

MOUNTAIN GUIDING IN KINABALU PARK: AN EVALUATION OF VISITOR SATISFACTION

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Abstract

Tourism development in protected area could potentially become one of the most significant sources of revenue and bring substantial benefits to the community living surrounding protected areas. Local involvement in tourism activities must be accompanied with capacity building in order to ensure effective participation of local people. Based on the socio-economic principles of sustainable tourism, this will not only benefit rural folks but also enhance tourist satisfaction, thereby boosting the positive economic impact of tourism to support park conservation efforts. This paper intends to reveal how jobs are created through mountain guiding in benefiting the local communities. The paper aims to provide an insight into guiding quality provided by the local members. Personnel from Sabah Parks and mountain guides were interviewed and feedback through visitor questionnaire survey was obtained from climbers in Kinabalu Park in 2005. The analysis results reveal the fact where in despite of efforts by the park authority to create job opportunities to the local people, training provided to the mountain guides may be insufficient to cater for climbers' dynamic expectations, which may thwart income and employment security of the local people in the long run.

Keywords: mountain guides, visitor satisfaction, local communities, training and Kinabalu Park

Introduction

Kinabalu Park is located in the state of Sabah on Borneo Island, Malaysia. Covering a total area of 75,370ha, the park was established in 1964 following the passing of Sabah National Parks Ordinance in 1962. The park is managed by the Sabah Parks Board of Trustees (or Sabah parks for short). It is a Type II protected area according to the IUCN category system. In 2000, Kinabalu Park was declared by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee as a World natural Heritage site after meeting selection criteria ii and iv.¹

Kinabalu Park, find the visitors the highest peak in the country as well as between the Himalayas and the high mountains of new Guinea- Mount Kinabalu, which soars up to a height of 4,095.2m. The wide altitudinal ranges of Kinabalu Park from around 150m to over 4,000 have been the important aspect supporting the high flora biodiversity where a total of 5,000 to 6,000 vascular species are to be

found. Of these, there are at least 140 families of flowering plants including 1,200 wild orchid species and 612 species of ferns. Orchids, pitcher plants, rhododendrons, and *Rafflesia* are among the most significant plants found in Kinabalu Park.² The mountainous landscape in Kinabalu Park has attracted thousands of visitors to the park every year for various tourism activities. The number of visitor arrivals to Kinabalu Park increased from 829 to 434,903 within a time span of 40 years from 1965 to 2005. A total tourism revenue of RM5,475,421³ was recorded in the park, which accounted for 53% of the total income generated within the Sabah Parks system,⁴ making Kinabalu park the most significant income generator in the system.⁵

Of all activities, mountain climbing is famous among the visitors to Kinabalu Park and has become increasingly significant. In the period 1989-2005, an average of 9% of the annual visitor arrival took part in the activity. The proportion increased to 22% (46,084 trips) in 2005 where 50% were foreign climbers. Parallel with its significance, the tourism revenue generated through mountain climbing activity is substantial. It was the most important income source in the park. In 2005, climbing permits made up 43% of the tourism revenue in the park. Together with climbers' certificates (5.6%), mountain climbing contributed 48.6% of the total income generated.

This paper will first identify job opportunities offered to the members of local communities. Then, it discloses the capacity building provided to the local people to ensure long-term tourism earning, which in turn, could sustain the continuous income generated from tourism in the park with increasingly appreciation on tourist experience satisfaction level.

Sustainable Tourism and the Roles of Protected Areas

Traditionally, protected areas have been designated primarily for nature conservation. Little interest has been shown in linking the protected areas with the surrounding and to local communities. In the early years, until the 1970s, local communities were perceived as a threat to protected areas.⁶ It is not until 1980s, where the roles of local communities in protected areas were acknowledged⁷. This trend continues until the new millennium where the development of protected area management worldwide reveals the dual emphases in protected area management, i.e., meeting both conservation and social objectives (IUCN 2005) where special attention is given to the management effectiveness through innovative management approaches including involvement of the local communities.

On the other hand, tourism is expected to secure stable employment and income earning opportunities for local communities apart from maintaining high level of tourist satisfaction and ensuring a meaningful experience for tourists (WTO 2004). These commitments are based on the socio-economic principles of sustainable tourism, in line with the global development of sustainability concept.

In developing countries, local communities in rural areas are associated with the less prosperous strata of society. Involving them in the tourism business will enhance their economic situation and living conditions.⁸ Tourism also provides opportunities for economic diversification so that the local people will not be over-reliant on agricultural activities.

