

Local Communities' Perspectives towards Nature Conservation: A Study of Taman Negara Pahang, Kuala Tahan Malaysia

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ABSTRACT: Gazetting specific areas for preservation may not be a popular action, at least, among the local communities. They argue their rights are denied, particularly when they are not granted to collect forest produces in selected zones of the protected land. In many conservation efforts, local support is fundamental to effective conservation attempts. This paper presents preliminary findings of an on-going study that addresses local communities' perspectives on nature conservation efforts at Taman Negara Pahang, Malaysia. The study aims to explore influential factors that shape the locals' views on preservation activities surrounding Kuala Tahan. Focus group interviews were employed for this study with 24 respondents from two groups of Malay residents and one group of indigenous people, the *Batek Negrito*. Overall, respondents showed supportive attitudes towards the management of national park and conservation activities. The findings indicate the receipt of economic benefits from ecotourism increase local support for nature conservation, where the respondents were aware that a well-conserved national park is important to earn an income from tourists. Other factors like environmental and socio-cultural benefits from ecotourism, community understandings and awareness of parks, community cultures and traditions, community relationship with park authorities were also found to have impacts on people's perspectives towards nature conservation. Unlike local Malays, a conflict was discovered between the park management and the aboriginal community due to the *Batek* were prohibited from selling the park resources to earn additional income. The study suggests the ecotourism development should be enhanced by increasing the promotion to attract more tourists and improving the local infrastructure needs in order to win the local support for achieving conservation goals.

Keywords: Malaysia, ecotourism, local communities' perspectives, national park, qualitative methodology

Introduction

In response to a world-wide concern about the loss of diverse biological resources, nature conservation is practiced globally to protect natural resources, including plant and animal species as well as their living habitats. Along with this conservation movement, the establishment of protected areas has become one of the primary instruments for the protection of biodiversity worldwide. The number of global protected areas has grown from 1,000 in the 1960s to over 100,000 in the year 2002 (World Conservation Union and United Nations Environment Program World Conservation Monitoring Centre, 2003), covering over 12 per cent of the planet's land surface (Chape *et al.*, 2005).

The national park, which is listed under Category II of the World Conservation Union (IUCN) protected area management categories has been chosen for this study, as the park represents a specific relationship between human and natural environment. The study of national parks in varying situations, therefore, helps us to gain better understanding about the fundamental issues in environmental conservation, social development, the human psyche, and the cultural interpretation of nature (Macleod, 2001). In addition, the concept of the earliest national parks is based on an idea of a national heritage, where it represents strong symbols of a nation's understanding of itself, by symbolizing the own character and authenticity (Nynas, 2004). With the uniqueness of the flora and fauna species, many of the parks serve as a symbol of national identify.

For example, the study area of this research which is Taman Negara Pahang, covers the largest area at 2,477 square kilometres or 57 percent of Taman Negara which is the Malaysia's first national park established in 1938/39 as King George V National Park. The park was then named Taman Negara after Malaysia's independence from British rule in 1957, which literally means 'national park' in Malay. It makes up the central spine of the Peninsular Malaysia by a combination of three protected areas in three states, Pahang, Kelantan, and Terengganu. With an area of 4343 square kilometres, Taman Negara is estimated to be 130 million years old and has a reputation as one of the world's oldest tropical rainforest. The

park conserves more than 3000 species of flowering plants, 200 species of *pteridophytes* and a host of wildlife species (Latiff, 1996).

The traditional conservation movement has performed a clear conceptual division between natural environment and human. Nevertheless, park-people conflicts resulting from the displacing of local and indigenous people from natural resources have led to growing attention that protected areas should play a significant role in sustaining local communities in terms of economic and social basis. In an attempt to address the win-win situation for both biological diversity and local people, therefore, many developing countries including Malaysia successfully use the attractions of nature to promote tourism in protected areas (Ibrahim and Hassan, 2011). Ecotourism or also called community-based tourism is viewed as a more responsible form of tourism in a sustainable way of conserving natural resources, and also securing an income for many rural area households (Wearing and McDonald, 2002).

