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VOLUNTEER TOURISM OUTLOOK: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON DIVE TOURISM OPERATORS IN KOTA KINABALU, SABAH

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ABSTRACT

Volunteer tourism seems to be gradually gaining its popularity and is currently a fast-emerging industry in Malaysia, particularly in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. However, many previous studies merely explored its market niche and the various kinds of volunteer tourism issues. In addition, most of the studies concentrated on volunteer tourists, volunteer students and volunteer hosts. This study, therefore, was intended to explore the viewpoint of tourism players in particular the top management of dive tour operators with regards to volunteer tourism, and to know their involvement in a volunteer tourism programme that the dive tour operators had participated in. The results of this study illustrated that the significance of volunteer tourism is not only to the community and the environment but also to the country as a whole. Another highlighted part is that the participation level of dive tour operators in volunteer tourism activity is influenced by the location, cost, and time of the programme. The volunteer tourism programme is seen by the tour operators as beneficial to the community and host as well as the environment. The findings also show that volunteer tourism is an activity which includes travel and volunteer work without attempting to receive anything in return and this was fully understood by the top management of dive operators.

Keywords: Volunteer tourism; dive tour operators; perception; participation

ABSTRAK

Pelancongan-relawan dilihat secara beransur-ansur mendapat kepopularitinya dan kini merupakan salah satu industri utama di Malaysia, terutamanya di Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. Walau bagaimanapun, banyak kajian yang telah dijalankan adalah hanya untuk meneroka pasaran khusus dan pelbagai jenis isu-isu pelancongan sukarela. Di samping itu, kebanyakan kajian juga tertumpu kepada pelancong sukarelawan, pelajar sukarelawan dan tuan-rumah sukarelawan. Kajian ini, oleh itu, adalah berniat untuk meneroka sudut pandangan pemain-pelancongan khusus kepada pengurusan tertinggi pengendali pelancongan-menyelam berkenaan kepada sukarela pelancongan, dan untuk mengetahui penglibatan mereka dalam program pelancongan sukarelawan. Hasil keputusan kajian mendapati bahawa kepentingan pelancongan sukarelawan bukan sahaja untuk masyarakat dan alam sekitar, tetapi juga untuk negara secara keseluruhannya. Satu lagi bahagian yang diserlahkan adalah tahap penyertaan pengusaha pelancongan menyelam aktiviti pelancongan sukarelawan dipengaruhi oleh lokasi, kos, dan masa program. Program pelancongan sukarelawan dilihat oleh pengusaha pelancongan adalah untuk memberi manfaat kepada masyarakat, tuan rumah dan juga kepada alam sekitar. Dapatan kajian juga memberitahu bahawa pelancongan sukarelawan adalah aktiviti yang merangkumi perjalanan dan kerja sukarela tanpa cuba untuk menerima apa-apa pulangan dan ini difahami sepenuhnya oleh pihak pengurusan tertinggi pengendali menyelam.

Kata kunci: Sukarelawan pelancongan; operator pelancongan-menyelam; persepsi, penyertaan

1. Introduction

Tourism is one of the growing industries in Malaysia. Due to the advancement in technology, the demographic changes of individual especially in terms of disposable income, and the increase in leisure time, people tend to travel a lot which eventually makes tourism a significant industry in Malaysia. The fruition of tourism as a social activity in Malaysia has contributed to the escalation in the tourism product diversification. One of the diverse tourism products commonly known today is volunteer tourism or may also be referred as *voluntourism* (Barbieri *et al.*, 2012). Dzaenis (2014) in Malaysia Travel News wrote that volunteer tourism has begun since early-mid 1990 involving Western students between secondary school and degree level who were having their year out of education or gap year by travelling around the world and becoming volunteers with various non-government organizations at different countries they travelled. Dzaenis (2014) also added that the contemporaneous of volun-tourism packages offered by many travel companies, particularly to the new learner-traveller students, have started to grow since the 21st century.

