

# ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION OF WORLD HERITAGE BRAND OF PROTECTED AREAS: A CASE OF KINABALU PARK

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## ABSTRACT

*The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) designates World Heritage Sites (WHS) of outstanding universal value to cultural or natural heritage. The highest recognition or honor that the site/property can receive is the designation of a site/property as a UNESCO WHS. This can play an imperative role in the long-term sustainability of protected areas through developing greater visitor and community understanding, appreciation of the WHS concept and acknowledging the outstanding universal values of individual WHS properties. However, the role that WHS brand plays can only materialize if the communication of the brand is effective. Drawing on this background, the current research assessed the effective communication of WHS brand of a UNESCO WHS in Malaysia, namely Kinabalu Park (KP). Specifically, it aimed to achieve the following three objectives: 1) to examine visitors' awareness of KP's WHS listing; 2) to examine the extent to which KP's WHS listing has impacted the park's visitor numbers, and 3) to analyze visitors' perceived meaning attached to KP's WHS listing. Quantitative data were collected both onsite and online and analyzed using descriptive statistics. Primary results indicated an ineffective communication of KP's WHS brand, as evidenced by the inability of visitors to recognize the brand or what it embodied, as well as their assignment of a greater tourism meaning/value,*



*instead of conservation, to KP's WHS designation. It was also discovered that there was an increase in the park's visitor numbers post-designation, though it was arguable that the increase could be attributable to other intervening factors. The results emphasized the need for KP's management to properly follow the WHS brand guidelines stipulated by the World Heritage Committee and create a better interpretation of KP's WHS designation for a more effective communication of the brand.*

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## INTRODUCTION

As of November 2021, there are 1154 sites or properties worldwide designated as UNESCO WHS (UNESCO, 2021a). The designation of a site/property as a UNESCO WHS is probably the highest recognition or honor that the site/property can receive (Shackley, 1998). It implies that the site/property is “the best of the best” (Luly & Valentine, 1998). Furthermore, being listed as a WHS communicates the site's/property's outstanding universal value(s) for which the World Heritage Convention stands (King, 2011; Dewar, du Cros & Li, 2012; UNESCO, 2021b). In other words, WHS has become a brand that conveys the message that a site/property is exceptional, of interest not only to one nation but also to the whole world. The prestigious values associated with WHS have positioned it as an “elite brand” (Hall & Piggin, 2003), “top brand” (Buckley, 2004), or “international brand” (Dewar, du Cros & Li, 2012; Marcotte & Bourdeau, 2012). The international connotation of WHS has made it even more recognizable and effective at preserving heritage values compared to domestic brands such as nature reserves or forest parks (Wang & Yuan, 2020).

Apart from communicating the message that a site/property has a value that the international community recognizes, the WHS brand also plays a vital role in conserving natural and cultural heritage considered to possess one or more of the outstanding universal values outlined in the World Heritage Convention (UNESCO, 2021d). Several researchers such as

King and Halpenny (2014) and Wuepper and Patry (2017) have shown that the WHS brand can develop greater visitor and community appreciation of natural and cultural heritage, thus, prompting them to help protect heritage.

Nonetheless, the values or benefits of the WHS brand can only materialize if the locals and visitors can recognize the brand or recall what it denotes. In other words, the WHS brand will be ineffective at communicating a site's outstanding universal value(s) and the importance of conserving it if locals and visitors did not understand and appreciate the meaning of the WHS brand (King & Halpenny, 2014), or they did not understand why a WHS should be valued and sustained (King & Halpenny, 2014; Wuepper & Patry, 2017).

