

Adventure Tourism: A Study Of Tunku Abdul Rahman Park, Sabah

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Abstract

Adventure tourism is one of the main travel activities in the world. For instance, adventure tourism is among the primary contributors to the economy in Sabah, which is undertaken by most travellers who visit the state. This study was conducted to identify the perceptions of the local Sabahan visitors regarding adventure tourism activities at Tunku Abdul Rahman Park. Other than identifying the services and activities offered at Tunku Abdul Rahman Park, this study also seeks to examine how adventure tourism activities impact the environment of the islands. A 300 set of self-administrated questionnaires were distributed to the local visitors of Tunku Abdul Rahman Park islands (Manukan, Mamutik, Sapi, and Gaya). It was found that the majority of the local visitors indeed know about adventure tourism activities and they were satisfied with the services and activities offered at Tunku Abdul Rahman Park. While adventure tourism activities are deemed unharmed to the environment as they are believed to benefit the economy, it remains imperative that the infrastructure on the islands be improved. This study will benefit policymakers and tourism operators in Malaysia, especially in Sabah with insightful findings for the Sabah Parks management and Sabah Tourism Board in undertaking promotional ideas that pique the interests of potential tourists to visit the islands whilst sustaining the long-term environment of the islands.

Keywords: Adventure Tourism; Perception; Resident; Tunku Abdul Rahman Park; Sabah

INTRODUCTION

Tourism, as one of the world's fast-growing industries, has a significant contribution to the national income in terms of not only the growth of the country's economy but also currency exchange and employment (WTTC, 2014). In 2019, the domestic and international tourists in Malaysia contributed to approximately RM86.1 billion revenue, thus making them an attractive market focus (Tourism Malaysia, 2019). This reflects the significant sector of Malaysian tourism subsequent to the nation's manufacturing and palm oil industry. In fact, the tourism industry in Malaysia is becoming well-known across the world as one of the must-visit places in Asia.

Malaysia consists of thirteen states and three federal territories, each with its own uniqueness that distinguishes one state from another in term of culture, lifestyle, language dialect and even the foods (Tourism Malaysia, 2020). As such, these states strive to compete in the tourism industry, offering a variety of natural and cultural tourism products to become among the frequently visited destinations. Located in East Malaysia's Northern Borneo, Sabah is the second

largest state in Malaysia that is naturally and culturally diverse. Such diversities, in turn, added to the adventure tourism industry and has developed consistently over the years (Sabah Tourism Board, 2020). Sabah is among the eco-adventure destinations in Malaysia owing to its indigenous cultural diversities and natural resources such as islands, beaches, seas, coral reefs, rainforests, and Mount Kinabalu. As a result, these resources alleviate the various accommodating demands of visitors for adventure tourism activities (Sabah Tourism Board, 2020).

Numerous studies have focused on the perceptions of local residents regarding island tourism within a wide array of issues on island economies and infrastructure investment (Mohamad et al., 2020; Giannoni&Maupertuis, 2007), sustainable management and tourism development (Yang et al, 2015; Lenzen, 2008), impacts on islands as a tourism destination (Carlsen, 1999; Moyle Croy&Weiler, 2010; Tano, Garau-Vadell, &Armas, 2014), and ecotourism (Hall, 1993; Hsu, Chen & Chuang, 2005; Chao, & Chao, 2017; Aziz et al, 2018). While these studies are mostly focusing on a different tourism destination area, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, there are limited studies on the perceptions of local visitors regarding adventure tourism within the island context. Besides, most of the previous studies are not within the Malaysian context and only a few were conducted in Malaysia with almost none on Sabah islands in particular. Hence, the current study aims to determine the perception of the local visitors regarding adventure tourism products and activities as well as how these activities impact the environment of Tunku Abdul Rahman Park (henceforth TARP). From an academic perspective, confirming the cause of the perceived challenge can elaborate on existing theories. For tourism managers, understanding the factors that produce challenges can help them plan places and activities with the appropriate level of challenge in the experience coming from management.