In Malaysia, specifically in Sabah, various kinds of volunteer tourism packages have been offered to the volunteers by travel companies to give them volunteer experiences to a great extent. The volunteerism activities in Sabah are more concentrated on the conservation of nature and the environment (Responsible Travel, 2015). Scuba diving marine conservation project in the north of Borneo, as well as the environmental conservation and community consent project located in Kinabatangan, is an example of volunteer tourism that is currently being executed in Sabah (Responsible Travel, 2015). Sabah is delighted with plentiful of splendid islands as one of them is Tunku Abdul Rahman Park which also has become one of the spots for volunteerism activity (Project Aware, 2015).

The growth in popularity of volunteer tourism has captured the attention of many researchers to study this market niche. Most of the studies were about the general perception in volunteer tourism (e.g Carter, 2008; Dillette, 2012), the volunteer tourism motivations (e.g Sin, 2009), and the intimacy in volunteer tourism (e.g Conran, 2011) which concentrated more on volunteerism partakers such as volunteer tourists, volunteer students and the host community, as most of the dissertations were studied in foreign countries. Nevertheless, there is the dearth of study that needs to be conducted concerning the volunteer operator's viewpoint. There is a lack of studies concerning the volunteer operator's perspective on volunteer tourism in Sabah, consequently, this paper was intended to gain some acquaintance and understanding of volunteer tourism from the tour operators' point of view. In addition, this study also sought to find the volunteer tourism operators' awareness about volunteerism, their participation as a volunteer, and the outcomes of their participation in volunteerism activities.

2. Literature Review

Volunteer tourism is one of the appearances of a market niche in terms of alternative tourism. It has begun since late 20th century when there was a significant growth in both volunteer organisations and international tourism (Novelli, 2005). These growing trends have made volunteer holiday concept to be more noticeable in the mid-1980s through the escalation in a number of volunteer tourism organizations (Brown and Morrison, 2003). The emergence of volunteer tourism not only has captured the attention of many researchers and practitioners, but also has contributed to the huge impacts on tourism industry and management as a whole (Honey, 1990; Tomazos and Butler, 2012). Wearing (2001) has defined volunteer tourism as *“those tourists or individuals who are volunteering by embarking on holidays that might include ministering and lightening the deficiency of some society's groups and also refurbishment of environments into the society or environment aspect”*. Otoo and Amuquandoh (2014), in their previous study, wrote that *“volunteer tourism is known as a self-sacrificing activity which is envisioned to help others without requiring anything in return volunteering does not*

require salaries for the service instead it requires a sense of responsibility in terms of time, effort, and skill development". Those efforts in volunteerism eventually will create a feeling of achievement, self-satisfaction as well as will develop self-esteem of an individual; an activity in which time is given freely in profiting another person, groups and the organization (Otoo and Amuquandoh, 2014). Another literature has stated that volunteerism is an on-going, well-planned and unrestricted activity intended to help others with little or no tangible reward (Finkelstien, 2009). A volunteer too is described as someone who bestows leisure time to the interest of the public or client (Stebbins, 1992) and an individual who is involved in activities that are beneficial for both the helper and the one being helped (Wilson, 2000). Besides that, Chen and Chen (2011) described the concept of volunteer tourism in which people who could afford this alternative tourism might be observed in a more positive way by sharing money, free time, ability, courage, and goodwill, which can increase self-esteem or social status.

Volunteers tend to be younger in their age as reviewed by Zahra and McIntosh (2007). Meanwhile, Stoddart and Rogerson (2004) in their study of Habitat for Humanity South Africa, classified the age of volunteer into two categories that were, 20 to 29 years old (younger), and 50 - 59 years old (older) whereas, Kellicker (2004) has classified range of individuals aged from 35 to 44 years old as avid volunteers who participated in volunteer works the most. Volunteer tourist is somehow defined as a person who gets involved in volunteer tourism by travelling to another destination just to do volunteering on a particular project to the particular group (McGehee and Andereck, 2009). In contrast, Uriely *et al.*, (2003) said that volunteer tourism should not include volunteer hosts and community. McGehee and Andereck (2009), however, defended the statement by defining volunteer or "voluntoured" as the local residents hosting the volunteer tourism activity, and conceivable benefits for both volunteer tourist and the host community.

