



Nature and Community-based tourism (CBT) for poverty alleviation: A case study of Lower Kinabatangan, East Malaysia

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Abstract

Ecological tourism is intimately associated with natural features such as scenic beauty, beaches and marine areas, flora and fauna, parks and conservation areas. Increasingly, this tourism is organized to help in the cause of rural poverty alleviation through community-based initiatives. This study illustrates this CBT trend in East Malaysia. Data were collected from field interviews with 208 villagers of Kampung Perpaduan, Kampung Batu Puteh, Kampung Mengaris and Kampung Singgah Mata involved in ecological tourism activities in Batu Puteh, Lower Kinabatangan River of Sabah. The findings of the paper reaffirmed the rationales for community-based tourism which not only aimed at poverty alleviation and enhancement of local community participation, but also underlined the role of the natural environment in community based tourism (CBT). They revealed how the holistic, sustainable approach of integrating a rural development project with forest conservation efforts and profit-oriented tourism business could be achieved by working with multiple stakeholders at various levels of operation.

Keywords: community-based tourism, ecological tourism, holistic approach, local participation, natural environment, poverty alleviation

Introduction: Environment, tourism development and the rural community

Tourism is intimately associated with environment. Environment carries multiple meanings in the study of tourism, ranging from natural environment to various facets of cultural environment (Inskeep, 1991). Natural features such as scenic beauty, beaches and marine areas, flora and fauna, parks and conservation areas are some of the substantial elements known for their tourism attractions. While many rural areas are characterized by prominent natural features, they are not only often lack in requisite infrastructure or accessibility but also suffer from paucity of new ideas and initiative for development.

Recent development in tourism witnesses studies of the popularization of community-based tourism (CBT) in the developing countries specifically among the rural communities (Scheyvens, 2002; Muganda et al., 2010). Many of these rural communities host outstanding natural resources, which demonstrate great potential for tourism development (Hiwasaki, 2006). However, they are also featured with various environmental constraints, e.g., scarcity of local resources for economic development, limited access to education, capacity building and market connected with poor transportation networks. These constraints are not easily overcome even after tourism development takes place. Thus, it comes as no surprise when the recent studies revealed that many CBT projects could not sustain the momentum due to the lack of proper access to market and also poor governance, especially when the initial funding dries up (Mitchell & Muckosy, 2008; Goodwin & Santilli, 2009; Sebele, 2010).

Borrowing the case of a CBT project in Batu Puteh of Borneo, this paper intends to highlight the interaction between the environmental conditions and the development of the project. Specifically, it

reveals how the locals responded to the limitations in their life options by turning the constraints into potentials through tourism project packaged with forest conservation activities. While the set of facilitating factors leading to the success is clear, a holistic approach linking the community (social dimension), tourism business (economic dimension) and the natural environment (ecological dimension) appear to be the most essential one to ensure the project thereby the community sustainability in long run (Moscardo et al., 2013).

Methodology

Exemplary case study approach is employed in this research to understand the issues faced by community within a rural setting. The data collection involved two field trips to the study area. Semi-structured interviews and observations through participation were carried out. A total of 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with the local villagers who were directly involved and not involved in tourism operations. Those involved in tourism operations include the homestay operators, boat men, fishermen and local guides, the key personnel of CBT project, and the tourists to the village. Initially, one of the CBT contact persons was identified as the key informant. When the author arrived in the field, informants were further identified through snowball sampling method. Secondary data on the history of the place, people, tourism development and conservation initiatives, existing tourism programs and activities, tourist arrivals and income generation were substantially collected through the desktop and library search as well as official websites. Content analysis was used for analysis purpose.

Community-based tourism- spirit and purpose

It is in light of the increasing social responsibility in tourism development and the emergence of sustainability as an important issue at global level that CBT gains prominence as part of the governmental strategies for development while safeguarding social justice (Salazar, 2012). Rationales behind the CBT development have been widely discussed (Murphy, 1988; Kiss, 2004; Manyara & Jones, 2007; Hamzah & Khalifah, 2009; López-Guzmán et al., 2011). These initiatives typically portray a few key aspects which include poverty alleviation, economic diversification and greater local participation.

