

Aspects of Sabah's Tour Operators on Sabah Crocker Range Park as a New Dark Tourism Destination

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Abstract

This conceptual research paper focuses on the potential growth of Sabah's Crocker Range Park as a new dark tourism destination from the aspect of Sabah tour operators. The study is essential to support the planning of Sabah's government in developing dark tourism in Sabah's Crocker Range Park, which was reported in News Straits Times in 2021. The objectives of this study are to know the potential growth segment of Sabah's Crocker Range Park as a new dark tourism destination by identifying the key features of dark tourism attractions available in Sabah's Crocker Range Park from the tour operators' point of view and determining the best destination marketing tools for dark tourism products in Sabah for the domestic tourist market. Further study of dark tourism is required to fully comprehend its potential impacts. This unique destination is ideal for tourists seeking emotional connections, off-the-beaten-path experiences, and valuable first-hand knowledge, which also can be an economic booster for the local community.

Keywords: Dark Tourism, Sabah's Crocker Range Park, Tour Operators, Potential Growth

Introduction

Tourism-related "dark" activities and morbid goods and experiences are what the term "dark" refers to specifically. People are naturally curious about their own mortality and the darker sides of their nature, which may explain why haunted tourist attractions have become so popular. In a special issue of the International Journal of Heritage Studies, Foley and Lennon first used the phrase "Dark Tourism" to characterise visits to memorials and museums dedicated to tragic events (Foley & Lennon, 2007). This kind of 'new tourism' has led many researchers to investigate new issues and expand the scope of their research in dark tourism. Malaysia, like other nations, views dark tourism as a source of cash for the country's economy in addition to traditional and innovative tourism items. Places that have been marketed to tourists despite their potentially disturbing histories include Kelly Castle in Perak, Sabah

Memorial Park, Jerejak Island, and the Penang War Museum (Braithwaite & Lee, 2008; Suhasini & Chai, 2010). Through the Ministry of Tourism and other agencies with ties to the travel industry, the government is aiming to market "dark tourism" to visitors from outside the country. There are various initiatives currently underway at the federal and state levels to preserve and improve off-the-beaten-path tourism destinations (Ngo, 2012). However, it is only through the combined efforts of the tourism industry's various agencies that a new tourist product may be successfully promoted (Cooperative Research Centre, 2008). Many dark tourism sites in Malaysia, particularly Sabah, remain undeveloped. Therefore, the government of Sabah has lately announced that it will explore the dark tourism business as a means to draw in local and foreign tourists without damaging the state's rich cultural heritage (New Straits Times, 2021). Datuk Jafry Ariffin, Minister of Sabah Tourism, Culture, and Environment, on June 27, 2021, suggested that Sabah is rich with a history of conflict, devastation, or sorrow that might be turned into a tourist destination (Mu, 2021). He also added that the potential products that are yet to be recognized as dark tourism destinations, such as burial grounds, museums, and war relics, are among the sites. To date, there is a growing interest in visiting tourist attractions with a darker side to history, the tragedy of past events, and legends in Sabah. Sabah Crocker Range Park is well-known for its challenging trekking activities, stunning scenery, and being home to flora and fauna. However, some tour operators seldom see it as a dark tourism product.

Previous research has shown that the tourist industry typically accepts and promotes new products slowly. This is likely due to the fact that many tour operators have yet to fully appreciate the financial benefits that may be reaped from offering "dark tourism" (Zahari et al., 2016). There could be various reasons for the low level of promotion of Malaysian dark tourism sites by local tour operators through package tours. Small business profit, less demand, and a lack of resources could all be factors in their lack of enthusiasm. The research will be carried out to verify all of the issues raised in this study. Moreover, this research aims to assess tour operators' aspects of potential new dark tourism sites in Sabah's Crocker Range Park. More research is needed to gain a better understanding of the concept of dark tourism and its contributions. This unique destination is ideal for tourists seeking emotional connections, off-the-beaten-path experiences, and valuable first-hand knowledge. In the future, the promotion of dark tourism locations will rely heavily on the efforts of the tourism industry (Christou et al., 2018). Developing a new dark tourism package will also help increase tourist demand while boosting the tourism economy.

