

Ecotourism, local community and partners for wetlands? in the lower Kinabatangan area of Sabah: managing conservation or conflicts?

Abstract

Scientific research on biodiversity conducted by WWF Malaysia during the 1980s claimed that the Lower Kinabatangan Floodplain (Wetlands) including Sukau had the very good potential for ecotourism because it is home to many rare and endangered species such as orangutan, and the proboscis monkey, Borneo elephants, birds and reptiles. In the 1990s, an ecotourism project was introduced to Sukau Village where several private tour operators built tourist lodges along the Kinabatangan riverbank. Since then, some local people (Orang Sungai) have begun to participate in tourism activities and services. Many forest areas in this wetland area (Lower Kinabatangan area) however, were converted into palm oil plantations. Thus, the main questions in this scenario are to what extent has the Partners for Wetlands program have impacted the socio-cultural life of the local community, and what has been the effect on the stakeholder's activities in this area? To what extent can ecotourism be considered as a potential instrument for community development and/or environmental conservation in this wetlands area? Does the Partner for Wetlands program manage conservation, or does it manage conflict of interests among the stakeholders in this area?