Literature Review

Adventure tourism activities are referred to as any trips to remote destinations for physical activities, nature interactions, and learning certain cultures (ATTA, 2009) as well as engaging in leisure activities in unusual and exotic destinations at remote areas or into the wilderness (Millington, Locke & Locke, 2001). Adventure tourism activities can be arranged into classes of three characteristics, which are land-based, water-based, and air-based (Heneghan, 2014, Fatt et al., 2020). Adventure travel can include many challenging situations, such as rough roads and heavy currents, exacerbated by insufficient personalities experience, wet equipment, and competition (Pomfret & Bramwell, 2016). Moreover, challenges can take the form of physical or mental, driving participants' physical abilities and emotions, and require technical skills to be performed in physical conditions (Schmidt & Little, 2007). However, several studies have examined possible sources of challenges in adventure tourism. Briefly, adventure tourism is associated with outdoor activities that are based on the natural ground structures (Buckley, 2004), which require certain equipment that visitors can use in experiencing the adventure product. Adventure tourism consists of soft adventure and hard adventure. While soft adventure activities are more conveniently comfortable and often involve fewer physical risks and experience, hard adventure activities, on the other hand, require tourists to be physically and mentally fit as these activities usually involve high-risk elements. Meanwhile, the development of adventure tourism activities through human activities at areas surrounding the islands may cause environmental impacts to a certain extent. The association between adventure tourism activities and other purposes of coastal islands and marine environment could lead to a complex dispute among tourists, community, and the management over resources (Kenchington, 1993), thus resulting in the degradation of the marine environment due to uncontrollable activities and visitation to coastal and marine areas (Davenport&Davenport, 2006).

Some attention has also been paid to the impact of outdoor tourism activities on the environment, which is specifically relevant to adventure tourism commercials. Hence, tourism can be demonstrated to tourists and local visitors as a tool for encouraging awareness of sustaining island biodiversity so as to prevent the degradation of the natural environment of the islands (Aziz, et al., 2020). As argued by Philips (1985), tourism allows for conservation in line with a

revenue source, economic justifications, and a means of establishing support. Although adventure tourism might give positive or negative impacts on the environment of the islands based on the viewpoint of the local visitors, some of them may also think that tourism allows for a greater understanding and appreciation of environment preservation among tourists, besides increasing environmental infrastructure investments in the host country although this may simultaneously contribute to environmental degradation, pollution, or the destruction of natural resources (Kim, 2002; Liu, 1987). Many tourism scholars have highlighted the importance of understanding the perceptions of local visitors and their significance to tourism development. For instance, to support the development planning of adventure tourism in certain areas, the perceptions and attitudes of local visitors were considered accordingly (Omar et al., 2020; Nik Hashim, 2019; Andreck & Vogt, 2000; Nzama, 2008). Hence, to manage the impact of adventure tourism activities on the environment, planning is, therefore, required in the long run.

Research Site and Methodology

Tunku Abdul Rahman Park (TARP), which is located about 8 km from the Kota Kinabalu capital city, was selected as the research site. In 1974, TARP was established as a marine park for the purpose of protecting the flora and fauna surrounding the islands and preserving the unique marine environment as well as the coral reefs. TARP consists of five islands: Manukan, Gaya, Mamutik, Sapi, and Sulug. However, in this study, only four islands (Manukan, Mamutik, Gaya, and Sapi) will be selected since Sulug Island is not open to the public or any tourism activity due to its residential status; hence, the island was excluded from this study. To distribute the self-administered questionnaires to the local visitors of the four islands, a convenience sampling technique was employed and the data were collected within a three-month period from January to March 2015. Out of the total 300 questionnaires distributed to the target respondents, only 170 questionnaires were returned to the researcher. The IBM SPSS version 25 software was then used to analyze the data.

Findings

Based on the profile of 170 respondents of this study (see Table 1), there are 101 female respondents and 69 male respondents within the age range of 16 to 25 years old 100 respondents, 26 to 35 years old 40 respondents, 36 to 45 years old 25 respondents, and 46 years old and above 5 respondents. The majority of the respondents are Bachelor's degree holder with 120 respondents and most of them are government workers (75). This is followed by those who are students (37) and private employees (36); however, the occupation of the remaining respondents was not stated.

