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INTRODUCTION

Policy makers in Malaysia primarily viewed ecotourism as a rural development strategy leading to sustainable development where the natural resources, the local community, the visitor and the other stakeholders could all benefit from tourism activities (Wearing, 2001:395). However, the success of this strategy depended on how government agencies and NGOs (Non Governmental Organisations) created supportive local community or host community participation in ecotourism and conservation projects.

In remote ecotourism destinations, activities such as slash and burn agriculture, cattle farming, hunting, fishing, wood collection, timber harvesting and mineral extraction were practised by the local people in their everyday lives. For some villages in the Lower Kinabatangan area of Sabah, such as Sukau and Batu Puteh, these activities have been a major part of their traditional culture for over a century (Vaz & Pyne, 1997:42-43). These activities, in fact, require substantial amounts of natural resources (water, trees, wildlife, minerals, and most of all land and soil) to sustain the increasing population. The implementation and enforcement of regulations related to protected areas, however, are sometimes very rigid. This situation may foster confusion and resentment in the local people who are accustomed to using such lands and resources. As a result, the local people may become opponents of ecotourism and conservation related projects, and, thus, undermine its operations (Ross & Wall, 1999:127; and Schulze & Suratman, 1999). This is the main obstacle to the success of ecotourism management processes toward sustainable local community participation: local people do not have control over and agreed-upon access to the resources they require.

In the 1980s, scientific research conducted into biodiversity by WWF (World Wide Fund) Malaysia claimed that the Lower Kinabatangan area, including Sukau Village, is an important area for wildlife conservation (Malim, 2002:4). This is because many forest areas in Lower Kinabatangan were converted into oil palm plantations. This situation has threatened to cause loss of biodiversity in the area. In fact the WWF’s study also revealed that the Lower Kinabatangan Floodplain had very good potential for nature-based tourism or ecotourism, because it is home to many rare and

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3This paper was presented at the 5th Tourism Educators Conference, title on “Tourism and Hospitality” in Penang, Malaysia, 3-4 August 2007.
endangered species such as the *Orang-utan*, Proboscis monkeys, Bornean elephants and the Sumatran rhinoceros (Malim, 2002:3). Therefore ecotourism may be one way that conservation strategies could contribute to raising the standard of living of the local people who are being affected by the decrease in these natural resources.

As a result, the Sabah state government began to recognise the high value of the Kinabatangan floodplain and the need to modify policy on land development in the area. In 1992 it approved, in principle, the need to establish conservation areas in Lower Kinabatangan. The Lower Kinabatangan area potentially became a “protected area” for wildlife when a new Wildlife Conservation Enactment established in December 1997 (Vaz & Pyne, 1997:8); and the sanctuary is protected under the State Land Ordinance (1930). In the early 1990s, WWF Malaysia in collaboration with the Ministry of Tourism, Environment, Science and Technology, produced the National Ecotourism Plan. In this plan, the Lower Kinabatangan area was highlighted as “an ecotourism hotspot” in Malaysia. In mid 1998, the *Partners for Wetlands Programme* was set up by WWF Malaysia and the Sabah Wildlife Department to actively seize opportunities for wetland management, conservation and restoration (Prudente & Balamurugan, 1999:41).

In principle, the stakeholders from the local community, oil palm plantations, the tourism industry, NGOs and relevant government agencies work together as partners to identify the wise use of the wetland towards a common purpose for economic development and conservation. Among the Partners for Wetland’s activities tree-planting, the development of community-based ecotourism models and elephant research are being implemented. Furthermore, a vision “Kinabatangan: A Corridor of Life” formulated by WWF in the year 2002 is intended to provide a guideline to stakeholders and industries in order to maintain the sustainable development of Kinabatangan, especially through ecotourism development. Subsequently, on January 15th, 2002, the Chief Minister of Sabah, Datuk Chong Kah Kiat, officially announced that Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary had been gazetted (Malim, 2002:5). From this background series of events, Sukau village has emerged as one of the best-known ecotourism destinations in the lower Kinabatangan area alongside Abai, Bilit and Batu Puteh village.
THE ADAPTED STAKEHOLDER-BASED EVALUATION APPROACH AND A COMBINATION OF DATA COLLECTION METHODS

