Comprehending the responsible tourism practices through principles of sustainability: A case of Kinabalu Park

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ABSTRACT

This study initiates a research into the practices of responsible tourism in the UNESCO National Park, a place with high levels of biodiversity and value that is worthy of preservation. The responsible tourism definitions, practices and challenges emerged through an intense scrutiny of textual data, which were collected through in-depth interviews with 25 tour operators and park management. Results indicated that responsibility was constructed around the principles of sustainability, or a reification of, ecological friendliness, economical viability and sociocultural amicability in Kinabalu Park, Sabah. Finally, the paper exemplified three implication practices to boost responsible tourism development in Kinabalu Park and other similar parks.

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1. Introduction

Tourism offers the potential to provide economic development, through the provisions of increased income and employment and funding for the maintenance of national parks as well as conserving nature (Buultjens, Ratnayake, Gnanapala, & Aslam, 2005). However, the economic benefits of tourism can come at the expense of natural resources and may affect future generations who will likely depend on the said natural resources (UNEP & WTO, 2011). National parks are regarded as places with high levels of biodiversity and unique ecosystems. This is especially so for UNESCO selected parks which are valued and charged with the conservation of social, environmental and economic features. Therefore, responsible tourism has emerged as a preventive approach to maintain the sustainability of parks. Despite responsible tourism being a vague concept that is difficult to operationalize (Merwe & Wöcke, 2007), it is still a very important guideline for tour operators and authorities to implement. The attainment of responsible tourism requires careful management of tourists' and residents' behaviours to prevent deleterious effects on the environment, sociocultural setting and visitors' satisfaction.

Whilst there is a great deal of research emerging in the field of responsible tourism, a majority is focused on the corporate social responsibility by hotels (Merwe & Wöcke, 2007) and tourism enterprises (Coles, Fenclova, & Dinan, 2013; Frey & George, 2010). Other

research on responsible tourism concentrate on the tourists' perspective and trends (Caruana, Glozer, Crane, & McCabe, 2014; Goodwin & Francis, 2003; Ramachandran, 2009) and locals or hosts' perspectives (Ramachandran, 2009; Sin, 2010). Other studies have covered the factors influencing the degree of responsibility shown by tour operators (Budeanu, 2009; Khairat & Maher, 2012; Miller, 2001). By contrast, there are relatively few studies of tour operators' and park managers' perspectives on the meaning of responsible tourism practices (Stanford, 2008). Yet, tour operators have long been a source of irascibility among the critics who argue that the negative impacts of tourism are more or less in part caused by the actions of operators who therefore have a responsibility to act (Miller, 2001).

As a result, there is a dearth of knowledge on tour operators' and park managers' own understanding of responsible tourism or how they construct their practices as 'responsible'. This study posits that due to the lack of this knowledge, it is impractical to foster collaboration among multi-stakeholders. This is due to the missing link of both marketers' and managers' understanding of what it means to be responsible and how they reconcile their implementations as responsible or irresponsible. Therefore, this research is aimed at exploring the definition, practices and challenges of implementing and achieving responsible tourism by tour operators and park officers in a stellar case study at Kinabalu Park, Sabah.

2. Responsible tourism and the practices

Responsible tourism has enjoyed a long history as a preventive approach to maintain park sustainability. Responsible tourism shares

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much in common with 'sustainable tourism', 'ecotourism' and other related forms of nature and socially-conscious tourism practices (Caruana et al., 2014). The 'responsible tourism' label is by far the most favoured industry term that is used by tour operators (Caruana et al., 2014; SNV, 2009). In 1987, Krippendorf had presumed that tourism marketing needed to be more environmentally-oriented and socially responsible in order to satisfy the more demanding tourists in the 1990s and 21st century. Today, this presumption has been confirmed and has positively changed the tourism industry's attitudes to being environmental friendly. Responsible tourism has become an important means for tour operators to gain competitive advantages, including to ensure long-term viability of their businesses, differentiate their products in the market and create a positive image through local community collaborations (Caruana et al., 2014; SNV, 2009).

