

## Ecotourism, Foreign Tourist Perception, and National Parks: The Case in Northeast Langkawi

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**ABSTRACT** Scientists from the University of Malaya have suggested that the northeast of Langkawi be declared as a national park by virtue of its great diversity. This paper argues that this suggestion is strengthened by adopting a dual approach of nature conservation and ecotourism. Some issues of ecotourism as it pertains to Northeast Langkawi are discussed. An analysis of tourist characteristics and perceptions shows a strong potential for ecotourism through the labelling of Northeast Langkawi as a national park.

**ABSTRAK** Ahli-ahli sains dari Universiti Malaya telah mencadangkan supaya Langkawi timur-laut diisytiharkan sebagai taman negara oleh kerana biodiversitinya. Kertas ini menyokong cadangan ini dan menyarankan bahawa pendekatan dualistik tentang pemeliharaan alam semulajadi dan pelancongan-eko harus diperhatikan. Isu-isu pelancongan-eko mengenai Langkawi timur-laut dibincangkan dan analisis ciri-ciri dan persepsi pelancong asing menunjukkan bahawa potensi untuk membangunkan pelancongan-eko adalah bertambah baik jika Langkawi timur-laut diisytiharkan sebagai taman Negara.

(ecotourism, tourist perception, national parks, foreign tourists, Langkawi)

### INTRODUCTION

Scientists from the natural sciences in the University of Malaya have put forward their case for the necessity and urgency of gazetting the northeast of Langkawi as a national park by virtue of its great biodiversity. In that light, this paper presents the argument that the conservation of biodiversity through the gazetting of a national park status is further enhanced when the issue of ecotourism is considered. This twin pronged approach - nature conservation and ecotourism - can help to finance the park and at the same time provide alternative sources of income for the local population through their involvement in the tourist sector. The delicate balance of a controlled form of ecotourism that will sustain its authenticity would be the subject of other expertise. So also would be the economic and environmental impact of such conservation cum ecotourism on the island as a whole on domestic visitors and on the local populace [1]. For instance, when an area is gazetted as a conservation area, entrance fees may be charged which may be too exorbitant for the local tourist. Will this make the area less accessible to the

locals? This paper, however, intends to look from the perspective of the foreign tourists as to how they perceive Langkawi and their habitus (what they do) during their visits to Langkawi. It is important to accept that the perspective from without is an important component of the tourist industry of the country. It is only when the needs and ideas of the foreign tourists are considered will they feel more ontologically secure. Trying to develop our tourism potential without giving due cognizance to the consumers' demands is like trying to market a product without any market survey.

The objective of the present paper is best illustrated in an interesting "conflict triangle" scenario presented by Backhaus (n.d.) whereby a conservation area can be understood as an arena where different people with different needs and desires interact. The consequences of such differences are inevitable conflicts which are often the result of unintended consequences of actions. There are, first of all, the regulatory demands of nature conservation which may restrict complete freedom of, on the one hand, the tourists, tour operators, and tour agents, and on

the other hand, the local population's actions and activities (removing plants and littering, etc.). Secondly, there is the local population who may be opened to more opportunities for involvement in the tourism sector either as tour operators, guides, or in the park management (even though they may not have the skills). Thirdly, there is the tourists themselves (both domestic and foreign) which may have expectations and demands that may stress the conservation areas and the locals. This paper takes a look at this third factor – the foreign input towards the conflict triangle.

### **Tourism in Malaysia**

In 1999, tourist arrivals to Malaysia were 9.93 million but in 2002, there were 13.29 million foreign contributing about RM25.2 billion tourist receipts [2]. In 2004, though not immediately confirmed, the figure would have surpassed 13.3 million visitors with about RM30 billion incomes to the nation. In fact, the whole travel and tourism sector contributes some 10 per cent to the country's GDP.

While these figures look impressive, in reality the tourism industry in Malaysia suffers from several serious shortcomings. Firstly, the tourist industry is too dependent upon the neighbouring markets of Singapore, Thailand and Indonesia. These three countries alone constituted 70.6 per cent of the total number of tourist arrivals in 2002. Secondly, in terms of average spending per visitor, the value is only RM1,880 compared to RM4,300, RM2,800, and RM3,115 in Indonesia, Thailand and Singapore respectively. The main reason for Malaysia to lack behind in terms of average spending is the shorter average length of stay of the tourists whose expressed purposes were essentially to have a short holiday, do some shopping or sightseeing. Viewed in this light, it is suggested that if Malaysia can expand its ecotourism component, the average length of stay would be extended as ecotourism would require extended trips. Not only that ecotourism tours are also more attractive to tourists from Australian and Europe which are relatively higher-yield countries.

