

Forest Management for Eco-tourism: Understanding the Community Perspective of Co-Management.

Pengurusan Hutan untuk Ekopelancongan: Memahami Perspektif Masyarakat bagi Pengurusan Bersama.

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ABSTRACT

Forest management for eco-tourism needs to emphasis on the participation of the community to ensure that eco-tourism products remain sustainable. Without active involvement by the community, eco-tourism products face the risk of being destroyed by the ravages of overzealous economic development activities. Of paramount importance is the need for a balance of economic development and sustainable forest management. The forest inhabitants and the community need to be in symbiotic relations in order to survive in the forest. This study seeks to understand the community perspectives in co-managing the eco-tourism forest in RBFSP. For that reason, three community representatives, including two Penghulu and a Tok Batin were interviewed to seek their perspectives on co-management. The results, in a nutshell, indicate that the community is not ready for co-management.

Keywords: Forest management; community participation; eco-tourism; co-management.

ABSTRAK

Pengurusan hutan bagi kawasan eko-pelancongan perlu lebih menekankan kepada penglibatan komuniti di dalam memastikan kelestarian produk eko-pelancongan. Tanpa penglibatan pihak komuniti, produk eko-pelancongan diancam kemusnahan dari kerakusan program pembangunan ekonomi. Amatlah penting kewujudan pembangunan ekonomi yang diimbangi oleh pengurusan hutan yang lestari. Khazanah hutan dan komuniti perlu berada di dalam hubungan simbiotik bagi memastikan kelangsungan jangka hayatnya. Oleh itu, kajian ini telah dijalankan bagi mengetahui perspektif pihak komuniti terhadap pengurusan bersama di kawasan eko-pelancongan RBFSP. Bagi tujuan tersebut, tiga pihak wakil penduduk termasuk dua Penghulu dan satu Tok Batin telah ditemu bual bagi mengetahui pandangan mereka tentang perkara tersebut. Hasil kajian menunjukkan ketiga-tiga wakil penduduk kurang bersedia dengan pengurusan bersama.

Kata kunci: Pengurusan hutan; penyertaan masyarakat; ekopelancongan; rakan pengurusan.

INTRODUCTION

In the management of eco-tourism forest, it has been found that community has little involvement in the development, enforcement and conservation of the forests. Mohd Kher et al. (2013) found that non-participation of the local community resulted in the failure of several recreational forest areas. In cases where the management of recreational forests was handed over to private organisations or State Government agencies, the pursuit of profit became the motivating factor, deviating from its original objective, which is to increase the awareness of the public towards the importance of forest and the sustainable environment (Mohd Kher et al. 2013).

The problem of poor management and maintenance of tourist facilities at eco-tourism spots continue to be a regular feature. The management takes a long time to fix facilities which need

repairing. This was highlighted in the Auditor General's Report (2014), based on audit conducted for the months of January until March 2015 for Hutan Lipur Teluk Bahang (HLTB), Hutan Lipur Bukit Mertajam (HLBM) and Taman Negeri Bukit Panchor (TNBP) in Pulau Pinang. Among the problems noted by the Auditor General include:

1. Unused facilities
2. Missing signage
3. Failure to carry out scheduled maintenance
4. Non-existent park ranger services
5. The existing infrastructure for flora and fauna is not utilised

This situation will remain until additional funding is made available. According to the Auditor General's Report for Hutan Lipur Teluk Bahang (2014), weaknesses in planning and the slow progress of the privatisation project has resulted in

the infrastructure that was completed eight years ago, abandoned. Lack of funds is among the main reasons for many eco-tourism products being neglected and poorly maintained. Several other factors have led to the poor management of tourism in Malaysia. Among them, the attitude of government servants working in ‘silos’ (Hezri 2011).

Three other factors are the overlapping power among the government agencies, the conflicting revenue and policy mechanisms between State and Federal Governments (Amran 2004). Although, comprehensive development plans exist at the federal level, their implementation is still dependable on whether the state governments agree.

The state governments or in this case the local governments, are responsible for maintaining and beautifying the areas under their respective jurisdictions. The dogging problem remains the issue of funding because maintaining forests for eco-tourism requires high allocation. The returns from tourism activities go straight to the federal government, as against the proceeds from logging activity which has been the state governments’ main revenue (Amran 2004).

All these conflicts and contradictions have resulted in many weaknesses such as management flaws, lack of participation by the local community and the poor relationships between stakeholders. Therefore, it is important that a co-management structure in support of the stakeholders is created.

A co-management structure will reduce the problem of parties working in silos. Hezri (2011) believes that strong strategic alliance can help break the silos. The ‘Silo’ mentality occurs when a government agency protects its jurisdiction and refuses to go beyond it. The agencies refuse to assist other agencies overcome their problems. There are many problems in eco-tourism forest areas, including encroachment by illegal immigrants, poaching, polluted lakes as a result of illegal farming and logging.

In this situation, it is obvious that the government alone cannot shoulder this burden. This is where co-management involving all stakeholders in their respective areas, play a role in managing and protecting their forests. The local community can play a more active role to protect their forests which they depend on for their livelihood. Therefore, this research emphasises on the need to involve all the local community in protecting and maintaining the forest resources and facilities. The local community should be given more opportunities to participate in eco-tourism management activities.

In the RBFSP for example, the Rafflesia is a main tourist product. To a majority of foreign visitors to the area, the Rafflesia is the most important attraction. Locals, however, feel the waterfalls are the main attraction. In situations like this, it is important that stakeholders, especially the local community are engaged. In fact, the need to engage the local community in ensuring the sustainability of eco-tourism destinations was emphasised in national development plans like the 8th Malaysia Plan to the 10th Malaysia Plan. In this context, the sustainability of the local community should also be protected. If the community is lost, so will the natural resources.