It has been argued as problematic after putting back human into the ecosystem, since the surrounding residents often impact the ability of the protected areas to meet conservation goals. In other words, lack of community involvement in national park management and decision-making is associated with low support for conservation among the local people. Accordingly, in the context of Taman Negara Pahang, failure in considering the local communities includes their attitudes and level of participation in preservation activities will lead to limited success of the park management (Western and Wright, 1994; Macleod, 2001; Walpole and Goodwin, 2001). This is because the park is part of their life economically and socio-culturally, as the Malay and *Batek* villages are depending on the park resources to sustain their cultures and traditional way of life.

Therefore, the primary objectives of this paper aim to understand the local communities' perspectives towards nature conservation and discover the underlying factors which may have impacted on local support for Taman Negara Pahang in Malaysia. Due to the investigations of the linkages between community involvement in ecotourism and actual influences on conservation perspectives have been limited, it remains to be explored whether the ecotourism benefits and costs result in more positive or negative perspectives among the local people. Finally, the findings of this study are used to identify park challenges and suggest strategies for future conservation efforts.

Methods

The field information in this paper was collected through focus group interviews conducted in September 2013 in the villages near to Taman Negara Pahang, Kuala Tahan. The researchers applied purposive sampling to sample out 24 respondents to form two groups of Malay respondents from Kampung Kuala Tahan and one group of *Batek* respondents from Kampung Dedari, with eight participants in a group (**Table 1**). They were selected according to the three groups of stakeholders identified in this study: local villagers, government officials, and non-governmental players. Identifying the stakeholders was based on their expertise, knowledge, opinions and experiences dealing with natural resources conservation. The various interviewees from different backgrounds and responsibilities could provide variety, richness, and valuable data for the study.

In order to achieve the research objectives, all the questions asked were entirely open-ended to give more spaces for the respondents to express their feelings and perspectives towards nature conservation. All the interviews were recorded and then transcribed into a written text in order to conduct a thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke (2006). From the transcription of raw data, coding was done as the first step to find out the initial ideas that appeared interesting to the researchers. The different codes were then collated into potential themes. Finally, all themes were reviewed, refined and defined to map out the overall story that the analysis tells.

Table 1: The breakdown of the respondents for focus group interviews in each group

Stakeholders	Group 1 (Malays)	Group 2 (<i>Batek Negrato</i>)	Group 3 (Malays)
Local villagers	5	8	3
Government officials	3	-	3
Non-governmental players	-	-	2

Results and Discussion

Perspectives towards national park and nature conservation

The results indicate that the majority of the Malay and *Batek* respondents held positive perspectives towards the national park and strong support existed for nature conservation. In response to the open-ended questions “What are your opinions about the national park? Do you think the national park is important?” many of the respondents attributed their liking to the national park establishment and they were proud of staying near to the park. A Malay resident showed his positive conservation perspectives by saying that the national park is the most precious treasure of the country.

I am really proud and grateful to be a native here, because I can protect the treasure today and I will continue this culture to the next generation... to protect the treasure in the national park...

The ‘*gotong-royong*’ project to clean up the village areas conducted by the Temenggong Initiatives which is a non-governmental organization (NGO), has successfully obtained the high participation of the local residents. One NGO official argued that the involvement in those awareness programs successfully influenced locals’ perspectives on conservation efforts by increasing their understandings and awareness about the environmental problems. He said:

We (Temenggong Initiatives) have awareness programs, we went to the villages to conduct ‘gotong-royong’ with the villagers, and we provided them awareness... so far there are many improvements in terms of rubbish problems, if compared to last time, at the entrance of Kuala Tahan, there was a lot of rubbish...

In this study, the researchers agree to a statement made by Lankford *et al.* (1994), the local residents’ attitudes are not simply the reflections of residents’ perceptions, but the results of interaction between their perceptions and the underlying factors affecting their attitudes. Based on this argument, therefore, apart from evaluating the local communities’ perspectives towards nature conservation, this research is also designed to explore what factors influence

them in order to offer a tool for better understanding why and how such perspectives are formed. The factors mentioned by the interviewees as relevant are described below.

Economic, environmental and socio-cultural impacts from ecotourism

High community involvement in ecotourism sector existed for both Malay and *Batek* communities as this industry creates employment opportunities and income generation for the majority of them. Alike local Malays, the *Batek* people also participated in the economy as nature guides and boat drivers, while women produced handicrafts for selling directly to the tourists. Findings also explain a positive relationship between economic benefits from ecotourism and support for conservation activities, as one Malay respondent expressed the following quotation:

Natural resource conservation is the responsibility of both national park authorities and also the local villagers in order to obtain revenue from ecotourism development... ecotourism sector will be affected if the park is not well-protected.