In addition, the volunteer tourists do not only desire to attain a personal enjoyment but also to have an experience that portrays a positive impact on the host culture and community that they are visiting which include learning a new skill, self-challenge through the volunteer tourism activities and contributing to the development of society (McGehee and Andereck, 2009; Rogers, 2007). Wright (2014) said that volunteer tourism could also bring positive impact by developing new relationships and personal growth as well as enhancing the economic growth for tourism entrepreneur and businesses. McIntosh and Zahra (2007) have seen volunteer tourism as a part of sustainable tourism as it permits the participants to have more genuine encounters with the host community and brings benefits to both groups. The volunteers' help is urgently needed in order to fill the breaches of volunteer tourism project around the world (Cutchins *et al.*, 2012). Individuals are able to explore more and get numerous opportunities for personal growth by challenging and expanding themselves through volunteer tourism motivation (Dillette, 2012). Broad (2003) stated that the volunteers experience self-reflection which will boost their social awareness and support, and hence, will experience a subsequent change in their daily lives and belief systems. As volunteer tourism is growing, it has put the pressure on the non-profit organization or/and tour operators to be efficient in terms of volunteer welfare, and to be more responsible towards the communities they work with (Stebbins and Graham, 2004). The lack of literatures concerning tourism operators' involvement, roles, and their understanding towards volunteer tourism is yet to be established.

3. Methodology

This research was conducted among the top management of 28 tour operators that were registered under Sabah Tourism Board (STB) around Kota Kinabalu City of Sabah. Data collection was done within a period of three months which began in January and ended in March 2016. The purposive sampling was applied in this study as the number of samples was on a small scale, and corresponded to the needs in specific information and selection of informants particularly to the tourism players and experts in diving activity. The study site focused on

Tunku Abdul Rahman Park which is one of the volunteerism sites in Kota Kinabalu. A questionnaire was designed as a tool for data collection. The questionnaire consisted of three sections which were the demographic profile of respondents, the volunteer tourism issues and the overall opinion with regards to volunteer tourism. Since the study of volunteerism is exploratory, the obtained data were interpreted by using frequency, mean and standard deviation which provided descriptive information.

4. Results and Discussions

Out of 28 targeted top management of tour operators as respondents, only 14 responded which meant only 50% of the questionnaires were returned. Some of the tour operators were unable to participate in this study because they had changed their business from diving to non-diving business. It is shown in Table 4.1 that the majority of the tour dive operators were owned by Malaysians (78.6%). The majority of the respondents were aged between 26 to 30 years and 36 to 40 years old with the equal percentage of 28.6% respectively. Surprisingly, the results illustrate that majority of the companies were managed by women managers (57.1%). Most of the companies had been established between eight to twelve years with the percentage of 28.6% and another 28.6% had been in the industry for more than 12 years. In addition, 21.4% of the companies had been in operation in less than five years which made them considered very new in the industry. Meanwhile, the rest of the companies had been in operation for five to eight years (14.3%). It is noted that the majority of the respondents possessed their postgraduate education in Bachelor Degree (50%). The result of this study shows that the majority of the respondents were aged between 26 to 30 years and 36 to 40 years old, which is almost similar to Stoddart and Rogerson's (2004) and Dillette's (2012) literature which stated that volunteers tend to be younger or older. However, Kellicker (2004) illustrated that the range of volunteers' age from 35 to 44 years old can be seen as a middle age.

Table 4.1: Respondents' profile

Demographic	Frequency	%	Demographic	Frequency	%
Nationality			Years of Company's Operation		
Malaysian	11	78.6	Below 5 years	3	21.4
Non Malaysian	3	21.4	5 – 8 years	2	14.3
			8 – 12 years	4	28.6
			12 years and above	4	28.6
			No Response	1	7.1
Age			Educational Background		
26 - 30	4	28.6	Diploma	4	28.6
31 - 35	3	21.4	Bachelor Degree	7	50.0
36-40	4	28.6	Master	2	14.3
Above 41	2	14.3	No Response	1	7.1
No Response	1	7.1			
Gender					
Male	5	35.7			
Female	8	57.1			
No Response	1	7.1			