Moreover, if the communication of the WHS brand is not done right, it may lead to negative implications. Several researchers (Shackley, 1998; Ryan & Silvanto, 2009; King & Halpenny, 2014; Wang & Yuan, 2020) have discovered that when a site attains the status of WHS, it tends to attract a large crowd of visitors, resulting in over-tourism or invasive tourism of the site. Li, Wu & Cai (2008) argued that the designation of a place as a WHS implies that the site is "a definite must-see". This is particularly true when the WHS brand is used as a marketing magnet to draw visitors and their tourist dollars (Buckley, 2004; Fyall & Radic, 2006; Li et al., 2008; Poria, Reichel & Cohen, 2011; Hosseini, Stefaniec & Hosseini, 2021), instead of an instrument to convey the message of heritage conservation. For example, Buckley (2004) pointed out an increase in visitors, particularly international visitors, to Australian national parks after their WHS listings due to tour operators publishing the designation in their marketing media. What makes the situation even more cynical is that many of the WHS visitors are not even aware of the WHS brand, let alone understand the meaning attached to the brand (Poria et al., 2011; Dewar et al., 2012; King & Halpenny, 2014), rendering the WHS brand weak brand equity. Those visitors – so-called WHS baggers – usually visit WHS to "collect" WHS, to check off WHS from their bucket lists (Gray, 2016; Dowson, 2021; Chandran, 2021), a situation that may lead to what several reporters call "UNESCO-cide", or the genocide of UNESCO WHS (The Guardian, 2017; The National, 2017).

The impacts of over-tourism are multidimensional. Environmentally, over-tourism has been associated with problems such as water, air, land and

noise pollutions, biodiversity loss, waste management issues, infrastructure and facility congestion (including traffic pressure and overcrowding in public places) as well as physical damage to natural sites (Dodds & Butler, 2019; Atzori, 2020; Maidin et al., 2021; Ghaderi, Hall & Ryan, 2022).

Despite the above findings on the linear relationship between WHS designation and a site's popularity and visitor number, some other studies have presented contradictory arguments. To illustrate, Yan and Morrison (2008) and Hall and Piggin (2015) argued that a site's increased popularity and visitor numbers post-WHS designation is only marginal. The increase may be attributable to other intervening factors (Buckley, 2004; Poria, Reichel & Cohen, 2011) such as the overall tourism growth of a country (Hall & Piggin, 2015), an over-emphasis on the World Heritage brand in marketing media by tour operators (Buckley, 2004) and infrastructure improvement after a destination is designated as a World Heritage site (du Cros, 2006).

Thus, it is evident that the effective communication of the WHS brand of a protected site is of utmost importance. This effective communication can only be achieved if the WHS brand is communicated in such a way that it 1) represents the interdependence of the world's natural and cultural diversity (UNESCO, 2021b); 2) identifies the properties protected by the WH Convention and inscribed on the official WH list (UNESCO, 2021b); and 3) represents the outstanding universal values for which the WH Convention stands (King, 2011; Dewar, du Cros & Li, 2012; UNESCO, 2021b).

Drawing on the above background, the current research sets out to assess the effective communication of the WHS brand of one of the UNESCO WHS properties in Malaysia, namely Kinabalu Park (KP). Specifically, it aims to achieve the following three objectives:

- 1) To examine the awareness among visitors about the UNESCO WHS listing of KP.
- 2) To explore the extent to which WHS listing of KP has impacted the visitor number to the park.
- 3) To analyze visitors' perceived meaning attached to KP's WHS listing.

The findings will contribute to the existing body of WHS brand

research within the Malaysian context. Furthermore, it will also provide the management of KP with practical implications to ensure the communication of the WHS brand is done right following the guidelines provided by the World Heritage Committee and to ensure conservation will be at the forefront of the park's agenda.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### **Research Setting**

KP is located in Sabah, Malaysia, in the northern part of Borneo. The park comprises three prominent mountains, namely Mount Kinabalu (4,095 m), Mount Tambuyukon (2,579 m) and Mount Templar (1,133 m). In 1964, KP was gazetted as a park. Under the Parks Enactment 1984, the park is vested in the Board of Trustees of Sabah Parks (a governmental agency under the state's Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture) for a leasehold period of 999 years. Covering an area of 754 sq km, KP boundaries stretch over 100km long in three districts where the park's substations are situated, namely 1) KP Headquarters (the park's main entry point in Ranau), Poring Hot Springs substation (Ranau), Mesilau substation (Ranau), Monggis sub-station (Ranau), Sayap substation (Kota Belud), Serinsim substation (Kota Marudu) and Nalapak substation (Kota Marudu) (Sabah Parks, 2021).

