The world’s toughest mountain race: Key success factors of 25 years of the Mount Kinabalu International Climbathon

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The world’s toughest mountain race

Key success factors of 25 years of the Mount Kinabalu International Climbathon

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Abstract

Purpose – The Climbathon is an annual mountain running championship that takes place in Kinabalu Park, Sabah, Malaysian Borneo. Participants race to the peak (4,095.2 metres) and back, a distance of 21 kilometres of rainforest and mountain terrain, with a steep vertical gain of 2,300 metres. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the first 25 years of the Climbathon and to identify the key success factors behind the staging of this small-scale international sports event in Southeast Asia.

Design/methodology/approach – The research design for this study is interpretive, utilises a qualitative case study approach incorporating analysis of documents, oral history interviews, and personal observations gained through attendance and volunteering at the event which produced six insights, suggested as key success factors for the Climbathon. This study was guided by one key research question, to understand what has ensured the continuity of this small-scale international sports event known as the Climbathon.

Findings – Findings suggest the Climbathon has endured the test of time due to an innovative use of the summit trail, adherence to international sporting regulations, a pro sports tourism public policy led by the tourism ministry, membership to international sports organisations, corporate sponsorship, and a special sense of place towards Mount Kinabalu and the Climbathon for the event organisers, volunteers and officials.

Research limitations/implications – This case study presents knowledge about the Climbathon but findings are not generalisable. Any application of the success factors would have to be as guidelines adapted for a specific sport event. The use of oral history as part of a case study is subjective and open to interpretation. Future work could incorporate interviews with participants, spectators, volunteers and the local sub-committees to gain alternative perspectives.

Originality/value – This study makes an original contribution to the events and tourism field by presenting a case study on the success factors of the Mount Kinabalu International Climbathon. The study suggests a three pillar model of “Place-Plan-People” which may be used as a guiding philosophy for event development and delivery of small-scale international sports tourism events in Asia and elsewhere. The inclusion of oral history as part of a case study research design is novel and useful when knowledge is not available in any published form.

Keywords Oral history, Key success factors, Mt. Kinabalu International Climbathon, Skyrunning, Small-scale sports tourism events

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Kinabalu Park (UNESCO World Heritage Site) is located on the island of Borneo, in Sabah, Malaysia. A site rich in biodiversity, with much of its flora and fauna endemic, its most significant feature is Mount Kinabalu which attracts mountain climbers throughout the year (Wong and Chan, 2015). An ordinary climber takes two days, one night, to slowly ascend and descend the summit of Low’s Peak at 4,095.2 metres. The Mount Kinabalu International Climbathon is an annual mountain running championship where participants race up to the peak and return down the same path heading towards a finish
line. With a steep elevation right from the start, the total distance covered is 21 kilometres of mountain terrain ranging from tropical rainforest to sub-alpine forest nearer to the summit where it is cold and the air is thin. Even as the race tests participants’ endurance to the limit, the Men’s race record hovers at about two-and-a-half hours, with the women’s record a close second at the three hour mark. The Climbathon is categorised as mountain running, an official sport recognised by the International Association of Athletics Federation (IAAF), the world’s governing body for athletics.

For over 25 years, extraordinary athletes, local and international have travelled from over 40 countries to participate in what is known as “The World’s Toughest Mountain Race”. The Climbathon has been organised annually since 1987 as a small-scale sports event held in Asia which attracts sport tourists (participants) to race at a premier tourist destination. For this reason, it can be categorised as a sport tourism event. Small-scale sports events are defined as “regular season sporting competitions (ice hockey, basketball, soccer, rugby league), international sporting fixtures, domestic competitions, masters or disabled sports, and the like” (Higham, 1999, p. 87). According to Higham (1999), small-scale sports events use existing infrastructure, require reduced investment of funds, can minimise tourism seasonality, are more manageable than larger hallmark events and can also produce positive impacts for local communities. However, most literature on sport tourism event focuses on mega sporting events such as the Olympic Games or the FIFA World Cup (Gibson, 2002) at the expense of small-scale sport events due to the huge investment in and assumed economic returns. Mair and Whitford (2013) suggest that events and tourism are worthy of investigation specifically small-scale events which produce greater benefits at a local level and deserve more attention, over one-off, hallmark events. Understanding sport event success is also an essential outcome for the organisers and destination to leverage its hosting (Kaplanidou et al., 2013). The Climbathon is well-known amongst the international mountain running community due partly to its inclusion since 2004 in the annual International Skyrunning Federation (ISF) Skyrunner World Series race circuit.

In the organisation and delivery of events, longevity could be considered an important marker of success. Two questions arise about the Climbathon. How did a small-scale sports event evolve into a regular and prominent event on Sabah’s tourism calendar? Indeed, what are the key success factors of this small-scale sports event held here in Asia? As yet, a gap remains in both the sport tourism and event management body of literature. Knowledge of these success factors would be valuable to organisers of similar events both in the region and elsewhere in the world. Therefore, this study evaluates the first 25 years of the Climbathon to produce insights on the key success factors that have ensured the race goes on.

