

**URBAN ECOTOURISM DESTINATION:
EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL OF
KOTA KINABALU CITY,
SABAH, MALAYSIA**



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UMS
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH

**INSTITUTE FOR TROPICAL BIOLOGY AND
CONSERVATION
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH
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ABSTRACT

Ecotourism concept which refers to tourism activities in natural, undisturbed ecosystem often misfits with urban environment, however not impossible. Although Sabah is well known for its ecotourism market, the urban ecotourism concept in Kota Kinabalu city has never been explored. Kota Kinabalu is an entry point to other ecotourism destinations in Sabah and is strategically located in the South East Asia region, offers potential to the tourism industry. Current ecotourism destinations in Sabah faced carrying capacity issues thus need to explore new destinations. This paper analyzed local Kota Kinabalu resident and tourist' perception and value pertaining to the potential of Kota Kinabalu city as an urban ecotourism destination and how preservation of green spaces in cities supports sustainability. Their perception on the attractiveness of the ecosystem, conservation values and destination access were intercepted in this study. Kota Kinabalu city is found to have unique and world class natural attraction, suitable as ecotourism product. Tourist' motivation and satisfaction towards Kota Kinabalu city were also gauged, adopting the Importance-Performance Analysis method. Findings showed that Kota Kinabalu is highly potential as an urban ecotourism destination, and study results could assist decision makers in the local tourism industry in making tourism development decisions. This study identified potential urban green spaces within 10km radius from the city centre as ecotourism destination based on the standard minimum size of an urban green space. The findings demonstrate the need to positively exploit various perceived importance and values from stakeholders, coupled with the existing environmental features to pursue urban ecotourism and how ecotourism within Kota Kinabalu city could be an effective approach to enhance or preserve natural green areas. This study resulted in some findings that assists decision making in developing tourism in the state of Sabah.

Keywords: Urban Ecotourism, Green Space Conservation, Sustainable Tourism, Tourism Development, Destination Competitiveness

ABSTRAK

DESTINASI EKOPELANCONGN URBAN: MENGAJI POTESI BANDARAYA KOTA KINABALU, SABAH, MALAYSIA

Konsep ekopelancongan yang merujuk kepada aktiviti pelancongan di ekosistem semula jadi dan tidak terganggu lazimnya tidak sesuai dikaitkan dengan persekitaran bandar, namun tidak mustahil. Walaupun Sabah telah terkenal dengan pasaran ekopelancongan, konsep ekopelancongan di bandaraya Kota Kinabalu tidak pernah diterokai. Kota Kinabalu merupakan pintu masuk ke Sabah dan kedudukannya yang strategik di Asia Tenggara, memberikan potensi besar kepada industri pelancongan negara. Destinasi ekopelancongan sedia ada diancam terancam dengan eksploitasi berlebihan akibat aktiviti pelancongan. Kajian ini menggariskan perspektif masyarakat tempatan dan pelancong mengenai potensi bandaraya Kota Kinabalu sebagai destinasi ekopelancongan baru, dan bagaimana pemeliharaan kawasan semulajadi di kawasan bandaraya boleh menggalakkan kelestarian alam sekitar. Persepsi masyarakat terhadap daya tarikan ekosistem, nilai pemuliharaan dan akses ke destinasi didapatkan dalam kajian ini. Kajian mendapati bahawa keadaan alam semulajadi di bandaraya Kota Kinabalu adalah unik dan bertaraf dunia. Motivasi dan kepuasan pelancong terhadap pengalaman percutian di bandaraya Kota Kinabalu juga dinilai, menggunakan kaedah Analisis Kepentingan-Prestasi (Importance-Performance Analysis). Kajian ini mendapati bahawa bandaraya Kota Kinabalu sangat berpotensi sebagai destinasi ekopelancongan urban. Penemuan kajian ini dapat membantu pihak berkepentingan dalam industri pelancongan tempatan membuat keputusan bagi tujuan perkembangan industri pelancongan. Kajian ini mengenalpasti kawasan hijau urban, 10km radius dari pusat bandaraya yang berpotensi dimajukan sebagai destinasi ekopelancongan berdasarkan piawai ukuran minimum kawasan semulajadi di bandar. Penemuan kajian menunjukkan keperluan mengeksplorasi secara positif ciri-ciri utama penentu destinasi pelancongan serta keadaan semulajadi sedia ada. Ekopelancongan di kawasan bandaraya Kota Kinabalu juga boleh menjadi pendekatan yang efektif untuk meningkatkan atau memelihara kawasan hijau semula jadi. Kajian ini menggariskan beberapa penemuan yang boleh membantu dalam membuat keputusan berkenaan perkembangan industri pelancongan di negeri Sabah.

