



Salt licks and adventurous tourists: A framework for sustainable ecotourism

Ang Sek Chuan¹, Chan Ngai Weng¹, Jabil Mapjabil¹

¹Pusat Pengajian Ilmu Kemanusiaan, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800 Pulau Pinang

Correspondence: Ang Sek Chuan (email: asc56@hotmail.my)

Abstract

The objective of this study is to survey the demographic patterns of visitors to salt licks in Malaysia to determine whether there is any clear management direction for salt lick ecotourism in the country. Only respondents who had been to at least one salt lick in Malaysia were invited to do the survey. Survey forms were used in all the salt lick areas visited by the authors. In addition, emails were sent to invite participants to do the online survey. Data gathered from both surveys were tabulated using MS Excel software. The results showed that salt licks' visitors were more inclined to seek adventurous activities, were budget conscious, enjoyed nature and chose camping as the favourite accommodation. Watching wildlife was not as important for them as initially perceived but the experiences of visiting salt lick was. This study showed that the management plan for salt lick areas development should target the budget conscious- cum-adventurous tourists rather than catering to the willing-to-pay but rather unsustainable mass casual tourists, as this would reduce wastage and stress to natural heritage areas.

Keywords: budget tourists, ecotourism, salt lick, tourism, tourist management, tourist demographics

Introduction

Salt lick tourism is a special interest tourism. It has been around in Malaysia since the colonial years where the British exploited salt licks as gaming areas. Then, the motive to visit salt licks were practically for hunting rather than for watching wildlife. Today, with the diminishing wildlife and the strict wildlife regulations, gaming to salt lick areas has been replaced by wildlife watching. Salt lick hides have been built to cater for the high tourists volume to national parks, state parks and forest reserves. Visiting salt lick hides are some of the popular activities in national park such as in Kuala Tahan, Pahang. Another popular tourist attraction is Sira Air Hangat (hotspring salt lick) in Ulu Muda Forest Reserve (UMFR) in Kedah. Sira Air Hangat is a remote salt lick where one needs 2 to 3 hours boat journey to reach the salt lick. The nearest camp to this salt lick is Kem Labua. It is about 5 minutes boat ride to Sira Air Hangat. A resort with all the modern facilities was built in 2008 at Kem Labua. At the time of writing this paper, the resort has remained unpatronized, abandoned and has degraded by the forces of nature.

Materials and method

Salt licks come in different shapes, sizes and types. Qualitative and quantitative questionnaires were used in this study. The methods used to obtain information were open-ended questionnaires applied to residents, directed questionnaires for tourists, which they filled out themselves, observations and the first hand experience with tourists visiting salt licks since 1980s. Interviews with accommodation and boat

owners, managers and guides were also carried out. All people interviewed were informed that a study was being carried out and are aware that results would be published.

Study area

This study is based on all the salt licks of Peninsular Malaysia. The author visited the popular salt licks in Peninsular Malaysia to distribute survey questionnaires. The popular salt licks visited were Sira Air Hangat (UMFR), Sira Gajah (Belum Forest Complex), Tahan Hide and Tabing Hide (both at Kuala Tahan, National Park). Some respondents did the questionnaires based on some other salt licks (such as Sira Pong at Pedu Lake, Kedah) which have not been visited by the author.

Margin of error

The respondents for this academic survey were selected based on those who have *visited at least a salt lick* in Malaysia. Altogether there were 97 respondents who participated in the invitation to survey. This sample size was used due to the difficulty of finding respondents who had actually visited a salt lick in Malaysia. This was the major challenges in getting the appropriate number of participants for this study. According to Robert (2006), the margin of error is given by $1/\sqrt{N}$, where N is the number of participants or sample size. In this case, $1/\sqrt{97}$ gives the estimated margin of error as 10%. A 10% margin of error is deemed acceptable as given the numerous different salt licks and the diverse tourists from popular to remote tourists' salt licks and known only to the locals. There are two categories of selected participants - invited through emails and by printed survey hardcopies. The first category used the online questionnaires where visitors to salt licks were invited to go online to do the survey. The second method deployed the questionnaires form. Both methods used the same questions. The number of invited participants for this survey were sent to a link to the website for the survey were 500 persons but only 9% (43 persons) responded (Table 1). For the printed questionnaires the author handed the survey forms to 100 visitors who visited one of the following salt lick locations - Tahan Hide, Sira Air Hangat and Belum Temengor Forest Complex. Only 30 respondents from Tahan, 14 respondents from Sira Air Hangat and 10 respondents from Belum Temengor Forest Complex returned the questionnaires, making a total of 54 returned questionnaires (54% of 100). With 43 respondents (9%) using online survey and 54 returned forms, thus making a total of 97 respondents for this survey. The higher percentage from hardcopies was due to the fact that the author was able to wait to collect the survey forms.

Table 1. Respondents to this academic study

Mode of Invitation	No of Selected Participants	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
By email	500	43	9%
Hardcopy	100	54	54%
Total	600	97	16%

Data processing

All questionnaires collected from the hardcopies were input into website for easier computation and tabulation of the data. The data were processed using the build-in functions provided by the Limesurvey software. Limesurvey software is a free and open source survey application software which can be downloaded from <http://www.limesurvey.org/>. The software was downloaded and installed in the website in the folder limesurvey at <http://www.ofmalaysia.com/limesurvey>. Data collected with partial results and incomplete data were discarded to clean the data pool.

Challenges

There were challenges and setbacks in the survey and a lot of patience was needed to overcome these challenges. Forms that were distributed did not return. Invitations to the online survey were ignored. For example, the mailing list of 500 colleagues and friends were sent but only 9% responded to the survey. Most of those received were those who have just joined a trip to one of the salt licks. There was one invitation to a foreign tourist who had written his email address in the log book at Tabing Salt Lick, who promptly accepted the online survey. Getting locals to participate in this academic study on salt licks was a challenging task. Another challenge was the difficulty of finding visitors who have been to a salt lick. It should be noted that this academic survey applied to those visitors that have been to at least a salt lick before they were given the opportunity to answer the questionnaires. For example, at the floating restaurant at Kuala Tahan, the author took the initiative to talk to all restaurant patrons but practically all the patrons have not been to the Tahan salt lick as they have just arrived at Kuala Tahan. It seemed those who have arrived earlier and visited the salt lick were having other activities or probably resting in their rooms. A whole day at Tahan Hide was not fruitful too as the author only managed to get several foreign tourists to do the survey.