Apart from generating income to the park management, mountain climbing has offered job opportunities to the members of local communities. According to the Park Enactment No. 10 of 2002, it is compulsory for all mountain climbers to be accompanied by a mountain guide. This conforms to the roles played by park today in meeting the society objectives as well as meeting the socio-economic principle of sustainable tourism development where tourism must benefit the local communities. As most of the local communities are not traditionally prepared or equipped with skills prepared for the purpose of tourism development, it is important to ensure that the local participation is accompanied with capacity building to secure long-term employment and enhance income-earning opportunities. Park authorities must be supportive to ensure the successful participation of local communities. Providing appropriate training related to tourism business is a key criterion for enhancing capacity building among the members of local communities.⁹ At the same time, training can improve the quality of services offered by a park to the visitors, thereby enhancing visitor satisfaction and experience.

Visitor satisfaction is central to whether visitors return, recommend the destination to others or conversely.¹⁰ Visitor satisfaction generally depends upon the expectations of visitors. If the quality of the tourism product or service as a whole exceeds their expectations, then they are satisfied.¹¹ Park visitors are not homogeneous. Therefore, understanding the typology of park visitors is important. This can be done by identifying the different types of visitors to the park based on such criteria as personal characteristics and expectations.¹² On the other hand, a few studies have been conducted on the relationship between visitor satisfaction and turnover rate reveal that a high visitor turnover rate in a tourism destination is closely associated with dissatisfaction over the tourism product, e.g., with the type of visitor services or products provided there.¹³ Therefore, the quality of tourism services has a significant influence on overall visitor satisfaction.

In a competitive nature-based tourism market, a protected area becomes more appealing and diversified with the creation of activities and attractions. Ideally, these activities should complement and supplement the natural resources such as mountains, waterfalls and forests to enhance visitor experience. In order to offer meaningful and educational experience to the visitors, many of the tourism activities in protected areas are information-intensive and guiding is an essential component to channel information to the visitors effectively.¹⁴ In general, guides in protected areas play two main roles that is, to control visitor activities in order to achieve visitor management objectives¹⁵ and to inform visitors on the park's natural history and the conservation efforts being carried out.¹⁶ Properly trained guides in protected areas are able to increase the visitors' knowledge on the park ecology and management policies. Thus, guides contribute to minimum impact behavior and enhance the public appreciation over nature conservation thereby achieving the purpose of environmental education. Attributes such as responsibility, competency and communication are essential if guides are to carry out their duties effectively.¹⁷ Responsibility refers to the guides' attitude to their duties as a whole. This includes providing security and protecting the visitors from the environment and vice versa, and the willingness of the guides to provide such services to the visitors. Competency refers to possession of the required skills and knowledge necessary to

perform the task; whereas communication is related to keeping visitors informed in a language they can understand and to being friendly, respectful and polite.

Methodology

A tourist questionnaire survey was carried out with a total of 402 completed questionnaires to evaluate the level of visitor satisfaction on the climbing experience provided by the mountain guides in Kinabalu Park. The survey was carried out with the assistance of 5 remunerators. The satisfaction level was determined using the Likert Scale. A pre-test, which counted for 5% of the sample size, was conducted prior to the actual survey. Climbers descended from Mount Kinabalu were approached randomly at the strategic points within the park such as visitor centre, restaurants, reception centers and hostels. Taking into consideration the significance of foreign climbers in terms of number in Kinabalu Park, stratifications were made based on the proportionate statistic of local and foreign visitors. Depending on their preference, the respondents were approached in two ways. Respondents were either interviewed by the remunerators or they filled out the questionnaire while the remunerator provided them with clarification if necessary. Then the remunerator asked the respondents to explain their comment and additional notes were made. In order to avoid similar opinions given by members of one group, only one respondent was selected from each group of visitors. A 'group' here refers to couples, families, and friends walking together.

Apart from climbers, questionnaire survey was carried out on mountain guides to obtain their feedback on the job and capacity building opportunities offered to them. A total of 153 samples was collected. The questionnaires for mountain guides were distributed through the park staff at operation office and the author was present in case the respondents needed any clarification. Most respondents took the questionnaire with them and returned it to the author or park staff a few days later. Prior to the questionnaire survey, mountain guides were approached through unstructured interviews to obtain their opinion in-depth on the issues faced at work. SPSS was then employed to carry out the descriptive analysis.

Observation through participation was also carried out by the author to evaluate the interaction between mountain guides and climbers along the summit trail. To observe their interaction, the author went onto the summit trail without informing the climbers and mountain guides about the author's intention. Short casual conversations were also held with the climbers along the trail.