Besides the main reason of economic returns, other ascertains factors influencing people's perspectives could be also the environmental and socio-cultural benefits from the ecotourism development. The group interviews reveal that the local villagers were more likely to appreciate the environmental value of the national park in improving air quality and reducing pollutants. They also believed that the park plays an important role in generating opportunities for recreation and public transportation, improving local English language skills, promoting cultural awareness and thus improving better relationships among the villagers.

Although the majority of the interviewees expressed their satisfaction with the current level of ecotourism development, the interviews discover that the respondents would still expect more tourists come to Kuala Tahan in the future. They were aware that sustainable ecotourism depends heavily on a stable infrastructure facility. Therefore, they suggested efforts must be made to enhance local development needs, for example more public toilets should be provided and public transportation services should be improved. Moreover, they highlighted the promotion is indispensable to increase the number of tourists to this

conservation area, accordingly the government agencies are playing an extraordinary role in the planning, development and management of tourism initiatives (Bhuiyan *et al.*, 2011).

Community understandings and awareness of park

The analysis provides evidence that local residents who were more aware of environmental problems were more likely to support the protection of biodiversity. The Malay respondents are generally having understandings and awareness regarding the objectives of the national park establishment. Meanwhile, forest protection is the prime concern for the *Batek* respondents, where the findings show their disappointment of the environmental destruction for logging activities and infrastructure development. A possible explanation for this result could be the indigenous people have been affected by the degradation of natural resources over-time, since they are staying very close to the park and critically depending on the forest resources for their daily survival.

Community cultures and traditions

This section continues the similar interpretation as discussed above. The *Batek* have retained their rich cultures and traditions of giving up a life in the rainforest. Therefore, a very unique relationship with the rainforest has been well-preserved from elders to their descendants. Until recently, they maintain much of their identity and they are still traditionally following the steps of their ancestors, one of them claimed:

I come from the national park and I live here until today and I still can remember all the things happened in the national park... because I follow my grandparents, they were also staying in the national park...follow the ways of the old people last time, searching for food in the forest, go for hunting and collecting pine, rattan, scented wood and resin for my daily life.

Community relationship with park authorities

Lack of trust between park authorities and local people, and the difficulty of communication between these two parties can create conflicts (Hough, 1988). Group discussions with the

Malay villagers and national park staffs confirmed an effective communication and interaction between the park management and local communities. When they were asked “do the park authorities understand the problems and the needs of the villagers?” the locals presented a strong cooperation and support, with one said, “we are confident of the new Superintendent, he is more effective and positive, he listened to what we suggested”. On behalf of the park authorities, in the words of the Deputy Superintendent, “the local villagers are the important staffs for the national park, our management will not be successful if there is no support from the villagers...the national park management policy concerns the involvement of the local communities”.

The protection of natural resources in the national park, however, has caused a conflict between the park and the indigenous people living near to Taman Negara Pahang. Concerning the presence of rules and regulations, the *Batek* respondents expressed their dissatisfaction because they were only allowed for subsistence hunting and gathering forest products from the national park. Nevertheless, they were prohibited to do commercial hunting and sell all those park resources to make own profit. These results corroborated with Kimbrough (2013), who explained that the balance between biodiversity conservation, natural resources utilization and the needs of indigenous people is often wrought with conflict.

Conclusion

This study confirms local communities have a favorable attitude towards the national park management, particularly people who benefited from ecotourism activities showed more positive views on nature conservation. Ecotourism development in Kuala Tahan has not only contributed to economic benefits by creating employment and more income to the local communities, but also has resulted in environmental and socio-cultural benefits of increasing local awareness and appreciation of the natural environment, encouraging the development of public infrastructure facilities, promoting local English language skills, and preserving local cultures and traditions. The research outcomes have proven ecotourism’s contribution in creating a win-win solution for nature conservation and local communities. Therefore, to ensure the effectiveness of protected areas, the management of national park should see these ecotourism benefits as the opportunity to facilitate community involvement in conservation

efforts. Moreover, the problem of the relationship of *Batek* people with the park authorities should also become a concern of promoting more positive locals' perspectives towards nature conservation.

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