On 2nd December 2000, KP was designated as a UNESCO WHS, making it Malaysia's first World Natural Heritage site (Sabah Parks, 2021; UNESCO, 2021c). The inscription of KP was based on two of the WH outstanding universal values, namely Criterion ix and Criterion x (Sabah Parks, 2021; UNESCO, 2021c) that can be summarized as "Kinabalu Park has a diverse biota and high endemism. The altitudinal and climatic gradient from tropical forest to alpine conditions combined with precipitous topography, diverse geology, and frequent climate oscillations provide conditions ideal for developing new species. KP contains high biodiversity with representatives from more than half the families of all flowering plants. The majority of Borneo's mammals, birds, amphibians and invertebrates (many threatened and vulnerable) occur in the Park" (extracted from KP Nomination File available on the website of Sabah Parks).

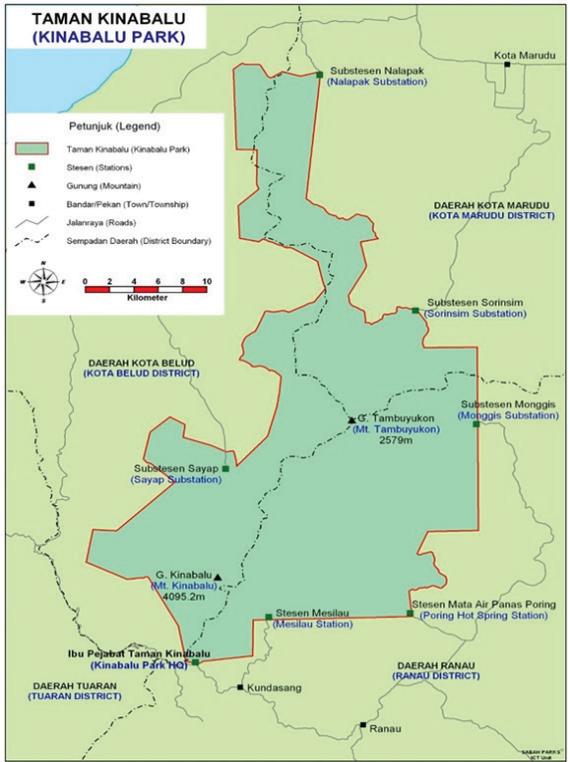


Figure 1. Map of KP

Source: Sabah Parks, (2021)

### Research Design

The current research used a quantitative research design that employed survey as the strategy of inquiry to investigate and describe visitors' awareness of KP's UNESCO WHS listing and its meaning, the influence of the park's WHS designation on visitor numbers, and the effectiveness of the park's WHS label in communicating and instilling the value of heritage conservation among park visitors.

### Sampling

The sampling population consisted of all individuals who had previously visited KP (the Park Headquarters, Poring Hot Springs substation, Mesilau substation, Sayap substation, Serinsim substation, Monggis

substation and/or Nalapak substation). Due to the large sampling population (the average annual number of KP visitors has been about 710,000 since 2010) and the researchers' inability to identify each KP visitor individually, a convenience sampling method was employed to draw the study sample.

## **Instrument**

Questionnaires were used to collect data. The questionnaires comprised several sections such as the following:

- Section A: Respondents' profile (gender, age, nationality, education, and career field).
- Section B: General questions asking about the respondents' ability to recognize the WHS brand.
- Section C: KP visit information (the substations of KP visited, the number of times visited, and reasons for visiting).
- Section D: Questions to examine visitors' awareness of KP's WHS listing and its meaning (outstanding universal value, tourism value, and conservation value).
- Section E: A question on the respondents' prior visits to other UNESCO WHS.

The questions/items included in the questionnaires were primarily adapted from several prior studies that have explored the WHS brand in terms of visitor awareness and influence on tourism visitation and conservation, particularly Poria et al. (2011), Dewar et al. (2012), King and Halpenny (2014), Wang and Yuan (2020), and Anh and Chen (2020).