Literature review
Sports events can be divided into one-off hallmark events, or regular small-scale events. For tourism destinations, “sport event tourism is internationally recognised as a substantial and highly desirable niche market” (Getz, 2003, p. 49). In a sense, there will be people travelling to take part in a competition (active sport tourists), and others who travel to witness the event (spectators) or visit famous sites of sport (Gibson, 2003). However, there is also the sports event itself, the organising body and the destination (built or natural) which also deserve attention. In essence, a sports event attracting tourists can be viewed as a sport tourism event. According to Deery et al. (2004), sports tourism is essentially event tourism and governed by the issues that effect events and event management. As such, exploring sports event success is important specifically the need to understand success factors behind small-scale events (Kaplanidou et al., 2013).
Most literature on sport event tourism focuses on mega sporting events such as the Olympic Games or the FIFA World Cup at the expense of small-scale sport events (Gibson, 2002). Mega events usually have government support and draw huge sponsorship that requires expenditure justification leading to economic impact research. Studies of sports event tourism in Malaysia have also focused on mega events such as Formula One Grand Prix, Tour de Langkawi, Commonwealth Games, Thomas Cup (badminton) and the Monsoon Cup (sailing) (Yusof et al., 2009). However, Hinch and Higham (2011) suggest that small-scale sport events should also be examined as these use existing infrastructure, require less investment of funds, can minimise tourism seasonality, are easier to manage than mega events, and can also produce positive impacts for local communities. Some studies on small-scale events include an examination of Rugby Union and the Super 12 Competition (Ritchie, 2004) and the critical success factors of the Twenty20 cricket competition in England and Wales (Hyde and Pritchard, 2009). One Malaysian study evaluated the benefits of a mountain-bike and motor-cross event at a popular lake tourism destination in Terengganu, Malaysia (Yusof et al., 2009). Findings indicated these races were an effective means of securing economic benefits in a rural community that might have limited attractiveness otherwise. According to Yusof et al. (2009), there is a lack of literature on sports tourists attending small-scale sports events in Malaysia and recurring, small-scale events in rural areas are worthy of investigation. Mair and Whitford (2013) suggest event tourism research should also attempt to understand social capital and community pride emanating from the hosting of an event.

The experiences of sport tourists result from their interactions with place, or the site of an event (Standeven and De Knop, 1999). The literature suggests that sports event tourism can also be examined in terms of suitability of “place” for a particular sport (Weed and Bull, 2009). Interestingly, though mega sports events are linked to built venues, small-scale sports event encompass a wider range of venues. These include rivers (fishing competitions), mountains (climbing), the countryside (running), the ski-slopes and golf courses. According to Weed and Bull (2009, p. 64), “it is the location of the activity in an unusual place that contributes to the uniqueness of the sports tourism experience”. They explain that the dependence on natural resources means the interaction of activity, people and place plays a big part in the experience of these sports tourists. Such sport spaces can become meaningful places to both active and passive sport tourists who develop ties or allegiances to a site (Hinch and Higham, 2011). This would affect their desire to return and participate in an event at the same location.

In a seminal article, Ritchie (1984) described special sports events as the staging of one time or recurring events of limited duration, developed primarily to enhance the awareness, appeal and profitability of a tourism destination in the short and/or long-term. Such events would rely on uniqueness, status, or timely significance to create interest and attract attention. As sports tourism developed into a niche market, destination management organisations (DMOs) utilised sports events to promote the destination (Kler, 2000). Indeed, the popularity of international sports translates into significant media attention and such events can be used to draw attention to the host destination (Westerbeek et al., 2002). DMOs also strategically use sport events to create a distinct brand image for the destination (Chalip and Costa, 2006). In their study of eight European countries between 2000 and 2008, Cserháti and Polak-Weldon (2013) suggest key success factors of the organising committees of international sporting events include objective and task planning, contract strategy, leadership, organisational culture, cooperation and communication and partnership.
Also, Kaplanidou et al. (2013) found that effective event management and delivery were two common factors to both event providers and spectators. Therefore, there is a need to further understand the role played by event providers. If these were DMOs, what was their role in the success of a sports tourism event?

In the UK, a key problem for this sector of event management is the lack of policy partnerships between sports and tourism agencies (Glyptis, 1991). This has affected the integration of sport and tourism as the development and implementation of policies are often determined and influence by the commitment of two different government departments (Weed and Bull, 2009). Sports events are governed by sports associations at national and international level. For a sports event to be categorised as a sport, the event should include vigorous physical activity, the element of a structured competition with codified rules as well as being goal-oriented (Standeven and De Knop, 1999). Therefore, the planning, development and implementation of the sport within a tourism context needs to be a priority area in light of the rules and regulations of sports governing bodies. In this way, standards of sport are maintained and the race is recognised within the international arena. There is also a call for a better understanding of the relationships between public policy for tourism and the events agenda (Getz, 2009; Mair and Whitford, 2013).

For sports events, the sports experience is a key factor which draws sport tourists to return, especially when, “the experience is highly desired or unreplicable at alternative destinations” (Harrison-Hill and Chalip, 2006, p. 179). Event organisers with such desirable, unreplicable sporting experiences on offer already have a competitive advantage over other destinations. For example, Hawaii, where the annual triathlon IRONMAN World Championship is held, the birthplace of this unique endurance event in 1978 is in a category of its own (http://ap.ironman.com, accessed May 2016). According to Gratton et al. (2004), sport events generate a diverse and heterogeneous flow of travellers which includes athletes, team personnel, fans, coaches, media and family members. Wheaton (2004) suggests the existence of an overt subculture derived from an interaction of the activity, people and places often positively affects alternative sports tourism activities. For example, skiers, marathon runners, and triathletes, for whom these sport events have become a lifestyle. In such cases, Weed and Bull (2009) suggest, there is commitment to the event in terms of active participation based on the element of fraternity. For such participants, both the trip and destination are pre-determined: organise the event, they will register and race. Sports tourism involves engagements with other competitors, spectators, officials and volunteers where every individual has an element of interaction with other people (Hinch and Higham, 2011). Here, Harrison-Hill and Chalip (2006) suggest sport tourism can be a means to foster repeat visitation. However, the challenge is to determine which market segments are likely to return through consideration of the bases for repeat visitation by sport tourists.

Based on the discussion, it can be summarised that the body of literature on small-scale sports events presents a range of practices that contribute to the successful delivery of such events. However, the literature does not identify any best practices related to mountain races, nor is there much on such events in Asia.

**Methodology**

An important element to consider in designing a study on sports event tourism is the involvement of people in the organisation and delivery of an event. The “people” factor was an important guiding principle and for this reason, the research design chosen included a case study method incorporating oral history, documents and observation.
An empirical case study method should produce a record of what has occurred, focusing on contemporary phenomena within a real-life context (Yin, 2009). Such a case study could illuminate an issue and contribute to forming an explanation.