Results and discussion

Age group

The age group (Figure 1) of 50-59 years old is the highest at 27% while the lowest is only 2% from the under 18 years old age group. There is 14% from the over 60 years old age group. Surprisingly the data shows that 41% (27% + 14%) of respondents are above 50 years old. This result shows that a large group of senior people visited salt licks in this survey. Only 36% (23% from 30-39 years old + 13% from 40-49 years old) are from the middle age group. There is only 23% below the 30 years old group. The survey could indicate that salt licks are more popular with those who have more time to travel especially those who are retired.

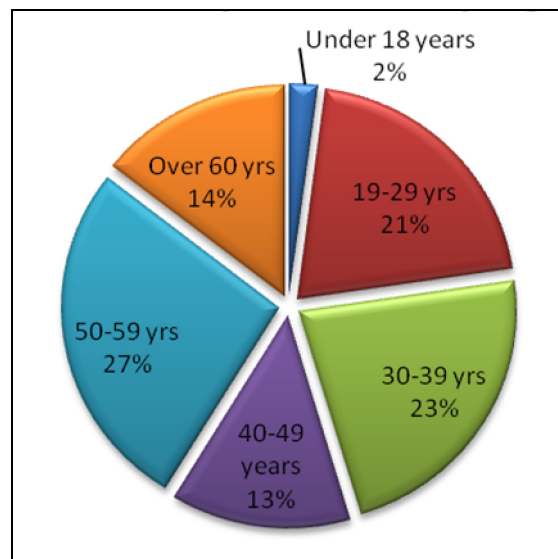


Figure 1. Age group

Gender

From the survey (Figure 2), it was found that there were more male tourists visiting salt lick than female. The percentage of male visitors to salt lick is in the ratio of 3:1. Salt licks are always found in remote area and that could be the reason why it attracted more male than the feminine group. This study reaffirms the research by Badaruddin (2005) in which there were more female local tourists visiting nature based destinations mainly for viewing purpose but *not to engage in adventurous activities*. Salt lick visits require some amount of adventure and that could be the reason for fewer female visiting salt licks in this study.

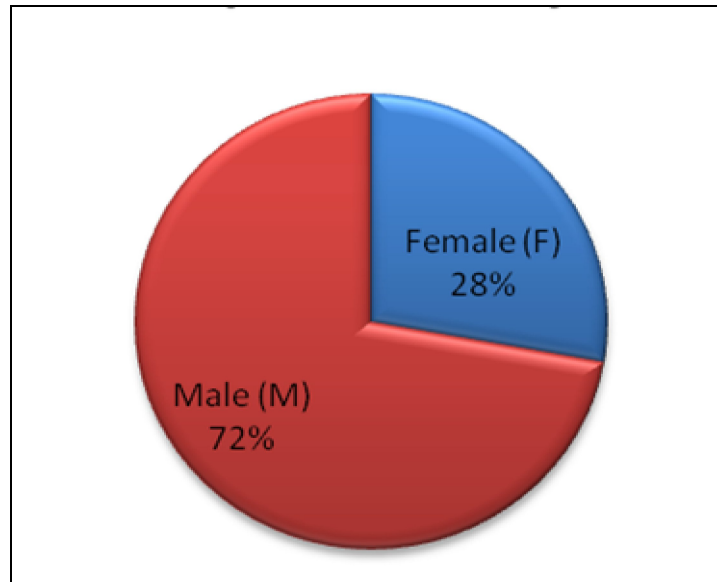


Figure 2. *Gender*

Nationality

From Figure 3, locals make up the bulk of respondents to this survey. Foreign visitors make up only 9% of the visitors to salt licks. In the study on Tabing Salt Lick (Ang and Chan, 2010) the local tourists accounted for 4% as compared to foreign visitors of 96%. It must be noted that Tabing Hide is in the popular Taman Negara Pahang (National Park Pahang) while this study was spread over several salt licks in Peninsular Malaysia where foreign tourists are lacking. The bulk of foreign tourists that responded to this study were visitors to Taman Negara Pahang. As traveling seasons for Malaysians mainly circle around the school holidays (Badaruddin, 2008), this survey was done during the off seasons to avoid the unnecessary local crowds. For example during the Hari Raya Holidays, the crowd will have less muslim locals and while during the Chinese New Year, there will be less chinese locals. A survey during the off seasons would have an even distribution of all local ethnicities.

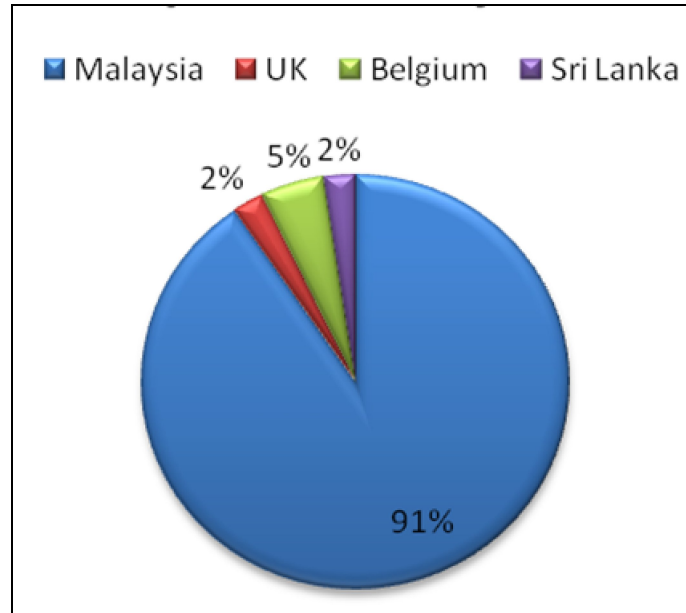


Figure 3. *Nationality*

Occupation

The bulk of respondents (Figure 4) who have time to visit salt licks are mostly not in the employment category. There were 31 respondents making 32% who were unemployed or pensioner at the time of this survey. Students were included in this category as they have more time to visit during their holidays. Middle management level was the least represented in this survey with only 14%.