## **Data Collection**

There were two stages of data collection. The first stage took place from June until August 2020, when COVID-19 travel restrictions were eased and domestic tourism in Sabah returned. It involved onsite data collection where the researchers distributed self-administered questionnaires to visitors at the KP Headquarters and the Serinsim substation. For the other substations of KP, several locals who lived close to the substations were employed to distribute the questionnaires onsite. The first data collection stage ceased when COVID-19 travel restrictions were re-enforced and domestic tourism was upended.

Due to the small sample size from the first stage of data collection (76 respondents, mainly from the KP Headquarters), the researchers decided to conduct the second stage of data collection, which took place from 22nd November until 10th December 2021. It involved using an online questionnaire shared on popular social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp. In addition, a filter question, “Have you been to Kinabalu Park?” was added to the online questionnaire to ensure only respondents who had previously visited KP would be included in the data analysis.

KP’s visitor arrival statistics from 1989 until 2020 were also obtained from the Public Relations Officer of Sabah Parks via email.

## **Data Analysis**

Responses from 470 respondents were used for data analysis (all 76 respondents from the onsite data collection and 394 from the online data collection). Twenty-two respondents from the online data collection were excluded from data analysis because they had not previously visited KP (they had only heard or read about the park). The response rate represented about 25% of the average daily number of KP visitors.

Data were analyzed via IBM SPSS Statistics 26.0 using descriptive statistics. Specifically, frequencies were obtained to analyze the data in Section A, Section B, Section C, Section E, and visitors’ awareness of KP’s WHS listing. In addition, means and Standard Deviations were used to examine the data related to visitors’ understanding of KP’s WHS brand in terms of the outstanding universal value, tourism value, and conservation value. Finally, graphs were used to analyze KP’s visitor numbers.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Respondents’ Demographic Profile and Prior Visits to KP**

Table 1 shows significantly more female respondents (65%) than male respondents (35%). The respondents were of different ages where 33% were within the 18 – 24 age range, 27% in the 25 – 34 age range, 23% in the 35 – 44 age group, 15% in the 45 – 55 age group, and only about

2% of the respondents were aged 55 or above. Most of the respondents were from Sabah (85%). The remaining respondents were from Sarawak (9%) and Peninsular Malaysia (7%). Moreover, most respondents had obtained tertiary education where 77% had an undergraduate degree and 10% had a postgraduate degree. The rest of the respondents had primary and/or secondary education (13%). Only 1% did not complete any formal education. About 60% of the respondents were employed in the public and private sectors, 15% were either unemployed or self-employed, and a little over a quarter were students.

Table 2 indicates that all the respondents had been to one or more of KP's substations, either for a single visit or for repeat visits. Among all the park substations, Poring Hot Springs recorded the highest number of visits (85%), followed by KP Headquarters (75%), Mesilau (57%), Serinsim (38%), Sayap (30%), Monggis (25%) and Nalapak (23%). This result aligns with the KP visitor statistics provided by Sabah Parks (see Figure 2) that show Poring Hot Springs and KP Headquarters significantly receiving much higher visitors than the other substations. Both areas are located in the Ranau district and the distance between them is about 40km.

The tourism marketing on KP has brought greater attention to Poring Hot Springs and the KP Headquarters because these areas contain the significant attractions of KP, such as Mount Kinabalu, the natural hot springs whose water is believed to have curative properties, and the canopy walkway over KP's rainforests. Furthermore, Poring Hot Springs and the KP Headquarters are easily accessible by a diverse range of transportation, have a decent road network and are within a relatively short drive from Kota Kinabalu, the capital city of Sabah (for example, it takes less than two hours to drive from the capital city to the KP Headquarters). The other substations are less marketed, and their accessibility is challenged by a relatively long distance from Kota Kinabalu (for instance, it takes about three hours to drive from the capital city to the Serinsim substation) and limited by a particular type of transportation (for example, a 4WD vehicle would be preferred to get to the more remote substations such as Sayap and Monggis due to the poor condition of roads).