In order to produce an informative case study on the Climbathon, interviews were conducted with key personnel, and a range of secondary data or material that was in the public domain was examined as recommended for case study research (Beeton, 2005). These included policy documents (sports and tourism), programme booklets, published articles (in sports magazines such as *Action Asia*, *Trail Runner* and *Asia Trail Magazine* and newspapers, for example, *Daily Express* and *The Borneo Post*), blogs, archival footage of the event on YouTube, and the official website listed at www.climbathon.my (accessed June 2015). In addition, personal observations of the event in progress enabled the researcher to gain an insider perspective of the roles played by officials to ensure participants experienced a smooth race. Ultimately, these various methods interact well, each informing and complementing the other to produce an informed understanding about the Climbathon. The key research question that guided this study was:

*RQ1.* To understand what ensured the success of this small-scale sports event.

This form of question is suited to an interpretive design, using qualitative methods in order to gain in depth, thick descriptions of the case study through a value-laden lens.

*Time frame*

This study chose to examine only the first 25 years of the Climbathon because between 1987 until 2011. During this period, the race utilised its original Summit trail format with participants racing to the peak and back with a half-marathon distance. By 2012, its route was altered, the race was rebranded and divided into two categories: the Elite race and an Adventure Series race. Although the Elite category still raced to the peak, the finishing line was at the end of Mesilau trail. New race records were created which did not encompass the spirit of “to the peak and back”. The advantages and disadvantages of these changes are beyond the context of this study. A 25-year old time frame may seem problematic, in terms of data collection and coverage if the case study only focused on documents and archival material. However, the inclusion of oral history interviews with two persons deeply involved in the Climbathon has alleviated this issue due to the information-rich nature of the participants. The event itself has had a range of milestones which guided the interview sessions and media documents were used as prompts to ensure coverage of key issues in the past 25 years of event organisation.

*Oral history*

A novel addition to this case study is the use of oral history as a method to conduct interviews. Indeed, Trapp-Fallon (2003) suggests that oral history provides tourism and leisure researchers with a potentially insightful approach for research, but one that is overlooked. Oral history as a research tool is useful for exploratory purposes and complements other research methods (Ladkin, 2004). The purposive sample of two key personnel involved with the development, organisation and delivery of the Climbathon event were approached to contribute to this case study. At first glance, the number of participants is perhaps questionable. However, the aim of oral history is to gain first-hand knowledge from people who have lived through an event in order to document and analyse the information for significance (Chaitin, 2008). The two individuals as a
purposive sample were the current race director and the organising secretary who were interviewed over five interview sessions that took place over a month and lasted about an hour each session. In order to enhance the credibility and transferability of findings, Table I overleaf provides brief biographies which highlights their depth of involvement in the Climbathon since its inception. The biographies should validate the rationale for choosing these two persons for the oral history interviews.

The details presented in Table I indicate that participants have been involved with the Climbathon as part of their careers; both had personal experience of the event. The race director had a sports background and the organising secretary an events background, which were useful in the organisation and delivery of this sports tourism event. Both were information-rich participants who could enlighten this case study with knowledge that was not available in written form elsewhere (Chaitin, 2008). Additionally, both participants represent the main event organiser (a DMO) which is a government agency. The researcher focused on asking open-ended questions which were person and experienced centred in order to elicit rich details on the Climbathon and involved active listening. Participants shared insights about the background of the event, organisational, developmental, promotional milestones as well as other relevant experiences.

A final piece of the case study came from the personal observations of the researcher who attended the race as a spectator on ten occasions. However, in 2014, in the capacity of a race volunteer, the researcher observed pre-race briefings for participants, organisers and trekked to the summit and back during the elite race. Documented observations gave insight into the on-site experiences of both event organisers and participants and contributed primarily to the interpretation of data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Brief biography</th>
<th>Involvement with Climbathon</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race director</td>
<td>Born 1938, joined the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports in 1970. A former state and national athlete, climbed the ranks to position of Director of Sports for the state of Sabah at the ministry before retirement at age 55 (1993). Moved to oversee sports tourism events at Sabah Tourism Board and later, Sri Pelancongan Sabah for the next 13 years. Continued involvement with Climbathon on a contract basis since. Asian representative for International Skyrunning Federation. Race director for annual Sabah Dragon Boat Race since early 1990s. Held position of Secretary-General of Asian Triathlon Confederation (2007-2014)</td>
<td>Co-founder. Attended first meeting in 1986 (age 48) when the idea for a mountain running championship was formalised. Coined the term “Climbathon”. Wrote the rules in accordance with International Athletics Federation. Acted in capacity of technical chairman annually since inception (managing race start, finish, results, time-keeping). Since 1996, race director (20 years ) but 30 years of involvement in total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organising secretary</td>
<td>Born 1976, joined Sabah Tourism Board in 1997 until year 2000. Moving to Sri Pelancongan Sabah (2000) and climbed the ranks in event management. Oversees organisation of various sports tourism (e.g. Sabah International Fishing Tournament) and tourism related events. Currently Senior Event Manager (age 40)</td>
<td>First involvement as a general events coordinator in 1997 (age 21). Since 2000, organising secretary annually (16 years) but 19 years of involvement in total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table I. Oral history participant biographies (2016)
Data analysis
Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim before being analysed thematically to establish the reasons behind the success of a mountain race that has survived for 25 years. Transcripts were read line by line and codes were allocated to data. Sub-themes were amalgamated with main themes. Extracts from documents as well as observations by the researcher were cross-checked with the themes as a form of triangulation. To enhance the trustworthiness of the data, the transcripts, as well as findings were presented to the participants for credibility checks. The findings presented here are part of a larger oral history project mapping the development of sports tourism in Sabah, of which the Climbathon is one event.