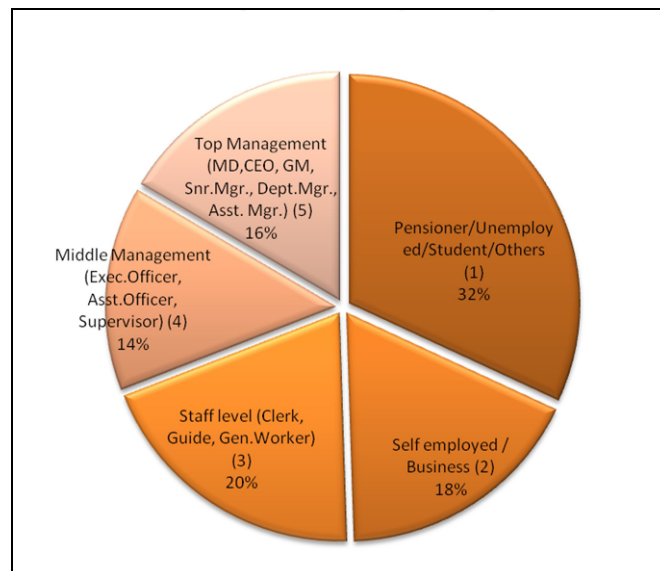


Figure 4. *Occupation*

Employment sectors

Three groups of employment sectors were surveyed. The study showed (Figure 5) that visitors from the private sector ranked the highest at 62% in visiting salt licks. Government servants were slightly higher at 22% than (Non Government Organisations (NGOs) at 16%. This study shows that private sectors are the major tourists visiting salt licks.

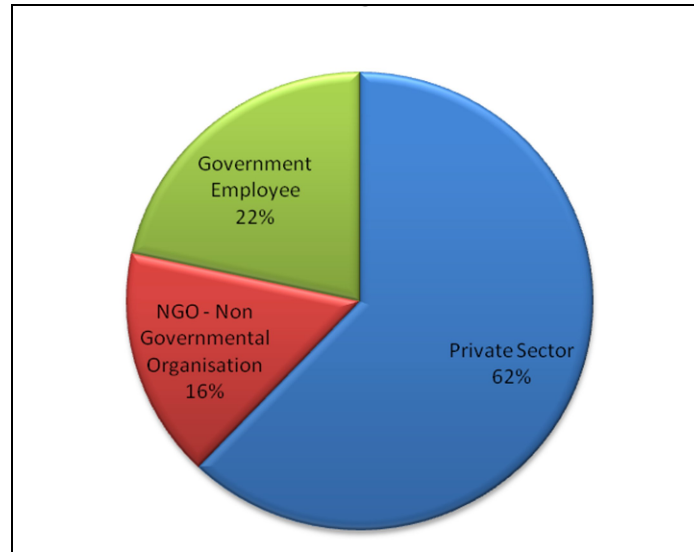


Figure 5. *Employment*

Type of travellers

Large percentage of 53% of visitors (Table 2 and Figure 6) to salt licks were done with friends. The other type of travellers such as business, solo traveller, couple and leisure groups trailing far behind. The highest among the minority travellers was the business group at 12%. Surprising, there are no respondent from the family group. The remoteness, time constraint, distance and the need for jungle trekking would probably not be suitable for family with children.

Table 2. Traveller type visiting salt licks

Traveller Type	No of Respondents	Percentage (%)
With friends	51	53%
Business, company or incentive travel group	12	12%
Solo traveler	17	18%
Couple	9	9%
Leisure groups	8	8%
With families	0	0%
Total	97	100

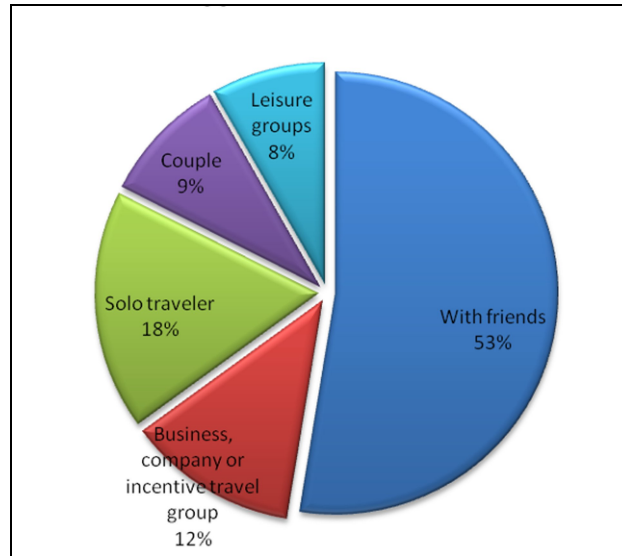


Figure 6. *Traveller type*

First visit to a salt lick

It is interesting to note that 2/3 (Figure 7) of the respondents (66%) have actually visited at least a salt lick before. Only 34% had their first experience visiting salt lick. Salt licks attract “repeat” visitors. Research shows that some visitors tend to repeat a destination when they feel satisfied (Pereda, 2002). This shows that most visitors to salt licks were satisfied and thus salt licks would have great ecotourism potentials. The high percentage of repeat respondents (66%) reaffirms the study by Preda (2002) which also shows that repeat visitors are more likely than first time visitors to return to the same destination in the future.

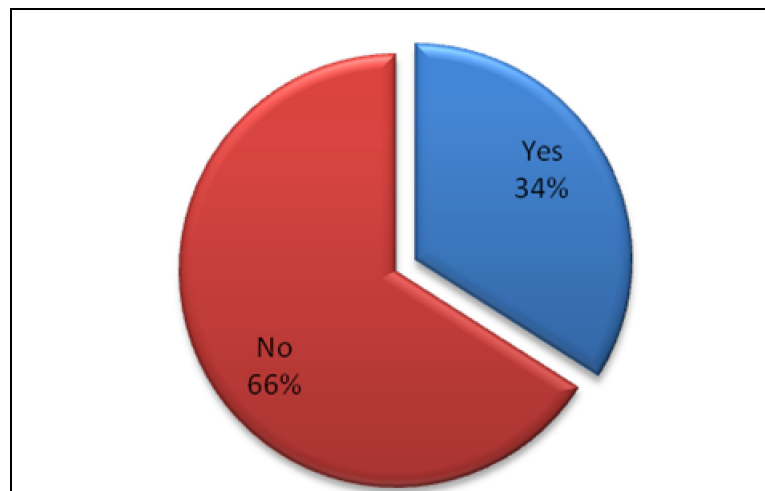


Figure 7. *First visit to salt lick*

Number of salt licks visited in Peninsular Malaysia by respondents

A large percentage of visitors (Figure 8) to salt licks were repeat visitors. For example, 25% of the respondents actually visited 5 or more salt licks in Peninsular Malaysia. 8% visited 4 salt licks, 21% (3 salt licks), 32% (2 salt licks) and 14% were first time visitors to a salt lick. The poor exposure and

advertisement on salt lick tours could be the reason why only 14% first-time visitors. Again this reinforces the hypothesis that salt licks have great appeal for repeat visitors.