This is the qualitative research method through case studies strategy from the perspective of critical ecotourism research (Lewis, 2003). There was a combination of data collection methods has been deployed during the fieldwork in this village, such as adapted participant observation method, focused and in-depth interviews, documentary research and a face to face interview survey (Robson, 2002; and Yin, 2003). This research is also considered and adapted “the stakeholder-base evaluation approach” (Mark & Shotland, 1985). This is because there are several stakeholders involved in ecotourism-related-conservation development in Sukau village. There is the Sabah Forest Department, the private lodge investors, the Sabah Wildlife Department, the World Wide Fund for Nature, Malaysia (WWF), the KOCP (Kinabatangan Orang-utan Conservation Project), the MESCOT (Model of Ecologically Sustainable Community), the local community and the tourists. To indicate the conflict of interests within these multiple stakeholders, the evaluation will be limited to their responses to the impact on their interests by the conservation programme of Kinabatangan Area.

In other words, this evaluation strategy, as termed by M.M. Mark & L.R. Shotland (1985:606), is a “stakeholder-based evaluation” or “participatory evaluation”. By adopting this approach, we can provide the views of the participants on conservation project-related tourism. In many cases in Sabah, when it comes to policy decision-making and implementation, the views of local people in the site of the programme are not taken into serious consideration or regarded “objectively”. The decisions made have regularly favoured “those who are in power at the local level but do not represent the true wishes of the people” (Sherlock, 2002:5). Thus, the issue of decision-making is all about conflict and negotiation processes, and will be a very important element of this research.

THE CONCEPT OF ECOTOURISM AND ECOTOURISTS IN TOURISM STUDIES

Terms such as green tourism, adventure tourism, natural history tourism, ecotourism and wildlife tourism are defined in general as “travel to natural areas and participation in nature-related activities without degrading the environment and preferably promoting natural resource
conservation”, and are used by the private sector and government agencies to promote “ecotourism” (Ti Teow Chuan, 1994:ix). Sabah is considered the most attractive and unique nature and adventure destination in Malaysia.

The above definition, however, is still inadequate because it does not mention the participation of local residents as an important element in the industry. The Ecotourism Society (1992), for instance, has defined the concept of “ecotourism” as:

> Purposeful travel to natural areas to understand the cultural and natural history of the environment, taking care not to alter the integrity of the ecosystem, while producing economic opportunities that make the conservation of natural resources financially beneficial to local citizens (Hawkins, 1994:261).

However, this definition is still inadequate in promoting community-based ecotourism, especially in aspects of control over resources such as land, capital, decision-making and so on. Thus the debates on what is the best definition of ecotourism continue among tourism scholars. To overcome these debates, Malaysia’s Ecotourism Master Plan (1996) adopted the official definition of ecotourism produced by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), of which Malaysia is a member. Ecotourism is:

> Environmentally responsible travel and visits to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features, both past and present), that promote conservation, has low visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local population (Mason, 2003).

Moreover, the problem in ecotourism development is also related to the question of who the “ecotourists” actually are. Tourists, in general terms, are people who leave their usual place of residence for more than one night but less than twelve months to visit places and who are “different” for the purposes of pleasure, leisure and self-fulfilment (Cohen, 1979; Theobold, 1994; and McIntosh et al., 1995). The motivations of the tourists to start their journey are strongly related to free time from work to travel in the “recreation cycle” (Krippendorf, 1987).

