

Attractiveness of Recreational Forests: An Overview on Selected Researches

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to discuss the challenges and potentials for transforming recreational forests in Peninsular Malaysia as viable ecotourism destination. The selected research and articles of recreational forest were accumulated in determining the lack and weakness of the forest. In fact, recreational forests have the potential to be developed and marketed as ecotourism destinations since our forests are endowed with diverse flora and fauna, as well as other natural destinations. Some of the recreational forests really famous but some are seems to have no visitors. Several challenges are also noted in this paper which needs to be addressed before the potential can be translated into a real tourism product. This include the lack of competence pool of personnel to carryout tasks necessary to receive visitors, lack of maintenance of current facilities, lack of structured programming of ecotourism activities and the non-existence of a concerted efforts in properly developed the recreational forests as a ecotourism destinations. Once such issues are addressed, recreational forests can help to diversify and adding a unique dimension into our ecotourism and outdoor recreation sector.

Keywords: Attractiveness; recreational forest; recreational ecotourism attraction.

1. Introduction

Recreational forest or amenity forest is a forest that constructed with the facilities to attract visitors (WWF Malaysia, 1998). It is a forest that designated for public recreational use which was conceptualized during the First Malaysian Plan (NorAzlin, 1999). During the year 2011, Forest Department of Peninsular Malaysia had listed down 124 recreational forests that still opening for public. Table 1 showed the number of recreational forests according to the state in Peninsular Malaysia.

Recreational forest may attract a large number of visitors. Forest Department of Selangor had stated that over 558,879 visits were received at his 10 recreational forests for the year 2011. This type of forest not only received local visitors, it also can be one of the ecotourism destinations among foreign visitors. Bukit Nenas Recreational Forest had received 5,278 foreign visitors instead of 1,092 local visitors in 2011 (Forest Department of Peninsular Malaysia, 2012). These shown that the forest can be an asset in developing ecotourism industry in Malaysia.

However, many recreational forests in Peninsular Malaysia had to be closed due to the danger cases such as diseases (Azman, 2010). LataBayu Recreational Forest had to be closed because this forest believed to be infected by *Meilioidosis* and *Leptospirosis* bacteria. But, this forest had to be closed only for 6 months and now open for public. Conversely, down to the infection, the number of visitors decrease because people afraid to come to forest. By reason of that, forest department had developed the facilities on that recreational forest (car park, gazebo, dressing room) to attract visitors to come again to this forest. On the other hand, issues for instance, littering and pollution (NurFarhana, 2010) also give an impact on recreational forests to maintain the number of visitors day by day. Hence, the management and maintenance is the main important in developing the forest.

2. Recreational Forest Values

As there are many issues appeared in recreational forests, we will summarize some of the articles reported by reporters in several newspapers. Nazarudin (2012) reported that facilities in Gua Batu Maloi Recreational Forest are not satisfied the visitors. In fact, the public toilets and prayer room are not in a good condition. Since Gua Batu Maloi Recreational Forest is famous among the natural recreation follower, this will reduce the satisfaction level on the visitors.

Meanwhile, Nasr (2005) commented that, the directions for the trails in some recreational forests are not enough. This will give impacts such as stray in a jungle and so on. For example, a case at Cherok Tok Kun Recreational Forest, one of the visitors had lost his way while using the trails for jogging. He had lost in about 6 hours in the jungle until he was saved by enforcement.

Other issue had been stated by NoorAmin (2008), based on his observation, the maintenance for recreational forests are still cannot be proud. In addition, we have to pay some charge to enter the recreational forests (for e.g. Kanching Recreational Forest and Sungai Chongkak Recreational Forest) but still, the maintenance and safety are not getting the highest level of satisfaction. Small payment for the workers is one of the reasons why this forest is lack of maintenance. They have to work overdue the time because visitors will come to the forest during leisure time, not in work time. Hence, they have to work for the whole day.

Differs with Taka Melor Recreational Forest, visitors have problem with the external access. Junita (2011) reported that the bridge that had been used to enter the entrance is collapse and no one tries to repair it for 9 months. During the incident, visitors have to use other trail to enter the forest. This make they worry because they have to leave their car far away and easy for being thief's target.

But, as much as issues in recreational forest, this forest also has a potential in placing itself as one of the natural attraction in Malaysia. Many international researches try to evaluate this forest in kind of estimated value and identify factors influencing willingness to pay (WTP). Rahimi (2011) in his research, try to measure the WTP based on maximum likelihood method. Uniquely, he using two-dimensional dual-choice questionnaire (DDC) as this method is a good way in determine the conservation values of forest resources (Venkatachalam, 2003).

Differ with Dwyer et al. (1989) they evaluate on urbanities WTP for trees and forests in recreation areas. In other words, they estimate on how much people are willing to pay for particular attributes of recreation areas such as trees, forests, lakes and facilities (for e.g. picnic areas and bike trails). They used questionnaire and send it to the respondent by email. Result showed that the highest value to pay is on trees and forests, other than water resources, lack of crowding, vandalism, litter and a certain age distribution of users.

