Developing Success Indicators for Ecotourism Site

Awangku Hassanal Bahar Pengiran Bagul and Shamzani Affendy Mohd Din

Faculty of Business, Economic and Accountancy, University Malaysia Sabah
Kulliyyah of Architecture and Environmental Design, International Islamic University Malaysia, 53100 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Abstract: Tourism has been hailed as one of the important industries in Malaysia and is expected to grow tremendously in the near future. Malaysia favours ecotourism as it is seen to be a sustainable economic activity and there is much support towards the any ecotourism ventures. However, long after the publication of National Ecotourism Masterplan in 1997, there is a lack of discussion on how the ecotourism sector is performing in Malaysia. Different stakeholders may claim different achievements and success for the same ecotourism ventures. This research sets out to explore the perception of success and develop the success indicator for ecotourism venture. The authors suggested that the indicators for ecotourism success cover not only the essential elements in ecotourism as set by the definition, which are conservation and social development of the community but go beyond that definition, which is business practices.

Key words: Ecotourism · Success · Indicators · Sustainability

INTRODUCTION

Success is often perceived as objective criteria subject to quantifiable analysis. Debates about success lie at the heart of much discussion for ecotourism. What should ecotourism aim for? What constitutes success? What influences the industry is not just any objective measure of success or quality but also subjective measures of success. Success in a general sense is mainly based on the desired outcomes and achievements. Many ecotourism writers deal with the outcomes of ecotourism, both positive and negative. The positive outcomes are usually viewed as successful scenarios or best practices. This gives some ideas on how success is viewed by writers in the ecotourism literature. Success, in this perspective, is grounded in the perception of individuals.

This research is largely influenced by ongoing work in researching the development of ecotourism sector in Sabah. Frequent visits to the ecotourism sites on a professional and personal capacity over the years have left a large impression that there is a notion that ecotourism is able improve the site’s current economic conditions and thus improve the living conditions of the local community. It is also very enlightening to entertain the various ideas and thoughts that came across from various stakeholders on the subject of success [1]. Over the years, many stakeholders are very eager to judge and give judgments of what success entails. This is due to the nature of ecotourism where the advocates, business, local community and the tourists is very closely tied together and monitored by many for various reasons grounded in monetary, political or emotional factors. The complexity of the stakeholders’ characteristics usually results in various perceptions of success. This has become an interesting prospect for this research, where these thoughts and ideas can be analysed more systematically and also can be expressed in an academic manner.

Therefore, the main research issue that has been formulated to form the main direction of this research is interpreting and developing the indicators for success of ecotourism sites in Sabah. Initial study indicated that ecotourism success is generally indicated by the health of its business operations, since it is very much a business in nature. Other general success indicators are the positive impacts that it brought to the area and its community. A set of indicators for ecotourism site success that are based on this issue would be valuable to the stakeholders of the industry in reviewing their current plans and policies, and is also useful in monitoring and evaluating current ecotourism projects.

Corresponding Author: Awangku Hassanal Bahar Pengiran Bagul, Faculty of Business, Economics and Accountancy, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Jln. UMS, 88400 Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia. E-mail: hbagul@ums.edu.my.
Based on the research issues, the research question that this research needs to address is to find out what is the success for ecotourism sites. This brings to the development of the research objectives that needed to be achieved, which is to determine what makes a site an ecotourism site in the context of Sabah, and to develop the indicators for ecotourism site success.

This research therefore sets to contribute to a greater understanding of ecotourism success. It will give guidelines to ecotourism stakeholders especially the advocates, businesses and local community to execute, evaluate and monitor ecotourism ventures more effectively through greater understanding and gaining knowledge in establishing, operating and evaluating a successful ecotourism site. The indicators that are developed in this research can be further used as a baseline standard to measure success.

**Literature Review on Success of Ecotourism:** In the ecotourism industry, success is usually based on the desired outcomes and achievement from the operations. Success is mainly grounded in the perception of individuals. The success factors for ecotourism businesses based on the business attributes itself such as business planning, marketing, market research, operational issues, ethical and environmental issues, and personal (operators) issues [2, 3]. Ecotourism business survival usually depends on the chance of learning the necessary skills to stay in business.

Ecotourism ventures should only be considered ‘successful’ if local communities have some measure of control and share equitably in the benefits. The term ‘community-based ecotourism’ should also be reserved for those ventures based on a high-degree of community control (and hence where communities command a large proportion of the benefits) rather than those almost wholly controlled by outside operators [4, 5].

Some authors have clearly adopted a livelihood perspective embracing development and conservation when providing definitions of ecotourism. Ecotourism could be examined as a case study in terms of the extent to which they generated economic benefits for the local community. However, this does not account for how the greater amount of money entering the community might be distributed, or how a community is being affected socially and culturally by ecotourism initiatives [6].