CBT is advocated for the economic gains generated from tourism which can be widely distributed thereby supporting the poverty alleviation objective. This effort is further enhanced through diversifying the local livelihood so that the local people do not solely rely on agriculture as they come to have tourism activity as an additional source of income. Therefore, CBT is often associated with pro-poor tourism as both help the poor people through providing employment opportunities, minimizing adverse environmental impacts, enhancing positive social impacts and increasing local participation in decision making process (Kibicho, 2008). However, what makes CBT distinctive from pro-poor tourism is that the ownership and management of the tourism business must belong to the local people (Ashley & Ntshona, 2003; Pro-poor Tourism Partnership, 2004).

In practice, the structure, objectives and themes of a CBT project are greatly shaped by the host community's needs. One of the recurring themes, as observed by Hatton (1999) is that, communities that suffer economic hardship often consider tourism as a potential development option; and one of the most important criteria leading to this idea is the presence of a perceived attraction normally drawn from the environment they live in. Furthermore, Wood (2005) holds that tourism is often chosen because of its low initial investment and lesser conflict with the existing activities of resource use.

From the moral perspective, the meaningful involvement of local people is preferable due to the governmental accountability consideration. Many past developments witness the failure of conventional top-down approaches to development in benefiting the people in need especially in developing countries (Wearing & McDonald, 2002; Dunn, 2007;). By taking the bottom-up approach, CBT is able to promote local capacity building and encourage greater local participation among the members (Okazaki, 2008).

Local members are also in a better position to understand the local needs and issues, thus having more practical and realistic solutions to problem (Iorio & Corsale, 2014). Furthermore, as tourism activities are developed and operated mainly by the local members, consent and support are gained locally which adds towards meeting the social sustainability objectives. More importantly, it forms a strong foundation at grass root level for such initiative.

In order to encourage local participation, the search for leadership within the community is crucial. The presence of initial leadership of a person or a small group, which Hamzah and Khalifah (2009) termed it as 'local champion' or Hatton's 'spark' (1999), helps to engineer change within the community that prepares its members for tourism development. This is common in rural areas where the locals still hold strong value of unity. In many CBT projects, there was always a local leader who anticipated the potential of tourism and kick-started the project, while others adopted 'wait and see' attitude until they saw the success of similar projects elsewhere. Due to remote location, many CBT project face the challenge of lack of access to tourist market and infrastructure (Hughes & Macbeth, 2005). In this regard, Hamzah and Khalifah (2009) stresses the importance of linking up with other stakeholders in tourism development such as the tourism industry which could assist in the marketing and promotion of products. This aspect is a dynamic evolution involving a good connection with other industry players to create a stronger economic chain in tourism business.

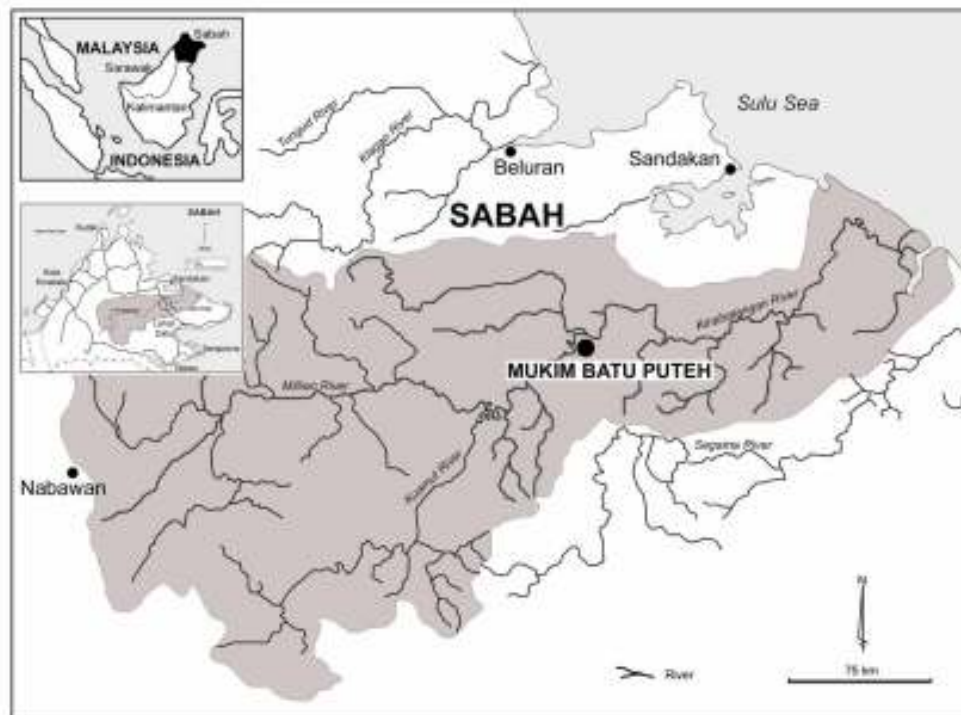
Community-based tourism in Batu Puteh, Lower Kinabatangan

