

# HOUSEBOAT AS A NEW TOURISM PRODUCT IN ROYAL BELUM STATE PARK

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## ABSTRACT

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*The houseboat is one of the vessels used to accommodate the users' navigational needs in Belum and Kenyir. It is an alternative to other accommodations for the camping site, resort, and hotel. Houseboats are the largest watercraft; they can be between 60 to 85 feet in length and up to 30 feet in width. Activities such as watching television and karaoke, washing, cooking, and fishing can be carried out on the houseboats. Houseboat can be parked at the jetty or moving around the Royal Belum State Park, and these activities are done on the boats. It mainly accommodates 14 people and usually consists of 4 cabins or rooms. This study aims to overview the houseboat as a new tourism product in Royal Belum State Park by revealing its history and implementation while focusing on its operation and management. In addition, reviews on previous research, field investigation, and interviews with the houseboat operators and Perak State Parks Corporation representatives were conducted. Findings showed that houseboat is a potential accommodation and infrastructure that must be developed and promoted as a tourism product. However, there is a lack of study on the houseboat in Malaysian national and state parks, mainly in Royal Belum State Park, and guidance on how to manage and operate a houseboat to be a successful tourism product that can bring more positive impacts on the economy, society, and environment.*

**Keywords:** houseboat, tourism product, Royal Belum State Park, state park

## INTRODUCTION

Lake is an option for the tourism industry instead of beach and island, and nature-based tourism is one of the significant drivers of the local economy in this area. Tourism activities, including houseboats, have minimal impact on environmental quality (Ibrahim et al., 2017). However, improper control of houseboats' oil, grease, and sewage systems could directly contribute to water pollution. The pollution in Malaysia can occur in various conditions not limited to the agricultural, industrial and construction sectors (Ahmad Halimi & Ismail, 2017). Safety issues have also arisen when drowning children and men overboard accidents occurred in Temenggor Lake. Some houseboats in Kenyir are not registered with the specified organizations, and some do not follow international standards as applied in Malaysia.

The Malaysian federal government has categorized the Royal Belum State Park as an important water catchment area and a part of the Central Forest Spine (Abdullah et al., 2011). Therefore, any activity and development at this lake will be controlled and protected under the Malaysian National Forestry Act. This area has been developed as a tourist attraction, where roads, bridges, resorts, hotels, and houseboats were constructed for accessibility and logistic purposes. However, a lack of infrastructure, facilities and social networking has occurred due to regulation and restrictions that have also been a barrier to developing the local community and ecotourism sector (Ibrahim et al., 2017). The number of tourist facilities is limited, and some areas are restricted from being accessed by tourists due to the protection of some indigenous people's settlements.

Realizing houseboat as a new tourism product that has become one of the tourist attractions, this study aims to overview houseboat tourism in Malaysia by revealing its history, background, and implementation, focusing on the operation and management of houseboats in the Royal Belum State Park.

## OVERVIEW

### National and State Parks in Malaysia

National and state parks function as places to conserve biodiversity and ensure the preservation of habitats and wildlife in each country (Fennel & Nowaczek, 2010). The Compendium of Environment Statistics stated that the Peninsular Malaysia has a total land area of 13.22 million hectares categorized as forested area. The total size of forested areas in the country and other forestry statistics are managed by the Forestry Department of Peninsular Malaysia (JPSM) (Official Portal of Forestry Department of Peninsular Malaysia (JPSM), 2022). These forested areas are named as the wildlife forest parks and can be divided into wildlife reserves and national parks, state parks, and other forested reserves. State parks include conservation parks named officially as the 'state parks', although they are established by different laws. The state parks include:

1. State Parks in Kedah, Kelantan, Perlis, Selangor, and Terengganu
2. The Endau Rompin State Park, Pahang
3. The Royal Belum State Park, Perak

Nevertheless, the management of national and state parks in Peninsular Malaysia often faces issues and controversies. A firm government action is needed to create responsible and sustainable management of these parks (Eagles, 2002). It is important to provide sufficient tourist facilities and increased range of activities to attract new tourists to visit the parks (Huang et al., 2008). The conflict between economic growth and tourism must be balanced, and conservation efforts must be promoted to protect natural resources.