**Table 1. Respondents' Demographic Profile**

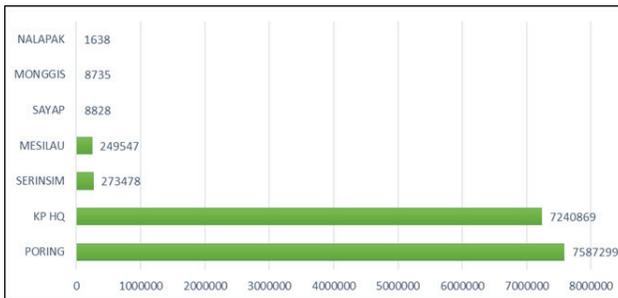
Gender	Male	35.5%	Education	No formal education	1%
	Female	64.5%		Non-tertiary education	12.7%
Age	18 – 24	33.0%	Employment	Employed	58.4%
	25 – 34	26.9%		Not formally employed	15.2%
	35 – 44	22.8%		Student	26.4%
	45 – 54	14.7%			
	55 and above	2.5%			
Nationality	Sabah	84.8%	Peninsular Malaysia		6.6%
	Sarawak	8.6%			

Source: Author

**Table 2. Respondent' Prior Visits to KP**

Poring Hot Springs (84.8%)	KP Headquarters (74.6%)	Mesilau (56.9%)	Serinsim (37.6%)	Sayap (29.9%)	Monggis (24.9%)	Nalapak (22.8%)
1 time (14.2%)	1 time (22.8%)	1 time (20.8%)	1 time (15.7%)	1 time (14.7%)	1 time (13.2%)	1 time (10.7%)
2 times (29.9%)	2 times (24.9%)	2 times (19.8%)	2 times (12.7%)	2 times (8.6%)	2 times (7.1%)	2 times (8.1%)
3 times (17.3%)	3 times (9.1%)	3 times (7.6%)	3 times (3.6%)	3 times (3.0%)	3 times (1.5%)	3 times (1.5%)
4 times & more (23.4%)	4 times & more (17.8%)	4 times & more (8.6%)	4 times & more (5.6%)	4 times & more (3.6%)	4 times & more (3.0%)	4 times & more (2.5%)

Source: Author



**Figure 2. KP Visitor Statistics by Substations 1998 – 2020 (Sabah Parks)**

Source: Author

## **Respondents' UNESCO WHS Logo Recognition and Awareness of KP's WHS Listing**

To assess the respondents' ability to recognize the logo of UNESCO WHS, they were shown the logo and asked to indicate if they could identify it or otherwise. Respondents who stated an ability to recognize the logo were then asked to provide the full name of the logo. As shown in Table 3, about three-quarters of the respondents did not recognize the logo of UNESCO WHS (71%). Of the remaining respondents who indicated an ability to identify the logo, about 67% of them could correctly identify the logo. The other 33% of respondents who wrongly identified the UNESCO WHS logo gave such answers as UNESCO, Sabah Parks, World Heritage Center and Kinabalu Park.

In terms of the respondents' awareness of KP's UNESCO WHS listing, most of them were aware of the park's listing (87%) before they even visited KP, through such channels as marketing media (88%), social media (60%) and official websites of Sabah Parks and Sabah Tourism Board (51%). When asked about the reason(s) for the designation of KP as a UNESCO WHS, the two top-rated reasons were Criterion vii and Criterion x. Moreover, some respondents associated KP's UNESCO WHS listing with the park's cultural values (Criterion iii and Criterion iv). In fact, KP is listed as a UNESCO Natural WHS for Criterion ix and Criterion x.

This result shows that while most respondents knew KP was a UNESCO WHS, they vaguely understood why KP was a UNESCO WHS. The result is not entirely unexpected because most of the information on KP makes a mention of the park's UNESCO WHS listing (especially using the statement "Malaysia's first UNESCO World Heritage Site") without explaining why the park is a UNESCO WHS nor the meaning attached to KP's UNESCO WHS status. This result is also in line with the findings of some previous studies, such as King and Halpenny (2014) who revealed that although WHS was launched over 40 years ago in Australia, only 8% of their respondents recognized the brand in the selected WHS, while Dewar et al. (2012) discovered that average visitors to the Historic Center of Macao had only a vague understanding of WHS, and Poria et al. (2015) found a moderate level of visitor awareness of Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth's WHS title.