The study area- geographical setting and history

Batu Puteh is located in the eastern part of Sabah and at the middle of the Lower Kinabatangan floodplain, some 146km upstream from the river mouth and the Sulu Sea (Figure 1). The area is connected by road to the main district cities; it is approximately 110km from Sandakan and 75km from Lahad Datu. Batu Puteh is also accessible by a six-hour drive from Kota Kinabalu, the state capital city or 2-hour by boat from Sandakan.

Historically, Batu Puteh was founded as a small *kampung* (village) by a religious man in 1956 together with a few of his relatives. The village got its name from a big block of white rock located right by the *Sungai* Kinabatangan (*sungai* means river), approximately 600 meters from the heart of the village. According to the villagers, the early inhabitants in *Kampung* Batu Puteh were the immigrants from *Ulu Sungai* Kinabatangan (upstream of Kinabatangan) consisting of a few tribes such as *Kaumut*, *Makiang*, *Sukang*, *Milian* and *Sinabu*. In the early days, these immigrants worked as subsistent farmers, also relying on fishing, seasonal fruit harvest and temporary employment to make a living. Today, these people are colloquially known as the *Orang Sungai* (or River People) with the cultural heritage rooted in a mix of three indigenous ethnic groups of Sabah known as *Idahan*, *Kadazan-Dusun* and *Paitanic*. More than 90% of the population is Muslims. The people speak *Sungai* language with a variety of 10 dialects. The *Orang Sungai* is famous for their folklore and performances and has unique and vast knowledge about environment.

This small *kampung* has grown to become a sub-district known as Mukim Batu Puteh consists of four villages, i.e., *Kampung Perpaduan*, *Kampung Batu Puteh*, *Kampung Mengaris* and *Kampung Singgah Mata*. In total, these villages cover an area totaling 1,335 acres, of which only 850 acres are given land title. As at 2007, the total population was estimated at 1,266 consisting of 185 families. The economic activities include oil palm (24%), fruits (4%), vegetables (1%), fisheries (7%), business (1%), government service (32%), and private sector (15%). The CBT project, known as Miso Walai Homestay, involves more than 208 villagers as collective efforts participating in various skills related to the project.



Source: adapted from WWF Malaysia, undated.

Figure 1. Location of Batu Puteh along Kinabatangan River

The environment

Kinabatangan River the longest river in Sabah, and runs for 560km from the Crocker Range in the southwest of Sabah to the Sulu Sea in the east (Figure 1). The River has a total catchment area of 16,800km². Being only 5°42'0" north of equator, it lies in the doldrums region known for hot, humid, and rainy weather throughout the year. On average, it has a temperature from 24° to 30° and an average rainfall of 3,040 mm with a humidity level around 87%.