### Royal Belum State Park

Royal Belum State Park has located approximately 192 km from Ipoh, 410 km from Kuala Lumpur, and 200 km from Penang, via the North-South Highway and onward to the Ipoh-Kuala Kangsar-Gerik-Banding trunk road (Figure 1). The area was gazetted as the Belum Forest Reserve in 1971 and 2007 following the Perak State Parks Corporation Enactment 2001 (Section 6) as a State Park for biodiversity conservation to facilitate education, research, and ecotourism (Official Portal of UNESCO, 2021). It was also gazetted under the Perak State Forestry Enactment and the National Heritage Site by the National Heritage Department, as the highest recognition accorded by the Government of Malaysia. Today, the state park has been listed in the UNESCO Tentative Lists to represent another natural and ancient tropical rainforest ecosystem of Outstanding Universal Value in terms of the humid tropical ecosystem diversity and conservation of rich and diverse tropical flora and fauna in Southeast Asia or Sundaland and of the Asia-Pacific region natural property.



**Figure 1:** Map of Royal Belum State Park

Source: Perak State Parks Corporation Official Portal, 2021

Royal Belum State Park is in Perak, bordering Halabala National Park, Kelantan Forest, and Ulu Muda Forest Reserve (Abdullah et al., 2011). It is the second-largest remaining continuous track of protected area in Peninsular Malaysia after the National Park, Pahang. The area expands to around 300,000 hectares and comprises lower Belum reserve, Temenggor forest reserve and Royal Belum State Park. The total area is 117,500 hectares and straddles northern Peninsular Malaysia forming the northern and strategic component of the Central Forest Spine. Other areas remain protected forests, and activities such as logging, and hunting are allowed here (with permits). Identified as an Environmentally Sensitive Area under Malaysia's National Physical Plan 2005, Royal Belum State Park is a reservoir of rich wonders, both flora and fauna, not excluding the unique landscapes such as the green mountainous terrain, waterfalls, limestone formations, caves, and unique riverine systems (Figure 2).



**Figure 2:** View of Royal Belum State Park

Source: Official Portal of Tourism Perak Management Berhad, 2021

It is also recognized in the National Physical Plan (NPP) Malaysia as an Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA) Rank 1 (Government of Malaysia, 2005). This category indicates that those areas classified should not be subjected to development, agricultural, or logging activities, and only low-impact nature-based tourism, educational and research activities are allowed. Royal Belum State Park is a blessing for this country and its people with tremendous invaluable assets that could never be traded with monetary rewards. Hence, any form of perils or threats to this area must be kept at bay or even be eliminated to ensure the continuity of the resources for the next generation to admire and appreciate, apart from the high recreational value it holds.

A study on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and risks of Royal Belum State Park have been carried out by Ibrahim et al. (2017) by using the SWOT approach to establish its feasibility as an ecotourism product. Landform, tourist attraction areas, tourism policy, services, social infrastructure, Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESAs), transportation and traffic, and area of sustainability

evaluation are among the criteria that have been examined. The study shows that there are issues and challenges occurred, such as the influx of immigrants, illegal forest product harvesting and logging activities; passive government policies and management, particularly toward the indigenous people community; and inadequate social infrastructure and utility facilities. However, the quality of the state park can be enhanced by having better infrastructure, utilities, and locations for checkpoints, jetties, chalets, camping sites, ferries, and houseboats.

Table 1 shows a detailed overview of foreign and local tourists' arrivals to the Royal Belum State Park and the income generated from 2015 to 2019. It was found that the influx of local tourists recorded an increasing number of tourists each year and the income generated. Out of the total number of tourists to the Royal Belum State Park, local tourists recorded a higher percentage than foreign tourists (Perak State Parks Corporation, 2021).

**Table 1:** Number of Tourists' Arrivals to Royal Belum State Park and Income (2015-2019)

Year	Number of Domestic Tourists	Number of Foreign Tourists	Total Number of Tourists	Income (RM)
2019	25,086	3,586	28,672	610,488
2018	24,937	2,868	27,805	588,894
2017	25,075	2,252	27,327	531,274
2016	21,450	1,925	23,375	391,706
2015	19,187	1,303	20,490	308,012

Source: Perak State Parks Corporations, 2021

## Houseboats

A houseboat is a large boat equipped with various facilities that include beds, kitchen, bathroom, refrigerator, television room, living room and dining room that are very comfortable (Muhamad et al., 2014). Each houseboat can accommodate 15 to 20 visitors at one time, where they can be between 60 to 85 feet in length and up to 30 feet in width, usually consisting of 4 cabins or rooms. Houseboats can be parked at the jetty or move around the lake area, and the operators provide these activities to the tourists: easy trekking, nature walks, jungle exploring, fishing, waterfall dipping, and wildlife spotting.

