

Tourism Development in Northeast Langkawi: The Views From Within

Tan Wan Hin

Department of Geography, Faculty of Arts Social Sciences, University of Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur
wanhin@um.edu.my

ABSTRACT Tourism has been aggressively developed in Langkawi since the late 1980s. However, the number of tourists has stagnated and new attractions are necessary. Accordingly, the relatively undeveloped Northeast of Langkawi with its natural resources can help revitalise the tourism industry through ecotourism. The paper examines the perceptions of local residents towards the economic, social and environmental effects associated with tourism development. Ecotourism development is viewed positively by the residents. They perceived that ecotourism will bring about economic benefits to the area though disbenefits such as inflation may arise. It is unlikely to cause social or environmental problems as ecotouristic activities involves small number of tourists, occur far away from area of population and cause little disruption to the environment.

ABSTRAK Pelancongan telah dimajukan di Langkawi sejak lewat tahun 1980an. Akan tetapi, bilangan pelancong telah merosot dan tarikan-tarikan yang baru diperlukan. Bahagian Timur Laut Langkawi yang mundur tetapi mempunyai kekayaan semulajadi boleh menghidupkan semula pelancongan melalui ekopelancongan. Artikel ini mengkaji persepsi penduduk tempatan kepada kesan ekonomi, sosial dan alam sekitar yang serius kerana ia melibatkan bilangan pelancong yang kecil, berlaku di kawasan yang terpencil dari petempatan dan tidak akan merosakkan alam sekitar.

(ecotourism development, Northeast langkawi)

INTRODUCTION

The economic development of islands in Malaysia has been hampered by their physical characteristics such as lack of natural resources, small physical size and sparse population. However, the myriad attributes of islands such as the natural attractions, isolation, separateness and small physical size are particularly appealing to tourists as destinations for relaxation and tourism is now regarded as a panacea to the economic ills of islands [1]. However, the fragile island ecosystem and limited resources of water, land and even beaches has resulted in concerns about sustainability, especially in the light of plans to develop the islands for tourism as a main source of income for the islanders, who have traditionally depended on fishing and agricultural activities as their livelihood.

The environmental consequences of developing islands through tourism are often in conflict with the desire to protect the very resources that sustain tourism activities. From an environmental

perspective, islands simply do not have the depth of resources to allow for recovery from the negative effects of mass development and increased usage of its resources. Notwithstanding these obstacles and concerns, islands generally embrace tourism as one of the best and, in some cases, the only development strategy available to them [2]. With their natural attractions, the problem of isolation is easily overcome to a degree by consumers travelling to the product, while the resources sought by tourists - sun, sea and sand - are often renewable, abundant and inexpensive to provide. Tourism is more pervasive in its impact on islands due to its small physical area and population size. The influx of large numbers of tourists from a different culture is likely to have more profound cultural and social effects as the number of visitors outnumbers the local population at certain periods and as the local residents come into more frequent contact with tourists.

As such, the responses of local residents are increasingly becoming an important element that

is considered in the development of tourism. This paper thus examines the perceptions of local residents' perceptions to tourism development in Northeastern Langkawi. It highlights their views to the expected economic, social and environmental effects that are normally associated with tourism.

Tourism in Langkawi

Despite being endowed with attractions such as sandy beaches and tropical rainforest, tourism development began only in the late 1980s. Before this, Langkawi was one of the least developed districts in the northern state of Kedah. On 1st January 1987, the federal government conferred duty free port status on Langkawi hastening economic growth, particularly in tourism. The number of tourists has increased dramatically from just 200,000 in 1986 to 1.98 million in 2003. Tourism has transformed the socio-economic conditions of the island. In 1987, 63 per cent of the population were employed in the agricultural and fisheries sector but by 1999 this percentage had declined to only 19 per cent as the tourism industry increasing dominated the economy [3].