Note: N = 14

4.1. The perception on volunteer tourism

As shown in Table 4.2, 50% of the respondents strongly agreed that volunteerism is when an individual joins a volunteer tourism activity. The respondents also strongly agreed that the volunteer host or the local community members would become part of volunteer tourism programme activity (50%). Meanwhile, 50% of the respondents agreed that volunteerism is a

self-sacrificing activity of helping others and not expecting something in return. The first items are similar to Wearing’s (2001) literature which illustrated that volunteer tourism could be defined as those tourists or individuals who are volunteering by embarking on holidays that might include volunteer tourism activities. This study found out that the hosts and local community members were part of volunteer tourism. In addition, this study also revealed that the volunteer tourism is a self-sacrificing activity in helping others without requiring anything in return which was supported by Otoo and Amuquandoh (2014) who stated that volunteer tourism is any activity where time is given freely to benefit others and does not require any salaries for the service.

Table 4.2: Results on volunteer tourism perspectives

Items	Percentage (%)					Mean	Std. Dev.
	1	2	3	4	5		
Volunteerism is when a person gets involved in the volunteer tourism activity	50.0	42.9	7.1	0.0	0.0	1.64	0.84
Volunteer hosts/local community members are a part of volunteer tourism	50.0	42.9	7.1	7.1	0.0	1.64	0.84
Volunteerism is a self-sacrificing activity intended to help others	42.9	50.0	7.1	0.0	0.0	1.64	0.63

Notes: 1=Strongly Agree, 2= Agree, 3= Not Sure, 4= Disagree, 5= Strongly Disagree; N=14

4.2. The importance of volunteer tourism

In Table 4.3 (a), 42.9% of the respondents indicated that the volunteer hosts strongly agreed that joining volunteerism activities would enrich the knowledge of the participants in relation to the tourism industry. In the following items, 50.0% of the respondents strongly agreed that engaging with volunteerism activities would definitely enhance the knowledge of volunteers on volunteer-culture awareness. Meanwhile, 42.9% of the respondents also strongly agreed that volunteer tourism would boost the level of understanding of volunteers towards volunteer-social awareness. Half of the respondents agreed that volunteer tourism would help to increase the sense of responsibility towards the host. From the findings, generally, most respondents agreed that volunteer tourism activities would increase the social awareness at tourism destinations, not only towards the environment, but also it would raise the cultural awareness and a sense of responsibility in volunteer tourists. This statement is supported by Brown and Morrison (2003) who mentioned that the growth of volunteer tourism industry is due to the tourists’ interest in the host community interaction. This will set the pressure on tourism operators to be efficient in providing volunteerism-package as well as to be more responsible towards the communities they operate in (Stebbins and Graham's; 2004). Besides that, the volunteers are expecting a self-reflection experience from the volunteerism and subsequently, would expect changes in their daily lives (Broad *et al.*, 2003). In addition, this form of tourism interaction which occurs between volunteer tourists and their host would improve cross-cultural understanding as well as understanding on issues faced by the host communities (Wearing, 2001).

Table 4.3(a): Results on the significance of volunteer tourism

Items	Percentage (%)					Mean	Std. Dev.
	1	2	3	4	5		
To give awareness to people about tourism industry while volunteering	42.9	35.7	7.1	14.3	0.0	1.93	1.07
To increase the understanding of volunteer-culture awareness	50.0	28.6	14.3	7.1	0.0	1.79	0.97
To increase the understanding of volunteer-social awareness	42.9	35.7	21.4	0.0	0.0	1.79	0.80
Increase the sense of responsibility	42.9	50.0	7.1	0.0	0.0	1.64	0.63

Notes: 1=Strongly Agree, 2= Agree, 3= Not Sure, 4= Disagree, 5= Strongly Disagree; N=14

The results in Table 4.3 (b) show that 42.9% of the respondents either equally strongly agreed or agreed with those three items mentioned. The societies, nowadays, are more educated in protecting the environment, as most of the respondents agreed that volunteerism increased the responsiveness to environmental protections and host community fortifications. The increase of awareness towards the environment has emerged globally and the growth of social-tourism has become a phenomenon in these recent years (Carter, 2008; Uriely *et al.*, 2003). Volunteer tourism, in other words, has portrayed a positive impact on the host culture and community (Rogers, 2007) and volunteerism is positively beneficial to those involved, with direct impact on the host community and volunteer tourists while engaging in volunteering (Brown, 2005; Sin, 2009). Apart from that, the community may benefit from structural improvements due to volunteer tourism while the tourists may benefit from the irreplaceable experience gained while volunteering (Rogers, 2007).