Kata kunci: Ekopelancongan Bandar, Pemuliharaan Kawasan Hijau, Pelancongan Lestari, Pembangunan Pelancongan, Daya Saing Destinasi

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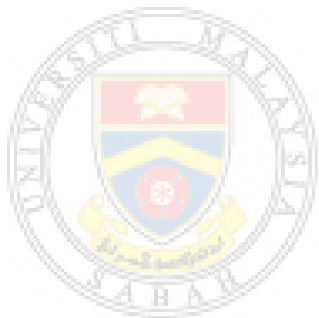
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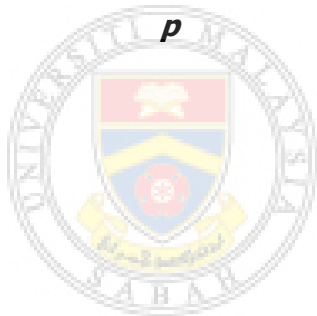
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CBD	-	Central Business District
DBKK	-	Dewan Bandaraya Kota Kinabalu
DOSM	-	Department of Statistic, Malaysia
FR	-	Forest Reserve
GDP	-	Gross Domestic Product
GIS	-	Geographic Information System
IPA	-	Importance-Performance Analysis
IUCN	-	International Union for Conservation of Nature
KePKAS	-	Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Environment Sabah
KK	-	Kota Kinabalu
KMO	-	Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin index
PCA	-	Principal Component Analysis
SDC	-	Sabah Development Cooperation
STB	-	Sabah Tourism Board
SPSS	-	Statistical Package fir the Social Sciences
TARP	-	Tunku Abdul Rahman Park
UGS	-	Urban Green Spaces
UN	-	United Nations
UTC	-	Urban Transformation Centre
WHO	-	World Health Organization
WTO	-	World Trade Organization
ac	-	acre
<i>et al.</i>	-	and others hectare
ha	-	hectare
i.e.	-	in other words
km	-	kilometre
m	-	metre

LIST OF SYMBOLS

%	-	percentage
=	-	equal
<	-	less than
>	-	more than
&	-	and
χ^2	-	Bartlett's test of sphericity
α	-	Cronbach's value
m	-	mean
sd	-	standard deviation
<i>p</i>	-	significant value



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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Biodiversity that includes all type of ecosystem whether managed or unmanaged is the foundation of ecosystem services to which human well-being is intimately linked. It is defined as “the variability among living things from all sources including inter alia, terrestrial, marine and other aquatic ecosystem and the ecological complexes of which they are a part of; includes diversity of species, between species and of ecosystem” (Swingland, 2000). Thecla (2009) explained that biodiversity refers to variety of life forms on earth, consisting animals and plants, both individually as species and collectively as ecosystem components. Each of these species and organisms work together in ecosystems, like an intricate web, to maintain balance and supports everything in nature that we need to survive, i.e. food, clean water, shelter and medicines. Nestled in the western of the Crocker Range, the forest complex in Kota Kinabalu and Penampang is famed for its verdant green and pristine forest with lush hills sometimes enshrouded with passing clouds. The supply of fresh water, food and medicinal resources from the highlands, climate regulation, recreation, pollination and photosynthesis are some of the many ecosystem services provided by natural areas which are key to the survival of mankind. Kota Kinabalu; a city, blessed and still very well covered with natural ecosystem is an important biodiversity connectivity as well as watershed area. She is also being internationally recognized as an important bird and wetland area, acknowledged through Kota Kinabalu Wetland in Likas by Ramsar (Daily Express, 2017).

