

Sustainable Tourism for Peninsular Malaysia's Indigenous Peoples: A Summary, Background and Issues

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Abstract

This article briefly discusses the background and issues related to the indigenous peoples in Peninsular Malaysia. There are various problems and issues that are attributed to the indigenous communities, among them are being left behind in education, poverty, and the personal characteristics of the indigenous community itself, which is known for its modesty. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the background and problems that arises in maintaining the sustainability of indigenous tourism in Peninsular Malaysia. The results of this study are expected to improve the sustainability and quality of the indigenous tourism industry in Peninsular Malaysia in the future.

Keywords: Sustainability, Indigenous Tourism, Culture, Income, Peninsular Malaysia.

Introduction

Over the past decades, the issue of sustainable development or environmental sustainability has become a critical issue at the local and international level. According to the Brundtland Report (1987), sustainable development is an organized and continuous development that does not impact the environment, not only for the current generation but also for future generations. This report also states that the concept of sustainable development is a development that fulfills the current needs and does not impact the environment (Wheeler, 2004). During the United Nations conference in 2005 on sustainable development, the three pillars of sustainability was agreed upon, which are economic, social and environmental sustainability (United Nations, 2005). These pillars are important as it is considered to be able to fulfill the basic needs of humans at the local and global level as and will not damage the environment (Kates, Parris, Leiserowitz & Harvard, 2005).

To explain the concept of sustainable development, some scholars divide the sustainability aspect into three interrelated dimensions, namely the economic, social and physical/ecological dimensions (Blowers, 1992). Economic sustainability refers to the use of available sustainable resources for the best possible benefit. This idea aims to promote the use of resources in an efficient and responsible manner as well as benefiting mankind and the environment on a long term basis. According to Rolston (1994), the ecological sustainability model is to maintain the biodiversity and ecological integrity and at the same time to focus on the earth's wellbeing. Natural resources are important to be sustained because humans depend on the ecological system. The social sustainability capital in general refers to the beliefs that can increase the efficiency of society towards the social network (Adger, 2001). The social sustainability capital determinant includes personal characteristics like age, gender or health, family, educational or occupational characteristics, attitudes and values (Lehtonen, 2004). Social sustainability can contribute to the wellbeing of the individual, family or community (Stone & Hughes, 2002).

Background

According to the United Nations' (UN) estimate, there are roughly 370 million indigenous peoples in the world and about two-thirds of them live in Asia (United Nations, 2007; UNDP, 2012; Ramlee, 2013). In recent decades, the indigenous communities in Asia have struggled to uphold their rights in determining their destiny in order to protect their territory and resources (Ramlee, 2013). The Orang Asli people traditionally make a living from hunting, fishing or foraging the jungle to sustain their living and daily needs. The Orang Asli are a minority group in Malaysia and are the indigenous community in Peninsular Malaysia (Ma'rof & Sarjit, 2008). In terms of the settlement distribution of the Orang Asli, 38% lives in the remote areas, 61% lives in the rural areas and 1% in the urban areas. They are categorized into three main Orang Asli groups, which are the Negrito, Senoi and Proto-Malay. Each category consists of sub-categories of tribes or clans in which they speak in their own native language apart from the local Malay dialect (JAKOA, 2011). The definition of Orang Asli in the Federal Constitution of Malaysia was set out in Article 160 (2) that states that Orang Asli refers to the Malay Peninsular's Aboriginal Peoples. From a legal aspect, the status of Orang Asli had been provided for under specific laws, namely Act 134 of the Aboriginal Peoples Act 1954. This Act was specifically designed specifically to ensure the rights and welfare of the Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia (Nordin, Hassan, Ganesan, Ahmad, & Balakrishnan, 2013). Section 3 of Act 134 defines Orang Asli by classifying aborigines as follows:

- i) any person whose male parent is or was, a member of an aboriginal ethnic group, who speaks an aboriginal language and habitually follows an aboriginal way of life and aboriginal customs and beliefs, and includes a descendant through males of such people;
- ii) any person of any race adopted when an infant by aborigines who has been brought up as an aborigine, habitually speaks an aboriginal language, habitually follows an aboriginal way of life and aboriginal customs and beliefs and is a member of an aboriginal community; or
- iii) the child of any union between an aboriginal female and a male of another race, provided that the child habitually speaks an aboriginal language, habitually follows an aboriginal way of life and aboriginal customs and beliefs and remains a member of an aboriginal community.