Table 1: Local Visitors' Profile

Demographic Profile	Item	Frequency
Gender	Female	101
	Male	69
Age	16-25	100
	26-35	40
	36-45	25
	46 and above	5
Education	SPM	40
	Diploma	10
	Bachelor's degree	120
Occupation	Student	37
	Government Worker	75
	Private Worker	36
	Others	22
Total		170

The Involvement In Adventure Tourism Activities At TARP

In reference to the research findings, 72% of the respondents had previously visited TARP, while 18% of the respondents were first-timers. As for their knowledge of adventure tourism activities, 74.8% of the respondents acknowledge TARP as a popular destination for adventure tourism activities and 75% of the respondents understand the meaning of adventure tourism activities; however, 58% of the respondents have not tried the adventure tourism products offered at the park. While 90 % of the respondents agreed that the activities offered at TARP are adventure tourism-related, 10.2% of the respondents, however, disagreed otherwise. In terms of the adventure tourism activities offered at TARP, snorkelling was the most popular activity undertaken by 57.1% of the respondents, followed by banana boat ride (36.4%), short jungle trekking (30.8%), scuba diving (26.1%), parasailing (22.4%), and kayaking (22.5%). Although relatively new and introduced at the end of 2014 at TARP, these activities have been popularly engaged in as represented by 4.6% of the respondents. However, paragliding is the less popular adventure tourism activity as represented by only 2% of the respondents.

The Visitors' Perception Of Adventure Tourism Activities At TARP

The majority of the respondents agreed that TARP is an adventure tourism destination, which is accessible and offers a variety of adventurous and suitable activities to engage in. Besides, the respondents mostly agreed that they were primarily attracted to visit TARP as it offers fun and enjoyable adventure activities, besides feeling a sense of safety to participate in the activities. In terms of satisfaction, the respondents were satisfied with the prices offered at TARP for all activities and public facilities, and that these activities are likely to attract repeat visitors. The respondents also suggested that TARP should offer more activities in the future.

The Perception of the Environmental Impact of Adventure Tourism Activities at TARP

Based on the research findings, 54.3% of the respondents agreed that there are green practices around the islands by which recycle bins are provided (46.7%) and the park landscape is suitable for adventure tourism (51%). Moreover, 47% of the respondents agreed that adventure activities contribute to environmental awareness, while 42.0% of the respondents agreed that the activities reflect green practices to some extent. Besides, 37.4% of the respondents also noticed some environmental awareness campaigns on the billboard. It was further revealed by 40% of the respondents that the tour operators reminded the participants of the do's and don'ts prior to any adventure activities and that the operators practise environmental awareness (38%). 32% of the respondents also reported no defacement or vandalism around the islands due to adventure tourism activities. Nevertheless, the respondents had mixed feelings about whether the crowds of visitors would harm the environment (29.0%) and whether adventure activities would harm the environment in the long run in the absence of sustainable practices (27%). Notwithstanding, some of them believed that the crowds of visitors would not harm the environment as they acknowledge the green practices at TARP.

CONCLUSION

In general, adventure tourism at TARP is deemed beneficial as the local visitors were mostly satisfied with the activities offered at TARP. The findings of this study could provide insights into the local visitors' perceptions of adventure tourism activities at TARP besides providing further information, particularly to the TARP management concerning the marine park operations, maintenance, and development. While sustaining the fragile park resources (Zaei, 2013), the industry stakeholders could also contribute to the improvement of tourism products owing to the significant perceptions of the local visitors (Eshliki&Kaboudi, 2012; Nik Hashim et al., 2019; Hashim et al., 2019). Overall, based on the research findings, most of the local visitors agreed that TARP offers adventurous tourism activities and they were satisfied with these activities; thus, they intend to revisit the islands in the future.

Additionally, some of the local visitors had suggested TARP management to offer more sustainable tourism activities in the future. As for their perceptions regarding the impact of

adventure tourism on the environment, the findings revealed that most of the local visitors, to some extent, acknowledge the environmental impact of such adventure activities. Hence, besides conserving the environment through long-term planning and offering sustainable adventure tourism activities, the local visitors believed that adventure tourism could contribute to a greater understanding and appreciation of the natural resources around the islands. However, the findings revealed that some of them still lack environmental awareness as the economic benefits of tourism on the islands are the main concern. Hence, the park management should take note of this issue to sustain the long-term environment of the islands. Since the findings also revealed an extent of uncertainty on the environmental harm caused by the crowds of visitors or adventure activities in the absence of sustainable practices, the TARP management should, therefore, elevate the activities involving green practices awareness by adding more billboard notices that deliver interesting information about green practices and the islands' strategic locations.

Furthermore, it is important that the park management protects the environment and the surrounding marine areas by educating the local visitors and reducing any development around the islands to conserve the environment. Sabah Parks can also limit the capacity for the number of visitors entering the marine park area. To meet the market demands, more adventure activities should be offered to the visitors in the future but with adherence to the conservation policy outlined by the park management. The TARP management should also focus more on green practices rather than operating the park without considering any impact on the environment.

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