Nevertheless, vision and practices of responsible tourism were not without critics. For instance, Wheeller (1991) noted that responsible tourism was adopted more often as a marketing ploy than for ethical management. Responsible tourism was also politicised in the tourism research context, leaning towards progressive neoliberalism (Duffy, 2008) and being a burden in retrospect to the history of colonialism (Sin, 2010). Notwithstanding such critiques, the adoption of responsible tourism as an umbrella term for a wide range of responsibility practices by the actors in the tourism industry and tourists themselves is by now fairly well established. Given the burgeoning stream of literature, the studies vary in terms of how they frame the loci of responsible tourism. Bramwell, Lane, McCabe, Mosedale, and Scarles (2008) outlined that there were four research perspectives in the responsible tourism context: the relationship of production and consumption, types of actor relations, the role of different actors reflecting issues of responsibility or how they behave towards responsibility, and finally political assumptions underpinning responsible tourism.

Responsible tourism and business shared the same three approaches to the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) (Merwe & Wöcke, 2007). The first approach was the accountability to shareholders, the second was the responsibility to the stakeholders who could influence or are influenced by the outcome of a company's objective and lastly, as well as the more recent approach, was the responsibility to the society within where the business operated (Van Marrewijk, 2003). Apart from that, Garriga and Melé (2004) grouped CSR theories and related approaches into four categories: (1) instrumental theories, i.e. mainly for wealth creation, similar to Van Marrewijk's shareholder approach, (2) political theories, i.e. power of corporations in society, (3) integrative theories, i.e. satisfaction of social demands and (4) ethical theories, reflecting the societal approach. These approaches and theories were applied by Merwe and Wöcke (2007) in their study to define the concept of responsible tourism by African hoteliers.

Merwe and Wocke's findings showed that the responsible tourism concept was defined as the future of sustainable industry, protecting the environment and ethical business practices. These elements seemed to be a common definition of responsible tourism in the African industry. However, the application of "South African" definitions of responsible tourism to Malaysian tour operators and park managers may deprive them of the opportunity to express what they really understood about the term of responsible tourism: to the extent that the South African understanding of responsible tourism may or may not be relevant in the Malaysian context. This study took a different approach with a qualitative approach.

In addition, a number of responsible tourism initiatives in South Africa, entrenched in the White Paper on the Development and Promotion of Tourism (DEAT, 1996), were carried out by the government, which included volunteer guidelines, certification of membership organisations and responsible tourism awards. Merwe and Wöcke (2007) found that when member organisations had a clearer understanding and conceptualisation of the term related to responsibility, they more likely they were to practise the responsible tourism guidelines and be aware of the business rationales thereof, such as marketing advantages.

In contrast, the park authorities of Kinabalu Park (Sabah Parks) were playing a reactive role in terms of responsible tourism initiative (Goh, 2008). According to Goh's findings, the financial budget analysis revealed that Sabah Parks has not shown strong support to nature conservations even when the privatisation programme was enforced.

Responsible tourism practices were recognised as an effective way to motivate tour operators to achieve long-term sustainability (Budeanu, 2005; SNV, 2009). Tearfund (2002), DEAT (2013), and UNEP (2005) outlined a number of responsible tourism practices to sustain a tourism destination. These practices can be categorised into six categories: raising awareness, cleaner production, local capacity development, green supply chain management, internal management and sustainability reporting (Chan & Tay, 2015). Most of the prior studies concluded that the most popular practice by tour operators was to encourage customers to use low impact products. Another frequent implementation was to use environment-friendly products, which was found in Font's and Merwe and Wocke's studies. Nevertheless, in the report by Tearfund (2002, p. 20), Gordon highlighted that "*if tour operators did not have an ethical code and were not providing information to tourists on the benefits they bring to people in destinations, it was doubtful whether they knew themselves what impact they were having.*" Gordon further contended that tourists were more actively looking for a responsible experience and were no longer satisfied with policies that were in place but not implemented or without evidence provided.

Whilst some works examined the practices of responsible tourism implemented by tour operators (Khairat & Maher, 2012; Tepelus, 2005; UNEP, 2005), few studies explored both the tour operators' and park managers' own construction of responsible tourism, how they classified their practices as responsible or irresponsible and the challenges they faced. Budeanu (2009) delineated that local authorities' limited considerations towards responsible tourism practices may affect the way tour operators handled their tourism activities. To address this omission, this study explored the tour operators' and park managers' views of responsible tourism by using emerging themes from the data of ecological friendliness, economical viability and sociocultural amicability and sought to interpret how they defined and practised responsible tourism in Kinabalu Park, Malaysia.