### **Tourism and ecotourism in Langkawi**

In Langkawi, tourist arrivals have increased from 0.8 million in 1998 to 1.3 million in 2001 and 1.9 million in 2004 with almost half of these being foreign tourists. With an estimated maximum carrying capacity of 4.9 million tourists, the level of tourism in Langkawi is still rather low. Hotel

occupancy rate in Langkawi in 2002 averaged about 49.5 per cent (Kedah Maju 2010, n.d.). What do tourists do in Langkawi? Is there a role for ecotourism in Langkawi since ecotourism has been labelled as the best selling tourist sector in Malaysia? In fact, about 35 per cent of visitors from developed countries come to Malaysia because of its ecotourist attractions. It is almost impossible to agree on a definitive meaning of ecotourism. Everybody talks about ecotourism but nobody seems to know exactly what ecotourism is and everybody seem to have their own definition or notion of what ecotourism is all about. Probably having its roots in "ecological tourism" (hence eco-tourism), the term has become the "in" word since the early 1990s, and widely used by tourists and the tourist industry without any clear definition. Nonetheless, while difficult to be precise, every one knows that it has something to do with visiting relatively undisturbed natural areas, which subsequently needs to be conserved to remain pristine or authentic. In short, it is nature-based tourism. It should not be assumed in any case that ecotourism does not harm the environment. Sometimes, ecotourism can cause more harm than good to the overall biodiversity and especially to the nature and way of life of the local and indigenous peoples if ecotourism is not well managed. Thus, it is important that ecotourism should not exceed its carrying capacity in order to minimise its negative impacts [11]. So what does Langkawi has to offer foreign tourists?

The Langkawi Islands comprise a group of 104 tropical islands out of which only 3 are inhabited. Tourist attractions in Langkawi may be divided into several main categories:

- i) eco-tourism, where tourists can go up to the hills of Machincang and Gunung Raya, or trek into the mangrove swamps of Sg. Kilim, or make expeditions to the surrounding caves and islands,
- ii) recreational activities such as sailing, yachting, snorkelling, scuba diving, coastal trekking, parasailing, water skiing, and canoeing,
- iii) relaxational holidays in the resorts and chalets along the beaches of Cenang, Tengah, and Datai,
- iv) agro-based tourism such as visits to kampongs, fruit orchards, padi fields, etc.
- v) marina tourism in Pulau Rebak Besar,
- vi) the pull of the mythical legends such as that of Mahsuri in Ulu Melaka,
- vii) man-made attractions such as Underwater World, cable car, bird paradise, Taman Buaya,

Galleria Perdana, snake sanctuary, and the Summer Palace, viii) tourist events such as air shows and sporting events. It is obvious that the lure of Langkawi has been dominated by the cultural, mythical and man-made attractions rather than the pull of nature and geology at least to many of the domestic tourists [3]. The ecotourism part of tourism has yet to be fully developed. The authorities recognise this in their Local Plans [4]: "the potential of natural resources in Langkawi District is capable of fulfilling the needs and demands for ecotourism of international standards". However, even when they are nature-related, the attractions in Langkawi are largely "easy and casual" to borrow concepts of "hard" and "soft" tourism from Backhaus (n.d.). This refers to nature-based tourism where the tourists may just get into a boat and see the eagles being fed. There is little commitment and dedication demanded unlike an arduous trek through the mangroves. Undeniably, this type of tourist activity attracts a larger number of tourists. It is also assumed that eco-tourism would be more attractive to foreigners rather than locals because ecotourism tends to be more expensive. In any case, how many locals would pay to see the mangrove swamps? Thus, this paper intends to capture the characteristics of foreign visitors and how they perceive and behave (the things they do) during their stay in Langkawi.

## PRESENT RESEARCH

### Profile of foreign respondents

The focus of the present study is on the foreign tourists' perception of the places they have visited in Langkawi especially with regards to ecotourism in the northeast. The objective is to use the eyes of the foreign travellers to help build the case for the development of Northeast Langkawi as a national park. Although the purpose of a national park may be specifically to allow the preservation of species, biodiversity and interesting natural landmarks, it is also obvious that such a declaration would allow increasing tourism and recreational facilities to be made available and sustained for future generations to come. It is also obvious that as the country and the world becomes more and more globalised with its pressurised demands on people's time, people would want to see and feel pristine, unpolluted and authentic environments. To what extent is Langkawi able to provide that pristine, unpolluted, and authentic environment?

