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## Cultural Interpretation toward Sustainability: A Case of Mount Kinabalu

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### Abstract

The study looked at the role of cultural interpretation in sustainable tourism development. Using Mount Kinabalu as a case in point, it examined Kinabalu Park visitors' (including Mount Kinabalu climbers) awareness of the indigenous cultural values of Mount Kinabalu. It also analyzed their level of satisfaction with the cultural interpretation of the mountain and their perceptions of cultural interpretation toward sustainability. Using convenience sampling, questionnaires were distributed to park visitors at several points at the park headquarters. Descriptive statistics were conducted to obtain frequencies, means and standard deviations. It was discovered that Kinabalu Park visitors did not have an in-depth knowledge of the cultural significance of Mount Kinabalu. They knew significantly more about the scientific aspects (i.e. geology, botany and zoology) of the mountain and the history of early Mount Kinabalu climbing. The cultural knowledge they had of the mountain was limited to the commonly interpreted theme of Mount Kinabalu sacredness. Despite the positive experience with the cultural interpretation presented by mountain or tour guides, visitors were dissatisfied with the overall cultural interpretation of Mount Kinabalu. They did not think the exhibit centers at the Kinabalu Park headquarters provided sufficient information on the indigenous cultural values of the mountain. They indicated that they would like to learn more about the cultural significance of Mount Kinabalu and agreed that there should be more information in that respect. Visitors agreed that the knowledge of the indigenous cultural values of Mount Kinabalu deepened their understanding of the mountain and increased their awareness of its physical environment which indirectly resulted in a desire to protect the park or the mountain. They also agreed that knowledge of the mountain's cultural significance made them appreciate the native non-material side of the mountain, enhanced their understanding of and respect for the indigenous cultural values and prompted them to behave respectfully. The present study proposed several recommendations that the park management can consider to ensure appropriate visitor interpretation.

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## 1. Introduction

For the indigenous people in many parts of the globe, nature is often interwoven with culture and they cannot be viewed separately (Ivanovic, 2008). Natural features, such as mountains, rivers and lakes, usually hold symbolic or spiritual meanings for them (Carr, 2004; Kipuri, 2010). The long and complex relationship between nature and the indigenous people represents their unity with the natural and spiritual surrounding (Carr, 2004; Buggey, 1999). For many, places in their landscapes are regarded as sacred, as places of power, of journeys related to spirit beings, of entities that must be appeased (Buggey, 1999). For example, the Maori people in New Zealand believe their connection to natural landscapes signifies the right of a person to be a member of a tribe and hence develops that person's sense of belonging to the land and the people who occupy the land (Hakopa, 1998 cited in Carr, 2004). In 1992, the World Heritage Convention became the first international legal instrument to recognize and protect cultural landscapes (Mitchell, Rossler & Tricaud, 2009). Cultural conflicts between tourism and indigenous societies can occur if the cultural values of natural/protected areas are not recognized and communicated (Zeppel, 2010). Interpretation can play a significant role in achieving sustainability in those areas (Moscardo, 1998). There are limited studies on the role of cultural interpretation in sustainable tourism development (Zeppel, 2010). Using Mount Kinabalu as a case in point, this study attempts to fill the gap. Specifically, it examines Kinabalu Park visitors' awareness of the indigenous cultural values of Mount Kinabalu; analyzes their level of satisfaction with the cultural interpretation of Mount Kinabalu; and analyzes their perceptions of cultural interpretation toward sustainability.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Indigenous cultural values

In many parts of the world, the value of places goes beyond the physical or material; very often, indigenous cultural values are attached to them, that is, the native non-material values as perceived by the indigenous people who have resided in the places for decades (Buggey, 1999; Kipuri, 2010). They establish a relationship with places primarily in spiritual terms instead of in material terms (Buggey, 1999; Kipuri, 2010). They consider themselves to be an integral part of the land and are in harmony with animals, plants and ancestral spirits that occupy the land (Buggey, 1999). The view of land sacredness has its roots in the cosmological and mythological relationships focusing on earth and sky, land and water, and perceptions of power and place (Buggey, 1999). For instance, the Anishinaubaeg people of the Great Lakes region believed the sun, earth, moon, and thunder had kinship relationships as father, mother, grandmother, and grandfather (Buggey, 1999). Because aboriginal people have lived in their areas since ancient times, they have intimate knowledge of natural resources and ecosystems of their areas (Buggey, 1999). Such knowledge and the respect they have for the spirits that inhabit their places have shaped their lives (Buggey, 1999).

According to UNESCO (2013), cultural landscapes “represent the ‘combined works of nature and of man’ ... illustrative of the evolution of human society and settlement over time, under the influence of the physical constraints and/or opportunities presented by their natural environment and of successive social, economic and cultural forces, both external and internal”. The World Heritage Convention recognized three main categories of cultural landscape namely 1) the clearly defined landscape designed and created intentionally by man; 2) the organically developed landscape, relict or continuing; and 3) the associative cultural landscape (Mitchell, Rossler & Tricaud, 2009; UNESCO, 2013). Cultural landscapes related to indigenous people in all probability fit the third category (UNESCO, 2013). Soon after the 1992 breakthrough decision, three places were inscribed on the World Heritage List for their cultural and spiritual links with people namely 1) Tongariro National Park in New Zealand for its cultural and religious significance to the Maori people; 2) Uluru-Kata Tjuta in Australia for the traditional belief system of the Anangu people; and 3) the Laponian Area in Sweden, home of the Saami people, the biggest and one of the last places with an ancestral way of life based on the seasonal movement of livestock (Buggey, 1999). To date, 88 properties with 4 trans-boundary properties on the World Heritage List have been included as cultural landscapes (UNESCO, 2015). It is crucial to recognize the cultural values of landscapes as cultural conflicts between tourists and indigenous people which can occur if and when the indigenous cultural values are not recognized and communicated (Zeppel, 2010).

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