“Ecotourists”, on the other hand, are commonly known as a distinct and identifiable group who select a certain travel experience
and destination, namely that of nature-oriented experiences in pristine natural environments (Butler, 1980:5-12; and Eagles, 1992:3). However, there is an inherent risk in assuming that ecotourists are automatically an environmentally sensitive breed. There are two types of ecotourism (Cater, 1997). The first is a deep form of ecotourism, commonly represented by small, specialist-guided groups with highly responsible behaviour towards the natural environment. The second is a shallow form of ecotourism, those who visit a destination area for a few days, unlikely ever to return to the same place because they may be more interested in their travel experience and behave less responsibly towards the natural environment (Cater, 1997). This second group of ecotourists can possibly create adverse effects on the environment and the socio-cultural life of local communities in the destination areas if their presence is not controlled or managed carefully.

ECOTOURISM, PROTECTED AREA AND LOCAL COMMUNITY: THREE DIFFERENT SCENARIOS OF THE RELATIONSHIP

S. Nepal has provided three different scenarios based on the relationships between three main actors: tourism, national parks or protected areas, and local communities in the ecotourism development context (Nepal, 2000:74-76).

Firstly, Win-win-win Scenario. All three players or actors mutually benefit. Tourism enhances the management capability of the park. Therefore, favourable conditions for tourism and recreation opportunities are created. Local communities benefit from parks, and are encouraged to support conservation activities. The result is that tourism benefits local communities, and local attitudes toward tourism or tourists are favourable. Prospects for inter-cultural exchange are good.

Secondly, Win-win-lose Scenario. Tourism benefits local communities, but the park suffers from tourism impacts; tourism may benefit from the conservation efforts of the park but the impact on local communities may be negative (i.e. cultural impacts); visitors/tourists enjoy the opportunities provided by the park but do not contribute locally. Tourism benefits but both the parks and local communities lose. Local communities do not benefit from tourism, and tourism does not enhance but rather degrades the management capability of the park (Nepal, 2000).
Thirdly, Lose-lose-lose Scenario. All three players are affected negatively. In this scenario, environmental conditions degrade, tourists are discouraged from visiting the park, and local communities do not receive any economic benefits. Neither tourism nor the park is capable of fulfilling the needs of local communities. Local communities become hostile to tourists and cause severe impacts on the park by engaging in unsustainable activities.

Meanwhile that community participation is an essential concept in ecotourism development. The term “community participation”, like sustainability, has become a mantra for development agencies in less developed countries, for increased stakeholder participation is now being demanded by international organisations and many NGOs (Dalal-Clayton, Dent & Dubois, 2003:92-93). The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) developed this concept in the late 1970s to the majority of disadvantaged countries (communities), in the so-called Third World, could participate actively rather than passively in socio-economic development to achieve a greater capacity to advance their own interests and control their own livelihoods (Stiefel & Wolfe, 1994:3). Thus the term “participation” has become a voice for those excluded from the shaping of future development.

Many people and developmental organisations have defined the term “participation”. Sometimes it is difficult to understand whether those talking about people’s participation mean the same thing or simply use the phrase as a kind of magical incantation (Adnan et al., 1992). In the worst situation, people are always dragged into participation of no interest to them, in the very name of participation (Rahnema, 1992). In general, however, the term “local participation” can be defined as “the ability of local communities to influence the outcome of development projects, such as ecotourism, that have an impact on them” (Drake, 1991:132). The concept of “local community” here means “a group of people who share a common identity such as geographical locations, class and/or ethnic background” (Wearing, 2001:395). The local community may also share a special interest or dependence, for their livelihoods, on natural resources such as hunting, fishing, wood collection, timber harvesting, trees, land and soil to sustain their increasing population. The concept of “local community” in this research, however, is to mean a group of people who are living in the specific boundaries of the (eco)tourism destination area, together with natural and cultural elements, where the tourist experience take place, and
tourist product is produced, and who are potentially affected, both positively and negatively, by the impacts of (eco)tourism development.