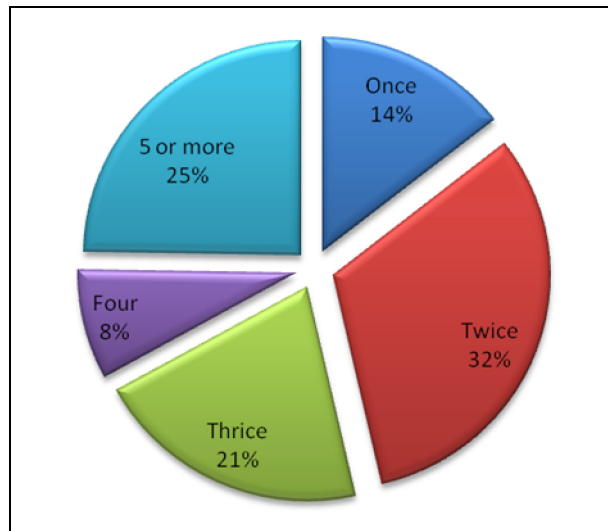


Figure 8. Number of salt licks visited in Peninsular Malaysia

Number of visits to the same salt lick

From Figure 9, there were 51% who responded to this question indicated that it was their first visit to the particular salt lick. This shows that about half of the respondents were new to that salt lick and it was a new experience. 14% have visited at least twice for that particular salt lick, 5% thrice and 2% four times while 28% visited 5 or more times for a particular salt lick. The 49% that have visited the same particular salt lick more than once could further confirm the importance of repeat visitors in salt lick tourism.

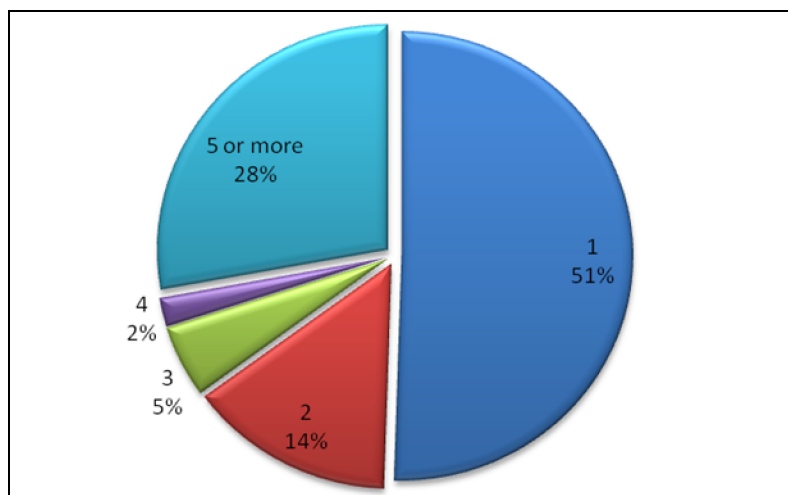


Figure 9. Number of visits to the same salt lick

Respondents preferred activities

Salt lick is a wildlife watching's site. However, from the survey (Figure 10), only 19% taken wildlife watching activity in Peninsular Malaysia. The rest of the activities is adventurous in nature. The survey shows that 23% of the visitors to salt licks make jungle trekking as their first choiced activity. Wildlife watching only ranked second at 19%. This could means that visitors to salt licks are those who enjoy jungle trekking. Visiting salt lick is only part of their programs where trekking to a salt lick becoming the objective. This question was further rephrased and the result show that jungle trekking was still the most frequently participated by those visitors to salt licks (Figure 11). Jungle trekking is however one of the requirement to visit remote salt licks. This can include salt licks such as Sira Air Hangat in Ulu Muda or Tabing Hide where one needs trekking and river crossing to reach the particular salt lick.

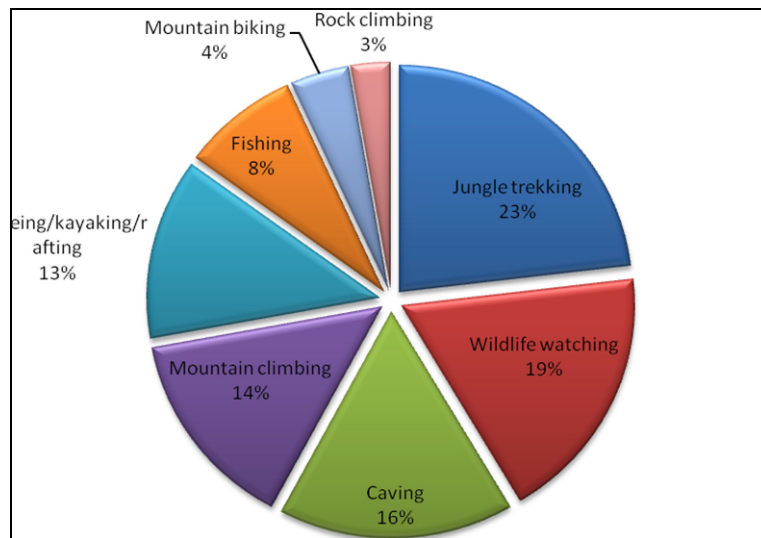


Figure 10. *Preferred activities taken in Peninsular Malaysia*

Most frequent activities participated by respondents

64% (Figure 11) of the respondents who visited salt licks have chosen jungle trekking as the most frequent activity participated. The next highest frequented activity was mountain climbing at only 16%. Only 8% choosed other non adventurous activities. This shows that salt lick visitors are more inclined to be visited by jungle trekkers than other outdoor activities participants. Hence, the target tourists for salt licks should be more towards people who prefer jungle trekking and adventurous “customers” than any other casual tourists.