3. Methodology

The empirical substance of this paper represented a subset of data derived from a case study of Kinabalu Park in Sabah, Malaysia. This study involved two stakeholders: tour operators and park managers of Kinabalu Park. Tour operators were licensed in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia and currently operated tours at Kinabalu Park. Park managers were responsible for the conservation programmes and safeguarded the sustainability of Kinabalu Park.

3.1. Kinabalu Park

A flagship site of Malaysia is the World Heritage Site of Kinabalu Park, classified as a biodiversity hotspot with the highest mountain in Southeast Asia (Backhaus, 2005). Kinabalu Park is one of the oldest World Heritage Sites in Malaysia and well-known domestically and internationally for its diverse flora and suitability for climbing. Kinabalu Park is a protected area under category II identified by the IUCN (2000) and is a World Natural Heritage Site (UNESCO, 2013). The park is located at the northern tip of the Crocker Range that forms the backbone of mainland Sabah. Kinabalu Park is surrounded by 45 villages which share a common boundary with the park (Nais, 1996). With a combined population of over 15,000 people in the villages, these communities are comprised of the Dusun or Dusun-Kadazan ethnic sub-groups who have occupied the area for generations (Hamzah, Ong, & Pampanga, 2013; Nais, 1996). The map of Kinabalu Park's boundary and the villages are shown in Fig. 1. The Kinabalu Park has four

Fig. 1. Location of Kinabalu Park. Source: World Heritage Site (2011).

substations namely Sayap in the Kota Belud District, Nalapak and Serinsim in the Kota Marudu District, and Monggis in the Ranau District.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

The qualitative and audiotape transcribe texts analysed in this paper were from tour operators and park managers of Kinabalu Park. The purposive sampling strategy resulted in a total of 25 tour operators and 3 park managers. The participants were contacted through telephone or email. Those operators who were interested in participating in the research were asked to participate in an in-depth interview. After agreeing and giving their permissions, research invitation letters were emailed to Sabah Parks and three park managers who agreed to be involved in the study. Participants in the study were assured of their anonymity via the use of number as pseudonyms.

Interviews with the tour operators occurred in offices (n = 25) and ranged from 45 to 90 min in length. Interviews with the park managers were held in the offices at the park's headquarters (n = 3) and ranged from 60 to 120 min in length. The pre-formulated research questions were intended to be semi-structured. Responses were open ended for participants and the interviewer to expand upon the responses at the discretion of the interviewer and interviewee. The interview commenced with a short self-introduction and an introduction to the research. To answer the research questions, the participants were asked non-leading questions such as "Why do you say so?" and "When planning a responsible tour to Kinabalu Park, what comes to mind?" These were part and parcel of phenomenological interviewing (Arsel & Thompson, 2011), enabling the respondent to construct narratives of their experiences on responsible tourism practices from a wider nexus of discourses (Caruana et al., 2014; Fletcher, 2009; Grimwood, Yudina, Muldoon, & Qiu, 2015).

The adoption of a constructivism–interpretivism approach follows Lawson's (2006, p. 16) the view of the interview as a socially constructed event and interprets the hidden meanings underlying social action (interviewee). This approach activates respondents' narrative production through open-ended and topic-based questioning (Smith, 2006). Drawing on the nature of phenomelogical-based research, the interviewee may identify with multiple narrative positions (Arsel & Thompson, 2011), even ones that seemingly contradict each other,

allowing the interviewer to probe the linkages between, and hidden context of, the themes which are formed based on emergence of narrative constructions (Caruana et al., 2014). With the constructivism–interpretivism approach, the researchers began to disaggregate the body of text into related parts by using mind mapping, which was to clear the mind of previous assumptions about the responsible subjects (Buzan & Buzan, 1994). Guided by the interview protocol and the research aim of this study, data were categorised into main themes.