Dark tourism studies have been done mainly on the visitors' perceptions, such as travel motivation, visitor intentions, and more. Other than the tourists, tour operators' perception also matters in running the tourism business smoothly. Crocker Range Park in Sabah has been the site of numerous scientific investigations into a wide variety of topics; for example, looking at nature tourism products on frogs and toads. Such research has the potential to amplify the benefits of nature tourism by increasing conservation efforts, spreading environmental education and awareness, getting more locals involved in conservation and nature tourism, boosting local and national economies, and boosting the quality of life for everyone (Kueh, 2005). Therefore, it proves that Dark Tourism has never been studied in Sabah Crocker Range Park's offerings in any detail. Looking back at earlier research on Sabah's Dark Tourism offering, only Kundasang War Memorial and Sandakan Memorial Park were examined, for example, research done by (Chong et al., 2018). Sabah Crocker Range Park, on the other hand, is less studied as a dark tourism product and as a promotional tool in the eyes of travel

operators. The government is promoting Sabah Crocker Range Park as a Dark Tourism product. A study must be done to close the gap left by earlier studies.

Hence, the study aims to know the potential growth segment of Sabah Crocker Range Park for the domestic tourist market with the key features available in Sabah from a tour operator's point of view. The researchers also want to investigate the tour operator's knowledge about the dark tourism attraction in Sabah. Furthermore, the other intentions in making this study are to identify the best destination marketing tools for dark tourism products from the perspective of tour operators. The content the researchers would like to investigate is, for instance, Content Creation, Social Media Marketing, Social Influencer Marketing, Video Marketing, and more. In this study, tour operators will prove suitable marketing tools for dark tourism products.

Literature Review

Sabah Crocker Range Park

Crocker Range Park can be found on the western side of Sabah, as stated by the organization's official webpage dedicated to parks in the state. The northeast-southwest axis of the Park is roughly 75 kilometers in length, while its width is about 15 kilometers. It has an area of 139,919 acres, making it more than twice as large as Singapore making it the largest state terrestrial park. Within its eight districts, the Park spans an elevation range from 100 meters to 2,050 meters at the pinnacle of Mt. Alab. The Park is mostly forested, and it contains a small but significant portion of the western coast of Sabah's rare dipterocarp forest. There are five significant rivers that originate in this area, making it a crucial water catchment area for the western part of the state. The New Strait Times reports that three locations in Crocker Range Park (CRP) are ideal for "dark tourists" looking for an alternative experience (Miwil, 2021). The first site is located at the Ulu Senagang Substation, and the second is located at Pinamansok Waterfall, which is 700 meters from the same substation. The last site is the salt trail from the Inobong substation in Penampang to the Malungangan substation in Tambunan (Miwil, 2021). In addition, three sites at Crocker Range Park (CRP) have been identified as potential destinations for dark tourism. The article stated that Dark tourism destinations are usually identified as areas with a grim past, such as war sites, prisons, slavery places, graveyards, memorial parks, and places with significant historical events. Crocker Range Park research and education coordinator Betty Tan Lan Hwa said two potential products at the sprawling 139,919-hectare range are located at the Ulu Senagang substation. In 1992, a private British aircraft crashed on the hillside of Tinutuan. It is said that seven onboard died at the scene. The plane wreckage, which is now overrun with shrubbery, and the pieces of wood believed to have been used to carry the bodies were still there when park staff visited in 2017. Next, There is a stone that bears the features of a human face and another stone with a mortar shape with a 20-cm deep hole that is always filled with water. According to ancient belief, if the water is disturbed, it will cause floods or disaster, adding that a flood occurred when a ranger removed the water last year. These findings have opened the eyes to how potential dark tourism can be promoted in the Sabah Crocker Range Park and benefit the country financially.