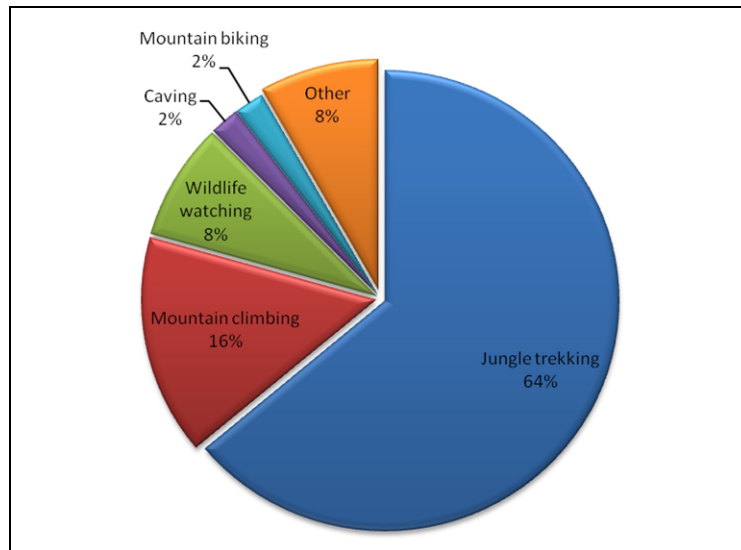


Figure 11. Activity participated most frequently

The most enjoyable event of visiting a salt lick

Although visiting salt lick does not guarantee seeing a wildlife, the majority of respondents at 66% (Figure 12) said the most enjoyable part of visiting a salt lick was the experience. Watching wildlife is secondary at only 31%. This study suggests that the present of salt lick at remote area make a good and interesting attraction. The chance to watch wildlife is of lesser significant. The experience of enjoying the natural surrounding becoming more important than seeing a wildlife. However, it would be the highlight of the visit if one would be able to see a wildlife thus fulfilling the ultimate aim of coming to a salt lick.

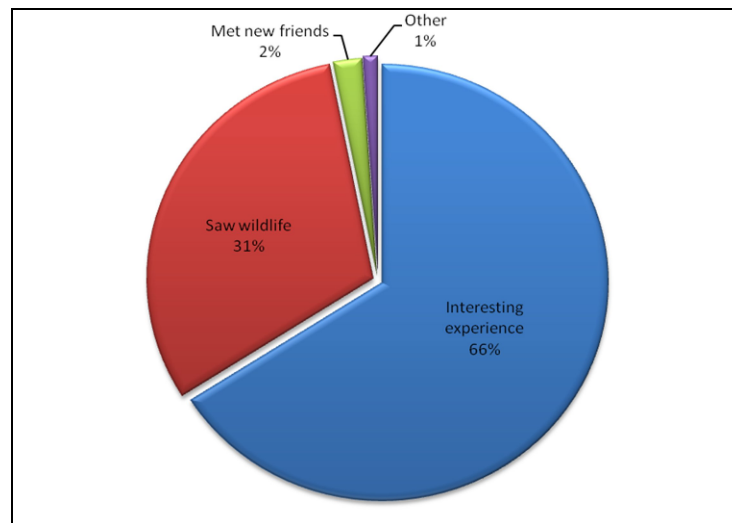


Figure 12. Most enjoyable part of a visit to a salt lick

Perception of respondents on salt lick tourism

41% (Figure 13) describe salt lick tourism industry as limited in the variety of activities. This is understandable as visiting salt lick is confined to a small cubicle hide minus music, loud noises and even

fire for cooking is not encouraged. 35% know nothing about salt lick tourism. They only knew about it as part of a tour itinerary. 21% were probably serious nature tourists who can enjoy the quiet atmosphere at a salt lick. The 3% of respondents who describe salt lick tourism industry as among the best in the world were the park rangers that gave the best possible answer to the park that they work.

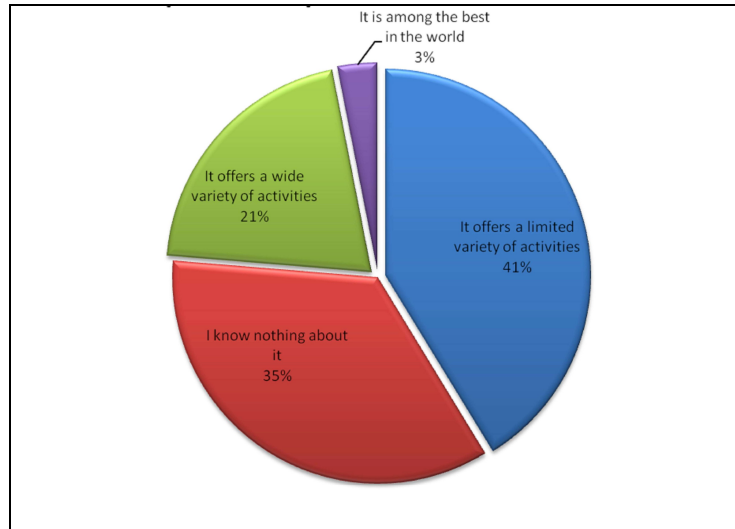


Figure 13. Perception of respondents on salt lick tourism industry

Re-visits to salt lick by respondents

A total of 87% (Figure 14) of the respondents indicated a positive response to visit salt lick again. The large number of respondents could be attracted by destination attributes (Yoon and Uysal, 2005) of the natural environment. Only 10% will not visit salt lick again while 3% indicate a “maybe”. This is a good sign that visitors to salt lick could be an effective ambassadors in promoting salt licks to their friends. A repeated visits will be expected if proper conducive environment and facilities are provided.

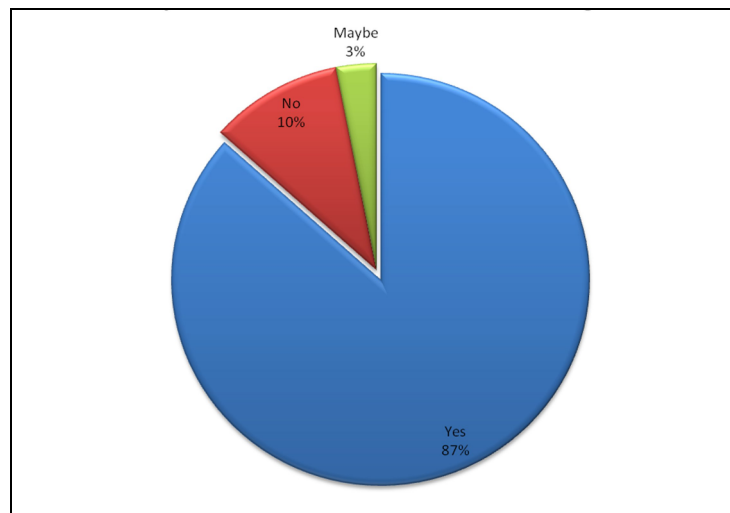


Figure 14. Respondents that would visit salt lick again

Reasons for taking salt lick tour

It should be noted that visiting salt lick was always part of a larger itinerary and there was never a standalone tour just to visit salt lick in Peninsular Malaysia. Of the 97 respondents, 30% (Figure 15) believed that salt lick is the best place to watch wildlife. 25% agreed he or she was offered a good tour to salt lick. 20% heard so much about salt lick through word of mouth and therefore taking up the tour to salt lick. 11% had participated on a previous visit to salt lick. The regular salt lick enthusiasts was at 5%. 2% was attracted by the advertisement of salt lick. 7% have other reasons. This study believes that advertisement on salt lick could help generate interest to salt licks. At present there are few advertisements on salt lick tour in Malaysia.