According to Ahmad and Mohd Jelas (2009), the Orang Asli are a small community in Malaysia and are part of the indigenous population alongside the Peninsular Bumiputera (Malay, Siamese, Mamak), Sabah Bumiputera (Kadazan, Dusun, Murut, Bajau) and Sarawak Bumiputera (Iban, Kenyah, Bidayan). According to statistics by the Department of Orang Asli Economic Affairs (JHEOA), the total number of Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia in 2003 was 147,412 people (Zainal Abidin Ali, 2004) that can be classified into three groups which are Negrito, Senoi and Proto-Malay. Within each main group of the Orang Asli, it is further divided into various clans or tribes. The Senoi are the biggest main group with a total of 81,826 people (55.5%) followed by the Proto-Malay with 61,585 people (41.77%) and the Negrito with 4,001 people which is the most primitive group (2.71%) (Zainal Abidin Ali, 2004). The term Orang Asli was used after the nation's independence as equivalent to the term "Aboriginal People" as embodied under the Aboriginal People Ordinance of 1954. Ethnographers divide the Orang Asli groups based on the differences in their origin, language, and physical appearance, namely the Negrito, Senoi and Proto-Malay groups (Lin & Mohd Risdi, 2008).

In the Senoi group, there are the Semai, Temiar, Jah Hut, Che Wong, Mah Meri and Semaq Beri tribes that live in Perak and Pahang. The Proto-Malay consists of the Temuan, Semelai, Jakun, Kanaq, Orang Kuala and Orang Seletar tribes that live in the Pahang, Johor, Negeri Sembilan and Selangor. While in the Negrito group, there are several tribes like the Kensiu, Kintak, Jahai, Lanoh, Mendriq and Bateq tribes that live in Kelantan, Perak and Pahang (Khor & Mohd Shariff, 2008). In 2011, the state with the highest Orang Asli population is Pahang with 67,506 people (37.9%) followed by Perak with 53,299 people (29.9%) and Selangor with 17,587 people (9.9%) (JAKOA, 2011).

In Malaysia, the tourism industry had developed since 1972 in tandem with the establishment of the *Tourism Development Corporation Malaysia* (TDCM). Nevertheless, rapid growth happened about 15 years later when the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (renamed to Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism in 1992) was formed in 1987 to expand the industry. The growth of the tourism industry in Malaysia can be seen in the increase in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) between 1990 to 2013 that shows an increase in income from RM 2,575.1 billion to RM 65.44 billion (Ministry of Tourism, 2013). The tourism industry has become the main focus as a result of its contribution to the nation's economy. Subsequently, sustainable tourism that focuses on nature tourism was introduced in the early 1990s, also referred to as ecotourism (Awang et al., 2015). As an example, in the early stages of ecotourism development in Malaysia, focus was given to excursions of the tropical jungles and coral reefs. Nevertheless demand from local and international tourists for the cultural and community-based experience have bolstered this tourism industry (Zeppel, 2006). However, there are shortcomings in terms of transportation and road services that require improvement (Ah Choy, Atan, Muhammed, Sakawi, & JH, 2012).