However, the number of tourists visiting Langkawi has stagnated since the mid 1990s. While this may be attributed to various factors such as the threat of terrorism, outbreaks of various diseases in the area and stiff competition from other destinations, it is also symptomatic of the lack of new attractions in Langkawi and the rise of a more discerning breed of tourists who are no longer contented with the three 's' of tourism. Accordingly, northeast Langkawi with its rich natural resources such as mangrove swamps and natural life can play a role in revitalising tourism in the island by offering an alternative attraction and a travel experience different from other areas in Langkawi. This area has been relatively ignored in the past as tourism development has focussed on other areas where sandy beaches abound such as in the west of the island. However, the advent of affluent tourists with special interests offers the northeast of Langkawi the opportunity of developing ecotourism as a strategy for the economic development of the area.

The Rationale for the Study

It is a current trend in tourism development to incorporate the views of residents in the areas who will be directly affected by such

development. The study of residents' perceptions is not merely an academic exercise but is undoubtedly a key component in the identification, measurement and analysis of tourism impacts [4]. Residents' perceptions are important because public attitudes can create a hospitable environment for tourists and the resultant satisfactory tourist experience. Resident's perceptions may be a factor in shaping the attractiveness of a destination. Ignoring the perceptions of residents, especially the negative ones, may result in community backlash such as withdrawing support for the industry, hostility to tourists and community protests at tourism projects. In other words, if the tourism industry is to develop within a community, the hosts of the 'host industry' must be willing participants [1].

A questionnaire survey was conducted in 2004 among the residents of northeast Langkawi who are expected to be most affected by any tourism development in the area. Of the total of 197 who were randomly selected, 43 were from Kisap, 48 from Klim, 61 from Itau and the remaining 45 from Padang Lallang. The questionnaire was divided into two main components. Firstly, it solicited information on the socio-economic background of respondents. This included particulars of age, sex, race, education, income, and occupation. Secondly, respondents were asked to rate their responses on a scale of 1 to 5 on whether they agreed to various statements on the economic, social and environmental impacts of tourism development. A score of 1 indicates their strong disagreement while a score of 5 means they strongly agree to the particular statement on tourism impact.

Socio-economic background of respondents

The breakdown of the respondents by various demographic characteristics indicates that they are not significantly different from those of the overall population which is mainly rural and dominated by one ethnic group. Briefly the demographic characteristics of the respondents are as follows.

Males constitute 55 per cent of the sample. As expected, 96 per cent of the respondents are Malays. Being a rural area, the study area is predominantly populated by Malays. There is a small community of Myanmarese and Thais and thus four of the respondents were from that ethnic category. The educational level of the respondents is indicative of the relatively

undeveloped status of northeast Langkawi and the lack of high paying employment opportunities. Less than ten per cent of the respondents have had education beyond the secondary school level. These comprise mostly teachers, government servants and a few employees in the tourism sector. The predominant employment opportunities are in the agricultural and fisheries sectors which do not require a high academic qualification. It is also probable that those with higher education have migrated elsewhere where such opportunities abound. Thus, there is little in-migration into the area. This is indicated from the survey data where most respondents have lived in the area for a length of time which is almost similar to their age. The mean age of respondents is thus high at 41.3 years and almost half the population are more than 40 years old. Significant tourism development in the area has only occurred in Tanjung Rhu. Thus only 25 per cent of the respondents cited they are employed in the tourism industry mainly as paid employees in tourism plants while a small number managed businesses related to the tourism industry. The low educational levels, the rural economy and employment in the lower paid jobs in the tourism sector are reflected in the high percentage of respondents (84 per cent) earning a monthly income of less than RM1500.00.

The northeast region can thus be claimed to be one of the most undeveloped areas in Langkawi as evidenced by the statistics from the survey. In such a scenario, tourism development, in this case ecotourism, can be an appropriate development strategy. However, tourism development brings with it a multitude of effects and it would be pertinent to examine how residents view such effects before any concerted development takes place.