The analysis followed the guidelines of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith & Osborn, 2007). IPA allows researchers who are concerned with how people describe their lived experiences and also interprets how people make sense of an experience through interpretative activity (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The IPA guidelines call for a procedure in which the researcher first evaluates the data by looking for relevant and recurring themes. The emergent themes are listed, and thereby looking for connections between themes. A combination of themes and quotes was used to interpret the responsible tourism practices. The analysis approach was completed by two researchers who independently applied IPA and then results were compared to assess inter-rater consistency of the data. The emergent themes were returned to the interviewees for member checking and then were further reviewed by another two researchers. Several iterations between the researchers and interviewees were completed before a final structure was accepted. Quotes were directly extracted from interviews with tour operators and park manager to illustrate the range and depth of themes about responsible tourism practices in Kinabalu Park.

The demographic profiles showed that the majority of the participants were Malaysians (92%) and of male gender (52%). Two-thirds of the participants worked at the managerial or executive level and the remaining 36% were chief executive officers, owners (16%) or at director levels (20%). Table 1 summarises the demographic profiles of the study participants. The demographic profiles revealed that most of the respondents were Sabahans (Malaysians) living in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. Only two Japanese tour operators were involved in the interview. Furthermore, respondents were all specialist tour operators promoting and selling Sabah tour packages including trips to Kinabalu Park. The majority of the respondents worked in management positions and were therefore authorised to make decisions for the tour company. The executive level respondents were the persons who held

Table 1
The profiles of tour operators.

No.	Demographic variable	No. of participants
1.	Nationality (regionally)	
	Sabahan (Malaysian)	26
	Japanese	2
2.	Gender	
	Male	16
	Female	12
3.	Position	
	Chief executive officer or owner	4
	Director (sales director, managing director)	5
	Manager (operation manager, sales manager, sales and operation manager, business development manager)	8
	Executive (tours operation, sales)	8
4.	Sabah management team	
	Park's managers	3

responsibility for the design and planning of the tours to and promotions of Kinabalu Park. Executives were also responsible for community relations, including relations with the park managers.

4. Findings

4.1. Ecological friendliness

The analysis revealed two ecological principles of responsibility definition represented by tour operators and park management. First, participants interpreted responsible tourism as protecting the environment. The interview responses included responsibility to conserve the natural resources for the next generation, to sustain or protect nature and the environment, and to use environmentally friendly products. A tour operator expressed that, "Responsible tourism to me is protecting the destinations for the generations to come. If we don't protect, our children will not be able to enjoy the unspoilt nature as what we found it." This was predictable because most of the tour operators were locals (Sabahans). Local customs, rules and practices for the transmission to future generations were essential to the local people's enjoyment of human rights and human dignity (Battiste, 2000).

The second principle, the circumscription of responsible tourism, circulated around an ethics of 'leaving no trace' or to reduce the stresses on the destinations. Participant 25 mentioned that, "Responsible tourism is more or less about lowering the impacts to the local environment and ecosystem." Only one participant (7) mentioned that reducing the negative environmental impacts through eco-packaging. Participant 7, for example, who understood responsible tourism with responsibility practices in eco-packaging, expounded that, "We can package the product that has less negative impacts on the environment, such as eco-packaging by using green cars to reduce carbon dioxide emissions … to avoid air pollution."

Tour operators minimised the environmental impacts by following a number of responsible tourism practices. Among these, awareness-raising emerged with an overwhelming conviction and was widely considered as a practice of common sense. This was because the management of Kinabalu Park was pertained to Sabah Parks, thus they were unauthorised to perform responsible tourism practices at will. For instance, participant 7 noted that Kinabalu Park "is a World Heritage Site, so we cannot do much as it's under the management of Sabah Park. However, as a tour operator, we can contact Sabah Parks if we have any comments come from our clients. Actually, what we can do is to educate the tourists... We have distributed the information to our clients such as 'Take Nothing but Photographs'." On the same subject, participant 13 highlighted that, "Pictures and memories belong to you, but not the environmental resources … what we can do is create awareness among our clients. Other things like the programmes or activities are not up to us. It depends on the government and Sabah Parks."