Thus, ecotourism is essential to ensure that the sustainability of the local community’s participation can be maintained. There is a symbiotic relationship between local populations and protected area resources or biodiversity where local residents are acting as stewards of the natural resources (Wearing, 2001). In return, local communities benefit from protected areas, and the experience of the tourists may be enhanced by opportunities to interact with local people and the natural environment. In other words, community participation is essential in ecotourism development because whenever development and planning do not fit in with local aspirations and capacities, resistance and hostility can increase business costs and/or destroy the industry’s potential. Therefore, if (eco)tourism is to become successful, it needs to be planned and managed as a renewable resource industry, based on local capacities and community decision-making (Murphy, 1985:153).

A PROFILE OF MUKIM SUKAU AND THE VILLAGERS: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

The Mukim or sub-district of Sukau (commonly known as Sukau village) is located on Kinabatangan river 40 km upstream from Abai village, 134 km by road from the city of Sandakan and 50 km from Kota Kinabatangan town centre (see Map 1).

This meant the visitors, on riverboats or by car from Sandakan town, can reach the village. There is a 40 km gravel road from the Sukau junction of the Sandakan-Lahad Datu motorway. The area of the village is 5.5 square km (Kementerian Pembangunan Luar Bandar Malaysia, 2000:1). Mukim Sukau geographically can be divided into three main parts: Upper Sukau, Middle Sukau and Lower Sukau (interview with Pak Cik Indal, 20/4/2003; and see Map 1). The main economic activities for the villagers of the upper Sukau are small-scale oil palm plantations, and subsistence farming. Most of the villagers actually originated from the middle and lower Sukau, but migrated to upper Sukau to concentrate in the new scheme of cash crop agriculture from the 1980s. The local residents in the middle and lower Sukau traditionally are fisherman, subsistence farmers, hunters and gatherers. Compared with the residents from the upper Sukau, however, the majority of the local residents in these parts (middle and lower Sukau) have been actively involved in ecotourism
Map 1: The Four Main Villages in Lower Kinabatangan Area of Sabah: Abai, Sukau, Blit, and Batu Puteh
activities in this area. Thus, the observation part of the study is focused more on these parts of Sukau Village but for face-to-face interviews with local residents, the sample covered the entire village including upper Sukau.

The population of Sukau village, according to WWF statistics, is about 2000, of which the majority of young people have migrated to the main towns and cities in Sabah such as Sandakan, Tawau and Kota Kinabalu. The Ministry of Rural Development (Kementerian Pembangunan Luar Bandar Malaysia, 2000), however, estimates that the population of Sukau village is less than that, only about 1,426 people of whom the number of houses is 103, and the number of families 116 (Kementerian Pembangunan Luar Bandar Malaysia, 2000). Recently, the majority of the villagers still sustain themselves through subsistence farming (e.g. tending home gardens or hill rice cultivation), hunting and fishing, cash crop agriculture, short term work (e.g. forest clearing, building village infrastructure, contracted rattan collections, boat hire to tourists, oil palm plantation work, and contracted work for conservation projects of NGOs), small scale trading and businesses and so on (Payne, 1989; and Azmi, 1996).

Source: WWF Malaysia, (undated)

Who are the visitors in Sukau village? There are two types of visitors or tourists that the majority of the respondents or villagers most deal or interact with in Sukau village: international tourists (93.0%) and domestic tourists (7.0%) (see Table 1). According to the respondents, most of the international tourists, with whom they commonly interacted, came from the United Kingdom (26.0%), Japan (11.0%), France (10.5%), Australia (7.5%), USA (7.0%), Germany (6.0%) and Sweden (5.5%). As for the domestic tourists, most of them came from Sandakan (2.0%), Kota Kinabalu (4.0%) and Peninsular Malaysia (1.0%). This meant that local people were exposed to various categories of people and cultures in their everyday life in ecotourism-related activity.

There are no systematic data or precise figures that have been documented regarding the total number of international and domestic tourists visiting Sukau village from 1991 to date. However, Kementerian Pembangunan Luar Bandar Malaysia (Malaysia Ministry

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2During the fieldwork, the researchers asked private lodge companies, the police, and the government district office about this data. However, not all of them can provide this study with official figures because they do not have data on total tourist arrivals in Sukau village since 1991 until to date.
of Rural Development, 2001:66) quoted an estimated figure provided by WWF about the total number of international and domestic tourists visiting the Lower Kinabatangan area (see table 2).