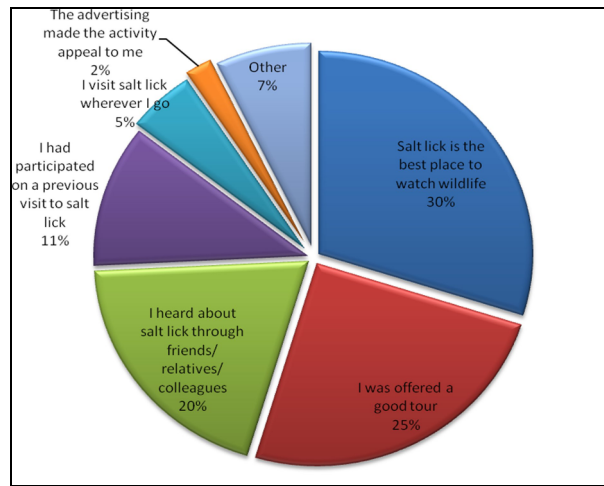


Figure 15. Reason for taking part in this salt lick tour

Group size

From the survey (Figure 16), it can be deduced that more than half of the visitor (9%+31%+14%=54%) to salt licks are in small group of 10 persons or less. Those that are above 10 persons are 11 to 15 persons (17%), 16 to 20 persons (23%) and above 20 persons (6%). This can imply that most visitors to salt licks were done in smaller adventurous groups. Big groups are most probably casual tourists and the numbers are usually unsustainable to the fragile ecosystem.

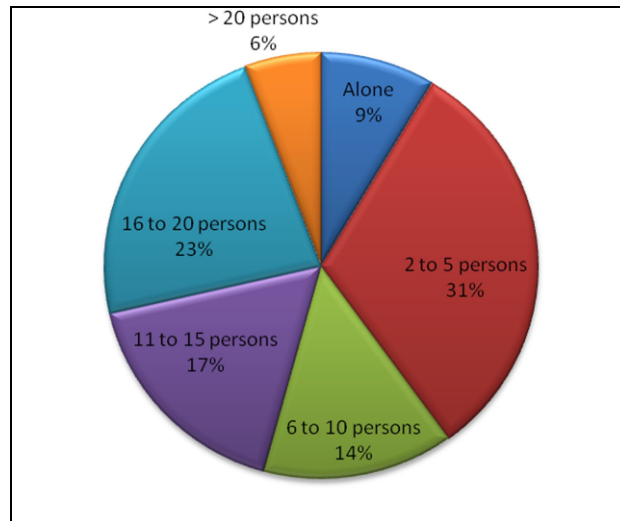


Figure 16. Group size in the tour group

Meeting expectations of salt lick by respondents

Figure 17 is on the expectation met by respondents. A large percentage of respondents at 83% have responded positively. An 8% responded negatively while 9% could not decide. This indicates a high number of visitors to salt licks are satisfy with the salt lick visited. The 8% (No) and 9% (Don't know) only make up of 17% which were probably first time visitors. Referring Figure 7, there were 34% first time visitor to salt lick. Presuming that all 17% (8% + 9%) of those surveyed (Figure 17) do not wish to visit salt lick again, then these figures should suggest that half (34%-17%) of those first timer to salt lick will be visiting salt lick again in the near future. This reveals that every two first timers to salt lick, one of them will be interested to visit salt lick again.

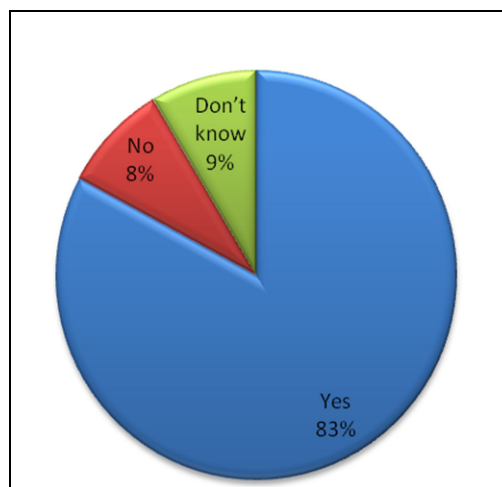


Figure 17. Meeting expectations of salt lick by respondents

Number of animals seen during visit to salt lick

Figure 18 surveys the number of animals seen at the salt lick by the respondents. 40% of the respondents did not see any wildlife. While one animal was seen by 14%, 2 animals (17%), 3 animals (11%), 4

animals (9%) and 5 or more (9%). The chances of seeing wildlife is always the preferable choice but seeing one in the wild is quite unpredictable. The breeding period of animals, the timing of the visits by respondents and the noisiness of the group are some of the factors that can influence the chances of seeing wildlife at salt lick.

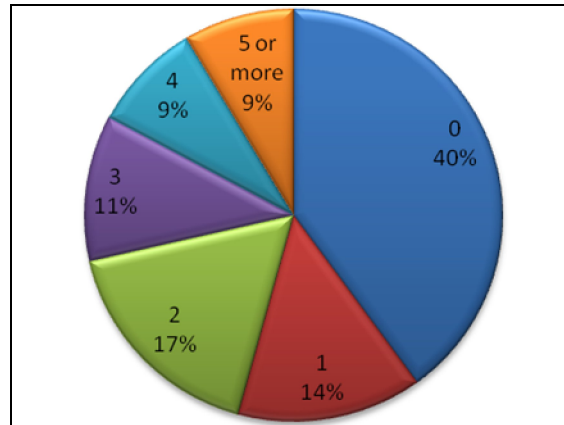


Figure 18. Number of animals seen during visit to salt lick

Overall visit rating to this salt lick

The highest overall rating for salt licks is an average at 43% (Figure 19). A higher percentage above average surveyed inclined toward “Excellent” at 49% (23% + 25%). This confirms that the overall rating is above average. The high percentage in the overall figures suggest that participants were happy with the salt lick visited. This further shows that salt licks are rated favourably amongst visitors and thus have good ecotourism potentials.