Sabah Parks has organised many training and educational programmes for the public, especially for the mountain guides and students. Conduction of awareness programme and environmental research for visitors and society surrounding the park were one of the missions for Sabah Parks. The assistant director of research and education expressed that, "We have organised educational campaigns to students, who visited to Kinabalu Park … The training were also provided to mountain guides and porters, for example English conservation training, eco-practices knowledge and mountain cleaning activities." Although both tour operators and Sabah Parks executed numerous distinct actions of awareness rising yet, the findings showed that awareness was still low in the tourism industry, as participant 13 evidenced that, "Low awareness was a challenge for us. Not only the tourists and local residents but some other companies did not appreciate the 'greenness'; they really made a lot of trouble." Park managers also indicated that shifting one's awareness into action was an arduous task. As Budeanu (2007) instructed, awareness was merely for strengthening the attitude but not shown in action.

Another responsibility practice was cleaner production, which was the production that integrated preventive environmental strategy (UNEP, 2001). One participant (11) mentioned that: "Mongolian Yurt is our lodge which was built with reused materials." Reuse of used material can be categorised into cleaner production practice because it minimised the use of raw resources, saves the cost of building, decreases contamination and human health risks and is better environmental compliance (Ashton, Luque, & Ehrenfeld, 2002). Likewise, cleaner production also included the river (participant 14) and mountain (park manager) cleaning activities and preparation of dustbins in buses and vans to dissuade passengers from throwing rubbish out the windows (participant 23). Other than that, the zone division was used prominently by Sabah Parks to protect the sensitive zones. The park manager explained that, "Some zones were prohibited areas and some zones were only open for researchers and scientists who want to explore new species or to do research." Licences were issued to mountain guides who were qualified to lead climbers and annual training was provided by Sabah Parks for the said guides. Conservation strategies, as responsible tourism practices, were also mentioned by the park director, which included the understanding of plant and animal species of special concern. He said it was important to know the factors that threaten flora and fauna as to organise resources in order to protect endangered species, especially rare orchids. Carrying capacity was also enforced by Sabah Parks and only 10% of the landscape is allowed for tourism development, as well as the number of climbers at one time is limited.

Typically, these practices of environmental protection were met with certain challenges and can be characterised as a scar on the realisation of responsible tourism in the park. Issues like the population pressure was a significant barrier to the practice of cleaner production. Participant 7 mentioned that, "Tour operator sector is growing up, so for certain periods the destinations are crowded and it may affect the tourists' experience and also bring negative impact to the ecological system." Participant 17 added that, "Privatisation, if you want them (Sutera Sanctuary Lodge) to decrease the (numbers of) climbers, they must decline; but the first solution is to decrease the numbers of climbers, they were the main sources of pollution." Population pressure constitutes a major threat to World Heritage Sites (Li, Wu, & Cai, 2008). Some participants stated that it was hard to set a limit for visitors in Kinabalu Park because restaurants and resorts were privatised, thus the company may not agree to limit the visitors. According to Goh and Yusoff (2010, p. 182), monopoly control of the accommodation and eateries' facilities, especially at Laban Rata, demonstrated the risk of having the private sector dominating the business as the sole player in the market. The lack of economic competition enabled the private sector to create artificial shortages (e.g., overbooking).

Apart from this, Sabah Parks and tour operators encountered identical limitations of green technology of modernity. One of the park managers mentioned that "high cost and technology such as CCTV and some

devices were not viable in practice, like solar cells can only generate limited energy." Three tour operators noted that transportation was a major cause of air pollution but they have limited choices because Malaysia still did not have green buses, which were vehicles with green engines that consume less petroleum than conventional vehicles or used renewable energy sources to fuel the engines. For instance, participant 14 identified that, "Another challenge is transportation like vans and bus. We do not have green engines unless it's a car" and participant 17 clarified that, "It is hard to practise green tourism in practical. Buses and vans are using diesel and causes air pollution."

Human encroachment was another challenge encountered by park management. As park managers pointed out that "local people go into the Park for illegal hunting: they do not have the intention but were hired by others to hunt." As a matter of fact, aboriginal people were aware that conservation required the expulsion of all hunting and trapping however, the lure of money has made them blind. This implied that in spite of local residents who had no intention to hunt, many do so just to make ends meet. Additionally, the curiosity of tourists jeopardise the rare species, especially orchids. As participant 13 says that "They know and care about nature, but they just want to try to take these flowers. They want to bring them back home and to see whether they (the rare flowers) will survive and flourish or not."