A questionnaire survey was conducted over a total of three-week duration in June and July 2004. The interviews were conducted at the Langkawi International Airport Departure Lounge where passengers were waiting to board their planes. All respondents were thus interviewed after their stay in Langkawi rather than at the beginning or during their stay. Altogether 125 "respondent groups" were identified – whether single, couples, families, or friends travelling together and the interviews were conducted with one of them acting as a representative. It is assumed that responses reflected the collective opinions rather than that of a single individual in the groups concerned. Effectively, the survey would have covered over 320 individuals. In terms of countries of origin, 48 were from countries in Europe, 25 from Asia (China, Japan, and India), 15 from Australasia, 2 from USA and Canada, 28 from Singapore, 6 from the Middle East and one from South Africa. The largest group of foreign visitors from a single country came from the United Kingdom. It is also interesting to note the relatively large numbers coming from Asian and the Middle Eastern countries. In the light of the fact that China, Japan and India are featuring fairly strongly in the tourist faces to Langkawi, one wonders whether the Malaysian tourist tagline "Truly Asia" may be really relevant in the case of Langkawi! Males dominated the respondents with 80 per cent. The largest age group was between 31-40 years of age (35.2 per cent) followed by the 21-30 age group (26.4 per cent). Those above 50 years of age constituted about 21.6 per cent. So it is interesting to note that the bulk of the tourists are not "retirees" but rather those with strength and vigour that would look favourably towards ecotourism whereas the older group prefers to just lie down and relax in the hotel beaches.

About 80.6 per cent of the respondents were first time visitors to Langkawi who had come to "relax" themselves (21 per cent), to experience the "unspoilt environment" (19 per cent) and "to enjoy the beaches" (18 per cent). As for the 19.4 per cent who were "returned" visitors (those who have been to Langkawi before), 62.5 per cent of them came for the same purposes of relaxation, the beaches and the unspoilt environment. Only 3.2 per cent were business-related return trips. If foreign tourists want a "holiday" or a place to relax, it is obvious that they could have their

holidays anywhere else. So another question asked is why they choose Langkawi out of so many alternative locations around the Andaman areas (Phuket, Penang, etc). The reasons, though varied, point to Langkawi as one of the more favoured destinations: Langkawi has good sailing and diving opportunities, beautiful beaches that are not too crowded (in Cenang and Datai), a holiday destination near to Singapore or en route to Australia and New Zealand. In terms of duration of stay, the bulk of the visitors had stayed 3 to 5 days (60.2 per cent). Only 14.6 per cent had stayed more than one week. The average length of stay is 5.05 days. Many literature on types of tourists concentrate on whether tourists are individual tourists who are also known as the "non-institutionalised travellers" or group tourists (Backhaus n.d.). However, in Langkawi, neither of these predominates. This may be due, perhaps to the methodology of the present study which may fail to capture individual backpackers who are more likely to use the ferry crossing, or group travellers who are more likely to have very late plane departure times. Notwithstanding this, it appears that families coming for a holiday are the norm with about 72.8 per cent recording as couples or nuclear families. Only 2.4 per cent came in tour groups. The backpackers or individual travellers constituted 21 per cent. This must also be seen in the light of an unwritten policy of not encouraging backpackers who stay in chalets as compared to the decently-dressed family tourists, 88 per cent of whom in this study stayed in 5- star hotels. The dominance of family type vacation implies that the nature of tourism demands in Langkawi should be more of the flexible but customised sort rather than the standardised mass package tours that prevail, for example, in Kuala Lumpur.

