



Creating an innocuous mangrove ecosystem: Understanding the influence of ecotourism products from Malaysian and international perspectives



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ABSTRACTS

The uniqueness of the mangrove habitat has contributed to the economic development of a number of countries, through the expansion of ecotourism activities, including in Malaysia. Careful consideration is crucial for ensuring mangrove ecosystems are well preserved and protected through ecotourism activities. Studies have highlighted that incongruous ecotourism products have led to failures in the ecotourism industry. Therefore to support both economic development and efforts to conserve mangrove ecosystems, this study has sought to support the establishment of a highly influential ecotourism product for Malaysia's national, local and international mangrove ecotourism industries. An ecotourism product is comprised of a physical product, activities, and facilities and services. Activities are the most influential of the mangrove ecotourism products. Physical products and activities are greatly prominent in Malaysia. In particular, physical products are commonly selected by local visitors as being important for encouraging them to visit, while activities are mostly selected by local and national visitors. Most facilities and services appeal to Malaysians, while very individual sets of facilities and services appeal to international visitors. Findings have confirmed that highly influential ecotourism products for mangrove ecotourism are safe for the mangrove ecosystem. This finding is significant for economic development, and also for conservation efforts regarding the mangrove ecosystem.

1. Introduction

Tourism is imperative for driving the national economy. In Malaysia the tourism industry is the fifth largest industry, continuing to be a major part of the nation's economic development. Jaafar et al. (2015) reported that Malaysia's tourism industry contributed a total of RM65.44 billion (US\$20 billion) to Malaysia's Gross Domestic Product in 2013. However, a high level of mass tourism activity has been observed as being mainly economic-oriented, leading to economic inequalities and contributing to environmental pollution and cultural invasion (Fennell, 2002). Tourism activities have also often neglected the socio-environmental aspect, which is profound in terms of environmental conservation and wellbeing (Hassan et al., 2016). The exacerbation of this concern has expanded the ecotourism industry within the broader tourism industry (Wearing and Neil, 2008).

Ecotourism is defined as being travel and visitation which is environmentally responsible, involving visits to relatively undisturbed natural areas, allowing visitors to enjoy and appreciate nature (National Ecotourism Plan Malaysia, 1997). This type of tourism incorporates

cultural features, promotes conservation, ensures low visitor impact, and supports the beneficial, active socio-economic involvement of local populations. According to Vasanth (2005), the ecotourism industry currently constitutes about 10 percent of Malaysia's total tourism revenue. The characteristics of ecotourism differ slightly from the tourism industry, whereby the focus of ecotourism attractions is on the surrounding environment and a given destination's natural setting.

In view of this, ecotourism has unique characteristics which require distinctive management systems for ensuring tourist satisfaction, while at the same time protecting the destination's natural environment. Visitor expectations are dominant in the ecotourism industry, as ecotourism relies on both nature-based products and tourist experiences and expectations. Ecotourism products are defined as being physical objects, services and organization places which are influential in satisfying client demands, including physical products, activities, facilities and services (Chaiboonsri and Chaitip, 2008).

Recently studies have consistently revealed that a key concern for the ecotourism industry are incongruous ecotourism products, which can result in the industry's failure (Ali Jozi and Rezaian, 2010; Nouri

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et al., 2012; Ghorbani et al., 2015; Sánchez-Cañizares and Castillo-Canalejo, 2014; Arsic et al., 2017; Ayob et al., 2009). This underlines the importance of ecotourism products in successful deliveries within an ecotourism industry. The identification of these ecotourism products, and determination of their potential environmental impacts, are pivotal to conserving and protecting mangrove ecosystems.

Mangroves are salt-tolerant plants that grow in intertidal areas, in the transitional zones of coasts and estuaries, and along rivers draining into the sea (Naidoo, 2009; Zhou et al., 2010). They are the dominant forests of tropical and subtropical sheltered coasts, providing food and habitat for flora and fauna including fish, crustaceans and mollusks (Alongi, 2002; Walters et al., 2008). The mangrove forest characteristics are ideal for the ecotourism industry. Mangrove areas cover approximately 150,000 km² worldwide, spreading over Southeast Asia, South, North and Central America, Australia, the Middle East, and South Africa. The largest mangrove areas can be found in Southeast Asia, including in Malaysia. Various countries have actively promoted mangroves as ecotourism destinations, including Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines, Australia, various countries in Africa, and many more. Malaysia is one country with a significant mangrove forest reserve, rich with plant diversity (Zakaria and Rajpar, 2015). The country also has several eminent mangrove ecotourism destinations recognized by both local and international visitors.