Perceptions of the Impacts of the Tourism Development

To assess how the local residents would respond to the proposed ecotourism in the area, 22 statements on the effects of tourism development were presented to the respondents. These statements represent the most commonly cited effects of tourism, whether positive or negative. Respondents were asked to rate their responses to each statement on a score ranging from 1 to 5 (1 – strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – neutral, 4 – agree, 5 – strongly agree). The mean scores were then calculated and mean scores of more than 3.0

were taken as agreement with the statement. A higher mean score would thus indicate a stronger agreement with the statement and vice-versa. The percentage agreeing to each statement was determined by the number of respondents who scored 4 and 5 to each impact statement.

Economic Impacts

The economic benefits from tourism development are well documented and has often been emphasised as the rationale for its introduction. It creates an inflow of revenue to the destination, generating business turnover, household income, employment and government revenue. This also gives rise to secondary benefits as the income is re-spent in the local economy creating further rounds of economic activity. These secondary effects, can, in total, considerably exceed in magnitude the initial direct effects. Moreover, tourism is effective in generating employment in the less developed and outlying regions of a country where alternative opportunities for development are more limited [4].

Lacking natural resources, islands often turn to tourism as a panacea for their economic problems. Thus, in the case northeast Langkawi, more than 88 per cent residents perceive that tourism development is the most appropriate development strategy for the area (Table 1). A significant majority of the respondents are of the opinion that tourism development will benefit the local economy of northeast Langkawi. Almost all the residents agree that this will produce more job opportunities, resulting in a high mean score of 4.11. Similarly, a high mean score of 4.11 was recorded for the statement that the project will result in increased business opportunities such as the sale of souvenir items, food, traditional herbs and medicine and opening up car rental companies and travel agencies [3]. Jobs and business opportunities are created not only during the construction phase of tourism projects but also in the service sector that accompanies tourism development. Almost 93 per cent of the respondents agreed positively with the effects of tourism development on job and business opportunities. The support for tourism is also evidenced by the highest mean score of 4.31 among the economic impact items that more tourists should be encouraged to visit the area because of the expected economic benefits.

As tourism grows in a region, it makes increasing demands on the scarce resources of the area. Tourist expenditure gives rise to inflationary effects on prices of local goods and land as demand for land for tourism projects soars [5]. A total of 81.8 per cent of the respondents perceived that land values and house prices have risen in the area. Similarly, 76.4 per cent of the residents feel that food prices have also increased. Tourism has often been criticised for its inflationary effects as tourists are more inclined to pay high prices because of the temporary nature of their visit. Also, local businesses exploit this situation by raising prices.

Introducing ecotourism in the area will also imply increased boat activities. However, residents are unsure whether this will cause a decline in the catch of fish. Another negative effect associated with tourism is that the local population with their lower level of education, and skills are often marginalised as non-islanders seize such employment opportunities [3]. The responses to this effect are rather mixed. A mean score of 3.26 was recorded with slightly more than half agreeing to this negative effect.

From the analysis of economic impacts, it cannot be denied that local residents perceive that tourism development will bring about the economic revitalisation of the area. However, it is also obvious from the responses of residents that a significant number of them also perceive that the economic benefits also entail disbenefits such as inflation.

Social Impacts

The benefits of tourism to the local economy are generally accepted but such benefits have often taken place at the expense of negative social influences on the local population. Differences in culture in the case of foreign tourists and dissimilarities in class, status and ethnicity in the case of domestic tourists provide an environment where negative social consequences may arise. This is compounded by the very nature of the tourism itself – anonymity, short length of stay, propensity to spend, etc – which often results in tourists shedding their inhibitions and the consequent problems of gambling, drugs, vandalism and prostitution. The tourist is living in ‘non-ordinary time and place’ while to the host population it is ‘ordinary life and home’. On weekends and holidays when the number of tourists exceed the local population, problems of

congestion at the beaches, shops and restaurants may give rise to resentment among the local residents.

