SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT PRACTICES OF MICE VENUE PROVIDERS IN EAST COAST REGION, PENINSULA MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this study is to review the sustainable tourism development practices of MICE (Meeting, Incentive, Convention and Exhibition) at hotel venues in East Coast Region, Peninsula Malaysia. Responding to the importance of sustainable tourism practices, Malaysia has started to apply such practices in all tourism products, which include the hotel facilities. Malaysia offers a range of MICE venues that are either purposely built or integrated with hotel facilities. As one of the fastest emerging MICE tourism destination in the region, the sustainable tourism development practices by MICE venue providers is almost a must. The implementation of sustainable practices will bring benefits to the industry. However, it requires participation from all stakeholders in revising specific guidelines or following already accepted best practices to ensure the viability of the sustainable tourism concept. Most of the MICE venues in the East Coast Region, Peninsula Malaysia have the potential to apply sustainable tourism development practices in their day to day operation. The result of this study will be used to propose guidelines for sustainable tourism development practices in MICE tourism.

Keywords: *East Coast Region, MICE, sustainable tourism development practices, tourism*

INTRODUCTION

MICE (Meeting, Incentive, Convention and Exhibition) sector consists of related diverse meetings, incentives, conventions and exhibitions activities including conferences, congresses and trade shows. This sector has been regarded as one of the most dynamic and important sector of the tourism industry that focuses on business activities rather than leisure (McCabe, Poole, Weeks, & Leiper, 2000).

Malaysia is among the fastest emerging country for MICE activities. Ranked in the top forty MICE destinations in the world by International Congress and Convention Association(ICCA, 2009), the sector is expected to attract more than 100 million business travelers and MICE visitors by 2015.Responding to this expectation, various MICE stakeholders should play their role to achieve the desirable recognition as MICE sector providers.

Many countries that emphasize greatly on tourism industry as a mean of development and economic growth tend to focus on the concept of sustainable tourism development although the present eras are now moving towards a more innovative and challenging concept in providing tourism experience.According toWorld Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) (1987), sustainable tourism is about a process of change that aims to secure a harmonious relationship between development and the environment (ecological, economics and socio cultural). In this paper, the focus will be on sustainable development practices from the context of MICE tourism stressing on the hotel venue providers' side.

OBJECTIVES

This research aims to achieve two objectives which one to review the venues of MICE industry in East Coast Region, Peninsula Malaysia and to study the sustainable tourism development practices for MICE tourism.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

3.1   MICE Tourism in Malaysia

Overview of MICE in Malaysia (2008)showed that 30% of the total revenue from tourism was generated from MICE sector. Their contribution to the tourism revenues occurs when they are visiting the country either as part of a large conference group or a group travelling on incentive trips. According to the industry sources, the MICE travelers spending margin are generally 3 to 5 times more than average leisure travelers, therefore MICE travelers are regarded as a high revenue-generating market. In terms of the length of stay, MICE delegates usually stay longer whereby the minimum are three days. Hence, they also give "overflow benefits" in the long term for local tourism business once they become repeat tourists of a country.

Year 2003 is the beginning year of MICE industry in Malaysia. According to the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA, 2009)Malaysia and Ireland shared the same ranking at 32. The country holds a total of 87 association meetings with a total of 59,880 numbers of participants in 2008. Kuala Lumpur as one of the city in Malaysia is ranked at 21st in 2008 with the total of 29,102 participants after hosting 61 Association International meetings.

3.2   Venues of MICE Tourism

Destination refers to the represented areas that can draw peoples' attention to visit. Whereas, venue refers to individualunits within these areas whereby it can be almost any type of building where MICE events take place (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2001), being residential or non-residential (Rogers, 2007). All these infrastructures such as a convention centre, meeting rooms play a vital role in holding MICE activities(Davidson & Rogers, 2012). They provide one or more services to the business tourists while destinations are supposed to deliver all the services that the business tourists need(Swarbrooke & Horner, 2001).

3.3   Sustainable Tourism Development Practices for MICE Tourism

Business tourism is a significant element in many tourist destinations. From this perspective the "attractiveness" of a place includes intrinsic qualities that draw leisure tourists, and also other elements, specifically, including conference facilities, offices or corporate headquarters, corporate entertainment opportunities and specific hotel or other accommodation for delegates or business travelers (perhaps incorporating the latest information technology facilities).

