

## **Communicating ethnic identity through ecotourism**

### **Abstract**

Advertising is a ubiquitous medium of representation in tourism, often forming the first point of contact between the visitor and the destination. It is often however the case that such advertisements, especially when authored and promoted by commercial agents, may not faithfully depict or reflect cultural, social and environmental realities, and in some cases may not actually correspond with the characteristics of the advertised location or community at all. This paper seeks to understand whether ecotourism strategies can provide an alternative means of advertising, and the operation of sustainable, low impact tourism programs that provide a more faithful reflection of the host community and environment for the visitor, and harness the local knowledge and culture of the hosts to their own advantage. Based on field interviews and participant-observation, this paper presents an example of how the Murut Tahol community in the heartland of Borneo has employed the concepts of ecotourism in a variety of ways to attract visitors and to display their cultural and ethnic identity, and its connection with the environment. The results of this study indicate that ecotourism packages can be tailored, arranged and presented in such a way as to harness a more authentic cultural experience that benefits both the visitor and the host community. This paper argues that the state and commercial tour operators must engage, empower and employ local actors and communities as tourism agents, hosts and facilitators of ecotourism activities.