Case study: the Mount Kinabalu International Climbathon
In order to examine the Climbathon, it is necessary to build up a clearer picture of the space, place and environment within which this sport tourism event has flourished for over 25 years. Kinabalu Park is located in Kundasang, Sabah, Malaysia on the island of Borneo, covers an area of 754 square kilometres and was gazetted as a national park in 1964 (Goh, 2007). As the main nature based tourism destination in Sabah, arrivals increased from only 829 visitors in 1965 to 434,903 visitors in 2005 (Goh, 2007). Key visitor activities include mountain climbing and trekking around the park trails, where the park is graded as an IUCN Type II protected area. Visitor numbers experienced a sharp increase in the year 2001, after the park was accorded World Heritage Site status in December 2000 (Goh, 2007). The park is managed by the Sabah Parks Board of Trustees, known as Sabah Parks, a conservation based agency of the Sabah State Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Environment. Mount Kinabalu is the most significant feature of the park with climbers trekking to the most prominent peak in Southeast Asia at 4,095.2 metres. For most of the year, Kinabalu Park attracts both nature and adventure tourists who take two days to climb the mountain. But once a year, some rather extraordinary mountain runners arrive for a race known as the Climbathon. What started this mountain race?

Due to the mountain terrain, the fastest way to rescue a distressed climber during bad weather (winds, mist, torrential rains) when a helicopter could not be used, was by foot. In 1984, a Park Warden and the Deputy Director of Sabah Parks decided to form a “Rapid Reaction Rescue Squad” consisting of fast runners who could reach climbers in trouble. For this purpose, an in-house “fun-race” was set up to identify the swiftest park rangers and mountain guides (Kan, 1996). The fun-race became a yearly event for park staff which was brought to the attention of the state tourism and sports ministries. Here was an opportunity to create a formal race that could be used to further promote the mountain to the world and attract tourism to Sabah. These remain the main objectives of the Climbathon which by 1987, was officially launched as a national championship with 253 participants. In 1988, the race was opened to international participants, and witnessed the prowess of Nepalese Gurkhas (stationed in neighbouring Brunei) as mountain runners who went on to dominate the top spots between 1988 and 1993.

The Climbathon
In order to understand the intensity of this mountain race, it is necessary to compare the time difference to ascend and descend the mountain between the average climber and a mountain runner. Ordinary climbers trek up the Summit Trail, a distance of only 8.72 kilometres over two days (a second option is to summit via the Mesilau trail) due to
the steep elevation in terrain. The Timpohon Gate (elevation 1,866.4 metres) located 5.5 kilometres away from the main Park Headquarters marks the start of the climb. At the headquarters, climbers meet their guides and porters, and are transported by van to this starting point and greeted the next day when they return. Figure 1 overleaf.

**Figure 1.** Climbathon race route

**Source:** Sri Pelancongan Sabah (2010) (courtesy from Sri Pelancongan Sabah Sdn. Bhd)
depicts the race route which is also the route used by the majority of climbers to reach Low’s Peak, or the summit.

The summit trail is used for the Climbathon. Runners are flagged off at the Start area near the base of the mountain, a few hundred metres before Timpohon Gate which involves a steep climb to the summit requiring an increase in elevation of over 2,000 metres in a short space of time, and as the altitude increases, the temperature drops and the air becomes thinner. Therefore, the race tests participants’ fitness, endurance and ability to overcome a vertical climb and still have the energy to race down and cross the “Finish” line at the Park Headquarters (elevation 1,563.8 metres).

In addition to the steepest vertical climb of any SkyMarathon® worldwide, cut-off times, and the total distance of the race of 21 kilometres, the Climbathon became, in the words of the founder of skyrunning, Marino Giacometti “an emblem and a true expression of skyrunning at high altitude” (Sri Pelancongan Sabah, 2010). This race consists of humid rainforest and mountain terrain which includes wet and slippery ground, stairs, bridges and granite rock surface where the weather is cold and can be unpredictable (Radin, 2010). These factors coupled with the time limit to complete the race earned the Climbathon the accolade of “The World’s Toughest Mountain Race”. The race records (Table II) exemplify the meaning behind the race tagline of “Are You Tough Enough?”.

At an international level, the Climbathon is categorised as mountain running, a worldwide sport and branch of traditional athletics. The philosophy of athletics, in this case mountain running, is based on the time factor, or how to reach the finish taking the defined way as fast as possible. This is the objective of those who take part in competitive mountain running. Athletes find their challenge in matching their speed against that of other runners, a competition between individuals. According to the IAAF Rule 1, traditional athletics consists of track and field, cross country, road running, race walking and mountain running (www.iaaf.org). Mountain running was added to this list in 2003, after the World Mountain Running Association (WMRA) had staged, since 1985, a successful event entitled “the World Trophy”, attracting entries from more than 30 countries. The IAAF recognises WMRA as the controlling body for international mountain running competitions since it has organised mountain races for over 30 years (www.wmra.ch, accessed February 2015). Although factual information about the Climbathon is accessible through the official website or published documents, the events and tourism literature accords very little focus on this event. It is not known, for example, how this small-scale event has been organised and delivered, nor what its success factors have been. The findings of this case study are an attempt to both document this sports tourism event and to understand its success factors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Record holder and year</th>
<th>Race record</th>
<th>Category and time limit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marco De Gasperi (Italy), 2010</td>
<td>2 hours 33 minutes and 56 seconds</td>
<td>Men’s Open 2 hours 30 minutes to the peak and finish within 4 hours 30 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna Pichrtova (Czech Republic), 2004</td>
<td>3 hours 6 minutes and 54 seconds</td>
<td>Women’s Open 3 hours 30 minutes to the peak and finish in 6 hours 30 minutes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Sri Pelancongan Sabah (2010)
Key insights from 25 years of the Climbathon

Undeniably, the Climbathon is a unique sports event tourism experience. Based on the data collected and analysed, findings suggest there are six key success factors that have guided this event. These are elaborated next.