Dark Tourism

According to Stone (2006), the word "dark" brings a sense of apparent scary practices and morbid products and experiences within the tourism domain (Stone, 2006, p. 146). The focus is on events involving death, pain, and atrocity. The subsequent development of tourism destinations can be attributed to a natural fascination with death and the darker features of

humanity (Foley, 2009; Fonseca et al., 2016, p.1). People have traveled to locations related to death, disaster, and loss for as long as they have been able to travel. As a result of travelers' finding positive in places of death, suffering, tragedies, and atrocities, the dark sector has emerged as an academic field of study only recently (Dunkley et al., 2011; Hartmann, 2014; Stone, 2010). Dark tourism is the youngest subset of tourism, introduced only in the 1990s. It is a multifaceted and diverse phenomenon. Dark tourism studies in Western countries succinctly portray dark tourism as a study of history, heritage, tourism, and tragedies. As a result, dark tourism has been identified as niche or special interest tourism. Regarding the relationship between death and tourism, or 'thanatourism,' Seaton (1996) says it took off in the 19th century. However, 'Dark tourism' has only recently come to the attention of increasing academics (Biran & Hyde, 2013; Sharpley & Stone, 2009; Stone, 2013). The social sciences are becoming increasingly interested in death and dying, as evidenced by the rise in prominence of "death studies" as a multidisciplinary research area (Light, 2017, p293). The University of Central Lancashire (UK) has established an Institute of Dark Tourism Research (IDTR) (Light, 2017, p,276). Several countries have attempted to incorporate dark tourism as a product into their tourism industry after it was recognized as a phenomenon (Blom, 2000). Countries around the world have a significant impact on both their economies and their image. A wide range of new destinations, attractions, and exhibitions are springing up around the world to cater to the 'dark side of travel' for those who want to see real or re-created death (Sharpley & Stone, 2009).

Marketing Tools

The term marketing tools refers to various strategies, resources, and digital programs companies can use to market their goods and services better. Businesses can use these tools to launch marketing campaigns and measure their results. Organizations can collect and evaluate critical data using various technologies because marketing campaigns allow them to contact customers directly. According to the Indeed website, organizations frequently use various marketing tools because each one serves a specific purpose in their marketing strategies. To promote dark tourism to domestic tourists in Sabah, tour operators must have the greatest destination marketing tools to make these packages known to consumers. In this day and age, the internet is the most potent marketing tool for advertising businesses and services all over the world.

Below is the suggested marketing method to promote dark tourism products based on tour operators' aspects

- a) Content production is the first suggested marketing method tour operators may use to promote dark tourism items. This marketing tool is less about whatever platform the tour operator uses to produce it and more about how they grab consumers' attention.
- b) Social media marketing is another marketing tactic that may be used because it is so important nowadays. Numerous social media platforms are available to promote products and services. The ideal tool will vary based on which network is better for tour operators to promote to a specific audience. Facebook, Instagram, and other social media platforms are examples.

In addition, tour operators can use social influencer marketing as a means of expanding their tour agency. Influencer marketing is a type of social media advertising that makes use of the popularity and credibility of well-known public figures to promote a product or service. The

recommendations of social influencers serve as social proof to potential clients, which is why influencer marketing is effective. Celebrities and a few dedicated bloggers dominated influencer marketing a decade ago. People have witnessed the rise of social media influencers, market saturation, and even fraud involvement (Chen, 2021). Other than that, there is video marketing. Video marketing generates

awareness, builds engagement, and drives sales. A significant part of digital marketing overlap with content marketing. For the first time, video marketing has become a must-have skill for all marketers. However, this was only the case for a short time.

Importantly, the scientific literature provides no clear definition for the efficacy of marketing strategies. Because marketing's essence is achieved through the application of marketing tools, the effectiveness of marketing tools is implicitly included in the definition of marketing's efficacy (Daukeviit et al., n.d.). The modern business relationship is shifting from a purely transactional one to a more social one. Using Engagement Marketing principles to prepare for successfully engaging prospects and customers before, throughout, and after the purchase cycle, with high-quality and relevant information as the basis for this engagement, is more important than ever for successful firms (Bashar et al., 2012).