Human expands their needs and develop natural areas, changing landcovers for habitat and their other necessities. These urbanization encroachments caused changes

to prior residents that often move or die. However, many other elements persist i.e. rocks, sunlight, river flows, and many organisms that continues to grow and evolve around human. A study by Kuhn *et al.* (2004) stated that human settlements also encouraged other species growths as they could provide habitats that were not present before and are very diverse. These demonstrates that urban biodiversity is indeed a unique form of biodiversity that differs from undisturbed, natural biodiversity. Davern (2017) described that urban green spaces supports urban biodiversity and how it provisions for the continuity of urban species, either native or non-native species. Tourism is a strategic sector featuring low consumption, high employment opportunities and substantial benefits. It is the flagship of modern service sector and promotes employment. Tourism, approached in sustainable manner, travel for recreation helps drive economic growth and alleviate poverty (UNWTO, 2010). In many areas where biodiversity is at threat, tourism can be a solution through conservation. However, is urban biodiversity worthy enough to be conserved and are they attractive enough to bring in more revenue from tourism activities?

1.2 An Overview of Tourism Industry in Sabah

Tourism is a resilient industry amidst global socio-economic slowdown and challenges. The Malaysian government has chosen the tourism industry as one of the National Key Economic Areas (NKEA) under the National Transformation Programme (NTP) in 2010, as a part of the nation's growth plan towards high income status. The 11th Malaysia Plan (2016-2020) on green growth will be a fundamental shift on how Malaysia sees the role of natural resources and the environment during its socio-economic development, protecting both development gains and biodiversity at the same time. Under the Malaysia Tourism Transformation Plan (MTTP), the country targets RM 168 billion revenue, and 36 million tourist arrival by 2020 from tourism activities. Tourism Direct Gross Domestic Product that sums the gross value added generated by tourism industry of the economy contributed RM 82.6 billion of a 7.8% growth from previous year to the Malaysian economy (DOSM, 2017). Trading economics model predicts that Malaysia's Tourism Revenue is projected to trend around RM 78.300 billion in 2020 (Tourism Malaysia, 2016).

The state of Sabah depends on tourism as an economic drive for the state, one of the major contributors to Sabah's GDP. The best tourism year for Sabah was in 2018 with a whopping record of 3.88 million tourist arrivals and RM 8.34 billion tourist receipts. Tourist arrival showed an increase of 5.3% between 2017 and 2018, in which Sabah attracted 3.68 million visitors in 2017 while an increase of 6.6% in tourism receipts (STB, 2019). The market was largely contributed by China, South Korea and Taiwan; a contribution from direct international flights to Kota Kinabalu International Airport as well as a relax policy on visa requirement into the country. It is estimated that by 2020, Sabah's tourist receipts will reach RM16 billion and an arrival of 8.1 million visitors (STB, 2019). The Board also envisions to make Sabah among the most livable places in Asia by 2025. These data histories showed the high potential and importance of tourism industry to the State revenue for economic wellbeing. As a long-term strategy, the tourism stakeholders must identify new tourism products to remain relevant in the global tourism market. As ecotourism could not be separated with natural environment, tourism activities could either degrade or preserve the wellbeing of the local environment. Hence, the importance of exploring Kota Kinabalu city as ecotourism destination.

1.3 Importance of New Ecotourism Destination

Mount Kinabalu in Kundasang, Ranau and Tunku Abdul Rahman Park (TARP) in Kota Kinabalu are two of the many ecotourism destination products that has been championing the tourism industry in Sabah (KePKAS, 2018). The Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Environment Sabah (KePKAS) through various research has noted that both ecotourism locations could be compromised if these destinations continue to accept visitors beyond their carrying capacity and their challenge is to address degradation problems and carrying capacity issues (Borneo Post Online, 2018). Various actions and plans had been executed by the State Government to minimize impacts such as to regulate the number of tourist arrival and to selectively close certain section over a period of time. However, this does not slow down the number of tourist arrival at these iconic destinations. To reduce pressure on the afore mentioned interest, new iconic destinations should be developed and promoted; supplied with guidelines to better manage new areas, moreover natural areas.

Humans put increasing pressure on the planet, using and consuming more resources than ever before, we risk upsetting the balance of ecosystems and losing biodiversity. Changing landcovers, climate crisis, overharvesting of natural resources and polluting waters created by humans are impacting biodiversity around the world. All this pressure adds up to a landscape that is quickly changing, with nature struggling to keep up. Thirty percent of Borneo's forests have been wiped out in only 40 years to give way to development. A rapid assessment of the tourism potential in TARP on Gaya Island conducted by Institute for Development Studies (IDS), Sabah (2013) identified that hygiene and health implication from the water villages at the island was a major factor limiting tourism potentials of the park. Again, the lack or no enforcement at all on cleanliness was the contributing aspect of the issue.