Table 4.3(b): Results on the significance of volunteer tourism

Items	Percentage (%)					Mean	Std. Dev.
	1	2	3	4	5		
To build responsiveness of people in helping communities	42.9	42.9	7.1	7.1	0.0	1.79	0.89
To build awareness of people in protecting the environment	42.9	42.9	14.3	7.1	0.0	1.79	0.89
Contributes positive impacts on hosts and volunteers	42.9	42.9	14.3	7.1	0.0	1.71	0.72

Notes: 1=Strongly Agree, 2= Agree, 3= Not Sure, 4= Disagree, 5= Strongly Disagree; N=14

4.3. *The reason for involvement in volunteer tourism*

Table 4.4 shows the reasons that influenced the involvement of the respondents in volunteer tourism. Half of the respondents agreed that they were aware that volunteer-tourism is to help others and to increase awareness of people in taking care of the environment. This is followed by the second item where 42.9% of the respondents strongly agreed that they had the desire to support volunteer tourism in the future as it contributes significantly to the tourism industry. Meanwhile, 35.7% of the respondents strongly agreed that volunteerism is beneficial to the tour company in terms of goodwill and recognition. In the following items, most of the respondents answered strongly agreed (50%) that involvement in volunteerism might be due to the opportunity for the staff to participate in outside activities, to develop new skills as well as the desire for a new challenge in volunteer-tourism. In other words, the awareness of taking care of the environment has become one of the reasons for people to join the volunteer tourism and the involvement of volunteers might stimulate the willingness to help the host without financial gain

(Stebbins, 1982; Stebbins, 1992; Van Till, 1979). Another reason for the sustenance of volunteer tourism as a part of tourism industry is that volunteer tourism has contributed to the huge impacts on tourism industry economically (Tomazos and Butler, 2009). Chen and Chen (2011) added that the volunteer tourism could encourage a positive way by sharing money, free time, aptitude, courage and goodwill, which can increase self-esteem or social status to the volunteers. Furthermore, the opportunity for volunteers to participate in outside activities may also encourage them to improve themselves, develop new skills, new challenges and to be able to explore numerous opportunities for personal growth (Dillette, 2012).

Table 4.4: Results on the respondents' reasons for participating in volunteer tourism

Items	Percentage (%)					Mean	Std Dev.
	1	2	3	4	5		
Aware to help and take care of the environment	28.6	50.0	14.3	7.1	0.0	2.07	1.07
Support volunteer tourism in the tourism industry	42.9	28.6	14.3	14.3	0.0	2.00	1.10
Build goodwill and recognition for the company	35.7	21.4	28.6	14.3	0.0	2.21	1.12
Opportunity for staff to participate in outside activities	50.0	21.4	14.3	14.3	0.0	1.93	1.14
Opportunity to develop new skills	50.0	28.6	14.3	7.1	0.0	1.79	0.97
Desire for new challenges	50.0	35.7	7.1	7.1	0.0	1.71	0.91

Notes: 1=Strongly Agree, 2= Agree, 3= Not Sure, 4= Disagree, 5= Strongly Disagree; N=14

4.4. Consideration to engross in volunteer tourism

The results illustrated in Table 4.7 show some areas that need to be considered before participating in volunteerism by tour dive managements. The findings revealed that the majority of respondents (64.3%) agreed that convenient time needs to be cogitated before joining the volunteer tourism programme. Meanwhile, 50% agreed that the cost of volunteerism programme and 42.9% agreed that the distance of volunteerism programme may also complete the volunteerism participation by tour dive managements. At the same time, there was a mixed-feeling portrayed by the tour dive managements whether long distance was a factor to be considered in engaging in volunteer tourism programme where 28.6% agreed and 28.6% disagreed. These findings may be right as the volunteer participant (tour operator) would be concerned when considering the volunteer experience trip to be worth the cost and whether people will continue to participate if they had sufficient money, (*see* Lo and Lee's, 2011).