Innovative use of summit trail

Mount Kinabalu has always been an attraction for climbers and possessed a number of advantages which were successfully utilised to develop a sport event based on an existing route. Basically, the landscape with its rugged terrain, steep vertical climb, and distance were natural resources at hand. The organisers moved one step forward and attracted mountain runners and modified the race route to accommodate a “Start area” and “Finish line”. Kinabalu Park had an activity added to its repertoire; a mountain race which fit its image of adventure and challenge. The resource (the mountain, its route) was available, there was no need to build a venue, the organisers chose to add the element of competition and developed in the late 1980s, a unique mountain race in Southeast Asia. Therefore, it can be concluded that the creation of the Climbathon was an innovative use of existing well-established tourist resources (Kinabalu Park, Mount Kinabalu) and a community activity (the rescue of tourists and a fun-race). Before this time, the park was only a tourist destination; it did not host a formal sports event. The birth of the Climbathon marked the arrival of sports tourism to Kinabalu Park, and to Sabah in the late 1980s.

Adherence to international sporting regulations

Through the input of the state Ministry of Sports, this race was designed foremost as a sports event with adherence to international sporting regulations. The event was named the Climbathon to reflect the element of “climb” (a vertical gain of over 2,000 metres) and “marathon” (race is a half-marathon distance) based on input from both the park warden and sports director:

The Sabah Park Deputy Manager, Mr. Francis Liew in the 1986 meeting wanted the race to be known as Climb race to the peak and back […] I suggested the name Climbathon. I added climb withthon, from marathon […] since the race […] total distance was half marathon 21 kilometers (Race director, 30 November 2014).

From the onset, the race was designed according to formal competitive lines, whereby the race rules for the Climbathon were written in accordance to the IAAF rules for running championships. As senior technical official of the Malaysian Amateur Athletics Union (MAAU), the race director used his expertise to establish codified rules for the race:

I was Director of Sports at KKBS [sports ministry] at the time. I was invited by the State Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Environment’s Permanent Secretary Datuk Wilfred Lingham to the first meeting in 1986 which he chaired. They wanted to discuss a race up to the peak and back from Timpohon Gate. We were all there […] Eric Wong, was the Park Ranger in charge then. Francis Liew was Deputy Director of Sabah Parks […] he was made Race Director. I was made chairman of the Technical Committee and I was asked to write the rules since I was a senior technical official of MAAU […] which I did based on IAAF. Later, I made a few amendments to follow the International Skyrunning Federation rules (Race director, 30 November 2014).

It is interesting to note that the Climbathon rules were written before mountain running was added to the IAAF Rule 1. It was a valuable foresight to include athletics based
rules for this mountain race. Indeed, the strategy to involve the national sports association (MAAU) to officiate at the race was an integral element of success. Aspects of the race in terms of route, distance, attire, time-limits, aid stations and drinking stations, check stations judges, appeal jury and indemnity were designed in line with international standards. Such conscientious attention to detail ensured that the “sports” element in this sport tourism race retained an international sports standard. The importance of using existing resources (the fun-race) according to codified rules contributed to uplift this race as part of a World Series. This step made it possible, years later for the organisers of the Climbathon to successfully bid to host an international mountain running championship, as a member of the international mountain running fraternity.

Pro sports tourism public policy: the roles of Sabah Park, Sabah Tourism Board and Sri Pelancongan Sabah (SPS)

Undeniably, the policies and commitment of key government agencies have played an important role in the success of the Climbathon. The government is responsible for key infrastructural requirements, the quality of the physical environment in which sports tourism operates, and the extent to which sports facilities are allowed to develop. Moreover, through both its sports and tourism policies, governments can encourage sports tourism development, and through relevant agencies, promote events and attractions overseas. The administrative arrangements in Sabah provide an insight into the success of this event. Responsibility for developing and marketing tourism rests with the Sabah State Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Environment. Over the years, this Ministry has allocated the budget that has supported the race. In time, sponsors have also contributed to the operational costs for the event. Sabah Parks, the Sabah Tourism Board, and SPS are government agencies under the purview of this Ministry. These agencies have played important roles both in the establishment and success of Climbathon. Therefore, the success of this race can be attributed to the successful collaboration of these three government agencies guided by a clear pro sports tourism policy. The next section elaborates on the role played by each agency.

Sabah Parks was the agency that conceived the idea for this race and was the main organiser between the years 1987-1995. During this period, Sabah Parks made a decision to send representative runners (often national winners of the Climbathon) to participate in the World Mountain Running Trophy organised by WMRA. The purpose was solely to promote the Climbathon and Sabah through printed material distributed at annual WMRA races around the world. Over the years, the key role for Sabah Parks has been to maintain the route for the race, provide route judges and marshals, all of whom are park staff, including mountain guides. Park staff also handled rescue services in collaboration with first aid volunteers from the local hospitals. An important sub-division of Sabah Parks at Kinabalu Park is the Kinabalu Mountain Guides Association consisting of guides and porters, some of whom take on duties as marshals (time-keeping/water-stations) as well as participants in the race itself.

The second agency, the Sabah Tourism Board (known as Sabah Tourism) organised the Climbathon from 1996 with the assistance of Sabah Parks and other voluntary groups. The budget to organise the Climbathon is allocated by the tourism ministry through this agency. Sabah Tourism was instrumental in identifying sport tourism as a vehicle to target the sport tourists market segment. Sabah Tourism had been promoting Kinabalu Park as a nature adventure destination explicitly since the 1980’s. As organisers and marketers of the Climbathon, Sabah Tourism purposefully drew on the adventure element in the marketing of Kinabalu Park through this race.
The Climbathon was used as a form of destination branding for Sabah. By drawing on the accolade “The World’s Toughest Mountain Race”, Sabah Tourism created a distinct brand image which was used to promote the event to both national and international participants.

Sabah Tourism continues to play its role by promoting the Climbathon through its website. The continuous commitment of the Ministry of Tourism through this agency is also visible in the form of financial support for the prize money. In 2010, the race offered USD 33,400 (RM103,500) in prize money (Sri Pelancongan Sabah, 2010). As depicted in Table III, winners receive attractive prize money; and the first runner to reach the peak wins a 24 carat gold pendant. Prize money is also given to runner ups and there are 24 consolation cash prizes. The availability of prize money adds an element of motivation for the participants.