Kinabalu Park in Benefitting the Local Communities

According to the Park Enactment No. 10 of 2002, it is compulsory for all mountain climbers to be accompanied by a mountain guide, who is a member from local villages. This legal provision offers the opportunities for the local people to get directly involved in the tourism business in Kinabalu Park. The history of hiring mountain guides in Kinabalu can be traced back to 1851 when Gunting Lagadan, who originated from Bundu Tuhan, accompanied the first recorded climb by Sir

Hugh Low, thus became the first recorded guide in the park. When Kinabalu Park was gazetted in 1964, there was an informal agreement between Sabah Parks and the local communities that the park would provide job opportunities to the local people, especially as mountain guides, in view of the potential of Kinabalu Park in attracting mountain climbers.

In the early years, mountain guides were recruited from nearby villages, mainly from Kampung Kiau and Bundu Tuhan. Nonetheless, due to the increasingly demand, the guides were also recruited from villages such as Kinasaraban, Kundasang and Mesilau. The number of guides indicated a significant change since the establishment of Kinabalu Park, rising from 20 mountain guides in 1978 to 171 in 2005. Working as mountain guides in Kinabalu Park provides the local people with an optional income where the survey results reveal that almost 40% of the guides were not full-time personnel. The guides often combine their guiding job with traditional farming activities such as planting hill rice or temperate vegetables.¹⁸

As at 2005, recruitment of the mountain guides has been arranged by the Sabah Parks mountain guide committee. The local people have to apply for renewable license issued annually by Sabah Parks if they wanted to work as a mountain guide in the park. Annual application notice was distributed by Sabah Parks to the villages and also through verbal communication. Interviews were conducted with all new applicants, while both new applicants and existing guides seeking for license renewal have to take part in an examination, which is held annually. Applicants' knowledge on mountain conditions and topography, their health condition and performance during previous services are among the key selection criteria. First aid training, medical checkup and fitness test were made compulsory since 2002.

The Sabah Parks mountain guide committee also arranged guiding services for climbers and prepare work schedule of mountain guides. The schedule allocated a total of 45 mountain guides that are to be on duty daily. Based on the work schedule, each guide was estimated to carry out between 6 and 8 mountain ascents monthly, thus an average monthly wages of RM500-800 can be expected. Informal conversations with several experienced guides in the park revealed that most of the guides earned more than RM1,000 per month, especially during the peak seasons from March to September.

The results from the mountain guides questionnaire survey reveal that all guides recognized the significance of tourism in Kinabalu Park in providing jobs to the local communities. Furthermore, the compulsory hire of mountain guides as provided under the Park Ordinance 2000 has also enhanced job stability and thus income, despite the seasonal fluctuation in the number of visitor arrivals especially during the monsoon season between October and January. Apart from meeting the rising demand for climbers, the increase in the number of guides also aims to benefit more local members. Nevertheless, the number of guides in 2005 led to worries among the mountain guides that increases would eventually reduce their income level. While 47.7% of the respondents were of the opinion that the number of guides was sufficient, 47.7% said it was too high.

In terms of income, 90.8% of the respondents were not satisfied with their wages. Interviews with Sabah Parks' mountain guide committee revealed that several requests had been made by the mountain guides for an increase in wages.

Nonetheless, these requests were rejected on the basis that the existing wage level was on par with the quality of services offered by the guides. The existing rate ranging from RM70-100 depending on the number of climbers (with maximum of 8 persons per group) took effect in 2001. The wage in the 1990s was RM60 per 2-day/1-night trip¹⁹, RM50 in the 1980s and RM30 in the 1970s.²⁰ Dissatisfaction was also shown by the respondents in terms of climber group-size arrangement. At least 52% were of the opinion that the ideal group size per guide was 5 persons instead of the existing 8. This is because it was difficult for them to keep an eye on 8 climbers. In addition, a small group size would increase the frequency of climbing trips, thereby indirectly increasing the monthly income of the guides. In addition, 64% of the respondents disagreed with the idea that their wage rate was to be based on experience and qualifications. Not only the less experienced guides and those who could not speak English were against this idea, but also the experienced guides. This was because they were worried that many climbers would prefer to hire the less experienced/qualified guides when considering the cost involved, and that this would eventually reduce their job frequency and income.