Nearly two-thirds of its catchment area is forested and due to the abundance of rainfall and sunlight, at least seven distinctive natural vegetation zones are available ranging from the peat swamp forest, freshwater swamp forest, mangroves, forest over limestone, riparian forest on the river levees and the aquatic plants of the various oxbow lakes (Payne, 1989; Mansourian et al., 2003). In terms of physiography, the region can be divided into four areas, namely the coastal area; lower, middle and upper reaches of the Kinabatangan River. The upper Kinabatangan is marked by steep hills while the coast is mostly flat and covered by mangroves as well as palm plants. The middle part towards the lower reaches of the river is the hotspot for biodiversity. Notably, Lower Kinabatangan has been identified to be the largest forest covered floodplain in Malaysia and hosts the largest concentration of wildlife in Southeast Asian. Lower Kinabatangan has been the home to about 50 mammal species including ten primates and 200 bird species. The river flood plain has been the critical habitat for Asian elephants, *orang-utans*, Sumatran rhinoceros, proboscis monkeys and saltwater crocodiles. Notably, the river floodplain is one of the only two known places in the world where 10 species of primates; eight of Malaysia's threatened birds are also found (Mansourian et al., 2003).

Since the 1950s, the Lower Kinabatangan region has been threatened by the large-scale commercial timber logging and agricultural activities. Notwithstanding its significance as the biodiversity hotspot,

land use conversion from the natural forest into commercial logging forest, and later, into oil palm plantations has restricted the forest covers to only narrow strips along the riparian corridor. The intensive logging activities in Sabah reached its peak in the 1970s and early 1980s. Following the completion of state-wide forest inventory in Sabah in 1972, the availability of timber resources was revealed. Since then, de-gazettement of forest reserves was approved giving way to tremendous logging activities, with the timber royalties paid to the state government contributing some 80 to 90% of the state budget (RM1.1 billion) in 1979. It was estimated that the primary forest cover has shrunken from 2.8 million hectare to about 300,000 between 1975 and 1995. The total forest cover decreased from 5.5 million hectare (some 75% of Sabah's land area) to 4.3 million hectare within the same period. Specifically, the primary Production Forest dropped from 98% to 15% between 1970 and 1996 (Mannan & Awang, 1997). Massive depletion of forests was associated with the over-harvesting beyond the forest regeneration ability, abandonment of silviculture and forest rehabilitation, not allowing forests to recuperate after logging and the priority on revenue over environment limits (Toh & Grace, 2006).

The exploitative logging rate had also led to the decline in quality of hard wood species which were no longer suitable for export or local consumption. Nonetheless, these results did not stop the forest from depleting. The oil palm plantations began to take place in the late 1980s and 1990s. As the income generated from logging activities declined, these forests were converted into plantations. In 1995, there was 630,000 hectares of oil palm plantation in Sabah, which then rose to over 1 million hectares in 2003 (an increase of about 70%) accounting for nearly 86% of the total cultivated land in Sabah.

The continued deterioration of forest in Sabah had resulted in several attempts to gazette areas for ecosystem protection. Some remarkable initiatives include the Kinabatangan Orang Utan Conservation project (KOCP) initiated by a French-based non-profit organization, HUTAN and the Sabah Wildlife Department in 1998, and a 26,000-hectare Wildlife Sanctuary, gazette under the Sabah Land Ordinance 1997 in 2006, which aims to form the 'corridor of life' for the natural resources and wildlife along Kinabatangan.

The CBT project- features and process

The CBT project in Batu Puteh has its root to the villagers' initiative of Model Ecologically Sustainable Community Tourism Project (MESCOT). The MESCOT was set up in 1997 responding to the establishment of the Lower Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary that stretches approximately 160km along the lower Kinabatangan. Initial support was given by a local non-governmental organization and the MESCOT Initiative was started in Batu Puteh with financial support by WWF Norway and supported by WWF-Malaysia (Sabah), Sabah State Ministry of Tourism and Environment Development, and Sabah Forestry Department (SFD) (Pengiran Bagul, 2009).

The key reason that led to the development of tourism in the village is related to livelihood issues. In the past, many villagers obtained seasonal income by working in the nearby timber camps. Nonetheless, the conversion of forests into agricultural crops especially the oil palm which took place in the 1980s and early 1990s had caused shrinking job opportunities. Thus, tourism was seen as a potential source of income and employment for many unemployed youths in the village. Furthermore, the initial tourism development was perceived to require little upfront capital and the villagers could utilize the natural and cultural resources already available, e.g., rooms to accommodate the tourists were found within the existing houses; boats and boatman services for river cruises were available within the capacity of local people. In order to materialize the project, MESCOT spent its resources mainly for capacity building and resource inventory during the first four years. It offered membership to the youths ranging from 18 to 35 years at a registration fee of RM10 (USD1=RM3). The members were taught English language and desktop publishing. From the 1997 until 2000, the village youths were trained in ecotourism planning, business skills, English language, and natural and cultural resources research.

