

## **Exploring tour operators' perspectives on responsible tourism at ecotourism destination: meaning, motivation, and practices**

### **ABSTRACT**

The paper explores the meaning, motivation, and extent of Responsible Tourism Practices (RTPs) at Lower Kinabatangan; a premier ecotourism destination in Malaysia. Data were collected through 3 focus group interview sessions with 36 respondents consisting of tour operators, lodgers and homestay operators. Findings reveal that RTP is encapsulated in the sustainable tourism concept and related to the three sustainable pillars (environment, economic and social); and reflect less on responsible act and behaviour. Key themes that emerged include protection, conservation, and preservation; sustainability by minimising negative impacts on the environment, economy, and society; respecting rules and safety measures; creating jobs for locals and increasing awareness on local food, culture, and community; provision of quality tourism services; using solar power as an alternative energy source and educating staff. RTP strongly emphasises on the environment (including nature, and wildlife) and the sustainability of natural resources. Additionally, RT practices reduce negative impacts on the environment through conservation, preservation and protection. The social aspects of RT include collaboration with Sabah Wildlife Department, community support, control, and guidelines. Greater consideration is given to the environmental aspect, compared to the economic and social aspects; ethics, integrity, governance, and responsible behaviour are also not encompassed in RT. The paper provides an insightful understanding of the meaning and practices of RT from the perspective of tourism players and serves as useful baseline information to develop a manual for RTP. Further, the findings contribute to responsible tourism literature. The paper also suggests guiding principles for Economic, Social and Environmental Responsibility to make Lower Kinabatangan an ecotourism destination where wildlife and local people can co-exist with sustainable tourism businesses. Sound guidelines for RT are essential to ensure the sustainable development and growth of Lower Kinabatangan. Finally, more research and intervention programs are recommended to enhance RTPs for a balanced development.