Table 4.5: Results on the respondents' consideration in joining volunteer tourism

Items	Percentage (%)					Mean	Std Dev.
	1	2	3	4	5		
Short distance of volunteerism programme.	28.6	42.9	21.4	7.1	0.0	2.07	0.91
Long distance of volunteerism programme.	14.3	28.6	21.4	28.6	7.1	2.86	1.23
Realistic cost of volunteerism programme.	14.3	50.0	14.3	14.3	7.1	2.50	1.16
Right time for volunteerism programme.	14.3	64.3	21.4	0.0	0.0	2.07	0.61

Notes: 1=Strongly Agree, 2= Agree, 3= Not Sure, 4= Disagree, 5= Strongly Disagree; N=14

4.5. *The outcomes of joining volunteer tourism*

The outcomes gained from respondents in joining volunteer tourism are shown in Table 4.6. The majority of the respondents (57.1%) strongly agreed that the aftermath of volunteerism will develop the awareness with regards to the needs of the community. About 50% of the respondents responded 'strongly agreed' for each of the four items in the volunteerism aftermath as mentioned. The other outcomes which received positive response from the respondents with a percentage of 42.9% of 'strongly agree' were: creating awareness to the needs of the environment, forming bonds between the organization and the society, encouraging civic concerns, and providing lavish knowledge to the volunteers. From this finding, it was found that the results in creating awareness to the needs of the community and environment was supported by Wearing (2001) and Otoo and Amuquandoh (2014) who stated that volunteer tourism aims to assist the needs of the community. Through volunteer tourism, there will be more gap fulfilment in the volunteer programme, especially in developing countries. Cutchins *et al.*, (2012) mentioned that volunteers are urgently needed in order to fill the breaches of volunteer tourism projects around the world. It was also found that through volunteer tourism, developing new relationships and personal growth are some of the apparent benefits. Therefore, volunteer tourism helps in developing new skills, self-challenge through the volunteer tourism activities, as well as encouraging civic responsibility and contributing to the development of society (McGehee and Andereck, 2009; Wright, 2014).

Table 4.6: Results of the respondents' outcomes of joining volunteer tourism

Items	Percentage (%)					Mean	Std Dev.
	1	2	3	4	5		
Creating awareness about the needs of community.	57.1	21.4	14.3	7.1	0.0	1.71	0.99
Creating awareness about the needs of environment.	42.9	35.7	14.3	7.1	0.0	1.86	0.94
Forming a strong bond between the organization and the society.	42.9	35.7	14.3	7.1	0.0	1.93	1.14
Improving awareness about the significance of volunteerism activity.	50.0	14.3	14.3	21.4	0.0	2.07	1.26
Discovering something good in self.	50.0	21.4	21.4	7.1	0.0	1.86	1.02
Developing new skills.	50.0	28.6	7.1	14.3	0.0	1.86	1.09
Encouraging civic responsibility.	42.9	28.6	21.4	0.0	7.1	2.00	1.17
Strengthening the relationship between the management and staff.	50.0	35.7	14.3	0.0	0.0	1.64	0.74
Volunteer tourism activity gives abundant new knowledge for us.	42.9	42.9	7.1	7.1	0.0	1.79	0.89

Notes: 1=Strongly Agree, 2= Agree, 3= Not Sure, 4= Disagree, 5= Strongly Disagree; N=14

4.6. *The level of support to volunteer tourism*

There were four items measured in order to identify the support level of respondents to volunteer tourism (Table 4.7). Most of the respondents, surprisingly, strongly agreed with all the items given. It was found that the volunteer tourism programme played a substantial role to the resident or host community, and the role of government is crucial to encourage volunteer tourism. Meanwhile, the respondents also favoured to do more volunteer tourism activities in order to attract more volunteer tourists, and they strongly agreed that volunteer tourism would contribute positively in terms of economic to the local community. This finding was also similarly outlined by Dillette (2012) which claimed that volunteer tourism plays a significant

role to the local community. Moreover, the feature of volunteer tourism which is close to the community is seen as a genuine encounter that will bring benefits to both the host community and volunteer tourists as well as positive economic growth, and economic prosperity enhancement on volunteer tourism business (Dillette, 2012; Wright, 2014).