In Peninsular Malaysia, there is the involvement of the Orang Asli community and the ecotourism activities that enable these groups to improve their socioeconomic status. The introduction of tourism activities that involve the local community's culture have found its place and given emphasis by the government. This can be observed via the Northern Corridor Economy Region (NCER) plan that consists of the states of Kedah, Perlis, Pulau Pinang, and northern areas of Perak. It is generally known that these areas are left behind in terms of economic growth, and now have been given emphasis to execute the economic development

plan in ecotourism activities. Ecotourism activity is able to contribute to a steady economic development as it is a natural asset with a very high value (Siti Nor Awang, Kamal Solhai Fadzil, Wan Suzita Wan Ibrahim, Rosilawati Zinol, 2015). Despite this, tourism promotion activities have yet to be expanded further (Ah Choy et al., 2012).

Issues

Studies have been conducted on indigenous tourism industry and findings have shown that underdevelopment and poverty is the main challenge faced by the government in efforts to develop the Orang Asli community in an effective manner (Noraida Harun & Noor' Ashikin Hamid, 2010). In 2009, the Orang Asli community recorded a poverty rate of 49% which shows that 1 out of 2 Orang Asli are poor at that time (Azlina & Ma'rof, 2013). For instance, research by Norlida et al. (2012) on the village of Sungai Ruil in the Cameron Highlands found that the majority of Orang Asli are still in the low-income bracket. Only 1.5% of the community earns RM1500 to RM 2000 monthly, while the rest earns less than RM1500.

Poverty among the Orang Asli is generally said to be the major component of the national poverty data. In 2006, as many as 33.5% and 15.4% of the Orang Asli had been identified as belonging to the absolute and absolute hardcore poverty groups respectively (Ekonomi Unit Perancangan, 2006). In the Ninth Malaysian Plan (2006-2010), the government allocated RM417,400,000 for various strategies and programs to reduce the absolute and absolute hardcore poverty rate among the Orang Asli including economic programs, relocation initiatives, and other programs intended for human capital development (Bhuiyan et al., 2012). This issue of poverty will also hinder the Orang Asli community development process, and will hamper efforts to integrate the various Orang Asli groups with the nation's flow of progress as realized by other races. Hence in the Tenth Malaysian Plan, the government has targeted to reduce the poverty rate among the Orang Asli community from 50% in 2009 to 25% in 2015 (Azlina & Ma'rof, 2013).

In addition, the traditional Orang Asli way of life is the main reason the community remains below the poverty level (Suki Mee, 2005). Because of this, the indigenous tourism program was carried out among the Orang Asli community in order to raise the economic level of the Orang Asli community in general. But the attitudes and mindset of the Orang Asli community are the biggest challenges faced by the government in the initiatives to develop the Orang Asli community. Various parties have labeled the Orang Asli as a community that is too dependent on government assistance, a community with low self-esteem and modest, lacking in confidence and not appreciative of a productive work culture, and possesses low self-resilience in facing outside challenges and competition (Khairul Hisyam & Ibrahim, 2007). In 2008, as much as RM 320,000 was allocated by the government in building retail spaces for the convenience of the Orang Asli community (Wee et al., 2010). The government provided retail space and workshop utilities to Orang Asli traders or entrepreneurs at locations with the potential to improve retail business, services or manufacture that encompasses the states of Selangor, Malacca, Kelantan and Pahang (Wee et al., 2013). But the facilities for the infrastructure are still at an unsatisfactory level especially the basic amenities, such as the electrical supply. The level of readiness and execution of facilities for the purpose of tourism development is still at an unsatisfactory and lackadaisical level. It is made worse by the absence of a integrated program that involves the local community in the ecotourism activity (Suzita et al., 2015).

According to Mohd Jelas and Ahmad (2009), their personal characteristics is one the main reason for the Orang Asli's backwardness. Most Orang Asli are easily pleased with whatever income that are gained without thinking about long term income (Khairul Hisyam & Ibrahim, 2007; Mustafa, 2008). Hence, this may be the cause of the failure of the indigenous tourism that is created by the government. Other than that, traditional work such as foraging and hunting is out of favor among the younger generation as the returns and income from the sales of forest resource is not stable and considered not worth the effort put in. Due to economic pressure, the younger generation prefer to migrate to cities or commute to work at the nearest town. This in turn will give impact to the indigenous tourism in terms of the preservation of Orang Asli's culture (Liu, 2015).