Therefore, the main focus of this study is the perspective of the community towards co-management. Martin & Mc Cool (1992) and Tourism Concern (1992) held the view that the pre-requisite of sustainable tourism is the participation of the local community.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts the case study survey approach. Data was collected through questionnaires distributed to 26 different stakeholders who manage and directly involved with RBFSP (Table 1). They include local authorities, tourism service providers and the local residents. However, for this research only data from 3 local community representatives will be analysed and discussed.

The questionnaire was formulated based on the responsibilities of each stakeholder and the guidelines of eco-tourism management practices issued in 2002 by the ‘World Tourism Organization (WTO)’ and ‘the United Nations Environment Programme’. The stakeholders were also interviewed to gauge a deeper perspective on co-management. The local community was represented by two Penghulu Kampong and a Tok Batin for the purpose of this interview. This was done to collect data on co-management in the eco-tourism area of RBFSP, especially on current issues and crises faced by the stakeholders in the area.

COLLECTION OF DATA

The duration for the collection of data in RBFSP was between March 2011 and August 2012. This is mainly because monsoon season is between September and February. Due to water control measures at the Temenggor Lake dam during the monsoon, there will be frequent floods.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

TABLE 1. Stake Holders at RBFSP

Respondents	No	Percentage (%)
Tourist Guides at RBFR	2	7.7
Environmental Tourist Guides (with badge)	1	3.8
Boat Operators	2	7.7
Accommodation (chalets, motels, hotels, resorts, apartments bed & breakfast)	2	7.7
Restaurants	2	7.7
Management of State Park Corporation	2	7.7
Enforcement authorities/ Government Departments and agencies	12	46.2
Penghulu /Tok Batin	3	11.5
NGOs	1	7.7
Others (TNB)	1	7.7
Total	26	100

The following conclusion was drawn from the interview with the local community, two Penghulu and a Tok Batin.

TABLE 2. Community Perspectives on co-Management at Planning Stage and Implementation

Development Planning Stage:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lack of involvement by local residents at the planning stage 2. Opportunities in agriculture and fisheries activities are instructions and not the community's own initiative. 3. Unsuitable communication methods. Information does not reach the community. 4. The views of all parties should be taken into consideration. Briefing sessions for Penghulus should also be held so that accurate information on all activities could be disseminated effectively to the residents.
Implementation Stage:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Co-ordinations problems between State and Federal Government authorities. 2. Absence of a District Tourism Office to plan development programmes beneficial to the local community. 3. The Penghulus office is not used as a channel to disseminate information to the community. 4. The District office should be more proactive in creating awareness about eco-tourism and how the community can participate in it. 5. The residents' committees are not included at the implementation stage of development projects. 6. Training programmes are not done on a continuous basis.
The Effects:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lack of community participation. 2. Lack of confidence in tourism as a means to help boost the income of residents.
Recommendation:	The residents' committee should have a channel to express their views on projects at their development and implementation stages.

DISCUSSION

The data indicates that the local community is not agreeable to the idea of co-management because they do not have sufficient information. Information is not channelled through the village chief. Residents obtain information from other parties or as instructions which they need to carry out without prior discussion.

According to Sen & Nielsen (1996) and Pomeroy (2001), co-management takes place in five different categories, namely instructions, negotiations, co-operatives, advice and information as stated in the following table. RBFSP is more inclined to the first category of co-management which involves instructions. This means that if co-management should take place it comes in the form of top down instruction from the government which has to be adhered to.

TABLE 3. Categories of Co-Management Arrangements

Instructions:	Involves little exchange of information between government and consumer. There are mechanisms for dialogues with consumers. The process is simply about the government explaining to the consumers about projects which have been planned.
Negotiations:	An institutionalized structure to facilitate negotiations between the government and consumers, but all decisions rest with the government.
Co-operatives	The government and consumers co-operate as partners in the decision-making process.
Advisory	The consumers would inform the government of their decision and the government would advise and support their decision.
Information:	The government empowers the consumers to make decisions. The consumers are responsible for informing the government about their decision.

Source: Adopted from Sen & Nielsen (1996) and Pomeroy (2001)

The local community also feels that they do not benefit from tourism development projects. Unlike the private sector which gains from these development, the local community continue to be deprived. According to Ross and Wall (1999), the local community and the resources from protected areas should enjoy a symbiotic relations. The community should serve as the protectors of the environment and in return they would benefit from harvests, integration, multipurpose zones and protection of important resources like water catchment areas. But the reality is that these do not take place here. In fact, the community also feels that they are also missing the opportunity of improving their skills because they do not get continuous training.

Besides that, those among the community who carry out business activities feel that development in the RBFSP area will affect their livelihood because it will attract large-scale businesses with whom they cannot compete. The bigger companies with more solid finances would be involved in tourism services such as accommodation, food and beverage as well as transportation. This threatens the small-scale businesses carried out by the local residents.

CONCLUSION

Based on the data collected, the local community does not get sufficient information about development projects carried out by the state government. They are also not continuously involved in the development plans. According to Hasanah (2010) there has been no community involvement in any plan or projects involving eco-tourism. As such,

they lack the confidence that they could benefit from tourism activities.

This study found that the community members who want to be involved in government-organised programmes would need monetary incentives to enable them to participate. Most of the programmes are held on ad-hoc basis and this would have to be improved in order to ensure that community members participate directly in both the planning and implementation stages.

Co-management can take place here if problems involving the management, implementation aspects as well as community participation can be overcome. Co-management could still take place, but in the category of instruction and not co-operative, although that would be the real meaning of co-management.

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Received: 01 August 2015

Accepted: 17 March 2016