The main tourism products in Batu Puteh include Miso Walai Homestay program, village boat service, guide service, culture dancing performance and the Tulun Tokou Handicraft Association. The term Miso Walai originates from the Sungai language which means 'together as one house'. This

homestay program turned out to be central in integrating the overall community tourism program. Its main objective is to portray the way of life of the *Orang Sungai* people. Some highlights of the activities include dressing up in traditional costumes, building traditional fish traps, cooking local cuisine, participating in cultural rituals and local special events, visiting the local burial caves museum as well as getting involved in the community voluntary activities known as *gotong-royong*. Jungle trekking and wildlife observation cruises in the 45km² Supu Forest Reserve and the Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary are the key natural attractions. In addition, the tourists to Miso Walai also have the chance to get involved in the conservation-based activities include forest restoration, educational trail, nursery propagation, tree planting and silviculture.

Most of the tourists came on weekly basis and in groups mainly from the Fulcrum Challenge, Operations Wallacea, World Challenge, Intrepid Travel, Sabah Holiday and Pan Borneo. The targeted tourists are those who travel in groups rather than independent travelers. Until 2008, group tourists maintained at around 90% of the total tourists. There has been a steady increase in the tourist arrival over years. In 2000, only a total of 170 tourists or 760 tourist nights recorded with a total income of RM38,868. In 2001, the income had increased to RM73,850.85 (Hamzah & Mohamad, 2011). In 2007, the number of tourist arrivals to Miso Walai Homestay was recorded at 1,200 tourists or more than 2,640 tourist nights, with an income recorded at RM342,000. As of 2010, tourism income exceeded RM1 million contributed by significant tourist arrivals- a total of 262 domestic- and 2,466 international tourists.

Despite the success, substantial criticism of the project was received from the local community in the beginning. Some were doubtful about the prospect of tourism in contributing to their livelihood and suspicious about the idea of forest conservation. Furthermore, there was high expectation among the members who anticipated tangible benefits in short time. The villagers were also reluctant to join because they hesitated to renovate their houses and felt intimidated by the idea of speaking English to *Mat Salleh* (the local term specifically used to address the westerners).

In order to spread the benefits to the villages, Miso Walai Homestay registered itself as an association comprising of the coordination committee and regular members who opened up their homes to tourists. By doing so, the villagers could earn additional income approximately RM1,500 to RM3,000 yearly. This additional income contributes significantly to the improvement of the villagers' housing conditions bearing in mind that as of 2003, the monthly income of the villagers ranged from RM200 to RM1,500 per month with more than half of the working population earning less than RM5,000 annually (KOPEL Berhad, 2007).

In 2003, a community-based cooperative known as KOPEL Berhad (Koperasi Pelancongan Mukim Batu Puteh Kinabatangan Berhad) was formed. All the community groups were absorbed into the new establishment (Pengiran Bagul, 2009). This program has then set up a community fund to offer micro-credit for its members to improve the household hygiene, water supply, toilet facilities, electricity supply and roofing conditions. These soft loans were repaid from tourism revenue and were directly debited from the loaners' account. Moreover, the funds were also used to improve the villagers' general welfare including transporting sick and elderly villagers, organizing sports and social events at community level, arranging meetings and sending members for training by attending courses and conferences. Until 2010, the CBT project had created jobs for more than 128 people on a rotation system. The tourism project also supports approximately 35 families through accommodation and eateries provision, 21 local nature guides, 30 elders and youths in the village cultural group as well as the full-time local coordinators and support staff. The homestay providers were estimated to earn up to RM2000 monthly.