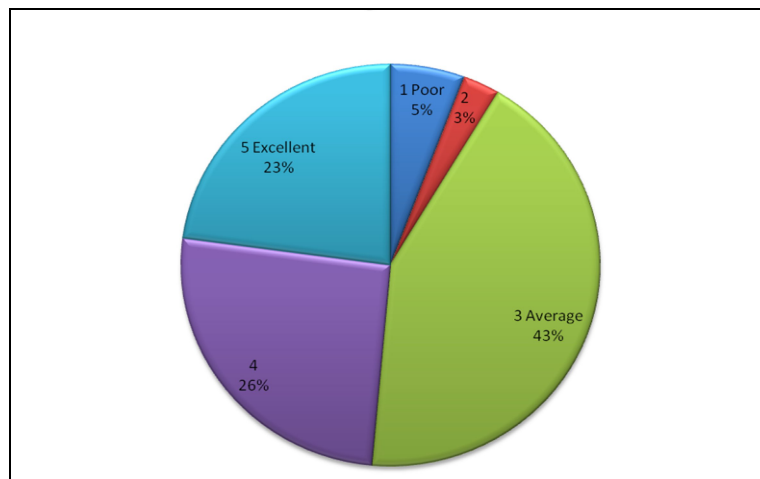


Figure 19. Overall visit rating to salt lick

Number of days willing to stay at salt lick area

More than half, 55% (Figure 20) of those surveyed prefer doing day trip to a salt lick. 27% will go for 2 days 1 night. 6% would like 3 days 2 nights. 9% opted for several nights. 3% would like to stay at salt

lick for 14 days. The lack of basic amenities at salt licks could be the probable reason for the large number (55%) that prefer to do day trip.

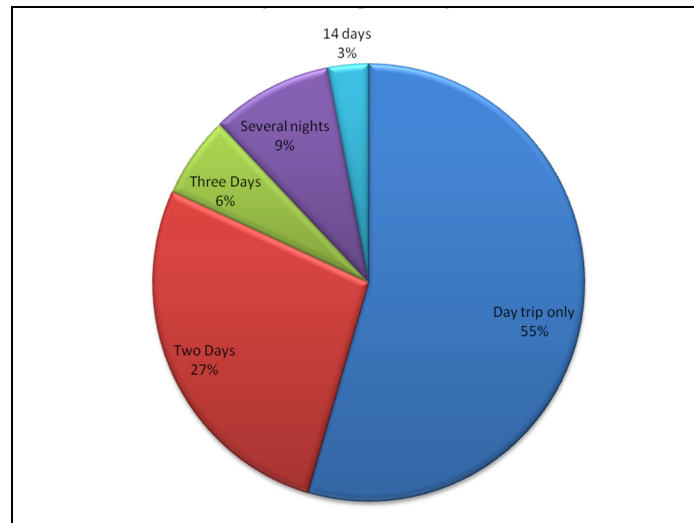


Figure 20. Number of days willing to stay at salt lick area

Main reason for visiting this salt lick

Surprising, no respondent indicated that “watching wildlife” was the main reason for visiting salt lick. The highest count at 63% indicated “Enjoy Nature” as their main reason for visiting salt lick (Figure 21). The next highest reason at 17% as a “Tour”, 11% (Research), 6% (Educational Study) and 3% (Photography). This tells us that the majority of those who visited salt licks were those who enjoy nature and the experiences rather than watching wildlife. Wildlife watching was never the subject of interest. This is probably partly due to the fact that the chances of spotting wildlife in the wild was slim and partly due to the fact that watching wildlife was never promoted by the activities of the tour operators.

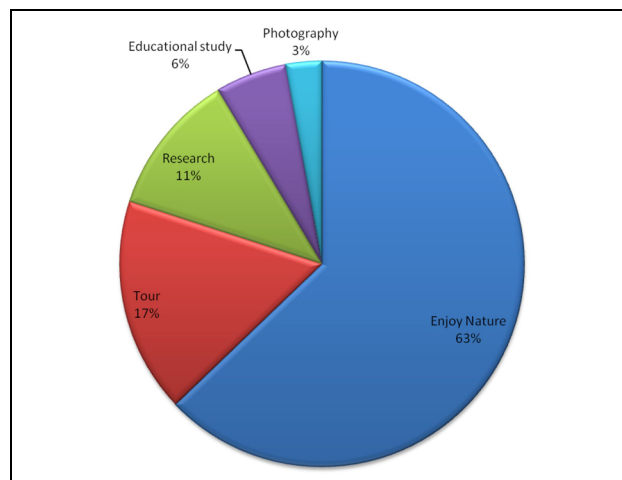


Figure 21. Reason for visiting the salt lick

Type of accommodation facilities used

Figure 22 indicates that 63% of the respondents who have visited a salt lick used camping as their mode of accommodation. The next popular accommodation is chalet at 14%, followed by hostel (11%), salt lick hide (6%), hotel (3%) and others (3%). Hence, it can be verified that the majority of the visitors to salt licks would not mind camping at remote areas in order to visit salt licks. This shows that modern resort accommodation is not an importance facility to attract salt lick visitors.

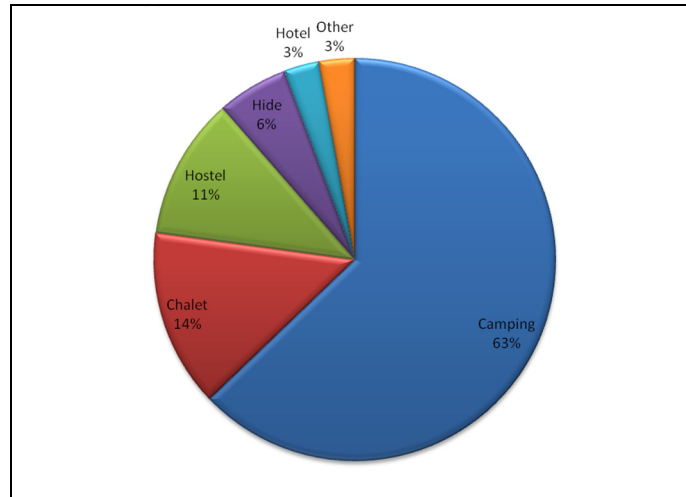


Figure 22. *Accommodation used*

Constraint in visiting salt lick

Lack of information on the salt lick is the main constraint for 34% of the respondents visiting the salt lick (Figure 23). 15% indicated the high cost. Both “lacking in accommodation” and “weather constraints” shared the same percentage of 13% of the respondents. 9% on poor quality service in transportation. 8% on too many regulations. 6% did not have any constraint as coming to the salt lick was fully organised by professional guides. Only 2% indicated the need to have friend to join the tour to a salt lick as a constraint coming to the salt lick.

