

# The Conceptual vs Reality of Ecotourism Approaches and Strategies in Pangkor Island, Malaysia

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## Abstract

Small islands are seen as iconic destinations for ecotourism due to their rich natural biodiversity and spectacular surroundings. Malaysia has a substantial number of islands, numbering approximately 878 islands. Pangkor Island is a popular destination among domestic and international tourists alike. However, the tourism industry can be a double-edged sword. On one hand, tourism development can improve quality of life and economic prospects of local communities; and on the other hand, it may inflict to destruction on the island's sensitive ecosystem. Natural environment is the core attraction for Pangkor Island. However, the extensive development undertaken to match the high intensity of tourist arrivals can lead to deleterious effect on the natural environment and diminish the overall quality of the tourists' experience. This paper attempts to explore the dichotomy between ecotourism concept and tourism development in Pangkor by exploring protection strategies and ecotourism management approaches in relation to Pangkor Island. The findings described in this paper are based on an evaluation of the existing planning strategies concerning tourism development, environmental conservation, observation and interviews with visitors in Pangkor Island. Lack of environmental practice among tour operators has led to significant threat to the island's ecosystem. Consequently, Pangkor Island require imperative attention in ensuring the sustainability of the ecosystem. Planning and development strategies for managing Pangkor and adjacent smaller islands need to be taken into consideration by acknowledging baseline conditions and present day realities.

**Keyword:** tourism, ecotourism, environmental conservation, small island

## 1. Introduction

In its broadest sense, environment can include both natural and cultural elements to encompass the natural, built and cultural milieu; notwithstanding, the term of environment can also be confined to the physical or natural milieu, thus differentiating it from the social and economic aspects of tourism (Mathieson & Wall, 1982; OECD, 2004). Tourism and the environment are inexorably linked; the environment is the setting that brings the tourists, while the while the impact of tourism activities and development takes its toll on the environment upon which it is based. Coastal and island destinations has gained popularity over the years, with coastal areas attracting an assortment of tourists; consequently, tourism development of coastal areas tends to be highly sensitive if exceeding the carrying capacity with intermingling background of tourists. Therefore, with coastal tourism development work being more intense, the impact on the coastal environment tends to be that much more substantial (Wong, 1993).

Pangkor Island, located off the north west coast of Peninsula Malaysia, is one of the most appealing island destinations (Richmond, 2010). With a population over 25,000 people (Ahmad & Ngui, 2014), Pangkor Island is located approximately 300km north from Kuala Lumpur and 200km south of Penang (Md. Shah, 2011). Lying just a 30-minute ferry ride from the port of Lumut. Pangkor Island is also one of the most accessible islands; a fact that has transformed Pangkor into an increasing popular weekend resort (Richmond, 2010).



Figure 1. Map of Pangkor Island.

Source: Google Map (accessed January 10, 2015).

A number of ecotourism packages have been introduced into Pangkor in an attempt to increase the island's popularity as a nature-based tourism destination. Simultaneously, it was hoped that with the increasing emphasis on ecotourism, there would be greater awareness of the need to conserve Pangkor's natural environment. Thus, a balance would be achieved between tourism-based development and conservation of the island's natural resources.

However, with increasing popularity of Pangkor as tourist destination, Pangkor Island is now facing pressure to expand the tourism infrastructure as to accommodate the increasing number of visitors (Chuan, 2005). In addition, tourism operators obviously want to expand the tourism development as gaining the profitable businesses. However, the major concern are lack of experience and knowledge among tour operators in practicing environmentally friendly approach in operating their businesses or tourism activities. Tourism operators assumed that Pangkor Island's popularity as a destination will be enhanced if the infrastructure is better equipped to accommodate a larger volume of tourists, thus generating increased tourism revenue at the cost of the island's natural qualities that actually attracts the ecotourist (Smith & Siguaw, 2011; Zainol, Bakar, & Ali, 2010).