Houseboats are stated as accommodation besides hotels, chalets and resorts and a potential infrastructure to be developed (Ibrahim et al., 2017). However, there is a lack of study on the houseboats in Malaysian lakes or national parks, mainly in Royal Belum State Park, and guidance on managing and operating houseboats sustainably. Baseline study and sustainable management are imperative for establishing booming ecotourism sectors in terms of economic, social, and environmental aspects. At Vembanad Lake, Kerala, India, the free operation of houseboats has caused environmental impacts on the ecosystem, including dumping toilet waste, plastic, and oil pollution in the water (John, 2018). Now, the number of houseboats is uncontrolled, decreasing the boat carrying capacity in the lake and upsetting the ecology of the backwater system. Management strategies are recommended for the conservation and management of wells and systems. Proper infrastructure must be provided for solid and liquid wastes, and sewage treatment plants must be implemented in the significant boat jetty stations. Monitoring is also essential for evaluating the effectiveness of the measures adopted, and awareness programs must be done to reduce the direct disposal of waste into the lake.

## METHODOLOGY

This study involves qualitative and quantitative methods, by carrying out literature reviews, field observation, interviews with the houseboats' operators, and questionnaire survey to the tourists. The questionnaires investigate tourists' expectation, satisfaction, and knowledge towards the houseboats. Two houseboats were selected to study the operation, management, and issues (Figure 3).



**Figure 3: The Selected Houseboats as Case Study**

The first observation survey was held in August 2020 to observe the implementation of houseboats in the Belum area and experience the accommodation and packages provided by the houseboat operator. The second trip was carried out in March 2021 as researchers aimed to collect information on the implementation of the houseboat industry from the involved respondents. Related respondents to this interview session were the houseboat operators and the representative of Perak State Parks Corporation. Later, questionnaires were distributed to the public to gather feedback on the tourists' expectations (who have not visited Royal Belum State Park yet) and tourists' satisfaction (who have visited Royal Belum State Park) with the tourist's activities and houseboat's facilities and operations.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Tourists Attractions in Royal Belum State Park**

Most of the tourists who visited this area consisted of 90% local tourists and 10% foreign tourists. Foreign tourists are likely more interested in visiting The National Park in Pahang due to the well-known globally, wider area, commercialization status and enough facilities provided for the tourists. Royal Belum State Park has attracted local and foreign tourists with its beautiful natural landscape, the existing rare types of rafflesias and hornbill, the indigenous people settlement, and the waterfalls (based on an interview with a representative of Perak State Parks Corporation, 2021). Lately, the houseboat has become one of these attractions as the new type of accommodation and transportation to cater to many tourist lands and water activities. Most tourists who visit the area research flora, fauna, and fish, using houseboats to carry them to rafflesia, hornbill habitats, and fishing spots.

Being on the border of Malaysia and Thailand (Halabala National Park), both areas share the same flora and fauna, allowing migration of indigenous people between the two countries. The late exploration caused the existence of flora and fauna species in this area by humans since this area used to be a communist hiding spot during World War II before the 1950s. Royal Belum State Park can be considered a virgin forest since it was only after 1990 that the area was opened to the public for research and tourism purposes. Nevertheless, hiking activities are not encouraged in the jungle area due to the significant number of elephants to prevent accidents among tourists. Moreover, the Perak State Parks Corporation has prohibited tourists from entering more than 1 km from the lake to the forest to ensure tourists' safety. 12 rangers from the Malaysian Armed Forces have also been appointed to guard the forest area since the area is also a Malaysian-Thailand border.

Although Royal Belum State Park is opened to the public as a tourist spot, the State Government aims to develop the area for exclusive tourism to preserve it as a nature site and actively carry out nature conservation works by limiting tourists. This decision is supported by its status as a royal state park, recognized by the Sultan of Perak to control the number of hotels constructed and other types of

development in this area. The State Government is also being ordered to report monthly to the Sultan of Perak on any planned development.