Table 2 indicates that the negative social consequences from tourism are not perceived as serious by the local residents of northeast Langkawi as yet and are unlikely to be important even with more intensive tourist development. For example, the mean score for the statement that tourism development results in immoral activities is just above the mean. Other low mean scores were recorded for congestion at nearby beaches (3.06) and traffic congestion (3.05). A possible explanation for the mean scores can be attributed to the fluctuating tourist traffic in the area as it is only at certain periods that congestion at roads and beaches are noticeable. In addition, strict enforcement and the strong religious values have ensured that immoral activities are curbed.

In contrast, a bigger majority of respondents agreed that positive social effects accompany tourism development. Thus, 97.4 per cent agreed that there will be improvement in the infrastructure, such as in the road system. The infrastructure, though constructed for the tourism industry is at the same time available for the use of the local people. A high mean score of 4.50 was recorded for this impact item. Additionally, residents perceived that the number of entertainment outlets in the area will also increase. The mean score for this item was lower (4.0) with an agreement rate of 90.5 per cent. Consistent with the perceptual patterns of residents, a high mean score of 3.96 with an agreement percentage of 85.0 per cent was noted for the statement that the local population are receptive to tourists and have not shown any form of irritation towards them. This finding is significant in that a satisfactory travel experience is essential for the continued growth of tourism. Tourists have no desire to visit areas where they are not welcome while communication via word-of-mouth of bad experiences to fellow tourists will deter future travel to the same destination. Doxey’s model of irridex suggests that with increased levels of tourism development, a community passes through a predictable four-stage sequence of reactions, namely, euphoria, apathy, irritation and finally, antagonism. It may be presumptuous to assume that the residents in the study area are in a stage of ‘euphoria’ but they are certainly not perturbed by tourist numbers and behaviour. It can be said that

whatever unpleasant aspects were endured without resentment because of the recognition of the importance of tourism to the island's economic vitality. Ecotourism if developed implies small numbers of tourists. It is thus

unlikely to cause social conflicts with the local population because of the low tourist numbers and as ecotouristic activities occur far from areas of population.

Table 1. Perceived Economic Impacts of Tourism Project Development by Residents of Northeast Langkawi

No.	Economic Impact	Mean	Per cent agreeing
1	Increase in employment opportunities for the local population	4.11	92.9
2	Increase in business opportunities such as the opening of new restaurants and stalls	4.11	92.8
3	Contributes foreign exchange to the country	3.88	81.8
4	Improvement in the local standard of living of the local population	4.04	92.2
5	Inflation in food prices	4.03	76.4
6	Inflation in land values and house prices in tourism areas	3.93	81.8
7	Tourism benefits only a segment of the local population	3.26	52.1
8	Reduction in fish catch because of the expected increase in boat activities	3.14	40.8
9	More tourists should be encouraged because of the economic impact	4.31	94.3
10	Tourism is the most appropriate development strategy in northeast Langkawi	4.08	88.4

Source: Field Survey 2004

Table 2. Perceived Social Impacts of Tourism Project Development by Residents of Northeast Langkawi

No	Social Impact	Mean	Per cent agreeing
1	Improvement in the infrastructure such as roads, electrical supply, etc.	4.50	97.4
2	Increase in the number of shops and shopping centres	4.00	90.5
3	Increase in entertainment outlets in the area	3.06	60.2
4	Tourism causes changes in local traditions and customs	3.27	52.8
5	Increase in immoral activities such as crime in the area	3.25	53.4
6	Occurrence of traffic congestion in the area	3.05	49.2
7	Occurrence of crowding in nearby public beaches	3.06	46.1
8	The local population are receptive to tourist and have not shown any form of irritation towards them	3.96	85.3

Source: Field Survey 2004

Table 3. Perceived Environmental Impacts of Tourism Project Development by Residents of Northeast Langkawi

No.	Environmental Impact	Mean	Per cent agreeing
1	Tourism development will accentuate the water supply problem	2.62	26.7
2	Tourism development will create more problems in rubbish disposal	3.20	44.5
3	Water pollution in the coastal zone will increase	3.12	44.7
4	The aesthetic/natural value of the area will be lost with tourism development	3.29	51.9