One of the most significant community projects in Batu Puteh is the forest restoration in the 50-ha degraded floodplain forests initiated in 1999 by MESCOT. The project took place in responding to the unprecedented forest fires that occurred during the widespread droughts of 1983 and 1998. A total of 100,000 trees have been planted so far. The initiative has also pioneered different restoration techniques including blanket liberation of vines and weed grasses and previously unstudied rainforest tree species (e.g., *Mytrogyna sp* and *Nauclea sp*) which had then attracted independent funding including Discovery Channel Singapore in 1999, Ricoh Corporation through WWF Japan (2000-2003), WWF Norway and the Netherlands as well as Shell Malaysia. In 2008, KOPEL was awarded a contract worth RM1.3 million by

SFD to carry out reforestation over an area measuring 250 hectares and silviculture covering 700 hectares. Apart from conservation efforts, the project also helps to provide additional income to the local people and to promote KOPEL program to the targeted niche market, i.e., the eco-responsible tourists, thus distinguishing itself from other tourism businesses along the Lower Kinabatangan. A total of 1,609 voluntourists visited Batu Puteh, which consisted of 75% foreigners in 2010. As at 2011, KOPEL paid out a total monthly salary of between RM28,000 and RM80,000 to the local women employed by the reforestation program (Hamzah & Mohamad, 2011).

In 2003, Miso Walai Homestay initiative of Batu Puteh won the Malaysian Community Initiative Award. A year later, MESCOT became one of the 26 global finalist selected from 436 projects worldwide which were involved in poverty alleviation and biodiversity conservation. MESCOT eventually won a merit award for community conservation in the UNDP Equator Prize (KOPEL Berhad, 2007). This CBT initiative was also identified as the apprentice project for homestay development by the Sabah government. The procedures used in developing Miso Walai have been used as the key reference for development of other homestay programs in the state, e.g., Papar (*Kadazans* tribe), Kota Belud (*Bajau*), Kudat (*Rungus*) and Long Pasia (*Lundayeh*).

Human-environment interaction: Turning constraints into opportunities through CBT

Similar to many CBT projects, poverty was a major concern for the villagers in Batu Puteh. The livelihood options were further limited when the logging sites were converted into plantation. Tourism development was started to ensure the continued survival of the rural folks in the difficult environment. As tourism required relatively lesser upfront capital investment, it was deemed 'affordable'.

Gradually, the CBT in Batu Puteh progressed with the increased tourist arrival and income generated from tourism project. The initial successful implantation of tourism project in Batu Puteh is attributed to two major combining factors, i.e., the high level of local participation through the setting up of MESCOT and the outstanding natural and cultural resources.

MESCOT core members who act as the 'local champions' were able to galvanize and transform the community from a run-down village due to both land and job insecurity, to assured alternative for livelihood, despite of the skeptical perceptions about tourism business among the majority of the villagers. The people who went against the idea were not cooperative in the beginning of the project, making the initial stage of the project a bit harder. Furthermore, as the MESCOT initiative deals with forest conservation and restoration, they were also challenged by the illegal loggers at the surrounding forests. A few MESCOT members were reported to be beaten up by the illegal loggers in several occasions as trying to stop the cutting down of trees. The persistence of the few individuals demonstrates the characteristics of 'local champions'. Despite of the criticisms and challenges, they managed to overcome the difficulties and brought fruitful results which then convinced the local people to participate in the program, thus supporting the key principle of CBT- meaningful local participation. This meaningful local participation has also enhanced the sense of belonging to their community.

The local institutions play an important role in making the program work. The sense of community which upholds the principle of '*berat sama dipikul, ringan sama dijinjing*' (an expression of burden sharing irrespective of the weight) has helped this program to move forward. Those who were not supportive of the idea initially were also welcomed to participate in the program. This turning point, of being accepted in the program despite their previous indifference or opposition has made the relationship among the villagers more cordial. The cultural performance and sharing of local knowledge with tourists have also helped in reinforcing the appreciation of those cultural values especially among the youngsters in the village.

The social responsibility and sustainability rooted within the ethical conscience of poverty reduction project became one of the key reasons motivating tourists to visit CBT projects. As mentioned by some tourists to the villages, 'we are not here just to appreciate the animals, it is something more than that'.