However, the migration of Orang Asli to the cities to improve their living standards is unable to make their lives better as most of them are involved only in work with low pay, for instance labor work, contractual farm work, restaurant assistants, and gardeners. The lack of knowledge is the reason Orang Asli youths fail to secure good work. Also, the adults are frequently cheated by middle men due to the illiteracy and lack of marketing knowledge. This can affect the indigenous tourism sustainability within the Orang Asli community (Khairul Hisyam & Ibrahim, 2007).

It is generally accepted that Orang Asli's student achievements in education are still too low as compared to other Malaysian citizens (Toh Kit Siang, 2008). The high dropout rate in education, starting from pre-school all the way to higher education institutions, are from the minority groups of the Orang Asli community (Doris Padmini Selvaratnam, Abdul Hamid Jaafar, Norlida Hanim Mohd Salleh, Redzuan Othman & Siti Hajar Idris, 2012). A study conducted by Zainal Abidin (2008) shows that the dropout rate of Orang Asli are much higher among secondary school students as compared to primary school students. This can be seen in 2008 when the academic status of Orang Asli attending secondary schools was about 26% vs. 74% of those attending primary schools, and the Orang Asli youths entering the public universities (IPTA) was only 63% (JAKOA, 2012).

Indigenous tourism requires Orang Asli that are proficient in English and possesses sufficient knowledge with regards to the tourism industry that they are involved in. However, when more than 70% of Orang Asli did not meet the minimum competency level in English (90%), Mathematics (74%), and Science (83%), this led to the lack of knowledge in the education field by the Orang Asli. In the subject of the Malay language, the intermediate language at schools, as many as 51% of Orang Asli did not meet the minimum competency level. Thus, the Orang Asli needs to master the two languages (Malay and English) as a first step in the efforts towards growing ecotourism in Malaysia. By raising the education standards of the Orang Asli community, it can lead towards the involvement of the Orang Asli community in the indigenous tourism industry.

The lack of participation and cooperation from the local community in ensuring the success of indigenous tourism programs are among the main problems in sustaining or maintaining indigenous tourism. Consequently, the engagement and cooperation of the local community, especially in matters related to the surrounding environment, for example the forests in this study, are important as they inhabit the area and are well versed in and understand the local environment of their homes and indirectly they can provide and contribute basic information

that are useful to ensure the indigenous tourism activities a success (Nur Atiqah Kamarus Zaman et al., 2014).

According to Drumm (1988), studies conducted in other countries such as Australia and Africa suggest that aspects such as control, involvement, decision maker and determining the direction should be given to the indigenous group. This is because they have the 'attraction' in growing 'indigenous tourism' (Drumm, 1988). The involvement of the indigenous community can also be expanded through involving them in the job sector that is created as a result of the expansion of the industry. Nevertheless, there are obstacles in developing the indigenous communities that are involved in tourism projects such as the lack of capital, lack of knowledge and skills related to the business management that impacts the development of indigenous tourism (Zeppel, 2006).

Conclusion

Based on the issues and problems that are raised, it is clear that there is a need for an empirical study to be conducted to monitor the sustainability process of indigenous tourism capabilities in the Orang Asli community at Carey Island, Selangor. The perspective and opinions of all study participants are important to obtain a clearer and deeper understanding to empower indigenous tourism in the Orang Asli community that will lead to increasing the product or yield in indigenous tourism. However, there have been no in-depth study conducted to observe indigenous tourism sustainability at Carey Island, Selangor. Hence, it is critical for this study to be conducted. The purpose of this paper is to briefly discuss the background and issues related to indigenous tourism in Peninsular Malaysia. It is hoped with the issues that are raised here will lead to a more in-depth study towards sustaining indigenous tourism especially at Carey Island, Malaysia.

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