Thus, it may be summed up that the communication of KP as a UNESCO WHS is ineffective because many respondents could not even recognize the WHS logo. While most of the respondents knew KP was a UNESCO WHS before they visited the park, they did not understand what the WHS brand signified or embodied for KP. In other words, they failed to understand precisely the outstanding universal values for which KP stood, and such an understanding is one of the three objectives that should be accomplished by the WHS brand (UNESCO, 2021b).

**Table 3. Respondents’ UNESCO WHS Logo Recognition and Awareness of KP’s WHS Listing**

UNESCO WHS Logo Recognition		Awareness of KP as UNESCO WHS		Source of info on KP as UNESCO WHS	
Yes	29.4%	Yes	86.7%	Marketing media	87.8%
No	70.6%	No	13.3%	Social media	59.4%
				Official websites	50.8%
				During a visit	40.6%
				Family & friends	24.4%
Why is KP a UNESCO WHS?					
Criterion iii <sup>a</sup>		30.5%		Criterion viii <sup>e</sup>	54.3%
Criterion iv <sup>b</sup>		28.9%		Criterion ix <sup>f</sup>	66.5%
Criterion v <sup>c</sup>		58.4%		Criterion x <sup>g</sup>	82.7%
Criterion vii <sup>d</sup>		67.5%			

<sup>a</sup>Because KP bears a unique testimony to Dusun communities’ traditions.

<sup>b</sup>Because KP represents the Dusun communities’ history.

<sup>c</sup>Because KP is an outstanding example of human interaction with the environment.

<sup>d</sup>Because KP contains areas of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance.

<sup>e</sup>Because KP represents major stages of earth’s history.

<sup>f</sup>Because KP has an exceptional array of naturally functioning ecosystems.

<sup>g</sup>Because KP contains important natural habitats for in-situ flora & fauna conservation.

Source: Author

### Impact of KP’s WHS Listing on Visitor Number

Has KP’s WHS listing increased the number of visitors to the park? Some previous studies have indicated a positive relationship between WHS designation and visitor number, but does this also hold true for KP? As shown in Figure 2, there seems to be an increase in the number of visitors to KP since the park’s WHS designation. To demonstrate the increase, a comparison was made between 1989 – 1999 visitor numbers (10 years before

designation) and 2000 – 2010 visitor numbers (10 years after designation). Overall, there was an increase of 28% in KP's visitor numbers since the park's WHS designation. In addition, a comparison of domestic and foreign visitors revealed that since KP's WHS listing, foreign visitors increased significantly more than domestic visitors, with increase percentages of 64% and 16%, respectively.

Is the increase in KP's visitor numbers since the park's WHS designation attributable to the designation itself, though? As indicated in Table 4, the respondents did not choose KP's WHS listing as the top reason for visiting the park. Instead, their visits were driven primarily by KP's being one of the top tourist attractions in Sabah (77%) and KP's attractive features such as scenery and activities (64%) and cool climate (63%).

Other intervening factors may also explain the increase in KP's visitor numbers. For example, in line with Hall and Piggin's (2015) finding, the increase in KP's visitor numbers since the park's WHS designation may be partly caused by the overall tourism growth in Sabah. The state's visitor arrival statistics have shown a steady increase in visitor numbers within the 2002 – 2012 timeframe, except for 2008 (global financial crisis) and 2009 (H1N1 pandemic).

Another possible explanation for the increase in KP's visitor numbers since the park's WHS designation is improvement in the overall state's infrastructure and specifically the park's tourist facilities (a factor also mentioned by du Cross, 2006). For instance, Sabah Parks reported increasing numbers of visitors to Poring Hot Springs substation and the KP Headquarters in line with the increase in the number and range of accommodation facilities in these areas. Also, in 1998, Sabah Parks privatized the accommodation and catering facilities in KP to a private travel and hospitality company called Sutera Sanctuary Lodges to raise the quality of the park's accommodation and catering facilities to meet international standards. Therefore, the increase in the number and range of facilities and the improved standards of existing facilities may have attracted more visitors to KP, particularly overnight visitors. Thus, the result of this study supports the findings of some previous studies, such as Dewar et al. (2012) and Poria et al. (2015), that WHS title does not necessarily serve as a magnet for tourists.