4.2. Economical viability

The economic sources were represented in park managers' texts as 'viable' to national park tourism development and conservation support. According to Goh and Yusoff (2010), a socio-economic principle of sustainability is that financial revenue behoves to support conservation activities in the park. Park managers identified responsible tourism as accountable in ensuring the pecuniary used for conservation activities in the park. An assistant park manager of research and education division stated that, "Financial revenue generated from tourism activities (such as entrance fee, canopy walk, climber license…) in the park was partially allocated to support research, training, and conservation strategy. For example, ex-situ conservation programmes for rare and unique threatened species."

On the contrary, economic profit was very vital for tour operators' business sustainability. Whilst profit was recognised within the business circles as 'sweet' and 'favoured', tour operators generated a marked profit at Kinabalu Park, thereby owning responsibility for natural protection. For example, interviewee 2 conveyed that, "If the environment in the park was not protected, it would be no more attractive, nobody would come and we will be forced to shut down in the end." Interviewee 9 also noted that, "We make money from nature; of course we are the ones responsible to conserve the place." In addition, tour operators supported responsible tourism due to the customers' satisfaction and safety. Interviewee 8 related responsibility "to bringing tourists to enjoy their holiday and we are responsible to provide the things (package content) to satisfy our clients" and participant 24 simply emphasised, "We bring the guests here, of course we have to make sure the guests are all right. Safety is the thing that comes first." Responsible tourism was intended to provide a more enjoyable experiences for tourists (DEAT, 1996).

The supply chain management practice was enacted into economical viability categories. Responsible practice of supply chain had implicit boundaries. It seemed to extend only to interviewee 11, who narrated that, "Choose the environmentally friendly supplier to offer services to the tourists." The supply chain management by tour operators was to consider supplier sourcing and selection, package promotion and marketing and tour operation from pre-departure to post-holiday (Green, Morton, & New, 1996). However, specialist tour operators were normally claimed as the stakeholders with less influence and limited resources to practise supply chain management (Carey, Gountas, & Gilbert, 1997) due to its required conformity and dedication from suppliers. As interviewee 11 argued that, "We cannot force

suppliers to offer eco-friendly products. And it is hard to achieve it if our government does not support us. We are limited by resources, power and funding to practise responsible tourism as a whole. It depends on the government or NGOs." However, the scarcity of resources was not merely confronted by tour operators, but park management too as they faced limited manpower resources. A park director expounded that, "Manpower challenges, but this is a common phenomenon in national parks. It has happened everywhere."

The intensity of tour operator market competition was another challenge to tour operators. High market competition caused by outside investors who injected funds into the tour operations in Sabah has caused a price war that led to low profit margins, negative impacts, and consequently damages to the natural resources in Kinabalu Park. For instance, "Foreign investors, like Sutera Sanctuary Lodge, are not owned by local people so the money is leaking out to other countries. Actually, Sabah has around 200 (actual number 197) tour operators, but some are not owned by locals," (participant 19), "Supply over demand: everyone tried to cut prices to attract tourists and it made our profit margins drop dramatically. For this situation, how are we to preserve the place" (participant 10). Illegal tour operators and tour guides were considered as a challenge for licensed tour operator as "there were many tour operators without licence in the market. Price war happened. Taxes are charged for licences, but illegal tour operator is just 'free and easy', so they can offer cheaper price" (participant 10).

Another challenge was that tourists were more concerned about the price compared to the quality of the place. As interviewee 5 mentioned that, "People don't know what is green tourism and they don't care about the place: what they care is price. They prefer cheaper prices compared to quality." A significant number of respondents in consensus supported the idea that Malaysian or Southeast Asian tourists tend to be price sensitive rather than be concerned of sustainability issues. Interviewee 19 reflected, "There is no point for us to promote responsible tourism if tourists don't know what it is about. They don't even care about the impacts of tourism on the environment: they care more about the price." Not only the tourists, the sense of responsibility was obscured or dutifully ignored by some tour operators and tourism business enterprises." Interviewee 1 conveyed that, "The outside corporation and investor tend to emphasise on the profit. They like to build shopping malls, restaurants and hotels… wherever in natural places, like the surrounding areas of Kinabalu Park and Sandakan Sukau."