In the year 2000, Sabah Tourism handed over the organisation of the annual Climbathon to its event management subsidiary, SPS. SPS is responsible for trade, merchandising and promotional publications which support the marketing and research roles of Sabah Tourism:

SPS acts as the local organising committee. We focus on the essential supporting elements of any sports event [...] these include pre-race enquiries, registration, hospitality, accommodation, transport, publicity and media. We oversee the Climbathon website, archive race records [...] But, additionally SPS is responsible for ensuring the festive-like atmosphere at the Finish line area where we include local cultural dances. We also coordinate the prize giving ceremony, and keep in touch with some participants until they return the following year (Organising secretary, 26 November 2014).

Membership of international sports organisations

An important success factor for the Climbathon has been membership of international sports organisations. The growth of mountain running internationally was successfully exploited by Sabah Tourism. The ability of tourism planners to recognise this opportunity and their willingness to provide commitment to the Climbathon is a key success factor. Indeed, the international collaboration with WMRA, and Federation of Sports at Altitude (FSA), now known as the ISF heralded a new horizon to the status and prestige associated with the Climbathon. This section examines membership of two organisations in particular, the WMRA and ISF.

In 1995, Sabah Tourism through the MAAU, initiated to have Malaysia accepted as a member nation in the WMRA. Malaysia became the first Asian nation to be a member of the WMRA. Each year, participants and officials from Sabah were sent to compete in WMRA championships in order to promote the Climbathon. This participation translated into plans to bid for a WMRA championship:

Table III.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men’s open (USD)</th>
<th>Women’s open (USD)</th>
<th>Men’s veteran (RM)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>4,500</td>
<td>4,500</td>
<td>3,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>4,000</td>
<td>4,000</td>
<td>2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>3,500</td>
<td>3,500</td>
<td>1,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Sri Pelancongan Sabah (2010)*

Linking sports events to tourism [...] it was a good link. The tourism minister at that time, (DSP) Tan Kit Sher wanted to organize a world championship in Sabah. I was asked to do the
bidding, which must be done through our national athletics federation – MAAU. I received permission from the MAAU president at that time, Dato Khalid Yunus. Our bid on behalf of Malaysia was successful during the WMRA races at Czech Republic in 1997. Datuk Tan went with me to Reunion Island the following year to receive the flag on behalf of Malaysia. We organized the World mountain race in 1999 in a circuit created within Kinabalu Park. It was [...] a plan to link up with WMRA, exposure for Kinabalu and our Climbathon (Race director, 4 December 2014).

On 19 September 1999, Malaysia hosted the 15th World Mountain Running Trophy in Kinabalu Park. The race was scheduled back to back with the Climbathon, with its own route as per its race rules of stipulated climb/race distance ratio. Some runners took part in both races and the Climbathon received an increase in foreign participation: from only 50 international athletes in 1998 to 116 in 1999. The opening ceremony of the World Trophy was officiated by the then Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Mahathir Mohammed, which in itself indicated the level of prestige bestowed upon the event. Moreover, the IAAF dispatched their technical delegates to oversee the event, indicating acceptance by the international sports fraternity.

The long-term strategic planning for the Climbathon involved membership to the WMRA which was used to host an international championship. The mountain running trophy was used to generate publicity for Kinabalu Park through the international media. This was a strategic decision to capitalise on one event in order to consolidate the position of Sabah as a nature adventure sports tourism destination.

International collaboration continued through membership to international sporting organisations. In 2003, the Climbathon became a member of the FSA. The FSA was a private, non-profit federation which had managed skyrunning since 1995. “Skyrunning is defined as running in the mountains above 2,000 metres altitude where the climbing difficulty does not exceed II grade and the incline does not exceed 40%” (www.skyrunning.com, accessed February 2015). The Climbathon fit these criteria and the organisers were invited to join the FSA. In 2009, the FSA was renamed the ISF and remains the only authority representing skyrunning. The principal aims are the direction, regulation, promotion, development and furtherance of the sport of skyrunning and similar multisport activities at altitude on a worldwide basis in accordance with the Olympic charter (www.skyrunning.com, accessed February 2015). Quite simple, skyrunning is the dedicated sport of running up and down mountains at altitude (Cooper, 2006).

Since 2004, the Climbathon has been part of the ISF annual Skyrunner World Series race circuit as its final race (14 races in 13 countries with participants from 37 countries as at 2010). The World Series attracts competitors who are top athletes from around the world aiming to improve their ranking in the international skyrunning arena. Points are awarded per race, calculated for each team and combined to provide an international ranking. Of the 14 member nations, Malaysia, through the Climbathon, was one of the only two Asian nations within this group, and for close to a decade remained the only race in the circuit which was held outside of Europe. The Climbathon was the final leg of Skyrunner circuit until 2011 when a new Asian Mountain Race Circuit was introduced in 2012. The ISF are very strict with member nations and scrutinise every race included in the circuit which is a testament of the high sports standards associated with the Climbathon.

Additionally through this collaboration, the Climbathon received the added benefit of organisers’ visibility through specific promotional material produced by the ISF. Affiliated races and their sponsors receive exposure through the official ISF website.
and through federation communication. At the same time, race organiser’s promotional material must include the ISF logo and the official competition category logo (e.g. “Skyrunner® World Series”). Inadvertently, this membership provides valuable international promotion for both the Climbathon and ISF ensuring participation from mountain runners.

A key outcome linked to membership has been the presence and availability of participants. Membership of the ISF ensured member nations sent participants and officials to the race, on a yearly basis. As part of an international circuit, where participants compete with likeminded runners, participation in the race is highly desirable. With its distinctive location and as one of the 14 races which occurred during the ISF calendar year, it is an attractive race for avid mountain runners.