To contribute to the growing body of knowledge on ecotourism, it would be useful to explore ecotourism-related physical products, activities and facilities which influence the mangrove ecotourism industry. Thus far, limited studies have been undertaken in relation to mangrove ecotourism in Malaysia, especially in terms of the sector's physical products, activities, facilities and services. Exploring the physical products, activities, facilities and services related to mangrove ecotourism, can contribute new knowledge to the ecotourism research sector. The identification of these ecotourism products is pivotal to conserving and protecting mangrove ecosystems, through understanding their potential environmental impacts.

The framework is significant to mangrove ecotourism management in planning and designing a mix of ecotourism products which consider environment impacts. Rather than only focusing on business aspects, management will be aware of the effect of selected products, activities and facilities on the environment. The determination of preferences between different stakeholders should encourage greater interest in mangrove ecotourism development. Besides, several studies have proven that there are dissimilarities between local and international tourist expectations for ecotourism destinations (Stone, 2014; Hearne and Santos, 2004). Therefore, understanding the unique needs and preferences of local and international tourists can provide direction when strategizing product development, while also protecting the mangrove ecosystem. Accordingly, this framework is applicable to not just mangrove ecotourism in Malaysia, but also to other countries including Indonesia, Brazil, Australia, Mexico, and the United States. From a holistic point of view, this is an effort to ensure that the mangrove ecotourism industry continues to be a key factor of Malaysia's national economy and economic development, while at the same time continuing to protect and preserve the natural features on which they are based.

Therefore this study's aims are to uphold economic development and the conservation of mangrove ecosystems, through validating mangrove ecotourism products and activities. This has been achieved through establishing appropriate and benign ecotourism products, which can satisfy both local and international visitors. To achieve this aim, the study has developed a framework for highly influential ecotourism products within the mangrove ecotourism sector, based on local and national-level Malaysian perspectives, and also on international perspectives. This framework has been developed through establishing and analyzing the influence of ecotourism products on mangrove ecotourism, from local, national and international viewpoints. This is the first holistic study conducted in Malaysia regarding

ecotourism product development, segmented into local, national, and international perspectives, looking at the three most prominent mangrove ecotourism destinations in Malaysia.

2. Conceptualizing the ecotourism product

Every organization depends on an effective marketing mix to achieve its desired goals and aims. A marketing mix is a set of controllable marketing tools which an organization uses to achieve a desired goal. Traditionally, physical industries have used 4Ps in their marketing mixes including product, price, place and promotion. Additionally, the service industry has adopted 7Ps, adding another three elements into the marketing mix including people, process and physical evidence (Ivy, 2008). The tourism industry has always been classified as a service industry, but international researchers have portrayed tourism as being a product rather than a service (Carlos et al., 2007; Osmund and Sunday, 2010; Jaafar et al., 2015).

Products are the goods or services that an organization offers to the market (Iman, 2002). Products are fundamental to the whole operation of businesses. They are conceptualized through three means, include a response to the existing market, the creation of a market, and a response to both market needs and creation (Iman, 2002). Product development is described as the process of creating a product from scratch, to the point where it becomes available on the market (Jaafar et al., 2015). Matilla (2011) explains that ecotourism product development basically begins with minor improvements made to an existing product. Therefore it is the responsibility of the service provider to be creative and innovative when developing an ecotourism product which will satisfy and attract visitors.

Eraqi (2006) has conceptually defined the ecotourism product as being a service or process which facilitates tourism, comprised of natural and cultural resources, facilities, infrastructures, accommodation and restaurants. Ecotourism products include physical objects, services and places of organizations, all of which are influential in satisfying client demand (Chaiboonsri and Chaitip, 2008). Therefore based on ecotourism's definition, conceptually an ecotourism product encompasses physically-built environments, infrastructures and facilities, and also activities provided at respective destinations to satisfy visitor demands.

Taneva (2009) highlights that tourism products must adhere to specifications and requirements set by earlier clients, to provide meaningful experiences that meet expectations. Customer satisfaction relates to the complete assessment of product performance and services provided (Bartikowski and Llosa, 2004). Therefore it is crucial for service providers to effectively identify and understand visitor needs. Tsiotsou and Ratten (2010) stated that destination is a significant tourism product used to attract visitors. According to Backhaus (2003), ecotourism destinations must be comprised of services and facilities which cater to visitor needs. In addition, Navrátil et al. (2013) extolled three main factors that attract ecotourism tourists, including the presence of dominant attractiveness, natural landscapes and cultural historical sites, and harmony in the given area's landscape. Therefore the right combination of ecotourism products will positively influence people's choice to visit, consequently ensuring the survival of ecotourism destinations in the market.

3. Ecotourism products of mangrove ecotourism destinations around the globe

Ali Jozi and Rezaian (2010) have listed several weakness factors contributing to the failure of ecotourism destinations, including a lack of available infrastructure. Another study performed by Nouri et al. (2012) has revealed that the weightiest weaknesses of ecotourism destinations involve the lack of facilities provided at destinations, including insufficient parking lots and accommodation. In their study, Ghorbani et al. (2015) revealed similar findings indicating that a

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