Capacity building in the form of workshop training was organized by Sabah Parks. This intensive in-house workshop was arranged annually by the mountain guide committee and was mandatory for all mountain guides. The training emphasized mainly on safety procedures, which covered a general introduction to the park and Sabah parks, important rules and regulations, first aid training and practice, emergency rescue and injuries handling on the summit trail. Basic public relation skills were also included. In the mid 1990s, classes were voluntarily initiated by senior staff of Sabah Parks to educate the mountain guides about the flora and fauna in the park. However, the program was eventually stopped after a few months due to poor response. In 1995, the Federal Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism (known as Ministry of Tourism since 2004) introduced Localized Tourist Guide course for mountain guides to improve the quality of guiding service in Kinabalu Park, which lasted only less than two years due to financial constraints. Since then, Sabah Parks started the training for mountain guides through establishment of the mountain guide committee.

Despite this initiative, the survey results indicated that the existing training may not be sufficient for providing a high quality guiding service to the climbers, especially to foreign climbers. The mountain guide questionnaire survey showed that more than 58% of the mountain guides could not speak English and more than 45% had communication problems with climbers.

On the other hand, the survey results also reveal the wish of the mountain guides to participate in the work schedule planning, which was solely managed by Sabah Parks. Despite 90.1% of the respondents were satisfied with the schedule, 48.4% felt that the combination of Sabah parks and mountain guides was the best option for managing the schedules and all other matters related to guiding services in Kinabalu Park. This result indicates that further training is required to increase the participation of mountain guides in the management of their services, if Sabah Parks intends to strengthen capacity building among the members of the local communities.

Climbers' Evaluation of Mountain Guiding Quality

The mountain guiding service is provided by the members of local communities and arranged by Sabah Parks. The duties of a mountain guide include ensuring the safety of climbers, providing information about the park, its flora and fauna along the summit trail and assisting during emergencies and when difficulties arise. The performance of mountain guiding in Kinabalu Park is associated with the roles supposedly played by mountain guides in the respondents' opinion. The importance of mountain guides was fully recognized by the climbers where 85.6% said it was necessary to hire a mountain guide. 76.4% of the respondents rated safety as their top concern while 16.9% were of the opinion that a mountain guide should be able to provide information and knowledge about the surroundings of the summit trail, which would make their experience of climbing more fruitful than just 'climbing'. Despite the fact that safety was rated as the key factor for most climbers, it was expected that the mountain guide should provide knowledge on park ecology and history, especially among the foreign climbers. The survey results showed that about 20% of foreign climbers selected both attributes (safety and information/knowledge) as reasons for hiring a mountain guide as compared to only 11% among domestic climbers.

When it comes to evaluation on performance of mountain guides in Kinabalu Park, the guides were generally rated above average in all attributes, i.e., knowledge and communication skills attributes in the 'competency' category, friendliness and language proficiency in the 'communication' category and responsibility in the 'responsibility' category. Majority of the climbers rated all attributes as expected. On the other hand, significant differences were observed between ratings given by domestic and foreign respondents. Overall, domestic climbers showed a higher level of satisfaction in all attributes. As for the attribute of 'knowledge provided by the mountain guide', 40% of domestic climbers rated it as satisfying and most satisfying, but only 18% of foreign climbers were satisfied; more foreign climbers (11%) were disappointed with the knowledge provided by their guides than domestic climbers (4%). Similar trend is observed for communication skills. While 53% of domestic climbers were satisfied with the performance of mountain guides, only 27% of foreign climbers were satisfied. As for language proficiency, the gap between domestic and foreign climbers in rating the attribute as satisfying and most satisfying was the biggest among all attributes: 61% of domestic climbers were satisfied with the performance of their guide but only 11% from foreign climbers. 13% of foreign climbers rated it as below average while only 3% of domestic climbers gave the similar rating.

Overall, there are some possible explanations for the relatively low satisfaction level expressed by the foreign climbers. The first is related to the mountain climbing fee they had to pay, which is 3 times of what is paid by domestic climbers. Thus, there were higher expectations regarding the experience of the guiding service, especially in terms of communication in foreign language. Secondly, the high expectations may be resulted from the education profile of the climbers and their purpose of visit to the park. The survey results indicated that mountain climbing was the main purpose of visit for 57% of foreign visitors to Kinabalu Park as compared to 26.4% of domestic visitors, and 25.1% of foreign visitors said that flora

and fauna were the key motivation, but only 15.3% of domestic visitors were of the same opinion. The survey results also show that 71.3% of foreign visitors were university graduates as compared to 38.6% of domestic visitors; which may have influenced the level of expectation on educational experience. Thirdly, foreign climbers had high expectation regarding the services provided in the park due to the status of Kinabalu Park as a World Heritage Site. Of these, 40% said World Heritage Site was one of the main purposes of visit. Lower satisfaction of foreign climbers on knowledge provided by mountain guides was possibly related to the roles of mountain guides perceived by them. As revealed earlier, foreign climbers had higher expectation regarding educational experience during the climb than the domestic climbers. Besides, analysis results reveal that the rating of guides' knowledge and communication skills by the climbers was directly influenced by the guides' level of English proficiency.