As depicted in Table IV, the numbers of international participants at this race have continued to grow. Since the 2004 entry into the ISF circuit, the numbers of both foreign and local participants have steadily increased with the continuous participation of repeat nations, and also the arrival of newcomers on a yearly basis. By its 25th year, the Climbathon had an established base of mountain runners who returned each year to take on the challenge. Over the years, local participants, or Sabahans have also increasingly participated in the race. Mountain runners often pick and choose their races to include new places as well as a return to familiar places (White, 2012)

Corporate sponsorship
In its 25-year history, the Climbathon has received support in terms of sponsorship from various organisations some of which has continued to the present day. This includes Malaysia Airlines (discounted airfares for participants and apparel), Telekom Malaysia, Sutera Sanctuary Lodges, Tourism Malaysia, Spritzer (mineral water) and Exotic Adventure (ground handling and tours). Future work can examine the importance of gaining corporate sponsorship to understand its contribution to the success of a sport tourism event. Additionally, the organisers have also received support from local government (district offices, government hospitals) and local media (Radio & Television Malaysia, local press) as well as international media including sport magazines.

Sense of kinabalu
Mount Kinabalu is a special place for the local Dusun community who live in villages at the foothills of this mountain which is revered and considered sacred. The Climbathon has evolved to become part of Kinabalu Park. For two days a year, the hive of all activity centres on this mountain race. It is suggested that most of the key stakeholders involved in the organisation of this race possess a strong sense of place (SOP) towards Mount Kinabalu and its Climbathon. SOP is the sentiment of attachment which humans develop in relation to physical places, and can be defined as the emotional, cognitive and functional bonds with a place (Stedman, 2003). Most of the local officials on duty as

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>279</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>322</td>
<td>364</td>
<td>368</td>
<td>493</td>
<td>740</td>
<td>735</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| International | 71  | 49  | 50  | 44  | 77  | 64  | 83  | 91  | 123 | 172 | 226 | 199  |

**Table IV.** Participants at the Climbathon between the year 2000 and 2011

**Source:** Sri Pelancongan Sabah (2014)
well as volunteers during the race have been involved with this event for over two decades. The park, its mountain and this race are deeply meaningful places for them. The Climbathon is a source of pride for these stakeholders, particularly as the event is a successful collaboration of local agencies. In the wider loop, the sub-committees consist of loyal individuals who volunteer to be on duty during the Climbathon, purely because of the satisfaction they gain from the experience of being part of this race (28th Mt. Kinabalu International Climbathon, 2014). The individuals who dedicate themselves to organising the Climbathon do so, in the spirit of knowing that every successful Climbathon consolidates the accolade bestowed upon this race, and promotes Mount Kinabalu and the park to the world. Here, it is suggested that the long-term benefits of staging this small-scale event includes a consolidation of local people’s SOP towards Kinabalu Park.

Discussion
The purpose of this study was to delineate the key success factors that have contributed to the staging of a small-scale sports tourism event, the Climbathon. To achieve this, a qualitative case study approach incorporating documents, oral history interviews, and observations produced six insights, or success factors for the Climbathon. Findings identified how this sports event was developed and managed to ensure longevity. Although successfully staged for over 25 years, published knowledge of this best practice was unavailable and this study addresses the gap in knowledge of mountain-based events held in Asia. At this juncture, it is necessary to broaden the utility of these success factors for sports event tourism on a wider scale. Therefore, this paper suggests three pillars which define this event, or a 3P model representing “Place-Plan-People” which may be used to develop and deliver small-scale sports events. Each of these will be discussed in relation to the Climbathon and the literature.

First, for the successful staging and longevity of an event, its location is a primary factor because it is the facility, or venue. The Climbathon occurs at Kinabalu Park, a World Heritage Site located 84 kilometres, and only over an hour away by road from the capital city of Kota Kinabalu, meaning it is accessible. In addition, Mount Kinabalu fits the ISF criteria of “where earth meets the sky” (Lawless, 2013). Therefore, the Climbathon is an international sport tourism event (activity) that takes place within a World Heritage Site (location in an unusual place) which supports suggestions by Weed and Bull (2009) and Hinch and Higham (2011). In combination, the activity and its location contribute to the uniqueness of the sports tourism experience, uplifting its significance and acts as a catalyst to race here. This “sporting venue” cannot be replicated; a competitor could not produce a similar route, the challenge of the race nor the total experience. This is a key competitive advantage of the Climbathon as location cannot be a secondary issue because it contributes to distinctiveness of an event and also determines the pool of participants that might compete based on accessibility to the event. Additionally, Kinabalu Park, managed by Sabah Parks, offers the necessary services needed to deliver this event including food and beverage, accommodation, transportation, as well as venues for briefings and prize-giving. The town of Kundasang with its burgeoning supply of bed and breakfasts, and lodges offers accommodation to participants, some of whom arrive weeks in advance in order to acclimatise and try out the route. Overall, the physical environment at Kinabalu Park and its surrounding area acts to transform a site of biodiversity into a sports space first, and then into a meaningful place for participants, enticing them to return annually which supports Hinch and Higham (2011). Therefore, “Place” should be considered the first pillar of a successful event.
The next pillar, “Plan” encompasses the strategic directions which have guided the rise of the Climbathon from a regional to international event. In contrast to the literature (Glyptis, 1991; Weed and Bull, 2009), the Climbathon indicates a strong level of integration between sport and tourism public policy. In line with Chalip (2004), the event organisers of the Climbathon identified strategies and tactics that were implemented prior to and during an event. Public policy favouring sport tourism through representation and participation at WMRA races with local athletes was an effective positioning strategy that ensured European mountain runners had heard of and some subsequently attended the Climbathon. By hosting the World Mountain Running Trophy in 1999, pathways to the ISF dawned on this small-scale event. Membership to the WMRA, FSA and ISF were calculated measures which were worthwhile. The ISF membership linked the Climbathon to skyrunners around the world through the Skyrunner World Series, enticing international participants and elite runners to the toughest race in the circuit. And where elite athletes race, the international media appears for coverage (Westerbeek et al., 2002). This was valuable exposure for the race simultaneously promoting Sabah as the location of a unique sporting event (Kler, 2000). Undeniably, the appearance of elites as a Marco de Gasperi, Kilian Jornet, Emelie Forsberg, Anna Frost and others over the years due to the ISF connection has served to raise the profile of the Climbathon. Additionally, the Climbathon was organised as a physical, competitive sport activity, with codified rules which supports Standeven and De Knop (1999), who state from the onset, success will depend on the “sport” element, and only later how well it is transformed into an event. The ISF have stringent regulations to include races in their world series based on quality of organisation and history of race: a testament to the forte of the Climbathon. Additionally, the role of the tourism ministry of Sabah over the years has been outstanding, not least through its generous funding. Without a doubt, because all three agencies involved in the organisation and delivery of the Climbathon come under the purview of one ministry, this enhanced stakeholder cooperation and built the right partnerships from the onset to stage this event. The longevity of the Climbathon also indicates the event management capabilities of the organisers. On an annual basis, well-crafted plans are put into motion to welcome mountain runners due to this strategic second pillar. Equally, the organisers are very clear about the philosophy behind the Climbathon, that it is a mountain race targeting mountain runners. As such, it continues to uphold the accolade “World’s Toughest Mountain Race” among skyrunners. Therefore, the second pillar, “Plan” ensures sporting regulations, policy, and purpose are well thought through and supported by stakeholders.

