



Community-based ecotourism management for sustainable development of marine protected areas in Malaysia



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ABSTRACT

This study explores the factors that influence the community's participation in managing community-based ecotourism (CBETM) for sustainable development of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) in Peninsular Malaysia. CBETM ensures community involvement for effective sustainable management as well as supporting environmental conservation practices. To achieve the objectives of the study, a quantitative method was applied, and data were analysed using structural equation modelling (SEM). The major findings of this study indicate that environmental knowledge for sustainable development, motivation to be involved with CBETM, perceived economic impact of CBETM, perceived social impact of CBETM and perceived cultural impact of CBETM have a greater influence on intention to participate in CBETM. It implies that these factors lead to the formation of positive intention in managing CBETM and promote community participation. This study will help policymakers to take relevant management policies to increase environmental knowledge for sustainable development, to motivate local community in CBETM, and to increase economic, social and cultural benefits among residents. These benefits encourage community involvement in CBETM that will support environmental planning to ensure environmental conservation practices among tourists and residents.

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1. Introduction

Malaysia is considered one of the most prosperous countries in Southeast Asia partly because of its rich marine resources. This enables Malaysia to maintain its position as an exceptional tourist destination and has supported economic growth, which directly increases the standard of living of the local community. Specifically, MPAs are considered exceptional tourist destinations in Malaysia (Tahir, 2008). The tourism industry of Malaysia contributes significantly to the economy and has proven itself a sector that stimulates economic growth (Vasanth, 2005; Jaafar and Maideen, 2012). MPAs in Malaysia are managed by a top-down approach because of its strong centralist political interference on coastal and fisheries

management (Siry, 2006). It indicates that Federal Government controls MPAs, not State governments. This has resulted in the lack of coordination between the Federal and the State governments where each planning agency is in conflict with others (Siry, 2006). Another important issue is that the Federal Government established the MPAs without prior discussion with the local community. This has hampered local community-based management practices within MPAs in Malaysia (Siry, 2006) leading to a negative perception of community-based ecotourism (Er et al., 2012).

The local community's understanding of economic, social and environmental issues is the basis of shaping related policies. Törn et al. (2008) found that poor involvement of local communities in the establishment and management of protected areas resulted in unfavourable behaviour towards sustainable use of natural resources. Social capital plays a vital role to improve cooperation and coordination of the local community for the development of community-based ecotourism (Liu et al., 2014). Participation of the local community helps build confidence for long term sustainability

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and ensure sustainable use and management of natural resources that reduce the adverse effects of anthropogenic exercises on the environment. This study attempts to analyse the perception of the local community towards CBETM and its economic impact on the development of the community within MPAs.

1.1. Overview of marine protected areas in Malaysia

Marine protected areas were created in the early 1980s when it was realised that marine fisheries have declined. To improve fishery resources, it was considered important that the coral reef areas inhabited by different commercial fish species, breed, feed and grow, must be protected. The coral reef areas are an essential habitat as they are exposed to numerous stressors caused by human actions. Given the situation, in 1983, former Prime Minister of Malaysia, led the Ministry of Agriculture to establish marine parks under Parts 41 to 45 of the Fisheries Act 1985.

The main objective of creating marine parks is to protect, conserve and manage in perpetuity representative marine ecosystems of importance, particularly coral reefs and their flora and fauna, so they remain in good condition for future generations. According to the [Department of Fisheries Malaysia \(2012\)](#), a total of 53 MPAs in Malaysia under the 1985 Act was designated as marine parks. The very short history of the establishment of marine parks in Malaysia is presented in [Table 1](#).

The Fishing Regulations (restricted area) was adopted under the Fisheries Act, 1963. In 1985, 22 islands in the states of Kedah, Terengganu, Pahang and Johor were declared as Fishing Prohibited Area (FPA) under the 1963 Fisheries Act. The Fisheries Act was adopted in 1985, replacing the 1963 law on fisheries, which led to declaring three islands off the coast of Sarawak as FPA. In 1994, 38 islands in the state of Kedah, Terengganu, Pahang, Johor and Labuan Federal Territory were declared officially as marine parks in Malaysia under the Fisheries Act, 1985. Management of the marine park island conceptual plan for Peninsular Malaysia was formed with a collective effort of the marine park, World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) Malaysia and Canada Fund.

