

# **SABAH'S SPATIAL ASSET**

## *Tourism and its Research Needs*

*Keynote address by:*

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### INTRODUCTION

*Geographers describe their discipline as a spatial science. That is, geographers are concerned with answering questions about how and why earth phenomena vary across the Earth. For instance, geographers investigate patterns of vegetation as they relate to distributions of climate, soils and topography. Thus geographers answer four basic questions when studying the environment, which are location, place, spatial pattern and spatial interaction. Geographers also study how human activities are shaped by and impact the natural environment. This study is a part of the 'man-land' tradition in geographic research, what one might say was the precursor to the modern tourism studies.*

*In this new millennium, tourism continues to grow as a major force in global trade. The World Tourism Organization has predicted that in the new millennium, tourism is set to become the largest industry in the world employing the highest number of people. As more developing countries like Malaysia rise to the challenge of tourism to seek its rewards, the developed countries are competing to control their market share. If not for the revelation of tourism and tourism-related researches, perhaps the industry would not be so developed and the citizen would not know that tourism produced many benefits such as incomes, jobs and taxes.*

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## THE IMPORTANCE OF TOURISM IN SABAH

*Malaysia (Map 1.1.) is one of the most vibrant and developed economies in South East Asia and enjoys political stability and industrial growth. A federation of 13 states and three federal territories Malaysia is South East Asia's major tourist destination offering excellent '3 S' (sun, sea and sand), bustling cities and spectacular flora and fauna. Tourism has become Malaysia's second largest and most dynamic industry and also the second biggest contributor to foreign revenue. Malaysia received 17.3 billion in 2000, a 40% jump from the RM12.3 billion in 1999 with corporate tax of RM2 billion in addition to RM500 million in service tax out of it, putting the real earnings from tourism at RM20 billion.*

Map 1. 1 Malaysia



Map 1. 2 Sabah



*Sabah, one of many Malaysian states, is located in the northern part of Malaysian Borneo (Map 1.2), covering an area of 73,620 sq. km. It is a melting pot of many different cultures and traditions, being home to about 2.9 million people with more than 30 ethnic groups. It is also known as one of the twelve mega-diversity sites in the world with its rich living heritage, which is ideal for ecotourism industry. It has world-class tourism products such as the highly pristine Sipadan Island, one of the top dive sites in the world and the Kinabalu Park, Malaysia's first World Heritage Site.*

*Since the 1980s, tourism has been an increasingly important industry in Sabah where the Federal government doubled its allocation for Sabah tourism projects from RM5.36 million under the Sixth Plan (1991-1995) to RM11.1 million under the Seventh Malaysia Plan (1996-2000). Tourism receipts amounted to RM1, 091 million in 2002, which is a significant contribution to Sabah's economy. Approximately 9,000 people were employed in the industry by year 2000 and today it has more than 255 hotels with more than 10,000 rooms.*

*The recently published 'Sabah State Development and Progress Direction' in Year 2004 by the Chief Minister of Sabah indicates that Sabah tourism sector is set to expand to achieve a bigger contribution to the Gross Domestic Product. It envisions attracting higher number of tourists through more intensive strategic marketing, infrastructure improvement and introduction of new products to new niche market. It targets around 2.7 million tourists annually within 5 years.*

*In the geographical perspective, tourism is Sabah's biggest 'non-exhaustive' commodities and invaluable spatial assets. Sabah has reached its development stage in the Tourism Area Lifecycle and is slowly heading towards maturity. The maturity stage is somewhat ugly in one perspective and there is a need to re-strategize the industry before or at that stage. There are instances where a country in Europe has to demolish a resort town because of its decline and problems associated with it, and there is also a neighboring country where the negative image it upholds is probably irreversible until the next new millennium. The industry needs to hear from scholars on its direction, whether it is heading to the right one. This is where research in tourism can be indispensable.*