This paper attempted to present the notion of understanding between the conceptual view of ecotourism approach and the realities of tourism development strategies and approaches at the selected case study area which is Pangkor Island.

## 2. Pangkor as an Ecotourism Destination

Tourism in Pangkor Island focuses both on its geological and natural heritage, which are beautiful rainforests along with its picturesque shorelines and the smaller islands comprising the Pangkor archipelago (Rotarian, 1999). Tourists have long been drawn to Pangkor's rural village charm, its diversity of flora and fauna (Oon, 2008), as well as its scenic landscapes (B. P. S. Bhd, 1985). Ecotourism is not a new economic agenda for Pangkor as the island has been considered a tourist destination among domestic and international travellers alike for their natural setting and rich biodiversity.

Tourism has generated substantial revenue for Pangkor, grossing approximately RM250 million in 2013 (Ha, 2014). This revenue had provided the much needed economic stimulus for local communities and has spawned the growth in job opportunities. Of course, much of this revenue is the result of extensive development having taken place on the island and surrounding districts in the decade between 2004 and 2014 (Ha, 2014). Contribution to the economic development requires recognizing the expanding development of tourism industry in nations, regions and globally. The difference between supply and demand side ; visitors perceived tourism as sightseeing, culture, shopping, entertainment, local cuisine and others while local residents perceived tourism as an imperative mainstay of their economies, driving development, employment opportunities and increasing quality of life (Md. Shah, 2011).

### 3. Method

This qualitative method was employed by adopting a content analysis based on critical analysis of literature review at the early phase. Qualitative research is a proper method when study phenomena is not much developed and is still unknown to others and also researchers are endeavouring to explore the interpretive and evaluative data and facts (Mola, Shafaei, & Mohamed, 2012). Therefore, this study is based upon direct observation of the case study site and interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 international tourists to Pangkor Island between December 25, 2014, and December 31, 2014, with each interview lasting 30–40 minutes.

### 4. Results and Discussion

#### 4.1 Ecotourism Concept and Conservation Strategies of Pangkor Island

Ecotourism has become recently become a topical concept in tourism industry, appealing to government agencies as well as environmental lobby groups. The Australian Commonwealth Department of Tourism's *National Ecotourism Strategy* (NES) defines ecotourism as 'nature-based tourism that involves education and interpretation of the natural environment and is managed to be ecologically sustainable' (Tourism, 1994). The NES recognises that sustainability is crucial in ensuring that local communities continue to benefit from their local natural resources. The NES identifies three dimensions or components of sustainable ecotourism, that it is environmentally educated, nature-based and sustainably managed (Tourism, 1994). The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) defines ecotourism as 'environmentally responsible travel to natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and accompanying cultural features, both past and present) that promote conservation, have a low visitor impact and provide for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local peoples' (Wurzburger, Pratt, & Pattakos, 2009).

In contrast, the conservation strategies in ensuring the sustainability of ecotourism are varies depending on the stakeholders' objectives and creativity in sustaining the ecosystem of the surrounding. The key strategies guiding Pangkor Island's environmental protection include the Pulau Pangkor International Development Dialogue (PIDD) and Reef Check Malaysia (RCM). The PIDD was established in 2014 in order to plan, promote and implement Pangkor's development. The PIDD is an international event that aims to promote the exchange of the knowledge and ideas at global, regional, national and state levels. The PIDD gathers experts from various disciplines to develop policies geared toward the sustainable development of Pangkor Island's tourism industry for the benefit of the development's many stakeholders, including local residents and the Perak state government (PIDD, 2014). Ultimately, the PIDD process is aimed at developing Pangkor Island into one of the best region destinations. In addition, stakeholders have sought to protect Pangkor's marine resources by collaboration with RCM, whose core responsibility in protecting the coral reefs. Since its establishment in 2007, RCM has conducted a number of educational programmes, surveys and reef recovery operations in attempt to protect and rehabilitate Pangkor's marine habitats (R. C. M. Bhd, 2012). The increasing development of infrastructure and accommodation for tourism in Pangkor Island, these human activities have contributed to the siltation of the island's coastline and inflicted to threaten the coral reefs. RCM aims to implement better coastal management practices to recover the coral reef species and fish populations (R. C. M. Bhd, 2012).