During the survey, climbers were also asked to differentiate the role of a mountain guide and a porter in Kinabalu Park, nearly half (48%) of the respondents said they did not see any difference. Some were of the opinion that a guide was supposed to show directions and give courage, but they did not perceive a great difference between the two. Although many reasons could possibly contribute to the fact that a large number of climbers were unable to distinguish between the roles played by the mountain guides and porters, negative comments given by the climbers during the survey and casual conversations indicated that a significant number of mountain guides in Kinabalu Park did not play their role as 'guide' effectively. Most of the comments were related to weak communication skill and poor level of competency. These include negative comments on the disability of guides to answer questions and to point out things of interests to the climbers, guides were not willing and not prepared to voluntarily provide any information until enquired. On top of that, guides were less interactive with climbers but were very interactive among themselves.²¹

Conclusion

In Kinabalu Park, most of the benefits to local communities were mainly positively measured in terms of number. For instance, the local communities had directly benefited through the creation of jobs for mountain guides. Nonetheless, the mountain guides were not satisfied with the wages earned and claimed that their hard work deserved higher pay. On the other hand, Sabah Parks was of the opinion that the quality of their services did not deserve wage increase. In terms of capacity building, in despite of the efforts made by the park authority in arranging training program for the mountain guides, the survey results reveal that training provided was insufficient to cater for tourism demand in the park, especially in terms of communication ability and English proficiency bearing in mind the substantial number of foreign climbers. These skills are significant for mountain guides in order to equip themselves with the capacity to offer their service to the climbers at an optimum level thereby further enhancement of climbers' experience in Kinabalu Park and higher income for the climbers. Furthermore, the appreciation among the general public on the park's conservation efforts can be further strengthened through these

experiences with educational elements, which is in fact, one of the key objectives that conservation efforts aim to achieve. The misconception that wages should be based on experience and qualifications such as English proficiency also indicates a necessity for better arrangements, such as the presence of incentives (rewards and sanctions) for motivating the mountain guides to improve their guiding quality. Meanwhile, the rising awareness among the mountain guides of the necessity for self-organization in Kinabalu Park also reveals the need for Sabah Park to facilitate them in the process of capacity building.

While these series of events taken place in Kinabalu Park do not provide convincing evidence to show that Sabah parks has made sufficient attempt to benefit the members of local communities through providing jobs as mountain guides, Sabah Parks has provided the legalized platform to facilitate the process of involving and benefiting local people in long-term. Nonetheless, more efforts are required to enhance the symbiotic relationship between the park and the local communities, especially in terms of income level, job distribution and training. Collaboration with NGOs and local universities may help in providing various training needed by mountain guides in carrying out their guiding duties as well as to equip them for management position, which would have direct influence on the income in long term.

In addition, the park visitors' demand for education-related elements such as information provided by mountain guides and the ability of these guides to answer questions was not well-understood by Sabah parks. A monitoring system in the form of conducting questionnaire survey or obtaining continuous feedback from the climbers to monitor the expectations and experiences of climbers to Kinabalu Park is one of the possible immediate rectifying actions to be taken.

Endnotes

¹ Criterion ii concerns outstanding examples representing significant on-going ecological and biological processes in the evolution and development of terrestrial, fresh water, coastal and marine ecosystems and communities of plants and animals, See Sabah Parks. *Kinabalu Park: A world heritage site?* Sabah Parks proposal submitted to the Sabah State Cabinet. Kota Kinabalu, Sabah: unpublished paper, 1998; UNESCO WHC. *New sites to be inscribed on UNESCO World Heritage List*, 2006. <http://whc.unesco.org/en/news/132>. (Accessed 23 Mar 2006).

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³ RM1= USD0.29

⁴ Sabah parks system consists of Kinabalu Park, Tawau Hills Park, Crocker Range Park, Pulau Tiga Marine Park, Turtle Island Park, Tunku Abdul Rahman Marine Park, Tun Sakaran Park, Tun Mustapa Park and Sipadan Island (in the midst of gazetting).

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