1.4 Problem Statement

The state of Sabah focuses tourism as one of its major economic driver for the state mainly due to high GDP income for the state through ecotourism. Since branded by the Local Government as a 'Nature Resort City' and the targeted as 'Nature, Resort and Maritime City by 2030', new tourism products should be enhanced and establish to sustainably develop the ecotourism industry. Currently, limitations of ecotourism destinations caused overcrowding and carrying capacity issue arises in certain tourist spots which could increase negative impacts on the environment. A city as a new destination does not normally fit with the term ecotourism as cities are developed, and the natural environment are not 100% natural. Other than that, information on urban ecotourism activities in existing nature settings within Kota Kinabalu city are very sparse and does not reflect a true potential of the city's charms. A bottom-up decision-making method would normally result in a win-win situation whereby, local residents and tourist as the main stakeholder of tourism industry in the city, are engaged to provide community insights for a comprehensive development of strategic and management planning. Therefore, a need arises to study on Kota Kinabalu city's ecotourism potential(s) from the perspective of local resident and tourists that inevitably allows community engagement for future decision-making reference, regarding Kota Kinabalu city as an ecotourism destination.

1.5 Research Objectives

Based on the research problems, there are three key research questions emerged. They are:

- i. Could ecotourism coexist in urban area, is urban ecotourism possible?
- ii. What are the key attractions that could be used to lure and encourage ecotourism right in the middle of a city?
- iii. What is the tourism performance of Kota Kinabalu?

The study aims to determine the potential of Kota Kinabalu City, Sabah as new urban ecotourism destination. This study emphasized on biodiversity, tourism destination and tourism activities within the city. The objectives of this study are as follow;

- a) To analyze local Kota Kinabalu resident and tourist perception and value regarding urban ecotourism;
- b) To explore tourist motivation and satisfaction towards Kota Kinabalu city from a destination perspective; and
- c) To identify existing and potential urban green spaces (UGS) in Kota Kinabalu City to be promoted as urban ecotourism in support of sustainable tourism.

1.6 Significance of Study

The research and information pertaining urban ecotourism in Malaysia is not widely available and limited. They are either from other continents or non-urban ecotourism activities. The study will give emphasis on the potential of urban ecotourism products that could reduce mass tourism in certain tourist spots around the city, i.e. Tunku Abdul Rahman Marine Park and Kinabalu Park. This study shall pave a way for conservation education opportunities on the importance and possibility of sustainable tourism and city development. Information collected will accommodate detailing recommendations to sustainably develop the city while maximizing her tourism revenue. The emphasis of the study is to explore possibilities of biodiversity conservation and ecotourism activities through engagement with main stakeholders of the city.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The urban ecotourism concept appeared for the first time in 1996 during the development of urban ecotourism strategy for Toronto, when Blackstone Corporation defined it as “one of the sustainable ways for travelling in urban areas” (Wu *et al.*, 2009). This chapter will unravel the essence of ecotourism in cities.

2.1 Tourism in Sabah

Tourism industry in Sabah is under the purview of Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Environment Sabah. The State government recognizes the orderly development of tourism as an important source of diversification of the State economy. Such orderly development involved both the promotion of active participation by the private sector as well as ensuring sustainable development to ensure that along lasting benefits are generated within the State.

Sabah as a liveable place in Asia by 2024 is in Malaysia’s Plans; in line with the Sabah Tourism Master Plan 2011-2025 showed detailed strategies to achieve the target. The three (3) phase period are, (1) addressing basic tourism infrastructure development, (2) strengthening Sabah’s position as eco-adventure destination and finally (3) transforms to the most liveable place in Asia with bustling metropolis and tropical paradise exist co-efficiently (SDC, 2007). Domestic travel amongst Malaysian is also a trend now, where many takes into consideration the weak Ringgit value and opt for affordable travel destinations. The recent Matta Fair in Kuala Lumpur ended with travel