According to Lee (2013) development is no longer compatible with sustaining the environment for ecotourism purposes. As development has expanded, the volumes of waste from construction work and domestic waste from accommodation sector considerably larger population are also increasing. In Pangkor Island, the demand for development can only be satisfied by the importation of construction equipment and materials via ship, resulting in increasing volumes of shipping oil and other wastes being released into the water, and impacting on the quality of the sea water, beaches, coral reefs and fish populations (Lans, 2011). In the long-term, the on-going development and the resultant environmental impact will begin to noticeably degrade the natural beauty (Barbier, 2013). This has an implication to the situation in Pangkor Island if the on-going development are not parallel to



sustainability the natural environment and host's destination. Consequently, prioritising ecotourism provides the impetus for maintaining Pangkor's unblemished natural areas that tourists ultimately come to Pangkor to experience. Thus, as the natural beauty of Pangkor is lost, other destinations will become increasingly attractive to the potential tourists.

#### 4.2 The Case Study Review on Ecotourism Approach and Reality

Based on the interviews with international tourists, Pangkor Island is not merely perceived as ecotourism destination. For some international tourists, the term of ecotourism has become a tagline for marketing purposes which intended to attract a greater number of tourists. One of the respondent (R1) stated, *'The word of ecotourism is marketing gimmick in this island. The real ecotourism that started many years ago with few numbers of tourists is not possible to continue in these days. Ecotourism concept is approximate completely forgotten due to marketing progress'*. R2 added, *'The tour package on the island advertised their package as "eco- tourism". However, the tour brochures for Pangkor are marketed to a massive number of tourists. There is nothing be linked as "eco-tourism" about how this natural island is being marketed and used. Unfortunately, only a few of these tour operators take their responsibility for ecologically sound and tourism practices seriously'*. The concept of ecotourism as perceived by the tourists supposedly in environmentally sensitive manner in conducting the activities. The understanding of ecotourism by the tourists are the visiting activities within natural habitat or surrounding with minimal impact to the environment. The peak season has shown the island was swamped with tourists, and irresponsible behaviour of tourists which contradict with the notion of responsible tourism (Figure 2). Moreover, tourism operators continue to impose an ever-increasing range of infrastructure to satisfy the whims of visiting tourists, leading to the destruction of trees and loss of Pangkor's biodiversity (Figure 3).



Figure 2. The trash and litter along the beach areas



Figure 3. Land clearing for future development

Pangkor Island, with its beguiling mix of resorts and fishing settlements, is a convenient and glamorous holiday destination. Tourists have the opportunity to learn the local's culture and enjoying the beauty of the natural surroundings. The lack of best practice among boat operators and tour businesses on environmental practice, resulting to detrimental effect on habitation and inhabitants. According to respondent R3, *'Pangkor is beautiful place, but the environment were not be taken care of. I can see the trash everywhere. There are too many boats on the beach and operators just dump oil into the ocean'*.