#### **Tourist behaviour**

While much can be deduced from the profile of the tourists, tourist behaviour that is the things they do and the perception of their experience while on holiday presents a much more interesting insight. Although Malaysia is one of the few mega diversity countries in the world [5], yet it should not be assumed that visitors come to Malaysia largely for ecotourism purposes [12]. In fact, it is often difficult to identify ecotourists because ecotourists do not differ considerably from other tourists at first sight. Even those who participate in ecotourist activities may not perceive themselves as ecotourists. Nevertheless, when asked if they would be interested in eco-

tours, 51 per cent said "yes". In reality, only 40.8 per cent of the total responses had actually visited the northeast of Langkawi, including some 10 per cent who were actually staying in the resorts in Tanjong Rhu. In other words, visitors to Langkawi came for other non-eco reasons. In fact, the impression appears to be that if visitors were really interested in ecotourism, they would have headed for other places in Malaysia like Mulu Caves, Mount Kinabalu, and Taman Negara. This argues that unless the northeast of Langkawi has an official label as a national park few ecotourists would ever venture to Langkawi for that purpose. This calls for more proactive measures if the objective of promoting ecotourism is to be achieved as envisaged in the Kedah Maju Master Plan in designating Langkawi as the Western tourist corridor of Kedah [6] and the Local Plan [4]. Not responding to the rising global demand for nature-based tourism does not seem to be logical given the increasing leisure, increasing awareness of the fragility of the ecosystem, and an increasing demand for outdoor activities such as walking, nature study, fishing or wild life observation. This is not to mention that ecotourists come from developed countries that are considered as high-value countries.

Detailed probing into those who ventured into the northeast (51 response groups) revealed that only about a quarter of them had participated in organised trips to the mangrove swamps involving eagle feeding and visits to the fish farms. These organised trips; on one hand, are easy and casual and less demanding of their time and efforts. On the other hand, the northeast can also provide the more difficult and dedicated activities that require high levels of physical exertion, time or specialised skills. Interestingly, each of these activities such as canoeing, bird watching, fishing, cave expedition, and mangrove trekking attracted only a small number of the visitors. How have foreign tourists perceive their visits?

Theoretically, perceptions should be viewed as valid social constructions of a tourist region, that is, tourist areas are not merely spatial constructs (Backhaus n.d.). If that is so, then it is pertinent to view perceptions in two possible perspectives: a) how are tourist areas seen in the context of maintenance and sustainability? b) whether their ontological experiences have been positive or negative. Ontology refers to their

wellbeing, security or comfort of their visits to the tourist areas. This is important especially in the case of Langkawi where the bulk of the tourists had come because they were informed by others of Langkawi. In other words, recommendations and word of mouth has been a strong basis for tourists coming to Langkawi. In fact, the largest proportion of visitors came to Langkawi because they heard from friends (36 per cent). Tour agents and the mass media contributed only some 20 and 18 per cent respectively.

#### **Perception of maintenance of tourist areas**

Although the researcher had hoped that foreign visitors would be able to give honest opinions of the cleanliness of the places they visited and whether such areas have been exploited without due regard to the question of sustainability, it appears that most visitors are rather tactful. More than half of those who had visited the northeast chose to remain "neutral". It is likely that most of the tourists in any case neither have very little idea nor are even interested about sustainability because their main objective is to just come and enjoy themselves. Among those who ventured their opinions, about three-quarters felt that the swamps, islands, beaches, caves and river channels in the northeast were either "clean" or "very clean" as opposed to 19.1 per cent who thought that these places were either "dirty" or "very dirty." As to whom they thought had polluted the environment, the "locals" topped the list (40 per cent), "other tourists" (36 per cent) and "boat operators" (24 per cent). The most common type of environmental pollution is the presence of plastic bottles, plastic bags, styrofoam, and other non-biodegradable materials.

How have they perceived the environment in Langkawi in general? Again, while more than half the respondents did not respond to this question, opinions were equally divided between those who thought that the environment in Langkawi as a whole was fairly "well maintained" and those who felt that the island had been spoilt by pollution from taxis and quarrying activities and the construction of too many hotels [10]. Is there value for money to holiday in Langkawi? A vast majority of 89 per cent of the foreign visitors think that there is value for money. Only 7 per cent felt that it was not worth visiting Langkawi, half of these were expectedly Singaporeans who were probably

comparing Langkawi with super sanitised Singapore. Viewed in another way, it may be asked whether there is quality and standards in our tourist products in Langkawi. How can quality and standards be ensured? Foreign visitors are of the opinion that the current lack of rules is giving liberty to the tourist groups, the tour operators, and the local community to litter the environment. The gazetting of a national park will ensure that such rules will be applied (assuming there are no problems of enforcement). As to whether the tourist areas of Langkawi are over-commercialised, 71 per cent felt that the current level is acceptable by comparison with other destinations in Southeast Asia, making Langkawi an ideal place for relaxation.