Moreover, as the park management contemplated on park conservation, tour operators showed partiality for economics, a dissonance has begun to emerge. The dissonance in Sabah Parks served as a model of protected area management in the park whilst tour operators were deliberately making a profit from the park without consideration of the impact of tourism activity (Carey et al., 1997). Park managers thus recognised tour operators' involvement as intrusive, even bordering on conflicts of interest; nevertheless, they were still aware of the importance of the tour operators' role in the tourism industry. This dissonance sparked critical reflection on a park managers' opinion, who commented that, "Cooperation with tour operators is a risk for us, they are more centralised on their own interests that are opposite with our visions and missions, even though we admit their roles are crucial for the development of tourism."

Sabah Parks has disciplined tour operators, enforced by numerous impartial regulations in accordance with the Park Enactment of 1984. Regulatory compliance was a common action by tour operators as "obeying the rules and regulations, like avoiding certain trails which were prohibited, because of the safety issues and also to protect endangered and rare species. Another policy was that all the buses and vans were not allowed to go inside the park to avoid air and noise pollution and traffic jams" (participant 2). However, some participants deemed obedience of the rules and regulations could not be considered as a form of responsible tourism practice. Interviewee 3 argued that, "It (rules and regulations) is not considered as a practice because it is

something we must follow. But sometimes it is hard to follow. For example, they (Sabah Parks) didn't provide enough car park space for us. So, we are forced to go inside the Park." Additionally, tour operators also mentioned that Sabah Parks was not enforcing the rules and regulations rigidly as buses and vans were still parking inside the park.

4.3. Sociocultural amicability

Sociocultural amicability represents another division that legitimises and normalises responsible tourism among tour operators and park managers. On one hand, responsible tourism to tour operators meant that, "We were responsible to manage the area or products that we sold. Manage the areas not only used by our own client, but it is also by the local community" (participant 21). On the other hand, sociocultural amicability was most pronounced when park managers discussed about responsibilities. Park management was accountable to satisfy residents with tourism development and enhance their sense of cultural heritage. Local community participation would contribute to the park's sustainability. Park managers (park management and operations division) expressed that, "Local people play an important role to park sustainability. They were hired as park rangers, mountain guides, and porters. They also helped in guarding the sensitive zones. Equivalently, they had better income and living standards." Park managers also highlighted that tourism positively influenced Aboriginal livelihoods like improvement to public infrastructure.

Other than Sabah Parks, tour operators were also practising local capacity development. For example, interviewee 22 indicated that, "Our company has hired local people to run the Adventure Centre. We have offered educational expeditions to international student groups, which incorporate community services like bridge restorations." Interviewee 18 described how they helped the local community: "Every tour that goes up to Kinabalu Park has stopped by at Kundasang market and we encourage the tourists to buy the local products." Apart from that, tour operators also helped local communities to promote Homestay products. For instance, "We have worked together with the Homestay owners as a business partner. They supply accommodation and we offer choices to the tourists, either Homestay or resort accommodation in Kinabalu Park" (interviewee 8), Interviewee 8 also noted that, "We do suggest Homestay but it depends on the guests' demands... actually, not many people like to stay there: only students as they prefer the price and for learning purposes."

However, the quality of Homestay services and communication barriers between the host and tourists was found to be challenges for tour operators. Interviewee 8 illustrated that, "Services provided by Homestay are different from one house to another house and from time to time. Many house hosts do not know English, so it is hard to communicate with foreign tourists," and "The communication barrier between mountain guides and tourists was also a challenge especially (for) Japanese (tourists)" (participant 12). As a matter of fact, there are a different guide expertise available to fulfil distinct clients' needs, such as bird lovers who need an expert bird guide; climbers need guides with scientific knowledge in wildlife biology and his accumulated direct experience within the mountain. It is imperative to engage a right guide, as interviewee 3 voiced that, "The challenge for us is to choose the right mountain guide with expertise in tropical fauna and flora annotation. Some freelance tour guides are not trained."