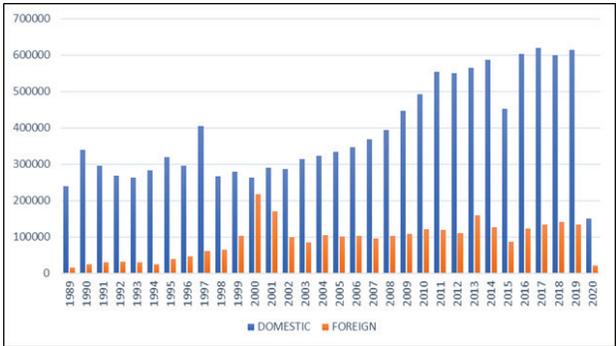


Figure 2 Kinabalu Park Visitor Statistics 1998 – 2020 (Sabah Parks)

Source: Author

Table 4. Respondents' Reasons for Visiting KP

Because KP is one of the top tourist attractions in Sabah.	77.2%
Because of the scenery and activities at KP (hiking, mountain climbing, birdwatching, camping, etc.).	63.5%
Because of the cool climate of KP.	62.9%
Because of the flora and fauna species at KP.	50.3%
<b>Because KP is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.</b>	<b>50.3%</b>
Because KP is easily accessible.	42.6%
Because of the tourist facilities available at KP (restaurants, accommodations, etc.).	41.6%
Because a trip to KP is easy to arrange.	37.6%
Because it's cheap to KP.	33.5%
Other reasons (school trip or a stopover).	1%

Source: Author

## Respondents' Perceived Meaning Attached to KP's WHS Listing

How did the respondents interpret KP's WHS designation? How did they perceive the meaning attached to the designation? As shown in Table 5, while the respondents perceived KP's WHS designation to have both conservation and tourism implications, they indicated a stronger association between KP's WHS listing and the park's tourism value (tourism's total mean score of 19.25 compared to conservation's total mean score of 17.92). In other words, the respondents considered KP's WHS status to have

a greater tourism meaning or value, such as the use of the park’s WHS designation as a marketing tool to promote KP and to increase Sabah’s international image and reputation as a nature-based tourism destination, rather than using KP’s WHS designation to emphasize park conservation, increase visitor’s interest in learning about the park’s outstanding universal values and encourage responsible visitor behavior. This result echoes the findings of some previous studies such as Buckley (2004), Fyall and Radic (2006), Li et al. (2008) and Poria et al. (2011) that WHS designation has become a marketing tool or a magnet to attract high numbers of visitors, particularly in developing countries Hosseini et al., 2021).

**Table 5. Respondents’ Perceived Meanings Attached to KP’s WHS Listing**

<b>Conservation statements</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
Being a UNESCO WHS involves the conservation of KP.	4.55	.347
The designation of KP as a UNESCO WHS makes me interested in learning about the park’s cultural and natural values.	4.36	.568
The designation of KP as a UNESCO WHS encourages me to behave appropriately when visiting the park (For example, not throwing rubbish, not picking plants, walking on designated trails, following park rules).	4.48	.448
As a UNESCO WHS, priority should be given to managing KP as a protected area	4.53	.363
<b>TOTAL SCORES</b>	<b>17.92</b>	<b>1.320</b>
<b>Tourism statements</b>		
UNESCO WHS can be used as a marketing tool used to promote KP.	4.75	.541
As a UNESCO WHS, KP increases Sabah’s image of natural beauty internationally	4.82	.460
As a UNESCO WHS, priority should be given to managing KP as a must-see tourist attraction in Sabah.	4.77	.594
Becoming a UNESCO WHS is the highest reputation a place like KP can receive.	4.91	.316
<b>TOTAL SCORES</b>	<b>19.25</b>	<b>1.429</b>