From the ecological perspective, the location of Batu Puteh furnishes both the limitations and opportunities to the villagers (Figure 2). Agricultural activities were not very successful because of the occurrence of floods at the river banks of Lower Kinabatangan. This was further thwarted by the combination of soil types; apart from the peat soil, the presence of sandy and stony soil has made the cultivating activities formidable. Its location at the ‘lower’ Kinabatangan also poses threat as the sedimentation was high resulting from soil erosion due to the logging activities upstream. Furthermore, its location by the Lower Kinabatangan could be one of the reasons that the land titles were not granted to the local villagers as the houses are located within the river reserve as per local authority planning standards requirement. This has created the feeling of shelter insecurity among the villagers and subsequently made the villagers reluctant to improve their housing condition. Besides, due to the proximity to the river, the villages, especially *Kampung Menguris*, were flooded many times during the monsoon season from November to March each year. Its location right aside the main road is also not ideal due to the noise created by the trucks from the plantation sites passing by the village, especially at night. Despite the availability of transportation network, i.e., the road as well as the river, the cost of accessibility was high. There was no direct long distance public bus passing the main road by Batu Puteh and the cost of transportation by river was expensive as only charter service was available. This could partially explain the low number of tourist arrivals to the homestay in the beginning of the project.

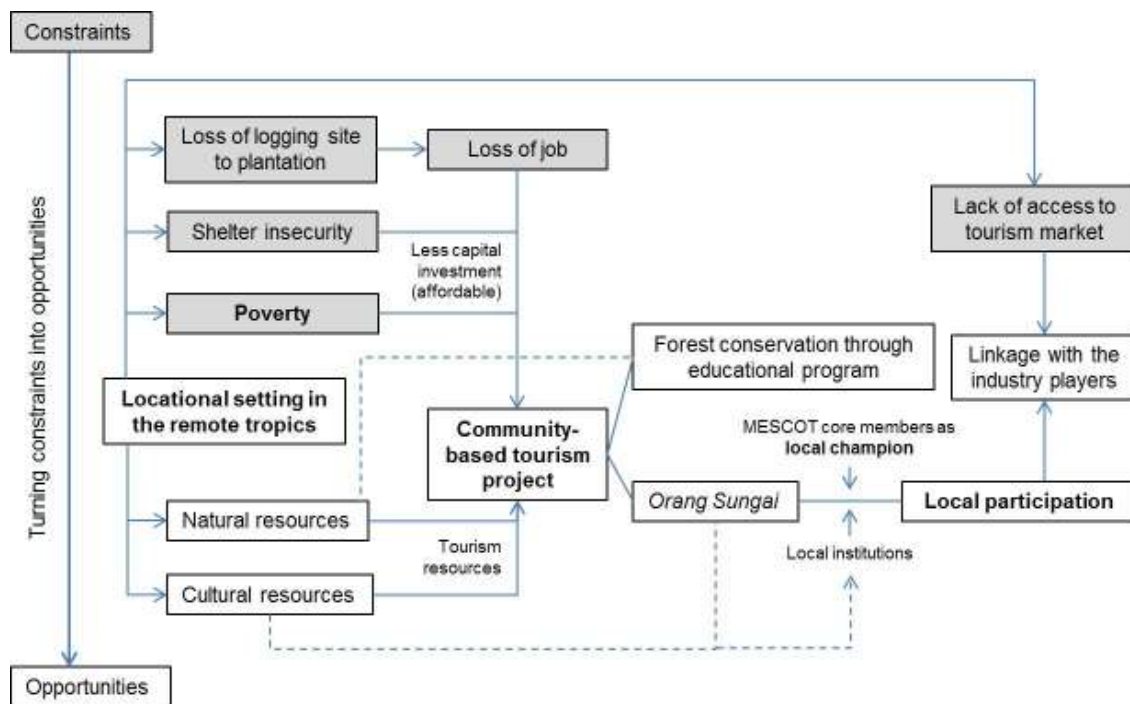


Figure 2. Framework explaining the constraints and opportunities at Batu Puteh, Lower Kinabatangan

