

**TOURISM BASED ON NATURE :
THE KOTA KINABALU EXPERIENCE**

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism as an industry often becomes more complex than it already is when it involves a combination of such diverse elements as the natural environment, cultural heritage and modern comforts. In Sabah, the emphasis of overseas promotion by both the government and the private sector has been on nature and all that it entails, such as adventure sports and physical recreation.

The good news is that Sabah is fortunate to still have a relatively unpolluted or uncorrupted natural environment that is obviously necessary to support nature-based tourism. The bad news is the flipside - the paradox that "tourism kills tourism", a self-destruct phenomenon that can result from indiscriminate or excessive tapping of tourism resources.

In an era when global sensitivity to any real or perceived threat to the natural environment is at all-time highs, countries with nature as the anchor of their tourism products are in the limelight, and not always in a positive way.

Phrases like "eco-friendly", "sustained development" and "carrying capacity" are thrown about like fashion statements, and quickly accepted by the mass media. Never mind whether or not those who utter these words believe in them strongly enough to practice what they preach or at least lend support to those who do. What truly matters first and foremost is general awareness. A deeper understanding can come later and as history suggests, it most likely will, although not necessarily in the same generation.

There have also been numerous efforts to instil conservation awareness among the young, from the small-scale district-level cleanliness campaigns to national and global campaigns such as recycling.

The Sabah State government also hopes for greater awareness among rural communities judging from the undertones of public events. Various forms of "pesta" or festivals are organised as annual events in various districts, usually themed after local produce such as coconut, *rumbia* (a member of the palm family with edible trunk) and bamboo. In each case, the local community is told that their participation can determine the success of the pesta and help improve their economic status. Although not exclusively for tourism purposes, these festivals are promoted as tourist attractions.

The support of the local community has been acknowledged as a prerequisite to the success of tourism as an important industry and therefore, a major contributor to the economy of the state. This, of course, is not a new discovery but a lesson learnt from the experiences of other more established tourist destinations.

Local community support is crucial in the Sabah context in view of efforts to spread tourism to rural areas. Notwithstanding the different motives of proponents of such decentralization, this move to share the pie equitably could ultimately help raise socio-economic standards in rural towns and even villages. However, such noble intentions can only be realised with the active participation or at least support of the host communities.

The same applies to Kota Kinabalu. As the state capital, it is understandably prominent in all overseas promotions, not necessarily because it has more to offer by way of natural attractions but because it is the

international gateway to Sabah. Neither is it however, any less interesting as a nature and adventure destination compared to other places in the state.

A natural environment envelops the city while large patches of greenery, such as the secondary jungles on Signal Hill, still exist within the Central Business District. Kota Kinabalu offers a spectacular sunset “where the ocean meets the sky” as its seafront faces the open waters of the South China Sea.

While its natural attractions may be limited, the city must shoulder the inflow of almost all visitor arrivals to Sabah as it is the main launching pad to every tourist destination in the state. It is also a gateway to destinations outside the state such as the Federal Territory of Labuan, Brunei Darussalam and the dive destination Layang-Layang Resort.

Placed in this context, the Kota Kinabalu experience in nature tourism is not only confined to its own natural attractions but rather, it is tied also to those of its neighbours within and outside Sabah.

As a destination for mass tourism, Sabah is a newcomer but one that is feverishly trying to catch up with its more established rivals. There is aggressive marketing by the Sabah Tourism Board in most of Asia, selected European countries and North America. Once again, by virtue of it being the international gateway to Sabah, Kota Kinabalu must be prepared to shoulder any anticipated increase in visitor arrivals.

Following its proclamation as the sixth city in Malaysia on the 2nd of February 2000, physical development became the order of the day in Kota Kinabalu, more so than it had ever been. While this might not necessarily be to accommodate the needs of the tourism industry, everything that is done to