## **Houseboats in Royal Belum State Park**

According to the houseboat operators, the houseboats started operating unofficially in 2000, with a few houseboats parked at the Pulau Banding Jetty as alternative accommodation to hotels, resorts, and campsites. In addition, houseboats were used for transportation purposes besides the tourism boat (speedboat) to travel around the lake and stop at designated parking areas for water and land activities. Today, there are 26 houseboats actively operating in the Royal Belum State Park listed on the official portal of the Perak State Parks Corporation and registered with the Houseboat Association in 2020.

The management and operation of houseboats in Royal Belum State Park are systematic and controlled by an authority called the Houseboat Association. All houseboats here must be registered with this association. This association is being established to make sure all houseboats are operated according to the regulations enforced by the Perak State Parks Corporation and avoid any issues related to the tourist's safety and environmental protection. The corporation also stated that only 35 houseboats could be operated to avoid congestion and pollution at the Pulau Banding Jetty, where all houseboats are parked, and at the surrounding lake area. The Houseboat Association is likely superior to Royal Belum State Park, compared to other National Parks in Malaysia, besides accessibility. This area can be easily accessed as the Pulau Banding Jetty is on the main highway of Perak-Kelantan.

## **Issues on Houseboats in Royal Belum State Park**

The tourism sector boomed in Royal Belum State Park after 2005, where many hotels and campsites were starting to be built in the lake and surrounding area. However, after the Pandemic Covid-19 occurred in the country and Movement Control Order (MCO) was implemented, the number of tourists to this area decreased. As a result, a few hotels have been closed temporarily and permanently. In addition, the number of tourists who visited houseboats has also decreased, especially during weekdays since the pandemic, but focusing only on local tourists from the Perak state.

Ensuring houseboats' tourists' safety is an issue when the houseboats are parked outside the Pulau Banding Jetty and when tourists are carrying out activities in the forest. This is due to the lack of the number of rangers on duty to guide the forest area. Although the number of rangers has been increased from 20 to 60, the broad area of the forest and the priority given to controlling illegal activities on wild animals at the border area have been a constraint to allow rangers to ensure the safety of all tourists. In addition, although the accommodation and package fees given for houseboats tourists are much lower than other hotels, Royal Belum State Lake tourism is generally costly compared to other national parks. The speed boat to surround the lake area costs RM700 for a maximum of 10 people and permit free costs RM25 per entry for tourists, and a research permit costs RM100 per year for researchers.

Houseboats' operations had also negatively impacted the Royal Belum State Park when there were issues with the waste management and operators' behavior during the early establishment. It was only in 2020 when all houseboats were regulated to have their septic tank for waste management after realizing the water pollution done on the lake. Operators were also reported to illegally hunt and kill numbers of deer in the forest for food during their stay without permission from the Perak State Parks Corporation. However, this issue has been overcome by the increased awareness among the operators to protect flora and fauna. Although Royal Belum State Park is preserved as a nature site and its status as a royal state park is recognized by the Sultan of Perak, there are some new proposals for new hotel development surrounding the area. This issue occurred due to the pressure on generating income to develop the economic sector of the State Government. The construction of new hotels may also be a

competition to the houseboats. It may affect the number of tourists who select houseboats as their accommodations and traveling transportation around the lake.

Moreover, as well as other tourist accommodations in Royal Belum State Park, houseboats are also affected by the pandemic Covid-19 from March 2020 until today. Table 2 shows the domestic and foreign number of tourists arrivals to the Royal Belum State Park and income generated from 2019 until July 2021. It is shown that both tourists' arrivals and income generated have decreased due to the implementation of the Movement Restricted Order (MCO) in the country and the closing of its border.

**Table 2:** Number of Tourists' Arrivals to Royal Belum State Park and Income (2019-2021)

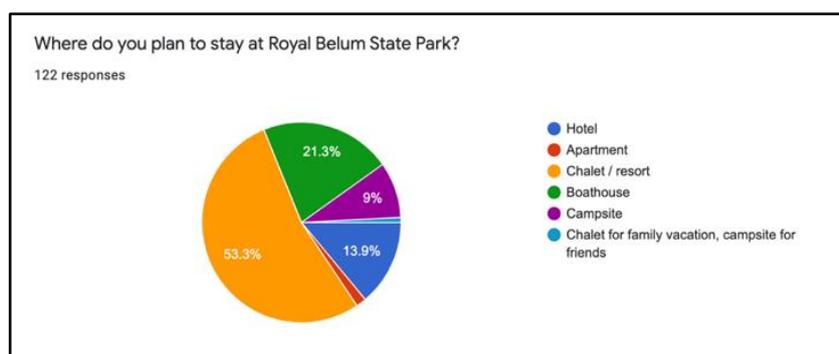
No.	Year	Domestic Tourists (people)	Foreign Tourists (people)	Total Tourists (people)	Income (RM)
1	January 2021 - July 2021	986	11	997	0
2	2020	9,708	505	10,213	254,301
3	2019	25,086	3,586	28,672	610,488