#### GEOGRAPHY AND TOURISM MARRIAGE IN RESEARCH

*Due to the complexity of social, environmental and economical aspects, tourism research requires input from numerous disciplines which includes marketing, economic, psychology, geography, anthropology, business, history, political science, planning and*

*design and many others. The great diversity of the elements that make up tourism means that problems are not resolved by only one research method. Leading tourism researchers, Graburn and Jafari stated:*

*'No single discipline alone can accommodate, treat, or understand tourism; it can be studied only if disciplinary boundaries are creased and if multidisciplinary perspectives are sought and formed'*

*Tourism is closely related to the field of geography as the base of its development. Geography can contribute towards the understanding of traveler origins and destinations and their relationships. Yet another important area of research in this field has been focused on the relationship between geographic factors and preferred zones of development. Research in geography can generally divide into two categories, which are 1) predictive; and 2) explanatory. Geographers have expressed an interest in tourisms for several reasons: spatial distribution, landscape conservation, impact of mass tourism, role in economic geography, tourism as an export and cultural aspects.*

*There are many instances that how research in geography has helped establish tourism in its own way. Let's look at the three icons of Sabah i.e. Proboscis Monkey (Picture 1.1), Mount Kinabalu (Picture 1.2) and Rafflesia Flower (Picture 1.3).*

*Picture 1.1 Proboscis Monkey*



Picture 1.2 Mount Kinabalu



*Research has established that the Proboscis Monkey is endemic to Borneo and they are restricted to riverine, peat swamp and mangrove forests of the coastal lowlands. More than half of the population of these Proboscis Monkey are located in unprotected areas, therefore they are considered an endangered animals. All of the profile and knowledge of this single species monkey has put Proboscis Monkey as a unique tourism asset and this has put a value into it. While the local community may see the Proboscis Monkey as just another monkey, the tourist will spend hundreds of tourist dollars to indulge in observing and getting to know the monkey up close but not too personal by divulging with the monkey's information and profile. With the value injected to this species, it has lead to promote the conservation of the monkey and its inhabitant, simply because it has a tourist dollar value, nevertheless, a value. This is also the same with the Rafflesia flower; it was just another flower before there is an awareness of its touristic value.*

Picture 1.3 Rafflesia Flower



*Mount Kinabalu on the other hand has attracted international event of Climbathon every year, which is a significant event in Sabah's tourism calendar. The uniqueness and iconic stature of Mount Kinabalu also gives spiritual meaning and value of the people of Sabah as its pride and Joy. This knowledge of Mount Kinabalu that span from numerous researches has won its title as the World Heritage Sites.*

*There are other instances of how spatial science research can contribute to tourism. The study of form and process of Sipadan geography (the only oceanic island in Malaysia) has created the island into a niche tourism i.e. reef and underwater limestone cave diving and this has injected the uniqueness to the island's personality and it is one of the world renowned diving sites today. The study of human activities and its impact to the natural environment in the Kinabatangan wetlands has lead to many policies development for better integration between the palm oil industry around the Kinabatangan area and the environment protection efforts around it, human-elephant conflict, and it also lead to the establishment of the Kinabatangan Wetland Sanctuary.*

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

*Research in Spatial Science that can contribute to the development of tourism can start from small contribution such as undergraduate final year project and postgraduate dissertation. There is definitely a need for more scholarly research projects in tourism and the results and findings should be published and promoted to be shared among scholars and stakeholders. For those who intend to embark on their research project, it is very much encouraged to look into the tourism aspect in the study of spatial science. For Sabah, the research findings, big and small, can be of great assistance to the policymakers of tourism, guiding tourism in directions that protect resources and produce economic*

*gains. Being a multidiscipline field, tourism does need spatial science to feed its body of knowledge. Research in tourism often benefits from an interdisciplinary approach in order to provide a complete picture of the situation. One measure of the growth and vitality in an academic field would be the quantity and quality of the research being done in that particular field. The 1<sup>st</sup> Undergraduate Conference on Spatial Science is considered as the first giant leap in involving the Junior Scholars to contribute to the academia research.*