Where conference centers are required, adaptations of existing buildings may be possible; otherwise new-builds will be necessary, requiring site clearance possibly resulting in controversy over the threatened loss of "heritage" buildings and/or disturbance to residents(Howie, 2003).

DISCUSSIONS

4.1   Tourism in East Coast Region

The East Coast Region of Peninsula Malaysia geographically, consists of the states of Pahang, Kelantan and Terengganu. However, for the development of the country, the East Coast Economic Region Corridor (ECER), has been introduced which covers the states of Kelantan,Terengganu and Pahang as well as the district of Mersing in the state of Johor.

ECER statistics showed that in 2005, over 1.9 million foreign tourists and 8.3 million domestic tourists visited the ECER states. It is forecasted to grow to 7.4 million foreign tourists while domestic tourism will be a significant contributor to the sector with 21.4 million by year 2020. With the growth of tourist arrival, it will naturally increase demand for room accommodation, better transport, and other tour–related services. In year 2020, the established hotels and rooms in ECER region is estimated to contribute to 15% or 24.5 million of total hotel guest in Malaysia.

4.2   MICE Venues in East Coast Region

Malaysia offers a range of convention venues. Some of it is integrated with hotel facilities and some of it is stand alone. This country offers an impassive choice of convention venues whether in the city, mountain or island locations, which are all, backed up by experienced staff and professional services. In addition to purposely built centres, many hotels are also the choice for MICE venues in this country. Hotels that range from 3 stars to 5 stars offered world class convention facilities and services. Ministry of Tourism and Culture Malaysia (MOTAC) has ranked the hotels in Malaysia into categories of star, orchid and apartment ratings that were differentiated by the facilities and services offered. These places can accommodate hundreds if not thousands number of delegates or provide small and medium sized meeting rooms for smaller scale functions.

According to the statistics from the Ministry of Tourism Malaysia (2011), the total number of the registered hotels in Pahang are (215), Kelantan (117) and Terengganu (88) which accumulated to 420. Statistics showed there are 73 hotels with star ratings and 78 hotels with the orchid ratings in Pahang. While in Terengganu, statistics showed that this statehas 34 hotels with star ratings and 47 hotels with orchid ratings. Finally in Kelantan, there are 23 hotels with star ratings and 39 hotels with orchid ratings.

Based on the registered number, this research is conducted to identify the number of hotels that offer MICE facilities in their hotels. The result showed that in Pahang, 32 hotels with star ratings and 5 hotels with orchid ratings offered MICE facilities. From that number, only 4 are aware and applying the environmentally friendly and green hotel concept. While in Terengganu, there are 19 hotels with the star ratings and 3 hotels with orchid ratings that have MICE facilities with 2 hotels are applying environmental concept and green hotel in their places. Finally in Kelantan, 4 hotels found to have awareness and apply the sustainability concept out of 17 hotels with star ratings and 4 hotels with orchid ratings.

There are about 80 hotels that offer MICE facilities in the East Coast Region. This is about 20% from the total registered hotel in the East Coast Region. Furthermore, the number of hotels that are aware and practice the environment friendly and green hotel are very limited,

which are only 10 hotels. It showed that only 12.5% are practicing green hotel from the total hotel that have MICE facilities in the East Coast Region.

4.3   Guidelines for Sustainable Tourism Development Practices for MICE Tourism

In Malaysia, there are limited researches being conducted on MICE tourism. However, as this research is focusing on hotels, a few guidelines can be used and some improvements can be done from MICE tourism context. As discuss earlier on the importance of sustainability, the concepts of sustainable tourism development have been divided into three namely as economy, social and environment.

i.   Economy

A guideline that can be used to look at the economic sustainability is the Sustainable Tourism Practices Checklist for the Conference and Events Industry from North Carolina that produced by the Centre of Sustainable Tourism at the East Carolina University for the industry professionals. There are 13 elements that have been identified namely:
- Provide information on local attractions and cultural activities for the participants
- To encourage participants to purchase local products and services
- Provide employment opportunities for local community members
- Allow local artists to display and sell their handicrafts at the property
- Form partnerships with locally owned businesses (e.g., transportation and guide services)
- Use local goods and services whenever possible
- Involve the organization in local philanthropic projects and develop a public relations plan that ensures participants, community, interest groups and others to be aware of the community involvement
- Provide volunteer opportunities for participants and staff

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- Exceed minimum local standards for employee's wages, salaries and benefits
- Ensure that operational demands for basic services (water, electricity, roads, food, and other resources) do not compete with local needs
- Provide education and training opportunities in the place of business for local community members
- Support training for community members for non-competitive tourism-related activities that complement the business
- Provide promotional information on local services and businesses to participant.

