

UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA

**THE IMPACTS OF TOURISM ON
THE LIVELIHOOD OF THE
STATELESS SEA GYPSIES IN
SEMPORNA, SABAH.**

NOR ATIKAH BINTI HADZLAN

MAS

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ABSTRACT

As a popular tourist destination, Semporna, Sabah receives more than 2,000 visitors daily. Yet, despite its popularity, Semporna is also home to a more than 26,000 stateless sea gypsies, which is the highest in Malaysia. This study analysed the impacts of tourism on the livelihood of the stateless sea gypsies in Semporna, Sabah and vice versa. Its objectives were: i) to examine Sabah's policy and practice towards the Pala'u and their involvement in tourism, ii) to explore in what ways and to what extent Sabah's tourism affected the sea gypsies and vice versa, and iii) to analyse the push and pull factors of compliance and noncompliance of tour operators in relation to the sea gypsies. This study employed a qualitative method and was guided by sustainable livelihood framework theory. Primary data were collected through structured and semi-structured interviews with respondents chosen using the purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Secondary data were mostly sourced from journals and articles. The data extracted from semi-structured interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings indicated that since there was no specific policy or set of guidelines in place to govern stateless sea gypsies in tourism industry, some of the negative impacts included violation of human rights issues, illegal employment, shifting culture, exposure to unislamic conduct as well as social and legal problems. Nevertheless, it had also led to some positive impacts such as the sea gypsies' improved standard of living, improved communication skills and higher tendency of mixed marriage which led to citizenship acquisition. Additionally, the study identified five key themes under Objective 3, which were categorized into push and pull factors. The push factors include bureaucratic hassle, desire to maximize profit, and minimize operational costs. On the other hand, the pull factors are avoiding fines and license suspensions, as well as ensuring business sustainability. The data classified into tangible and intangible impacts. For future studies, it is recommended that a different methodology such as ethnography is employed to better observe and understand more on the impacts of tourism on the livelihood strategies of the stateless sea gypsies.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

According to Article 1(1) of the Convention on the Status of Stateless Persons, a stateless person refers to an individual who is not considered to be a national by any State under its law (UNHCR, 2012). Any individual deemed as stateless; they have no nationality rights in any country in the world. Some of them might be born stateless and some become stateless for a certain reason. In some cases, these people become stateless without any appropriate reason. It is estimated that there are more than 12 million stateless people worldwide. There might be more because most of them are still not identified. In Southeast Asia, most of these stateless people live in the sea as a nomadic community. In Thailand and Myanmar, these stateless nomadic communities are known as the Moken people and Urak Lawoi. While, in Malaysia, specifically in Semporna, Sabah, they are known as the sea gypsies or *Palau'u* or Bajau Sama-Dilaut. The sea gypsy, as an indigenous group in Semporna, Sabah is a seafaring population and are well-known for their amazing diving abilities. In regard to Semporna tourism, the sea gypsy has become an unofficial tourist attraction ("Sea Gypsies Make Semporna Complete", 2019).

Sabah's tourism is one of the biggest income contributors of the state. Tourism is indeed important for the economy of Semporna. On a national level, tourism is the third highest contributor to Malaysia's foreign exchange receipt after manufacturing and commodities (Ching, 2019). In 2019, Malaysia recorded the arrival of 26.10 million tourists who generated RM86.1 billion into the economy ("Malaysia Tourism in Brief, 2020). Among others, it helps boost economic growth as well as growing the country's development. In 2019, as a key contributor to the services, the government had allocated RM100 million grants to the private sector for running the promotional and marketing overseas to increase the number of visitors to the country as well as the investors ("Budget 2019", 2018). Malaysia's 2019 Budget also included the subsidies allocation for other tourism purposes. In relation to that, the travel operators obviously play crucial roles in boosting the development of Malaysia's tourism industry.

In this regard, Semporna, Sabah is a prominent holiday destination. It is a small district, in the east coast of Sabah, with a total area of 113,412 hectares. For years, it