As for studies on tourist attractions, which is Sabah Crocker Range Park (SCRP), several articles promote Sabah Crocker Range Park (SCRP). For example, the article from Sabah Tourism that is introducing the available attraction at the Sabah Crocker Range Park (SCRP) (Crocker Range Park, 2022), which can be assumed as one of the marketing tools that can enhance the number of tourists visiting Sabah Crocker Range Park in the future. If the Dark tourism packages are promoted using suitable marketing tools, it will give more interest to the new consumers that would like to experience the packages themselves.

In the past, travelers relied on tour operators and travel companies, but now they can get everything they need online, eliminating the need for intermediaries. Because of this, visitors to the digital realm can take part in important activities. Various nations have varying degrees of digitalization when it comes to tourism products. Many third-world tourist attractions and businesses, for instance, would be unable to keep up with the pace at which first-world tourist attractions and businesses are able to take advantage of the new technology wave of innovations for tourism promotion (Li et al., 2017). Marketers should strive perpetually to enhance and perfect their internet promotional initiatives in order to maintain their standing in the industry. To that purpose, the next part explores current digital marketing trends within the tourism industry and provides predictions for the future of this field (Mpotaringa et al., 2021). Marketing tools can significantly impact any industry to sustain their business for an extended period, the same as the Dark Tourism activity or attractions.

Dark Tourism Tourist

Apart from all the interests of tourists during travel, one particular interest was developed, which is dark tourism. Dark tourism was globally expanded in other countries, and they are promoting this kind of package to their domestic tourists to get to know the history of the dark tourism attractions. It also gives knowledge about the dark side of tourist attractions, providing a new experience for the consumer, especially domestic tourists. Therefore, by promoting dark tourism in the country, domestic tourists will gain different experiences than their actual types of tours.

In order to ensure that domestic tourists are interested in these dark tourism packages, the tour operators should promote these packages with an attractive approach to ensure dark

tourism in Malaysia can be expanded in the future. It will be relevant over a long period. Nowadays, dark

tourism packages in Malaysia do not stand out to consumers because most tourists or consumers are unaware of this package and need to learn its benefits since it sounds horrifying. However, it is one of the gaining knowledge tour packages. So, the role of tour operators can break the rule of the tourist perceptions towards the tourist, especially domestic tourists.

Potential Growth of Dark Tourism in Sabah

Tourism is one of Malaysia's most profitable industries. It improves the economy and service prospects. According to the World Tourism Organization, Malaysia ranks 14th in international tourism arrivals. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic is endangering all countries, particularly Malaysian tourists. Malaysia should then take note of the expansion of the dark tourism business in the West, Europe, and even Australia. Their youthful travelers have ventured into areas that other tourists avoid. It is not surprising, then, that Malaysian young will eventually follow the trend, as this topic is becoming increasingly popular among them. They have courage and an interest in new things, and mortality is not unusual, let alone tragedies, disasters, violence, and any other dark side of cultural tourism (Ahmat, 2021).

The growth of Dark Tourism can be expected to increase over time if tour operators are on the right track in promoting Dark Tourism packages to the correct target market. Promoting using the current popular marketing tactic, internet sharing, will also be more efficient such as content development, social media marketing, influencers, video marketing, and more. This marketing tool was the most efficient in the modern era because all information required could be accessed with the touch of a finger on people's cell phones. The fact of the matter is that Malaysia possesses a significant number of potential for dark tourism, some of which have already achieved widespread notoriety. One example of this is The Agnes Keith House, which will be developed as a new Dark Tourism attraction with a unique perspective on tourism (New Straits Times, 2021). Fortunately, attract tourists, particularly younger generations of domestic tourists in Malaysia. To expand the potential of dark tourism attractions, plans need to formulate tactics that condense competition, establish a sustainable and all-encompassing holiday industry, and prepare for an impending disaster plan.