These elements showed the economic sustainability and it required by the MICE venue in order for them to practice the sustainable tourism development. All the elements ensure that the local people will also get the benefit from the tourism industry.

ii.   Social

According toSutter (2003), there are four indicators under these criteria consist of stakeholder participation, improved service availability, equal distribution and capacity development. TheAsean Tourism Standard (n.d) has used the collaboration with the community and local as their indicators. They put three elements under this dimension namely:
- Existence of plans/activities to help improve quality of life of the community.
- Existence of awareness raising programs for local community on environmental protection.
- Creation of activities in promoting culture and traditional performance and local ways of life.

In addition, theSustainable tourism practices checklist for the conference and event industry (2011) highlights two dimensions under these criteria. The first dimension is preserving the social norms and culture of local and indigenous communities. There are 7 elements under this dimension;
- Develop methods of establishing dialogue with local representatives to determine socio-cultural and economic impacts

of the organization and to ensure their concerns are recognized in operational decisions
- Train staff to ensure they are well-informed on local customs
- Develop informative educational materials for participants about the local community and local history
- Use appropriate and authentic cultural elements from the local region
- Make the property available for community events
- Establish policies that restrict commercialization of endangered or protected flora and fauna
- Incorporate traditional local arts and crafts and make information available to participants

The second dimension is training and education for employees and clients that suggests 10 elements;
- Ensure that a formal environment program is in place that includes all staff participation
- Place informational signing about organization's sustainable practices around the property.
- Provide an incentive program for staff and participants to participate in current sustainable practices
- Claims of environmental practices are transparent and verifiable by participants and third party entities.
- Notification about sustainable is provided in publications, advertising, and web site
- Offer feedback or comment cards to get participants and staff input on further sustainable practices
- Educate other businesses about sustainability by speaking at events and conferences and providing tours of facility's sustainable practices
- Provide continuing sustainability training for staff
- Include sustainability as part of staff evaluation
- Participate in an environmental or sustainable tourism certification program Acknowledgment

The elements showed that the sustainable tourism development should involve all including local communities, staff and customers due to the importance of their involvement for the social sustainability

iii.   Environment

Sutter (2003) proposed four items under this elements namely as fossil energy resources, air quality, water quality and land resource. Taking the consideration that most venues are residential, the Asean Tourism Standard (n.d) was used to look at the environment impact. Accordingly, there are eight elements that used to practice sustainable;

*   Use of Green products
*   Solid waste management
*   Energy efficiency
*   Water efficiency
*   Air quality management (indoor and outdoor)
*   Noise pollution control
*   Wastewater treatment
*   Toxic and chemical substance disposal management

The elements showed that there are many items in the environment that need to be considered in order to practice the sustainable tourism development. All of the elements should be parallel to each other so that it will create the good environment and to create the sustainable conference.

CONCLUSION

Attempts to introduce sustainable development in MICE Tourism require a continuous and undivided attention from various stakeholders such as the governmental bodies, the NGOs, the suppliers as well as the local residence. It also requires an in depth investigation from various perspectives including economic, political, technological, environmental, cultural and sociological.

In Malaysia, the East Coast Region itself was identified to regard sustainable development as an alien, strange and new concept especially in the hotel industry. Hence, this proves that a lot of efforts are required in order to implement this sustainable development concept at this location. Besides that, proper guidelines by government and

other related bodies should be prepared and make into existence. This is to ensure that East Coast Region will be able to put sustainable development concept into practice especially in the tourism products to achieve satisfaction and enhance the quality of life of both locals and visitors. This in the end will resulted to the preservation of its key natural economic, social and cultural assets for the present and future generation to experience.

In order to attract more tourists to come to Malaysia especially for MICE purposes, this sustainable tourism development concept is seen as a good platform to attract environmental and sustainability concern people.

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