Other research on WTP, Scarpa (2003) try to find the total and marginal recreational value of British forests. He using open-ended questionnaire together in using the primary data which is collected on 1992. The visitors were selected among who had just completed their visit to the forest, and were asked whether they were willing to pay a given amount to access the forest more willingly than going without the experience. Surprisingly, 33.64% said that they would pay but the manager should decrease the number of visitors.

We try to evaluate the value of these recreational forests, but do we really understand the value and demand for natural resources such as ecosystem function in this forest? (i.e. water quality and soil, wildlife and habitat restoration, productive landscape).

3. Management strategies

National Ecotourism Plan (WWF Malaysia, 1996) had identified several areas as ecotourism attractions. Among them are the islands, national parks, rivers, waterfalls, lakes and caves. These areas are gazetted as ecotourism attraction areas in accordance with the features found in the area, which bring the meaning that the area are wealthy with nature and wildlife. Recreational forests also can be one of these areas since these forests are rich with natural resources and uniqueness. Hence, we have to develop a great strategy in 'building' recreational forests as one of the ecotourism attraction. One thing that really important is management strategies whether in managing outdoor amenities or natural assets. Potts (2011) had listed eight steps to maintain the integrity of the resource within the community:

- a) Be inclusive and involve everyone in the dialogue concerning resource management.
- b) Use all available media to get the message across.
- c) Relate national or global issue to the visitors.
- d) Get people to interact and discuss their vision for the area.
- e) Provide summaries of the facts.
- f) Make sure every visitors get clear access to any information available.
- g) Involve volunteers.
- h) Use information centers and exhibits.

Other approach that can be use is public participation processes. A research to examine satisfaction level of visitors is the best way in applying public participation processes. Rizal (2006) tries to evaluate the visitors recreational satisfaction towards facilities provided at Ulu Bendul Recreational Forest. In this research, he uses index analysis to analyze the data given. As a result, satisfaction mean shows that visitors at Ulu Bendul Recreational Forest satisfied with the facilities provided. Some visitors are satisfied with facilities location for example like trail and barbeque location. In addition, visitors are also pleased with cleanliness level toward praying area and resting hut. It shows good maintenance of the facilities by management will bring highest satisfaction to the visitors.

There are many researches that use public participation processes. Table 2 summarizes the researches about evaluation on visitors at recreational forests that had been done by several researchers.

By using public participation processes, this will help in balancing through ranges of competitive use. Others approaches are stakeholder assistance and regulations (Chi and Marcouiller, 2011).

4. Recreational ecotourism destination

Recreational forests are one of the nature-based tourism (Buckley, 2009). Nature tourism or nature-based tourism can be defined as somewhat broader term which covers all types of tourism that relies on relatively undisturbed natural environments or natural features (Buckley, 2009). Natural-based tourism relies on environmental destinations to attract visitors to community (Potts, 2011). Ecotourism had been discussed by many researchers. The concept of ecotourism (nature-based education) had made this term very popular in many studies. Figure 1 explains the concept of ecotourism.

Based on the figure 1, we can conclude that Fennel and Eagles recognized the value in management from the visitors' perspectives. Ecotourism is always related with resource management. Lindberg and McKercher (1997) suggested that several changes have occurred in the development of ecotourism in the last decade. These changes include first, the desire for more educative and challenging vacations, combined with an increased environmental awareness, which has led to a growth in visitation at many natural areas, particularly in developing countries. Secondly, many economic development professionals view ecotourism as an opportunity for employment generation in regions that have experienced decline, or lack of development, in other industries. Third, many conservations and resource management professionals view ecotourism as an avenue for providing conservation-supporting benefits. Finally, ecotourism is regarded as being a sustainable tourism activity, and an exemplar for all other aspects of the tourism industry.

Moseley et al. (1976) presents guidelines for planning ecotourism areas; first, we have to documentation and careful analysis of the natural and cultural, having bearing on planning will be included. Secondly,

consideration of the natural and man-caused conditions and problems has bearing on the resource and thirdly, management and development planning which include the formulation of park objectives, delineation of boundaries, designation of management zones and establishment of management programmed.

Conclusion

By having good maintenance and management, recreational forests will become one of the nature-based destinations. Recreational forests also can refer as a site for conducting research, outdoor recreation and education place. Perdue (1996) in his research explained about tourism marketers must allocate promotional efforts across alternative markets with to achieve two goals (1) maintenance of important existing markets and (2) penetration of markets with high incremental sales potential.

By discuss the issues occur in recreational forests, we can identify the challenges that we have to face in realizing this forest as ecotourism destination. Some of the issues that can be listed i.e. there are no promotions specifically describing the forest as ecotourism attraction. Furthermore, the promotional materials for the recreational forests are not updated regularly and rather poorly designed and not so appending in terms of attracting the attention of foreign tourists. Next, most of the recreational forests, although are located not far away from major city area, had not been developed and presented for foreign tourists. Most of the forests are equipped with only basic amenities like toilets and gazebos without any meaningful facilities to attract or entertain visitors. Additionally, all recreational forests are currently without structured activities like nature talks, interpretation walk and environmental education program which are integral part of ecotourism to attract and retain visitors.