Ecotourism may have a profound effect on the culture at the destination area. Since culture is an area of interest to ecotourists, there has been a revival and rejuvenation of ancient festivals, cultural landmarks and so on. While this phenomenon may enrich the life of local communities and tourists alike, it also threatens the existence of some cultures in their original form. Commodification of culture also leads to negative perception of ecotourism. Even though there are arguments that culture will always evolve along with the process of modernisation, ecotourism has been criticised for accelerating this process. By focusing on the preservation of culture, it is quite clear that it is quite a positive outcome of ecotourism activities. These usually are seen as successful for a site.

Since ecotourism has many examples where it has had a positive impact on the environment, it has been able to capitalise on this growing environmentally friendly sentiment. Positive impacts include the growth of certain species of animals and the conservation of natural areas. However, some negative environment fallout do occur such as over consumption of natural resources, disruption of wildlife and human congestion in natural areas (with the increase of ecotourists) which can cause erosion to pathways, increase in litter and waste, and damages to plants.

As new ecotourism activities are developed, their success depends not only on the attractiveness of the offerings and the efficiency of their provisions, but also on the legitimacy of the commercialisation itself. This is an especially difficult problem in ecotourism since bringing together environmental concerns and commercial tourism depends on the support of a particularly diverse group of stakeholders including private entrepreneurs, local community, established tourism firms, industry associations, academic institutions, environmental groups, and regulatory bodies [7].

The potential of ecotourism as a source of employment and economic growth worldwide is significant. The ecotourism industry is complex because of its nature and the dynamics between its stakeholders [7]. Each group brings to the industry its own set of interests, capabilities, strategies, and traditions that may, and often do, conflict. Despite all that, ecotourism is still seen as an avenue in supporting conservation and increasing people’s appreciation of natural phenomena. Initiatives in the industry must provide opportunities for beneficial involvement of local communities and enhance local livelihoods.

Most tourism authorities agree that to be successful, ecotourism should promote conservation of natural resources and also provide financial gain for the host country and the local people [8]. Developing countries
have increasingly turned towards ecotourism to earn foreign exchange and at the same time, preserve the environmental resource base.

Path to success for ecotourism sites can also be closely indicated to ecotourism accreditation. Accreditation is usually used for benchmarking excellence of ecotourism operations [9]. There are a few award schemes such as Green Flag International, and the World Travel and Tourism Council’s Green Globe but these are not awarded on a wide scale. Excellence that achieves accreditation is usually based on the standard of accommodation grounded in conventional and sustainable classification, integration of ecotourism concepts on the tour operations and the quality of destinations. Accreditations are usually developed through sets of indicators.

Indicators in general should be able to help managers and others to identify how communities change as a result of tourism development. Damage to the ecotourism resources could result in economic losses for those whose livelihoods depend on tourism, and, ecological and social losses for the local community. A good indicator should be measurable, relevant, understandable, scientifically supportable and available when needed to make a difference to the decisions that the management of ecotourism site must make [10].

Methodology: The essence of this research is to understand the stakeholders’ perception of success for ecotourism sites while looking into what is meaningful to the individuals and then comparing it to the industry. This indicated that the nature of this research is purely qualitative. This type of research is able to build a strong and reliable foundation by uncovering motivations, reasons, impressions, perceptions and ideas of individuals. Since perceptions are sought after, an interest in meanings, perspectives and understanding is essential in order to get the full view of the issue. The researcher has to interpret situations and discover the meanings of the perceptions and perspective on the success issue therefore an exploratory investigation is suitable for this purpose [1].

In order to set the framework, the operational definition of ecotourism is selected for this research to set of what an ecotourism and ecotourism site amounts to. The operational definition is as follows [11]:

Ecotourism is environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features – both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low negative visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations.

There are three elements that are crucial in the framework of ecotourism within this definition, which are enjoyment of nature, promoting conservation and involving the local community. Therefore, this operational definition determined the ecotourism site for this research should have all of the three elements. The selection of sites started from the list of identified ecotourism areas in the National Ecotourism Masterplan. Based on the list, the number of valid research areas was reduced to five sites through systematic selection based on the operational definition. These are Sukau, BatuPuteh, KampungBavanggazo, KampungRantai and Rafflesia Information Centre [1].

All of the research sites share the same characteristics i.e. type of attractions and activities where all these sites are involved in nature and culture, have local involvement, use eco-practices, and are protected. However, there are differences in the ownership. The local community runs KampungBavanggazo and KampungRantai ecotourism operations while BatuPuteh’s operation involves both the local community and NGOs. Sukau’s ecotourism operation is mainly run by the private sector and a government department runs the Rafflesia Information Centre. While these differences in the ownership are found in the pool of the case study sites, this will not affect the results of the research as these sites share common characteristics more. The differences only provided insights on the success factor, whether the government, private sector or locally owned operation have differences in the degree of success. This will add more justification in terms of reliability of the results.