Table 1
The Country of Origin of Visitors that the Respondents Most Deal with in Sukau Village (N=200)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>International:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>26.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States of America</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holland</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Sure</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic:</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandakan</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kota Kinabalu</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Malaysia</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>200</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Data from the Fieldwork (2003).

Table 2
Number of International and Domestic Visitors in the Lower Kinabatangan Area, 1996-2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Domestic Visitors (Estimates only)</th>
<th>Number of Foreign Visitors (Estimates only)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>4,000</td>
<td>5,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td>6,000</td>
<td>8,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>800</td>
<td>4,000</td>
<td>4,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>1,800</td>
<td>8,200</td>
<td>10,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>1,900</td>
<td>12,100</td>
<td>14,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The number of foreign visitors visiting the Lower Kinabatangan area, including Sukau village, increased dramatically between years 1996 to 2000. In 1996, the total number of both categories of the visitors was 5,000. This number increased to 10,800 in 1999, and to 14,000 in 2000. Many people involved in the conservation programme in Lower Kinabatangan were very concerned about this trend because the increased number of tourists arriving in this remote area could affect the wildlife habitat and the socio-cultural life of the local people.

The majority of the visitors visiting the Sukau area specifically were independent holidaymakers, inclusive or package holidaymakers, foreign, day-trippers on holiday in Sabah, and Malaysian day-trippers from outside the Sukau area (interview with Mr. Jimmy Motalib, 22/4/2003). Most of these visitors stayed overnight (1 to 3 days) in the six tourist lodges. During this research, a variety of room prices per night/per person were charged by these tourist lodges depending on types of room (double or single) and type of facilities provided by the lodges (air-conditioning or not). For instance, the rate at Wildlife Expedition Sukau River Lodge for international visitors is RM 380 per night/per person including lunch, evening tea and dinner, and the boat fare for wildlife viewing. Sukau Rainforest Lodges charge RM 500.00 for a one day and two night package (interview with Mr. Adrian Trevor Migiu, 22/4/2003). These private tourist lodges have their own space or territory, separate from the vast majority of villagers’ accommodation in the village centre. Thus, the mutual social interaction between the visitors and the villagers did not take place except with the villagers working with the lodges such as boatmen, tourist guides, waiters, waitresses and so on.

Moreover, the main motivation for these visitors to come to Sukau is to experience the rainforest and/or to view wild animals rather than to experience indigenous culture. The statements and comments by the visitors about their experience in Sukau between 1995 and now indicated this situation:

“A very special place to be! It is not easy to say what we like most: the food, the care, the guides, and the knowledge of our guide. During our afternoon river cruise, we saw many monkeys and even an orang-utan. What a surprise! Far away from our European hectic world, we enjoyed nature so much!” (Yuehe & Yic van Esland/Holland, 29th June 1995 as quoted by http://www.borneoecotours.com, 17/1/2003).

“Simply superb! A fabulous experience, truly a day of National Geographic! The guides were excellent and the hospitality outstanding. We will return
with very favourite memories of Sukau and Borneo. We will certainly return” (Sandra Lindsay, California, USA, 22nd October 1995 as quoted by http://www.borneoecotours.com, 17/1/2003).

“We thoroughly enjoyed our stay at the lodge – it was a unique experience! Good for the soul and recharging the batteries. Please look after your rainforest and the Proboscis monkeys – we need them. Back at the lodge, the food was fantastic – well done and keeps it up. Staffs are friendly which is really appreciated” (David Parry & Liz Cotton, Cape Town South Africa, 25th July 1996 as quoted by http://www.borneoecotours.com, 17/1/2003).

“The experience of a life time and this is such an important place – a great example to the rest of the world” (Timothy M. Davey, Bristol, England, 20th December 1997 as quoted by http://www.borneoecotours.com, 17/1/2003).