Methodology of Study

This is an exploratory research on the opinions of tour operators regarding the addition of Sabah Crocker Range Park as a dark tourism destination in Sabah. Thus, this study will apply a qualitative method for the data collection. Data collection will be in a non-contrived setting around Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. The unit of analysis will be an individual, as every tour operator might have a different perspective on Dark Tourism in Sabah. A total of 20 tour operators are identified and a face-to-face interview will be carried out. Since there is no probability attached to the respondents' selection as respondents, the study will use a non-probability sampling. Additionally, this study will use purposive sampling in quota sampling because the researchers are focusing on the tour operators aware of Dark Tourism and have more information about Sabah's Crocker Range Park. In addition, the interview question is focusing on the tour operators' profiles, marketing tools, key features of dark tourism and the potential growth of dark tourism. The interview questions are adapted from (Stone, 2006; Nelson et al., 2015; Zahari et al., 2020; Thi, 2020). The thematic analysis will be applied in transcribing the qualitative data, and using SPSS to run the queries to report the findings.

Discussions**Some arguments for Dark Tourism and its potential**

Some individuals may view dark tourism as a bad thing. Meanwhile, some might think it brings advantages to the tourism industry, the country's economy, and even one's emotions. Every people might have a different point of view towards Dark Tourism. Thus, arguments about its advantages and disadvantages occur. Views of dark tourism may come from tourists, tour operators, the government, and the public. Their viewpoint would support or not support the growth of dark tourism. In addition, tour operators see dark tourism places positively due to their cultural, historical, and heritage values and educational worth. Some tour operators began offering dark tourism packages for profitability, and their promotion of dark tourism will influence the success of the dark tourism destination (Zahari et al., 2016). In addition, dark tourism was perceived as an exploitation of death and a disdain for the deceased in Sabah. Less acceptable to the local population is the disclosure of past atrocities and violence (Ramlee et al., 2018). Arguments towards dark tourism development may continue due to different points of view of people from time to time. With that, this study can determine and suggest a sustainable practice for managing the dark tourism destination without touching the community's sensitivity.

In addition, as Curwen (2020) explains, dark tourism is a profitable market for the government and the locals. Tourists must not only pay to stay in hotels and eat in restaurants, but they must also pay taxes to the government, which are used to build local infrastructure. Besides that, a dark tourism destination is educational, and it allows visitors from all over the world to learn about the background of the destination. Hence, suitable marketing tools need to be identified to promote dark tourism destinations for Sabah Crocker Range successfully. No doubt suitable marketing tools will increase tourists' desire to visit such places. Furthermore, tour operators' perceptions of the places they want to promote influence their intentions to sell packages, particularly dark Tourism sites.

Conclusion

Considering all this, Malaysia has many potential dark tourism sites, including Sabah's Crocker Range Park. Development and promotion are needed in order to expose the places to dark tourism enthusiasts around the world. For a place to be known worldwide, tour operators play an essential role in promoting the place to domestic tourists first. Promoting a dark tourism site can be done in various ways. Then, when domestic tourists have positive feedback on the destination, it can be further promoted to international tourists. However, some people view dark tourism negatively, but there are more positive views where we can ensure that dark tourism can be further developed in Sabah's Crocker Range Park. This paper can also serve as a resource for other researchers who wish to investigate dark tourism in Malaysia. In addition, the way of marketing tools will continue to evolve due to technological development. Despite this, dark tourism should be preserved because it offers a unique experience. Therefore, researchers must continue investigating the effective way to promote dark tourism attractions to become successful attractions benefiting the economy.

The conservation of natural tourist attractions that may be marketed as dark tourism can bring more benefits for the two distinct packages inside a single tourist attraction. Tourism attractions must be preserved to preserve the areas' natural resources. If the attractions are sustained, it will provide a better experience for tourists because they will be able to experience the true feelings of

what is happening at the dark tourism sites. It will provide the expected satisfaction and good feedback to tourists, which could lead to the potential growth of the places.

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