

Exploring Definitions and Practices of Responsible Tourism in Kinabalu National Park, Sabah, Malaysia*

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Responsible tourism is part of alternative tourism that is able to replace mass tourism. Kinabalu National Park is a nature-based tourism destination that has been declared by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization World Heritage Committee (UNESCO WHC) as a World Natural Heritage Site. This paper presents an exploratory research work in exploring and identifying the definition and practices of responsible tourism by the tour operators and park management on Kinabalu National Park, Sabah. Qualitative method is used to collect data through 21 in-depth interviews with tour operators in Sabah who operate tours at the Kinabalu National Park and two interviews with park management. This paper defines responsible tourism from the perspective of tour operators, as a form of tourism that creates a better destination for tourists and local communities, minimizes negative impacts, and is related to sustainability, ecotourism, green tourism, and environmental friendliness; it also relates to responsible tourism practices as implemented by the tour operators and park management of Kinabalu Park. The findings of this paper showed that the practice of responsible tourism is limited when implemented by tour operators in Kinabalu National Park due to the fact that the Kinabalu Park is under the management of Sabah Parks.

Keywords: practices of responsible tourism, tour operators' perspective, park management, Kinabalu National Park

Introduction

Tourism is seen as a high environment impact industry by its operations and is regarded as the largest industry worldwide (World Travel and Tourism Council [WTTC], International Federation of Tour Operators [IFTO], International Hotel and Restaurant Association [IH&RA], International Council for Cruise Lines [ICCL], United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP], 2002). The Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 highlighted the importance of responsible tourism through the Rio Declaration, which articulated the main principles of sustainable development in the 21st century (WTTC et al., 2002; Merwe & Wocke, 2007). "Responsible tourism" is a term first used by South Africa through a White Paper on "Development and Promotion of Tourism in South Africa" in 1996. The first Responsible Tourism Conference led to the "Cape Town Declaration" in 2002 where responsible tourism was defined as a three-tiered approach: to

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