“A superb place – everyone kind, helpful, our guide really enthusiastic and committed to give us a great two days” (Brenda Newman, Bale Tours, UK, 30th October 1997 as quoted by http://www.borneoecotours.com, 17/1/2003).

“Very good resort. Should be congratulated in pioneering ecotourism in this region and proving there is an alternative economic activity to logging and palm oil. Keep it up” (Phillip Clarkson, San Michelle, Sydney, Australia, 17th October, 1998 as quoted by http://www.borneoecotours.com, 17/1/2003).

“48 years as a Malaysian and I wore a sarong for the first time yesterday! Lovely place. Will definitely recommend local travel to my friends” (Suheelee Sham, Kota Kinabalu, 7th August 1999 as quoted by http://www.borneoecotours.com, 17/1/2003).

“An Orang-utan the first morning, a 4 metre python the last night, 5 species of hornbills sandwiched in between. A wonderful 3 days. On top of all the birds and wildlife, we made new friends, ate well and laughed a lot. You have done a wonderful job, and we wish you well with your mission to bring ECOTOURISM to Borneo and benefit local people. This is such a fragile environment. We know you will steward it well. Best of luck” (Tom & Jaene Joseph, Asia Transpacific, USA, April 3rd, 2000 as quoted by http://www.borneoecotours.com, 17/1/2003).

Since returning, we have been singing Borneo and your praises. In fact, just today, we gave your contact details to a friend who now plans to visit, saying, “You must contact Agnes! Borneo wouldn’t have been the same without her” (Tyra Smude, United Kingdom, March 2004 as quoted by http://www.borneoecotours.com/public/feedback/, 7/9/2005).

After visiting Sukau, Professor Ross K. Dowling of Edith Cowan University (ECU) Australia pointed out that Sukau is one of the State’s
attractions and has good potential for ecotourism. There are, however, some good points and bad points to its potential:

“The good points are that you have a diverse wildlife and rainforest experience, and it is very a genuine experience. The lodges operated by the tour operators are low keyed and small scaled which is good. Some of the guides were extremely good and would stand out anywhere in the world” (Dowling, 2005 in The Borneo Post, 13th April 2005 as quoted by http://www.borneoecotours.com/news/, 7/9/2005).

On the negative points, he pointed out, “the downside of Sukau, I saw lots and lots of boatloads of tourists going to the same spot (to see the proboscis monkeys) and this affects the carrying capacity issue there” (Dowling, 2005 in The Borneo Post, 13th April 2005 as quoted by http://www.borneoecotours.com/news/, 7/9/2005).

Therefore, from these visitors’ statements and comments, this research indicates that the main attraction for visitors to Sukau is because the pristine rainforest environment and the uniqueness of its wildlife, and not because of the local people’s culture and identity motivated them. The uniqueness of local culture and daily life activities were not in the promotion list of the private lodges in Sukau. As a result, local culture and nature have become separate items as ecotourism products in Sukau. Whilst the nature products were developed and promoted well by these private tourist lodges to domestic and international ecotourists, local culture as a unique ecotourism product was not developed, and was alienated from the promotion strategy. Thus, this situation has had a negative impact on the socio-cultural life of the local community. The main findings of this research related to the negative impact of ecotourism on the socio-cultural life of the local community are discussed below.


The findings of the research have indicated that there are conflicts of interest between the local community and the other stakeholders in Sukau village. There are a few main reasons why these conflicts of interests occurred among the stakeholders in this area. These are set out below.
A. THE VILLAGERS VERSUS THE PRIVATE TOURIST LODGE OPERATORS ON THE BOAT ISSUE

The research findings show that the private tourist lodge operators dominate the tourist boat services in Sukau. Although some tourist lodge managers claimed they had used the village people’s boats to carry tourists, many village boatmen of Sukau have denied this. The village boatmen actually were barred from fair competition with the lodges to ferry the tourists in their boats. This situation actually effectively marginalised the local community in the ecotourist activity in the village. At the early stage, when the lodges started their operation in Sukau village, the village boatmen were promised by the lodge managements that they would able to carry the tourists from the lodges in their boats, particularly in the peak season. However, it did not quite work out that way because, according to one informant:

“Most of the lodge owners preferred to use their own boats rather than local people’s boats. The village people’s boats could carry 7 people whereas the lodge’s boats could carry up to 30 or 40 passengers at one time. If they could give the boat rotation to us to transport the tourists, that would be much better” (interview with Mr. Pastor, 18/4/2003).