#### **Ontological experience**

Viewed in terms of ontological perspectives, it is important that foreign tourists should feel secure and comfortable and know that they have not been fleeced, or deceived as to what is to be expected. However, there may arise so-called "critical situations" when a tourist will feel ontologically threatened even when he stays in the hotel premises only (there are quite a number of such "in situ" tourists in Langkawi). For instance, a tourist may feel let down when he is given a room with a "marred" vista (for example, when allocated a hill view) rather than one with a good "mar" (sea) vista! It can also happen when the tourist expects a clean beach only to find a littered beach. A German tourist expressed his strong disappointment with the waters off Langkawi which was not as clean as what he saw in the brochure. When a tourist ventures out of the hotel on his own, he may be cheated by the unreasonable taxi charges (even the mere suspicion of being cheated is bad enough), or he may be unable to find his way to the right destination because of poor signage and unreliable information. These critical situations are minimised in package-organised tours which are highly predictable, efficient, calculable, and controlled trips that provide much ontological security to tourists even in untravelled paths. However, over packaging of ecotours may make the trips little more than mechanised affairs and do not allow the tourist to savour the naturalness of the environment at his own pace and likes.

About 92 per cent of the respondents are satisfied with their visits to Langkawi. Despite this, it is felt that there is not enough proactive action to protect the ontology of the foreign tourists for

several reasons. About 7 per cent felt cheated by the fares they had to pay for internal transportation via taxis aside from the fact that some rented vehicles were not up to par in terms of safety and maintenance. Boat operators who are normally local kampong folk have difficulties conversing in another language. Some 17.7 per cent were not happy with their tour guides for the reason that they were not able to add to a greater appreciation of the environment. For those who did not depend on tour guides, about one third felt that there is a lack of information and signage in crucial destination areas. It needs to be realised that clear and reliable information is necessary for the tourists to optimise their already limited length of stay and to prevent unnecessary loss of time looking for directions. In terms of the ease of access to the various destinations in Langkawi, 83.6 per cent said that travelling around Langkawi is not a problem because roads are good and hotels are able to arrange for their transport needs. Perhaps, one of the more appropriate indicators of their ontological security is whether they would return to Langkawi in future. More than 80 per cent indicated that they would return again to Langkawi.

### CONCLUSION

Given that Malaysia has more than 50 national parks [7], is it still pertinent to label northeast Langkawi as a nature park? The main objective of labelling a place as a nature park the world over is obvious. The label serves as a guarantee of an unspoilt, pristine environment and, therefore, provides authentic experiences [7]. Authenticity is defined as "anything that is not devised and structured to make a profit" [8, 9]. This will attract nature lovers. However, ecotourism is not the crowd puller in Langkawi. Only half of the visitors are interested in ecotourism in this study and only 40 per cent had visited the northeast. Yet, ironically, for almost 56 per cent of the visitors to Langkawi, the most memorable event or experience was linked to nature of one kind or another. In fact, more than three quarters of the tourists are of the opinion that Langkawi has not lost its pristine nature and is still very authentic. This augurs well for ecotourism in Langkawi and points to the urgent necessity for a national park status in order to protect the authenticity especially of the northeast with its caves, beaches, river systems, and mangroves. But until the biodiversity is preserved

through a national park status, much of the naturalness may be lost through uncontrolled tourism. The added advantage of such a declaration for a national park in Northeast Langkawi is that Langkawi is much more accessible than other areas in Malaysia and has direct flights with London, for instance.

To reiterate, more than 55 per cent of the tourists came simply because Langkawi offers a yet unspoilt environment suitable for relaxation. While "relaxation" shall continue to be a main theme for holidaying in Langkawi, it is now appropriate to constructively add another dimension of ecotourism. The Local Plans are well aware of this and mentions the importance of establishing "certain bird-watching areas" and the need for "interpretation centres" whatever that means [4]. Further, the authorities will take steps to ensure that eagle feeding activities do not endanger the birds, to maintain caves, and to ensure that the carrying capacity of ecotourism areas is not exceeded. These statements of intention, however, fall substantially short of the concept of a national park. For instance, whereas the management of the mangroves should follow the National Ecotourism Guidelines, who is there to actively monitor such things unless the northeast is gazetted as a national park? At the moment, although ecotours in Langkawi are not the exploitive type that damages the environment, there is no motivation either to contribute to the health of the environment. Just ensuring minimal damage to the host environment is but a passive approach towards ecotourism development. In short, the ecotourism dimension has not been fully explored and ecotourism will not be generative until and unless the national park label is applied to Northeast Langkawi.

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