Table 4.7: Results on the level of respondents' support to volunteer tourism

Items	Percentage (%)					Mean	Std Dev.
	1	2	3	4	5		
Volunteer tourism plays a significant role in local community.	57.1	21.4	21.4	0.0	0.0	1.64	0.84
Volunteer tourism plays a role in contributing positive economic in local community.	50.0	35.7	14.3	0.0	0.0	1.64	0.74
Government should do more to promote volunteer activities.	57.1	28.6	7.1	0.0	7.1	1.71	1.13
Developing more volunteer tourism activities to attract tourists.	57.1	28.6	7.1	7.1	0.0	1.64	0.92

Notes: 1=Strongly Agree, 2= Agree, 3= Not Sure, 4= Disagree, 5= Strongly Disagree; N=14

4.7. Overall opinions on volunteer tourism by dive tour operators

The general point of view with regards to volunteer tourism was posted to the Dive Tour Operator as the research question - *"In your opinion, do you think that volunteer tourism should be continued? Why?"* From the result, the majority responded that volunteer tourism programme should be continued for the sake of safeguarding the environment, the local community and for the state's economic benefit. One of the respondents, however, said that the effort of continuing the volunteer tourism programme is worthwhile in the tourism industry as it does not only give wide knowledge and be the eye-opener, but also it provides exposure for those who engage in volunteer tourism. In addition, the respondents also felt that volunteer tourism is good as it improves the tourism industry and it could offer many opportunities for the tourism development for Sabah state, particularly in ecotourism sector. As shared by one of the respondents: *"Yes, to continue to explore and develop tourism and attract more tourists to our country. I believe we can continue to develop our country in many ways, especially in ecotourism"*.

The respondents felt that volunteer tourism is important in order to increase awareness among people in conserving the environment. As the island is one of the significant products in tourism, therefore, it is essential to educate the local community to protect the environment through the volunteerism perspective. The respondents also pointed out that the utmost concern of volunteer tourism is for long-term benefit projects and should not solely be the desire of making money. Two respondents shared that: 1) *"Providing that the objective is for long-term benefit of the environment and local people. Should be non-profit driven."* 2) *"It should be continued but only in a manner that places environmental conscious higher than a desire to make money."* One respondent gave an opinion that volunteer tourism should have a specific target market in order to conduct more constant projects with the involvement of community. *"Yes. However, the target market has to be specific so as to be able to include more permanent projects that will include the local community in a long-term project that will enhance and increase their awareness of local as well as global impacts and how they can change their mindset on environmental impacts."*

The viewpoints of respondents indicate that volunteer tourism should be continued as it is very significant to the growth of tourism specifically in Sabah. Most of the respondents put environment as the main concern and this became the most reason why volunteer tourism should

be in continual process for long-term benefits. The involvement of community in volunteer tourism is considered crucial, and there is a need to educate and to increase their level of awareness in protecting the environment for both the tour operators and the hosts. As Finkelstien (2009) remarked that volunteerism is an ongoing, planned and discretionary activity aiming to help others.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the volunteer tourism participation and perception from the viewpoint of tourism players – the dive tour operators. The study also determined their active participation in volunteer tourism programmes. The study found out that volunteer hosts and communities were part of the volunteer tourism programme, and the volunteer tourism in its ability to increase cultural awareness through volunteering was significant. Apart from that, the study illustrated that the volunteer tourism motives were to develop new skills and self-challenge. However, the cost appeared to be the highest concern for people in joining volunteer tourism. The study also found out that the dive tour operators agreed that the benefit of volunteer tourism is able to initiate the awareness of helping the community as well as to contribute a significant benefit in tourism economics. In conclusion, the findings of this study had delivered a fundamental information pertaining to perceptions of tourism players participating in volunteer tour. From the findings, the majority of the respondents placed their full support in volunteer tourism as they viewed this form of tourism as one of the tools for the development of tourism. However, the outcome of this study is still very far from reaching the peak in the academic field. Therefore, further research is highly recommended to understand volunteer tourism issues pertaining to the tour operators' perspectives seen from a different aspect.

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