



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 socio-cultural 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, Wheeler (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 be 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 Wöcke'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 Wöcke'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

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