A several researches on visitors' perception and evaluation can be one of the solutions in solving some issues. By using the result and recommendation from these researches, the administrator and manager can identify the weaknesses and try to upgrade the forest. Determine the important attribute also can be the best way in developing the forest. Lee et al. (2010) in their research, listed down four important attributes in recreational forests (tourist attractions, accessibility, amenities, and complementary services). These attributes possibly will increase the level of satisfaction among visitors.

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Figures and Tables

Figure 1: Ecotourism Framework (Source: [Fennell, 2003](#); [Fennel and Eagles, 1990](#))

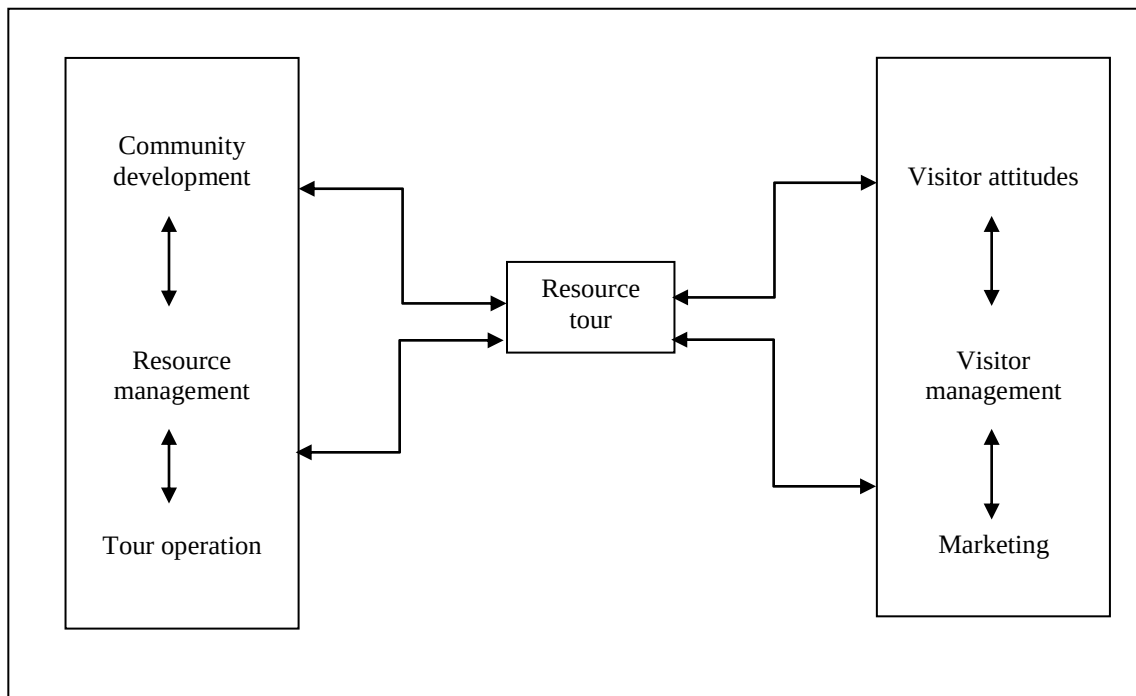


Table 1: Recreational forests in Peninsular Malaysia

State	Number of recreational forests
Johor	8
Kedah	27
Kelantan	3
Melaka	4
Negeri Sembilan	11
Pahang	28
Perak	16
Perlis	3
Pulau Pinang	2
Selangor	10
Terengganu	11
Kuala Lumpur	1
Total: 124	

Source: [Forest Department of Peninsular Malaysia, 2011](#)

Table 2: Research on visitor's evaluation at recreational forests

Year	Researchers	Topic of Study
2002	Zimmerman	Visitor's needs for facilities in Sungai Tekala Recreation Forest, Selangor
2002	Hasliza	An evaluation of visitor's opinion towards facilities, site resources and visitors safety in Kanching Recreation Forest, Rawang
2004	Afriezul	Visitor's awareness on the conservation of Recreational Forest: A case study at Kanching Recreation Forest, Rawang, Selangor
2005	ThilpatulKhairiah	Visitors' evaluation of facilities in Endau-Rompin State Park, Pahang (Recreational Forest)
2006	Kwan, K. W.	Visitor's perception on recreational use impacts on soil and vegetation in UluBendul Recreational Forest, Negeri Sembilan
2008	ShamsulHakim	Perception of visitors on facilities in UluBendul Recreational Forest, Kuala Pilah, Negeri Sembilan
2008	Nurfaizah	Visitor's recreation activities pattern in forest setting of UluBendul, Kuala Pilah, Negeri Sembilan