

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

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.