The strength of this research is the involvement of all relevant stakeholders as respondents that enable to provide holistic view of success through their perceptions. The stakeholders are divided into four categories, which are the ecotourism advocates (government and Non-Governmental Organisations or NGOs), private sector, local community and the tourists. Primary data proved to be useful for interpreting the success of ecotourism sites. They also provided first-hand information and the impression of ecotourism sites. Additional data was provided through supplementary data from secondary data and qualitative observations. The data gathered from the interview on their perception of success are analysed by clustering it into themes.
Since the research is qualitative in nature, there is the need to triangulate the data in order to strengthen the validity and reliability of the data used. Therefore, respondents’ validation technique is selected in a form of presentation of the analysed data to the respondents or representative of respondents [1].

Research Results: Indicators for Ecotourism Success:
The data analysis has resulted in various themes that amounted to more than 70 and reduced to 21 and these are the indicators that developed from the holistic view of the stakeholders (Diagram 1) [1]. At this stage, these indicators do not have any weight of importance between each of the indicators. This set of indicators that are developed from this research is able to assist stakeholders to understand and learn how to assess the success of an ecotourism site. These indicators are able to set the foundation to develop practical ways to measure success, ensure efforts are justifiably spent, and appropriate strategies and activities are carried out.

The stakeholders may be interested in learning the output of the activities and the outcome to the outputs in the short and long term and the indicators can assist them to identify the outputs.

Diagram 1: Ecotourism Site Success Indicators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ECOTOURISM SITE SUCCESS INDICATORS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Visible local community participation/High level of participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 High number of tourists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Well-managed site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Clear improvement in life and livelihood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Improvement to infrastructures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Meeting objectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Good cooperation among stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Practice good ecotourism management/Sustainable in every way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Promote conservation of natural resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Preservation of culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Number of ecotourism establishment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Happy and motivated community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Benefits to community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Being informative and educational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Satisfied tourists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 Links to other good tourism site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 Good high quality ecotourism products</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 High reputation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 Properly developed site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 Ability to draw interest with a ‘wow’ factor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 Ability to capitalise strengths</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While the indicators may induced much debates, further analysis through extended research would have been useful in strengthening the importance of these indicators. However, this research has achieved its objective where it developed indicators that are comprehensive, holistic and applicable to various ecotourism ventures.

DISCUSSIONS

The research has successfully explored the perception of success based on all possible stakeholders’ perceptions, be it the government, NGOs, business, tourist or local community. Many of the success for ecotourism operations, as discussed in the earlier literature review, include local community as its main component. The indicators from this research showed that the success of ecotourism sites are mainly concerned with the output of the ecotourism and mainly deals with macro elements.

The indicators can be further subdivided into three clusters based on the nature of its characteristics. The first cluster is a group of indicators that are related to the meaning and aspiration of ecotourism. The second cluster is a group of indicators that are related to the business aspects of ecotourism. The third cluster is a group of indicators that are related to the social development of the site.

The first cluster where the indicators are related to the meaning of ecotourism includes visible local community participation/high level of participation, practice good ecotourism management/sustainable in every way, conservation of the environment, preservation of culture, benefits to the community, informative and educational, and properly developed site.

The second cluster where the indicators are related to the business aspects of ecotourism includes high number of tourists, well-managed site, meeting objectives, good cooperation among stakeholders, number of ecotourism establishments, satisfied tourists, links to other good tourism sites, good high quality ecotourism products, high reputation, ability to draw interest with a ‘wow’ factor, and ability to capitalise on strengths.

Finally, the third cluster is where the indicators are related to the social development of the site includes improvement to infrastructures, clear improvement in life and livelihood, and happy and motivated community.

The themes for ecotourism site success do not just cover the essential elements in ecotourism, i.e. conservation and social development of the community, but extended to business practices, which is a rare
mention in the current ecotourism literature. There are eleven indicators that are relevant to the business aspect of ecotourism, superceeding the seven indicators that are related to the ecotourism meaning and aspiration, and the three indicators that are related to the social development of the site. This suggests that the practice of ecotourism and its perception of success in this research are broader and go beyond the theoretical definition.

It is true that ecotourism must be sustainable but it has to be a viable business too. The business has to develop the industry to meet the tourist market and attract ecotourists. The operators have to make money to survive. The key is to develop an ecotourism business that is financially successful while protecting or even enhancing the natural environment. Involvement from other interests or stakeholders such as the government is crucial in terms of funding, knowledge and concern.

CONCLUSION

It is suggested from this research that the success of ecotourism sites depends much on the success of its business operations. This research also has successfully developed indicators that are holistic from the perception of the stakeholders. Further research should be done on exploring these indicators and further improving them through developing systematic ranking to make them more meaningful.

REFERENCES