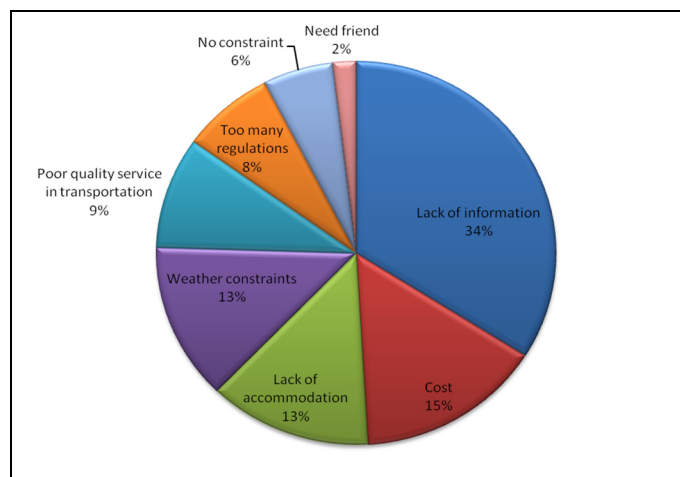


Figure 23. *Constraints in visiting this salt lick*

Information about this salt lick

Figure 24 shows that 50% came to know about a salt lick through “word of mouth”. 21% marked “Not relevant” to the question. 21% said they read from guidebook, brochures or magazines. 5% came to know about the salt lick through advertisement. 3% of the respondents have indicated that they had previously visited the same salt lick. This survey shows that advertisement plays a small part in attracting tourists to salt licks. There is a need to popularize salt licks through advertisement if salt lick tourism is to be sustainable.

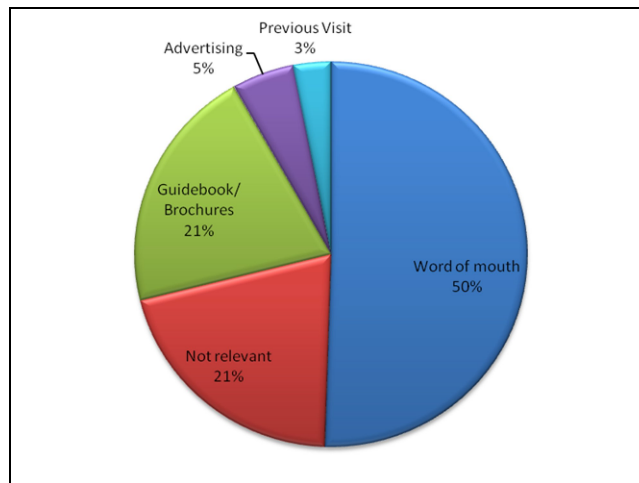


Figure 24. *Information about this salt lick*

Cost

Of the 97 respondents surveyed (Figure 25), 9% indicated that the cost of visiting a salt lick was “very important”, while 41% indicated that cost was an “important” factor in deciding for a salt lick tour. 35% said the cost was “somewhat important”. Only 10% (Not so important) and 5% (Not important). Hence, it can be deduced that visitors to salt licks are mostly budget conscious tourists. This shows that salt lick tourism is more popular with budget tourists than willing-to-pay (casual) tourists. Resort accommodations and expensive facilities in remote jungle will probably not be popular with salt lick tourists.

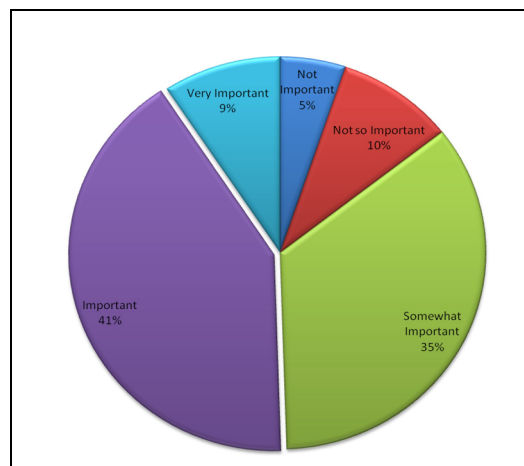


Figure 25. *Cost of visiting salt lick*

Conclusion

The findings in this study give an insight into various aspects of salt lick tourism which is so far not available. It was found that the person who is most likely to visit a salt lick is a budget traveller, prefers jungle trekking and adventurous activities, travels in small groups, adult male, recommended by friends and favoured by experienced salt lick visitors. Thus there is no necessity to build a resort in a remote jungle as travellers to salt licks are going to be budget travellers who prefer camping rather than resort accommodation. Beside the majority of the respondents (55%) would only wish to do a day trip to a salt lick. It seemed only 45% are willing to stay overnight. The findings showed that facilities and promotion on salt licks are lacking in Malaysia. Demand to visit salt licks will never be the main interest. Visiting salt licks in tropical jungles only attract adventurous visitors. Casual visitors who are willing to pay will not be interested to visit salt licks. Hence, the demand for resort accommodation is not there and any resort built in the jungle for salt lick visits will not be sustainable. There are many examples on failures of resort in remote parks¹. There are many resorts in Malaysia which are abandoned. The one upstream of Kuala Tahan (call Kuala Trenggan Resort) is a good example since Kuala Tahan is popular and Kuala Trenggan which is in close proximity would naturally be overflowing with tourists too. But that was never the case. The case of Kuala Trenggan located in the popular Taman Negara, Pahang is one good example of how a modern resort built just 40 minutes from the popular Kuala Tahan failed to garner enough tourists to make it sustainable. However, it was never to be profitable and the resort eventually had to close down after sometime. Even after a change of company and the attempt to revive the resort, it could not attract enough customers to this remote resort. Eventually it was left as a white elephant. The findings show that wildlife watching in salt lick areas in tropical jungles of Malaysia will never duplicate the profitability of wildlife watching in the salt pans of Africa. Salt licks are for the adventurous tourists. Salt lick tourism is “limited by demand” ecotourism which augurs well with the conservation of this natural landscape. Salt licks in remote natural areas need to be sustained to protect their overused. The fact that only adventurous tourists visit salt licks make them more sustainable in this ecotourism business. The World Tourism Organisation’s definition of tourism carrying capacity as the maximum number of people that may visit the tourist destination without causing destruction of the physical, economic and socio-cultural environment (UNEP, 1999). This definition blends well with salt lick ecotourism. Salt licks visited mostly by adventurous tourists is a perfect recipe for sustaining salt lick ecotourism.

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¹ Personal observation of resorts at Kuala Trenggan and Kuala Keniam of Taman Negara, Pahang.