Pasir Bogak and Teluk Nipah are Pangkor's two most popular beach areas. While Pasir Bogak is highly developed, Teluk Nipah retains its village atmosphere. To the west of Pangkor Island is Giam Island and Pangkor Laut Island. Giam Island has become popular for scuba diving and snorkelling. Tourists visiting Giam Island's beaches have been increasing steadily, often reaching up to several hundred visitors per day. To accommodate for the growing demand of tourists, more motorised boat operators are plying the waters, offering boat rides and other marine activates (Figure 4). Consequently, Giam Island's beautiful underwater realm has become a business commodity among local people. Even a short boat transfer to Giam Island is a considered costly trip; thus, many smaller boats ply the route between these two islands over a dozen of times in a day based on tourist demand. Although the economy benefit to the locals has shown a positive impact, however the balance between the ecosystem and natural surrounding need to be taken into consideration as these are the asset for tourism attraction. The U.S Environmental Protection Agency has identified a number of potential boating and marina non-point pollution sources, including improper solid waste and sewage disposal, oil and fuel discharges, improper vessel maintenance, and storm water runoff (Barr, Ohrel, Bierce, & Sheavly, 2001). In addition, water activities may impede shoreline stabilization, and inattentive boating operations can be harmful to marine life and fish habitats. Water pollution has become primary problem at the destination can no longer to be ignored. The resulting backwash from these boats repeatedly slaps against the mud banks causing them to erode more quickly. This erosion leeches toxins into water will led to contaminated, then the health of the entire organism is compromised. Moreover, the boat engines are deafening and oil and fuel discharges pose a threat to the environment if used or disposed. R4, who visited Giam Island, said, *'The focus of Pangkor Island is on the beach areas and water sport activities. However, there is so many beauty hidden inside this small island in its forests. It would be nice if there were hiking activities or hiking tours available, but there aren't'*. Figure 4 shows the traffic of tourist boats, as well as intensity of tourist in Giam beach.





Figure 4. The high number of motorised boats plying tourists to the Giam Island.

Source: Polywj's Photos, [http://polywjphotos.blogspot.com/2007\\_02\\_01\\_archive.html](http://polywjphotos.blogspot.com/2007_02_01_archive.html) (accessed January 20, 2015).

At this time, the only way to get to Pangkor Island is by ferry. Consequently, in light of Pangkor's popularity and demanding marketing, a high number of ferries are required during the peak tourist season (Figure 5). Ferries operate every 30-minutes, especially during public holidays, resulting in high traffic operations between Lumut and Pangkor jetties. Consequently, Pangkor Island jetty was once picturesque jetty has become unappealing with natural and human-made pollutants disposal.



Figure 5. The swarming of tourists at Pangkor's Jetty

Getting away from the water, Pangkor Island is swarming with monkeys and hornbills (Williams, 2012). Unguided visitors will often feed these monkeys to get a closer view. However, the some species of monkeys are easily adapted with human activities and these species have subsequently react to human by snatching the food, bags, soft drink containers and water bottles from the visitors. Hence, visitors have unintentionally exposed the monkeys to misbehave from their biological routine. Moreover, the snatched items were discarded by the monkeys to everywhere around the island which resulting littering problem. Similarly, tourists often attempt to feed the hornbills with foods that are unsuitable for this endangered species. As one of the Dutch respondent, R6 had given a remark, *'I saw one of the boat operators feeding the birds to attract tourists. The domestication of Pangkor's wild animals should be prevented. They are beautiful when they fly freely'*. R7 added, *'Please behave like responsible adults, tourists and inhabitants. Your island is so beautiful and we envy you'*. This show the concern that had been acknowledged by the visitor about the responsible behaviour the fauna and the habitant.

## 5. Conclusion

Pangkor Island inherit rich biodiversity and scenic natural setting has its own uniqueness in attracting domestic and international tourists. As the destination gained popularity, the number of tourists' influx to the island will increased. Moreover, as travel continues to become more accessible and affordable, the ever-increasing number of tourist arrivals to Pangkor's Island will threaten the island's sensitive ecosystems. As the asset of the destination is the natural environment, the planning strategies and protection of the resources need to be strengthened in order to sustain the ecosystem and served as ecotourism product. The key problem in sustaining the surrounding is the human behaviour which are not environmentally sensitive. The environmental practice need to be implemented among the tour operators and educating the locals and tourists in protecting the environment. The series of consultations and workshops should be fully involved in managing and development of policy. It is imperative action that government sector may provide the means to educate local community on the environmental initiatives that need to be implemented. While the PIDD dialogue sessions have proven to be an effective platform for the transfer knowledge between stakeholders; but at the same time, the various approaches in collaborative consultations play an important role in ensuring the sustainability of the destination.

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