Despite these constraints, the case of Batu Puteh also demonstrates the ability of humans to adjust and to adapt to the living environment. According to one of the villagers, *Orang Sungai* is associated with the *Dusun* people, an indigenous tribe living at the mountainous interior of Sabah mainly by the Kinabalu Mountain. Unlike the Toragja people of the Celebes who established their settlements on mountain top in consideration of the sacredness of mountain, Dusuns stay away from the mountain as a matter of respect since the mountain is considered as the resting place of their ancestors. In order to seek cultivable land and accessibility, the people moved downwards and settled along the riparian valley and alluvial plains. Established within this geographical setting, the *Orang Sungai* has equipped themselves with skillful techniques in fishing and water transportation. These skills have then turned out to be useful to establish

tourism business. Although flood events have been a regular problem faced by the villages, and the living conditions are hazardous, the coping techniques adapted by the villagers such as constructing houses on suspended columns have become an iconic feature of traditional rural housing among those living at the riparian areas, which also serves as an attraction to the tourists. Group bathing by the river is an important social activity among the *Orang Sungai* and it is also an activity offered to the tourists in the villages.

Batu Puteh is located at a considerable distance away from the urban centres and the accessibility is relatively low. Through working with the various travel agencies in urban areas and international tour operators, the homestay is able to survive by bringing in tourist groups. Apart from solving the transportation issue, working with the travel agencies also helps the homestay committee to tag the project into the tourism business network in the larger context thereby letting them focus on their niche, i.e., nature-based activities and hospitality within the villages. It also helps the members to learn from others' experience, and thus contributing to the capacity building through experience from the tourism operators in the larger context.

Hosting one of the highest concentrations of wildlife in Borneo, Lower Kinabatangan offers very distinctive natural resources as tourism attractions. The forest restoration and conservation on the other hand, portray the awareness among the villagers regarding the importance of the forest for their continued survival; it is not only the environmental responsibility but also appreciation for the forest being the key resource for their livelihood. In many homestay programs, tree planting is included in the homestay package as a marketing strategy. It aims at increasing repeat visits by making the tourists to feel that they are contributing towards forest or biodiversity conservation. Nonetheless, this activity hardly goes beyond environmental tokenism as it is seldom integrated into the overall conservation program. In Miso Walai homestay, however, the tree planting is conducted as a part of the reforestation project commissioned by the Sabah Forestry Department. Furthermore, the activities cover the whole spectrum of silviculture and are closely monitored and done under continuous consultation with the Forestry Department to contribute to the overall goals of creating the continuous 'corridor of (wild)life' along the Kinabatangan River. Tourists are briefed about the overall objectives and many stay on to get actively involved. Educational program are also designed for the students and volunteers. The program includes the introduction to forest safety skills and jungle survival course, forest habitat restoration basic training course; these support the development of nature trails and building works as well as knowledge and technology exchange. The most recent project engaged by the community, i.e., Tungog Rainforest Eco Camp opened in November 2009, also reveals the similar efforts of the villagers towards conserving the nature and supporting the theme of MESCOT. Many voluntourists who came to Batu Puteh between 2002 and 2007 were mainly involved in this project.

Concluding remarks: Reinforcing the role of nature

Batu Puteh demonstrates a case how the environment of resources could be significantly harnessed by the combined efforts of a community in light of improving their life conditions. It reveals the two sides, both the constraints and opportunities of the environment, within the setting of location (i.e., by the river, at considerable distance from cities), land use features and natural resources (i.e., rich biodiversity and forest, land ownership, change of land uses) and culture (i.e., dances, cooking, fishing and boating skills). Through the successful CBT development, Batu Puteh demonstrates a good example of bottom-up approach in rural society, responding to the conditions which have been determined by the environment. The local people not only adjusted to the tough environmental conditions, but managed to restore the degraded forests giving its CBT planned in a holistic manner within the ecosystem and by working with different stakeholders of tourism industry and of conservation.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to echo Taylor's 'stop-and-go determinism' that the role of human is significant in shaping the development; however, human is not a 'free agent' as his actions are a series of responds and adjustment to the context which has been pre-determined by nature. If there was no Kinabatangan in the tropics, there won't be *Orang Sungai*, and definitely no Miso Walai Homestay, neither the community-based nor eco-responsible tourists visiting the area.

The authors would also like to acknowledge the financial support given by the Malaysia Ministry of Higher Education through the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS) Vote No. 78648.

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