



# Seeking tourism sustainability – A case study of Tioman Island, Malaysia



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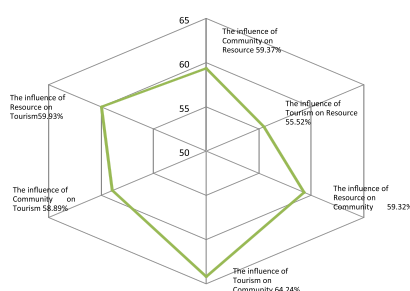
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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Used stakeholder approach in assessing tourism sustainability.
- Responses collected from three stakeholder groups: government officers, local communities and tourists.
- Based on SEIS (Sustainable Ecotourism Indicator System) framework and extends it to island destination.
- Added nine additional indicators based on themes emerged from island tourism research.
- Tested on an island in developing country: Tioman Island of Malaysia.

## GRAPHICAL ABSTRACT



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## ABSTRACT

This study evaluates Tioman Island's sustainability achievement using the Sustainable Ecotourism Indicator System (SEIS). Sustainability is achieved if each stakeholder makes a positive contribution to others in social, environmental, and economic dimensions. The overall sustainability score allows objective comparisons across destinations, which may provoke positive reactions from stakeholders to play their parts. Three questionnaire versions were designed in which each stakeholder group (39 government officers, 104 local communities, and 105 tourists) rated their perceptions of sustainable relationships with two other stakeholder groups, resulting in six sustainable relationship aspects. The results indicate that Tioman Island is classified as "potentially sustainable" (58.89%).

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## 1. Introduction

Like many island residents, the main income source for the

Tioman islanders of Malaysia comes from tourism. Tioman Island has received international recognition for its beautiful beaches, which were featured in the 1958 movie 'South Pacific.' In the 1970's, Tioman Island was voted one of the world's ten most beautiful islands by *TIME* magazine (Shuib et al., 2005). Tioman's location is shown in Fig. 1. The rapid tourism development, however, has destroyed the island's ecosystem (Mohamed, 2006). High tourist

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Fig. 1. The location of Tioman Island (source: Malaysia hotel Tour.com.).

arrivals have increased the capacity pressure on the island and diminished the quality of the experience (Hillery, Nancarrow, Griffin, & Syme, 2001). In fact, Shuib et al. (2005) identifies the following five challenges to sustainable tourism on Tioman Island:

- Inappropriate development
- Open burning
- Improper maintenance of architecture
- Poor facility maintenance
- Insufficient supply of well-trained local guides

Cheryl (2007) points out that poor government planning is a major impediment to sustainable development on Tioman Island. Conflicting mandates between the state government and the managing body of the Marine Parks, have resulted in planning deficiencies, poor distribution of benefits and dissatisfactions

among stakeholders. For example, the marina project construction on Tioman Island was carried out, despite opposition from local residents and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Also, Tioman Island's local community livelihood reported that 63% of the locals lived with a household income of less than RM18,000 (USD 5142) in 2009 (Norlida, Redzuan, Tamat, & Zaimah, 2011) – well below the country's *per capita* income of RM28,000 (About USD8,000) (New Strait Times, 2012). Fig. 2 shows local communities are living in simple houses and have to pump water from underground. This suggests that the residents' livelihoods have not improved as much as they should have, even after Tioman Island was declared an ecotourism site (the island was granted Marine Parks Area [MPA] status in 1994), which in itself promises benefits to local communities.

Newspaper reports (e.g., *The Star*, 2004; *The Malay Mail*, 2009) highlight the dissatisfactions of business operators, local residents, and tourists as follows:

- **Business operators** disagreed on development plans outlined by the government, such as the plan to turn Tioman Island into a duty-free destination; this was deemed inappropriate because tourists visit an MPA island for its natural beauty, not its shopping. Adding shoppers to the island would only increase the carrying capacity pressure and threaten the already fragile MPA ecosystem, jeopardizing the island's status as an ecotourism site.
- **Local residents** blamed poorly supervised tourists and inexperienced snorkelers for the damage done to the coral reefs.
- **Tourists** were upset that local operators prioritised profit over their customers' well-being; for example, tourists reported being stranded for hours waiting for transport during peak season.

This evidence points to the strain put on stakeholder relationships, which may lead to more serious sustainability issues. Poor stakeholder relationships are serious stumbling blocks to tourism sustainability in Tioman Island, as the environmental, social, economic, and cultural well-beings of some of these stakeholders are compromised by other stakeholders.

Thus, a study that systematically assesses the state of sustainability on Tioman Island is imperative. The sustainability score will provide a comprehensive picture for policy-makers and guide decision-making in Tioman development.



Fig. 2. The communities of Tioman Island (source: The author).

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