Source: Perak State Parks Corporations, 2021

### Tourists Expectation and Satisfaction

A questionnaire survey was carried out to identify tourists' expectations (to tourists who have not yet visited Royal Belum State Park) and tourists' satisfaction (to tourists who have visited Royal Belum State Park) with facilities and activities provided, including houseboats and their selection of accommodation. Questionnaires were distributed randomly to the public through an online google form to both respondents who have not yet visited and have visited the state park.

Of 122 respondents in the tourists' expectation survey, 21.3% have chosen a houseboat as a *'place to stay during their visit in the future'*, besides chalet/resort, hotel, campsite, apartment, and chalet/campsite (Figure 4). While, from 38 respondents in the tourists' satisfaction survey, 47.4% selected houseboats as *'place they have stayed'* during their last visit to the Royal Belum State Park (Figure 5). This survey showed that houseboat is well known among tourists and chosen as one of the Royal Belum State Lake accommodations besides hotels, chalets, apartments, and resorts. Tourists also stated that most of the information on this area is gained from other *'tourists' and 'houseboat operators' blogs and 'social media accounts'*, but less information from the Official Portal of Perak State Parks Corporation or other state government portals.



**Figure 4:** Questionnaire Results on Tourists' Expectations

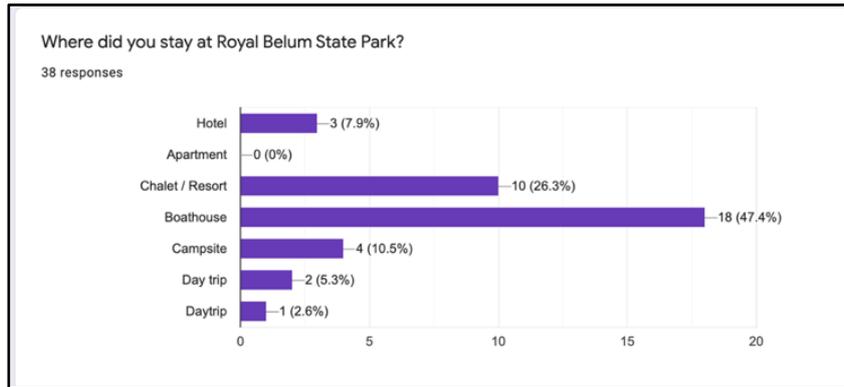


Figure 5: Questionnaire Results on Tourists' Satisfaction

## CONCLUSIONS

Findings showed that houseboats are a potential accommodation and infrastructure that needs to be developed as a new tourism product, providing an alternative to hotels, chalets, resorts, and campsites. Houseboats also provide cheaper accommodation for the tourists while also being used as transportation as the tourism boat (speed boat) to move around the lake. The number of houseboats operating is also controlled by the Houseboat Association to prevent water pollution and congestion in the Pulau Banding Jetty area. Nevertheless, issues on houseboats are also raised, such as decreasing tourists due to the pandemic, tourists' safety, and lack of promotion.

Due to the high potential and opportunities to promote Royal Belum State Park as one of the World Heritage Natural Sites and a critical Perak State tourism product, several recommendations on the houseboats' development may be considered. These include proper guidelines and regulations for houseboat operators to ensure tourists' safety and protection during their stay on the houseboats by the Houseboat Association. Perak State Parks Corporation should also promote the houseboats in the official portal and through travel agencies and tourist guides. The State Government's proactive action is also needed to protect and increase marketing activities by identifying the "selling point" and using this as a branding strategy for Royal Belum State Park for foreign and local tourists to boost the economy among tourism players in this area.

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## CONTRIBUTION OF AUTHORS

R.R.R. and N.A.K. conceived of the presented idea. R.R.R. wrote the manuscript with support from N.A.K. on technical part. A.A. supervised during data collection at the case study and A-A.A.A. lead analysis on the questionnaire results.

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