In 2004, the marine park section was moved from the Fisheries Department in a new direction under the Department of Natural Resources and Environment (NRE) with a new vision, mission, goals and strategic plan for the new management of marine parks. In 2006, June 14, the Minister Council meeting approved the formation of the Department of Marine Park Malaysia (DMPM). In 2007, July 16, the marine park section officially became the Department of Marine Parks Malaysia. In 2012 this DMPM forged closer collaboration with local communities by introducing alternative livelihood programmes, training of the Community Advisory Committee, closer collaboration with NGOs and local universities in research and monitoring.

2. Literature review

Community-based ecotourism focuses on environmental, social and cultural sustainability and plays a vital role in meeting the challenges of sustainability of world tourism ([UNEP, 2011](#)). In CBETM, local community members are considered protectors of natural resources and areas and expert in cultural, environmental and livelihood. Community-based ecotourism involves residents in conservation practices and often increases environmental awareness among residents ([Higgins-Desbiolles, 2009](#)). To make the appropriate decision in the environmental context, an individual must have a clear understanding of environmental issues. ([Hayombe et al., 2012](#); [Zhang and Lei, 2012](#)).

[Wanga et al. \(2013\)](#) found an association between residents' environmental knowledge and their attitudes towards ecotourism. Participation of local communities in ecotourism can be motivated by having suitable management strategies that target improving local understanding of the environmental issues, stimulating favourable attitudes towards ecotourism and developing environmental plans ([Zhang and Lei, 2012](#)). The lack of information about environmental problems has adverse impacts on local environmental behaviour. Environmental knowledge is an important variable that affects the level of environmental engagement ([Barr and Gilg, 2007](#)). Individuals who have excelled in learning the natural issues are more inclined to act in an ecological manner, *ceteris paribus* ([Oguz et al., 2011](#)). Different researchers have recommended that an absence of appropriate information or an overabundance of knowledge may prompt people to take steps that might harm the environment. If such people are more mindful of environmental issues and their reasons, they will be more interested in acting towards the earth in more rational ways. One of the greatest contentions towards getting the best type of natural activity is through knowledge. People with information, abilities and qualities will contribute to a stable and growing world ([Adomssent, 2013](#); [Lozano et al., 2013](#)). [Vicente-Molina et al. \(2013\)](#) found that knowledge has a significant influence on pro-environmental behaviour and attitudes towards the environment.

This paper examines the essential connection between the factors that affects the locals' intention to participate in community-based ecotourism with aimed the strengthening the ability of communities for sustainable use of natural resources within MPAs. In a nutshell, there is a correlation between environmental knowledge and environmental behaviour. Thus improving locals' environmental knowledge can encourage favourable attitudes towards ecotourism ([Zhang and Lei, 2012](#)). The sustainable use of the environment can be improved when locals have constructive insight into sustainable management ([Bennett and Dearden, 2014](#)).

Motivation plays a significant role in terms of making human beings dedicated. Motivation is required for the effective

Table 1
Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) in Malaysia.

History of MPAs in Malaysia	Location of Marine Park	No of MPAs
1983: The Fisheries Regulations was enacted under the Fisheries Act, 1963	Peninsular Malaysia	42
1985: 22 islands in the states of Kedah, Terengganu, Pahang and Johor were declared as FPA under the Fisheries Act of 1963. Fisheries Act 1985 was enacted, replacing the Fisheries Act 1963	Sarawak	3
1994: 38 islands in the state of Kedah, Terengganu, Pahang, Johor and Federal Territory of Labuan were declared and gazetted as marine parks Malaysia under the Fisheries Act, 1985,	Sabah	6 and 2 proposed
2004: Marine Park Section shifted from Fisheries Department to a new management under the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MNRE)	Total	53 Marine Parks
2006: Department of marine parks Malaysia was established in MNRE		
2012-present: Formulation of Policies and Management Plans for Marine Parks		

Source: [Department of Marine Park, Malaysia \(2012\)](#).

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