Source: Field Survey 2004

Environmental Impacts

It is the natural environment that is the main attraction of the tourist industry, yet in the race to reap the benefits of tourism; many destinations have been transformed without proper analysis of the impacts. Such rapid development often leads to a complete change of the area with extensive and irreversible consequences to the environment. At times, unsightly hotels of alien designs intrude into the surrounding scenic environment with no regard

for landscape aesthetics [5]. This has often been termed 'architectural pollution'

Only four statements relating to the environmental impacts were included in the study. It is evident from the responses that residents perceived that the tourism development will not result in much environmental damage. The mean scores range from 2.62 to 3.29 while the percentage who perceived that such damage will occur range from 26.7 to 51.9 per cent (Table 3). It is

pertinent to note that these scores are relatively lower compared to those for the economic and social impacts, implying that most residents do not perceive environmental deterioration from tourism development to be an important issue.

An oft-cited environmental problem in island tourism development is the shortage of water supply [2]. This is a consequence of the limited supply of ground water in the small physical area and the high demand not only of tourists but by tourists' facilities such as swimming pools and golf courses. This is not the case in Langkawi because of the larger land area and the availability of piped water from the mainland. Slightly higher mean scores are noted for water pollution and rubbish disposal. However, less than half the respondents are of the opinion that such negative environmental effects will intensify with the development of tourism. An incinerator already exists in the area to dispose of rubbish on the island while large scale tourism development and the resultant water pollution are not expected with ecotourism. However, slightly more than half of the residents perceive that the aesthetic beauty and value of the environment will be lost with tourism development. It is thus necessary to ensure that new tourism plants blend with the environment. Planning regulations in Langkawi already stipulates that buildings of more than four storeys are only allowed in Kuah town; however, it may also be necessary to specify the type of architectural designs that are allowed to ensure the aesthetic values of the environment are not infringed upon.

CONCLUSION

It is evident from the survey that tourism development in northeast Langkawi is viewed positively by the local population as they expect to reap the economic benefits from it. The positive acceptance of tourism development and new tourist projects among the local residents can be related to certain factors.

Firstly, the tourism industry is rather recent, having been developed on a large scale only in the mid 1980s and the negative social consequences associated with more developed island destinations such as Bali and Phuket, are not yet apparent. Careful planning will ensure that such negative influences and an

antagonistic attitude among local residents towards tourists are controlled.

Secondly, there is a clear distinction between areas of population concentrations and tourist areas. The main population concentrations on the islands are on the south while tourist sites are located on the southwest and west of the island. The density of population in the study area is also low. Furthermore, the number of tourists to ecotourism attractions such as in northeast Langkawi will be relatively smaller because of the high cost such tourists have to pay. As such, the frequency of contact between hosts and guests may be minimal while the economic effects may be high.

Lastly, in view of the lack of resources on the island, residents perceive tourism development as one of the few development options available and are more amenable to the impacts that may arise. Instead, tourism development may lead to the development of the infrastructure of the area and alleviate some the major problems cited by residents such as poor transportation and poor infrastructure.

REFERENCES

1. Tan, W.H. (2000). 'Guest-host interactions in the Perhentian Islands' in Teh, T. S. (ed.) *Islands of Malaysia: Issues and Challenges*. Kuala Lumpur.
2. Conlin, M.V. and Baum, T. (1995). *Island Tourism: Management Principles and Practice*. Chichester: Wiley & Sons.
3. Kalsom Kayat. (2000). Power Through Tourism: A Blessing on Mahsuri's Eighth Generation in Langkawi? Unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, Michigan State University.
4. Hall, C.M. and Page, S.J. (1999). *The Geography of Tourism and Recreation: Environment, Place and Space*, Routledge, London.
5. Opperman, M. and Chon, Kye-Sung. (1997). *Tourism in Developing Countries*, International Thomson Business Press, London.
6. Doxey, G.V. (1975). 'A causation theory of visitor-resident irritants: methodology and research inferences', *Proceedings of the Travel and Research Association, 6th Annual Conference*, San Diego, California, pp. 195-198.