot husbandry and livestock insurance scheme. This unique insurance scheme involves compensation paid to livestock owner if the death of the livestock happened in the farm and not in the forest. The project committee also conducted special workshops for school children, teachers and other interested group on environmental awareness.

The island of Calautit, Philippines, was proclaimed as Game Reserve and Wildlife Sanctuary managed by Multipurpose Cooperative. This cooperative formed and managed by former employees of an NGO when the contract with the Government to manage the area was expired. The Government agreed to hand over the management to the cooperative through co-management approach. The members of the cooperative were mostly the residents of adjoining islands. They handle the operation of the sanctuary, developing short term and long-term plan as well as ecotourism activities. With inclusion of fishermen and boat operators as members of the cooperative, poaching and illegal activities done by residents of adjacent island has been reduced dramatically which finally improved the population and the habitat of flora and fauna in the island^[18].

Strengthening of local institutions: The first step in initiating tourism enterprises among rural communities is the most difficult institutional arrangement. It involves establishing a management committee run by members of the community. Its primary purpose is to manage the relationships between residents, resources and visitors. All matters pertaining to the community, its needs and its development will pass through this institution. In addition, it protects the interest of the community and direct operations and actions on its behalf. It is important that the performance of the institutional players be well regulated and accountable to prevent the misappropriation of benefits. It is best if the institution lead by a strong leadership acceptable by all members of the community^[8]. Capacity building of local communities

is carried out through training and individual development in work related skills (technical, managerial, communication), entrepreneurial experience (business, financial) and organizational experience (leadership and accountability). Institutional strengthening may take place in the form of forums, trusts and management committees. Success stories of community based tourism process for strengthening the local institutions have been demonstrated at Bar Valley, Baghmara Community Forest and Calauit Game Reserve and Wildlife Sanctuary.

Linkages with regional and national levels: Linkages between local entrepreneur with regional, national and even international are the most important platform for long-term success of community based ecotourism businesses in a given destination. Together with the initial capital investment, foreign (not necessarily overseas) companies bring with them the advantage of operational expertise, market contacts and the 'image'. The combinations of these factors provide the input to the tourism sector which is unlikely to be available from the local community. The local community usually lack of the ability to link directly to the national and international markets which become the main reason why the benefits of ecotourism do not dissipate down to the community level. The middlemen whom are able to coordinate the ecotourism activities between the community and the tourists stand greatly to gain economically^[19]. Therefore, a genuine partnership between local community and the middlemen or the tour operators is a vital component for a successful community based ecotourism project.

An example of success story is the case study in South Africa put forward by Ashley *et al.*^[6]. The Wilderness Safaris, Maputaland, South Africa, a large, well-established Southern African tour operator that involved in some form of partnership or revenue sharing agreement with local communities to develop up-market tourist lodges. The Wilderness Safaris is also supporting local employment, local service provision and the development of complementary community-based initiatives. However, one of the challenge for this sort of partnership is that many communities have overly high expectations of involvement in tourism-both in terms of the levels and rates of returns and also the roles and responsibilities of their private sector partners^[6].

Proposition for Malaysian community-based tourism: There are many success stories about Malaysian ecotourism industries, but the overall picture seems to be lack of flavor if we relate to community involvements. Local participation has been limited to implementation of projects rather than the whole process of development.

Abas and Norazirah^[20], Sanggin and Jihen^[21] assert that locals have only benefited economically through low-skill and low wage jobs. Among other findings the studies have indicated that:

- A few local entrepreneurs involved in establishment of small business tourism related.
- Major constraints may associated with lack of knowledge, expertise and financial capability
- Yet, the involvement by the locals look more promising in future

Presently, the participation of the local people is generally confined to river transportations, low skilled jobs and undemanding services. In addition, they are mainly made to providing cultural demonstrations and performances as well as making and/or selling handicrafts. Baharom^[22] highlighted that this phenomena can be seen in Taman Negara National Park. It is also occurred in villages nearby Gunung Mulu National Park^[23]. Many entrepreneurs started the business activities on their own and later were left on their own to survive. The local seemed to receive little government support or doesn't show direction. There is lack of initiatives to encourage community wide in sharing the benefits, lack of support for and strengthening of local institutions, no linkages with regional and national levels and no across the board of training and effort to increase business knowledge among the locals.

The proposition is that the government has to encourage local communities to develop together their tourism business enterprise. Establishing a committee to head and monitor business operation, if possible day-to-day activities could do this. The committee will come up with its own business plan and strategy to be undertaken without much intervention. They will also decide what types of training that are required with help from government related agencies. The community itself is encourage to form their own conservation association to inculcate awareness among their members as well as conducting their own preservation and conservation program. Funds should be set up and finances or loan to be obtained from banks or big corporations with government help. Areas that are potential include the local communities of the places mentioned earlier including Kuala Tahan and Merapoh in Taman Negara and villages in Gunung Mulu National Park, Kampung Kuantan in Kuala Selangor, Pantai Aceh near Penang National Park and many other places near national or state parks.

Another proposition is by establishing honest partnership with more experienced private sector, which

would provide a new challenge to the local community in managing their resources in a more competitive environment. In this partnership private sector will bring in the tourists while the community manage their own facilities and activities. The community will determine the price of the visit whereby the private sector will take charge from the point of origin of the tourists to the community. In this case however a sincere and good partnership should be the basis of such endeavor in order for it to be successful.

Community-based ecotourism concept in developing countries is relatively new and experiences are still emerging. The potential is that it has the capacity for using resources of domestic origin; particularly resources that cannot be used for economic development and at the same time need protection. Therefore, it can generate development, which in principle is less risk of dependence and protection than most industrial production.

Within the context of sustainable development, this type of initiative generally can be used as a tool in promoting the economic development of a community and easily accepted by government agencies. In addition, community-based ecotourism is able to increase local economic activities, wider benefit sharing, more sustainable use of resources and helps to strengthen local institutions. Establishing partnership with more experienced private sectors give a new challenge to the local community in managing their resources in amore competitive environment.

In Malaysia the proposition is that operational institutional arrangement in relation to ecotourism *in situ* should be develop by the community to run ecotourism enterprise. It is important that people should share the benefits accrued from the enterprise through village development and conservation fund. The government role is to ensure that this proposition worked through leading the community by instituting arrangement between the community members or between the community and the private sectors as well as providing training related to ecotourism business.

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