Park managers and tour operators all agreed that the local community was more concerned about environment issues when compared to other stakeholders. Interviewee 1 construed, "If compared to tourists, local people are more 'ecological friendly'. Like Luanti Kampung near Sabah Tea (garden), it is a Tagal area which means that no fishing is allowed to preserve the environment." Park managers illustrated that local Aboriginals were previously dependent on hunting for survival and extracted natural resource inconsiderately. Nowadays, they were aware of the significance of the flora and fauna in Kinabalu Park, as "they realised that if they do not protect what they have now, in the

end, there will be nothing for the next generation. Additionally, Kinabalu Park was declared as a World Heritage Site in 2000 and it is under the enforcement of the Sabah Park Enactment." (Park director) Tour operators have received many negative comments from climbers, bird lovers and orchid lovers, who were disheartened due to frustrated expectations of not seeing the intended species [of birds/orchids]. Park directors showed photographs and explained that the number of fauna and flora was gradually diminishing because of human encroachment and tourism boom and bust.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This paper examined responsible tourism at a national park by engaging tour operators and park managers in defining responsible tourism and expressing how it was practised in their operations. Interview data were collected from 25 tour operators and 3 park managers and analysed using qualitative inductive techniques. In the context of Kinabalu Park, this research found that responsibility was constructed around the principles of sustainability, supported by the concepts of ecological friendliness, economical viability and sociocultural amicability. Participants recognised responsible tourism as a means of being accountable to conservation principles, particularly to protect nature for future generations. This was also expressed by study participants as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs (TDCT, 2009; WCED, 1987). Interpretative phenomenological analysis revealed that tour operators placed ecological responsibility in the hands of the local authority, in this case Sabah Parks. This finding was similar to studies by Budeanu (2005), Carey et al. (1997) and Curtin and Busby (1999). At times during the interviews with tour operators, it appeared that they were overplaying the role of and expertise of the government in ecological subjects as a reason for tour operators' inactivity.

Tour operators were found to hold a positive attitude towards responsible tourism adoption, but behaviour evidence in Kinabalu Park was lacking (Frey & George, 2010). Evidence from the interviews suggested that the problem may be due to a lack of awareness of responsible tourism initiatives. Low awareness was a foremost reason to cause behaviours of inactivity among tour operators, which included issues like tourists' concerns of price instead of quality, tour enterprises focusing on economical profits rather than ecological issues and local development tourism in Kinabalu Park by local authorities without involvement of other stakeholders. Another identified problem was limited resources within tour operator companies contribute to responsible tourism at the park (Carey et al., 1997). In addition to this, WCED (1987) argued that financial resources was the main barrier to achieve sustainable tourism due to high implementation cost. The interviews revealed that tour operators preferred to create alliances and adopt their own standards of best environmental practices under the guidance of industry associations without having to invest financial resources to complete an entire initiative. It meant neither to have slim organisational benefits nor bearing the large costs of implementation (Budeanu, 2009). This was consistent with current studies whereby the most popular practices by tour operators were raising awareness and rules and regulation compliance.

The national park policy left coordination and facilitation of community and industry engagement to the local park authority (Siti-Nabiha et al., 2011). As a result, tour operators were playing a passive role in responsible tourism practices. This study indicated that tour operators and local park authorities tend to act individually. Additionally, findings showed that park authorities were not interested in cooperating with tour operators due to the dissonance of interest which was mentioned earlier. The findings provided a cohesive definition of responsible tourism as practised at one of the National Parks in Malaysia. They are indicative of the sustainability principles inferred within the responsible tourism and were contextually for a specific time and space – from

definition to practices of responsibility as well as challenges – were socially produced and spatial in relation to Kinabalu Park.

The research findings provided three implications to enhance responsible tourism adoption. Firstly, the park management could enforce the rules and regulations more rigidly, explicitly specifying punishments like penalties or fines at a considerable amount of amerce, licence suspension, and litter felons could be ordered to sweep the streets as punishment for illegally discarding scraps of rubbish and others. Secondly, tour operators could prepare a sustainability report that clearly expresses their responsible tourism practices. This could be used by other stakeholders, for example Sabah Parks could observe their practices through the report and eco-tourists could differentiate the products. Thirdly, Sabah Parks could cooperate with tour operators to develop responsible tourism in Kinabalu Park, particularly some collaboration that could increase awareness about 'leaving no trace'. Despite these implications and suggested actions, there are many critiques about public and private agencies' interests (UNESCO, 2002). Critics would be right to point to the differences between the business principles of tour operators and their sustainability records at Sabah Parks on nature tender. Indeed, a crucial limitation of this research was a lack of approaches to avoid conflicts. Future research could further examine stakeholders' interests in achieving sustainability through responsible tourism.

Acknowledgements

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