Source: Author

## CONCLUSION

Using KP as the research setting, this research assessed the effective communication of the WHS brand of one of the UNESCO WHS properties

in Malaysia, namely Kinabalu Park located in Sabah, Malaysian Borneo. Specifically, it aimed to achieve the following three objectives: 1) to examine visitors' awareness of KP's WHS listing; 2) to examine the extent to which KP's WHS listing had impacted the park's visitor numbers, and 3) to analyse visitors' perceived meaning attached to KP's WHS listing. Results indicated that most visitors failed to recognize the logo of UNESCO WHS, which implied an ineffectiveness in the communication of the WHS brand. Although visitors were aware of KP's WHS status before they even visited the park, they knew neither the nature of KP's WHS designation nor the meaning or implication of the designation. Moreover, since the inscription of KP on the WHS list, there has been a steady increase in the number of park visitors, particularly international visitors. Nonetheless, the increase might be attributable to some intervening factors such as Sabah's overall tourism growth since 2002, infrastructure improvement, increase in KP's number and range of facilities as well as improved standards of the park's existing tourist facilities. Additionally, visitors attached a greater tourism meaning or value to KP's WHS designation than conservation meaning or value.

These results, thus, call for Sabah Parks, the management of KP, to take the necessary action to remedy the failure in effectively communicating the value of KP's WHS designation to the general public members and visitors alike. One such action requires Sabah Parks to properly follow the guidelines on presenting WHS information on a World Heritage plaque, as stipulated by the World Heritage Committee. To the researchers' best knowledge, the only visible sign indicating KP's WHS designation is located at the entrance of KP Headquarters, with words that read "KINABALU PARK, GAZETTED ON 16 JANUARY 1964. WORLD HERITAGE SITE, INSCRIBED ON 02 DECEMBER 2000". While the sign is easily visible to park visitors and shows the World Heritage emblem (and Sabah Parks' logo), it neither briefly describes KP's outstanding universal value(s) nor mentions the international recognition conferred by the inscription on the World Heritage list.

Additionally, there should be a better interpretation of KP's WHS designation. For example, the interpretive information on KP, provided by Sabah Parks, destination management organizations and tour operators, should not be limited to the statement "Kinabalu Park is Malaysia's first UNESCO World Heritage Site". But it should also explain KP's outstanding

universal values or the criteria for which the park was listed as a UNESCO WHS and the meaning attached to the designation, with an emphasis on the conservation value of WHS so that the WHS brand is not simply considered and used as a marketing tool to increase visitor numbers. As highlighted by Wan Shamsuddin and Harun (2021), interpretation inspires conservation; thus, conservation should be made a top priority when designing interpretive tools for heritage sites.

Furthermore, based on the result associated with KP's visitor statistics by substations, Sabah Parks may need to apply a principle of dispersion to distribute the park's visitor numbers more equally among the different substations, instead of having the visitor numbers heavily concentrated in only two areas (KP Headquarters and Poring Hot Springs substation). This may require restructuring marketing information on KP by de-emphasizing the park's iconic attractions (Mount Kinabalu and hot springs) to some degree and bringing more attention to the park's often overlooked but equally important attractions located in the other substations. However, it may be worth mentioning that encouraging people to visit the more remote substations may require more substantive measures such as improving accessibility to these remote substations. Dispersing visitor numbers to the different sections of KP is vital in controlling visitor impacts on the park's physical and sociocultural environments and distributing the economic benefits of KP tourism more evenly among the local communities.

Nonetheless, the study is not without limitations. About 85% of the responses incorporated in data analysis were gathered via an online survey, which could result in an inability to connect with people from far-off, remote locations with no access to the internet. Moreover, all of the respondents included in the study were domestic visitors. Thus, the study's findings have yet to represent the perspectives of internet-challenged individuals and international visitors, which can be recommended for future research. Furthermore, the study is focused on only one UNESCO WHS property in Malaysia. Thus, there is still much room for investigation of all the five UNESCO WHS properties in Malaysia. Only then the body of knowledge associated with UNESCO WHS from Malaysian perspectives can truly be enhanced.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest with any individuals or organizations.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Ms. Christy Bidder was the main contributor to the study who created the research instrument, collected data, did data analysis and wrote the entire paper. Mr. Boyd Sun Fatt helped in the design of the research instrument and data collection. Dr. Spencer Hedley Mogindol helped analyze the data and wrote parts of Materials and Methods.

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