Finally, the last pillar refers to “People”, incorporating both participants and the people involved in the organisation and delivery of this event. The Climbathon has succeeded in attracting a niche market that includes mountain runners, skyrunners, elite athletes, local, regional and international participants. This niche market has ensured the race had a steady supply of participants as suggested by the literature (Getz, 2003; Harrison-Hill and Chalip, 2006). It can be suggested that participants are attracted to the prestige associated with competing in this annual challenge because mountain running is also a lifestyle choice. Membership of running clubs, choice of available races in the vicinity will continue to attract a niche group of runners to the Climbathon.

Even as participants are imperative to an event, its longevity may be incumbent upon the people organising the event. The Climbathon succeeds because there is cooperation, or teamwork between people representing numerous government
agencies, sports associations, travel intermediaries and corporate sponsors. An intricate web of event organisers, officials and volunteers passionate about the event arrive at Kinabalu Park annually. Prior to and during the event, there are 16 distinct sub-committees with clearly defined roles within the organising committee. Most of the personnel involved have a long history of involvement with this event, dedication and passion, which contributes to the continuity and flow of event delivery. If athletes race for medals, cash and accolades, what do event organisers gain from a race? Findings suggest the Climbathon promotes a sense of pride for the personnel involved and is a meaningful event to the organisers which supports suggestions by Higham (1999) and Mair and Whitford (2013). As such, “People” is an integral component of the best practice model suggested here.

Conclusion
This paper has examined what ensures the success of a small-scale international sports tourism event using the Climbathon as a case study. Findings suggest the Climbathon has endured the test of time due to an innovative use of summit trail, adherence to international sporting regulations, a pro sports tourism public policy led by the tourism ministry, membership to international sports organisations, corporate sponsorship, and a SOP towards Mount Kinabalu and the Climbathon. This paper suggests a 3P best practice model incorporating Place, Plan and People that could be applied to small-scale sports tourism events in Asia and elsewhere. Key success factors in the literature are normally a long list of items that may now consider the 3P model for event development and delivery.

Findings demonstrate best practices of one event in Asia of an international stature which may be applicable in a similar setting or adapted for local events. Other small scale, recurring sports events in Asia (Fuji Mountain Race, ultra-trail marathons) should be researched to address knowledge of the events and tourism link as suggested by Mair and Whitford (2013). Events tourism researchers could attempt to incorporate oral history as a research tool when the purpose of research is to identify patterns or growth across several decades. In Sabah alone, there are over ten recurring events in the tourism calendar that deserve academic attention. It seems the divide between practitioners and academics remain where the two sides do not collaborate on understanding the true worth of an event. The legacy of the Climbathon can be seen in the range of spin-off adventure races which have grown into annual events including the Sabah Adventure Challenge. Others are Malaysia’s first Ultra-Trail race “The Most Beautiful Thing” held at and around Kinabalu Park with 800 participants in 2015. Sabah has become well-known as an ultra-trail running venue thanks to the annual Climbathon.

This case study has collated useful knowledge about the Climbathon but it is not without limitations. Findings are contextual and time-bound. Future work could expand the scope of the sample by incorporating interviews with participants, spectators, volunteers and the local sub-committees. Also, an in depth study on each success factor can be conducted to gain deeper insight. This case study could provide useful insights for the Climbathon organisers especially in light of the new Adventure Series route since 2012 which has been affected by the earthquake in 2015. Findings presented in this paper are valuable to tourism destinations that might have their own unique natural resource which could produce a similar event. There is potential for comparative studies in the Asian region. In 2016, there is Fuji Mountain Race held at Mt. Fuji (3,776 metres), Japan in its 69th year. The Philippines International Skyrace at
Mt. Ugo (2,150 metres) held for the 5th year. Additionally, the Lantau 2 Peaks race in Hong Kong covering Lantau Peak (934 metres) and Sunset Peak (807 metres) remains on the skyrunning circuit of events.

In conclusion, the proposed three pillar model of “Place-Plan-People” incorporates the six success factors behind 25 years of the Climbathon. This study is an exemplary case of a unique race, and its best practices that contribute to the sport tourism events management literature. Mountain running is now a popular sport in Asia and the ISF circuit continues to attract formidable competitors in this region. From its inception, the objectives of the Climbathon were to promote Mount Kinabalu, Kinabalu Park and Sabah to the world: this goal has been achieved, and surpassed by this small-scale sports event organised annually in a small corner of Southeast Asia.

References


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