B. THE VILLAGERS VERSUS NGOs

The findings reveal that the disputes between the villagers and NGOs were based on three main issues. Firstly, the dispute over the environmental conservation programme and the traditional use of forest and/or wildlife resources. Most of the villagers were not satisfied with the vision of WWF-Partners for Wetland that discourages local people from clearing and developing their forestland into oil palm plantations in the name of conservation and ecotourism development. As the Project Manager of Partners for Wetland has argued:

“There were so many people wanting to develop the land around Lower Kinabatangan area [for agricultural activities] but less of them were interested in the conservation programme, particularly the older generations. The WWF would approach the young generation in this area because they have more sympathy with the conservation issue” (interview with Datuk Rajah Indran, 10/6/2003).

As a result, WWF representatives have concluded that the villagers in Sukau find it very hard to fully support and cooperate
with them towards a vision of conservation through Partners for Wetland in Lower Kinabatangan. The villagers on the other side perceived that WWF made too many promises but never implemented them. That is why many local people continue to want to develop their land around Sukau for agricultural activities. WWF was seen by the villagers as never taking serious initiatives to involve the local community in ecotourism development or helping them to overcome the wild elephant problem effectively. Although they encouraged them not to develop their forestland, the WWF and the other government agencies did not provide any compensation for the villagers.

Secondly, the dispute over land - the land leasing agreement between the NGO of the Kinabatangan Orang-utan Conservation Project (KOCP) and a village family. There was a misunderstanding about a land rental agreement, in which the family felt they had been cheated by the KOCP management. The KOCP management, however, claimed that the family had not understood the written agreement fully; this was admitted by the real landowner (the leader of this family) before he passed away recently. For instance, the Director of KOCP explained how the rent agreement was made with the landowner as follows:

“We didn’t lease it by the month, but in total I believed we paid more than RM 45,000.00 for ten years, but with 3 conditions attached. The first one was the amount of money. The second was that we had to rebuild their house, pay the carpenters, and paint it and beautify it. Thirdly, we had to employ their family members, so at one time we had 8 of them working for us. Now it’s a bit less because some of them went to West Malaysia” (interview with Dr. Isabelle, 19/4/2003).

Thirdly, the findings disclose that the Development and Security Village Committee (JKKK) mistrusted the role of KOCP in the village. Some of the JKKK committee members were suspicious about the role of KOCP because they saw that the KOCP operation in the village had lasted a reasonably long time (nearly six years). One of the JKKK members claimed:

“We can’t deny that in many ways having them here has really helped us a lot. However there are still some issues that the villagers are not particularly happy about. For instance, the KOCP came here originally as researchers on the orang-utans, but we know that every researcher has a time frame in which to do his research. We see that KOCP has already been here a long time [six years]. When we ask them how much longer they are going to be
here, they find it difficult to answer the question” (interview with Mr. Awang Ismail, 5/5/2003).

The real reason, however, why some of the JKKK members are suspicious of the KOCP activities in the village is to do with the political power struggle at village level between them. One of the members of JKKK argued that the KOCP were sincerely doing work for the good of the community. However, day-by-day it has demolished the traditional role of JKKK in the village. This effect, however, has not been realised by the Director of KOCP. As she mentioned, “the situation is always changing. It’s sometimes difficult to see what the effects are”.

For instance, many government agency officers, education institutions and local or international researchers preferred to make contact directly with the KOCP and not with the JKKK as they usually did before. The conflict of interests between the JKKK committee members and the KOCP continue. Thus, some of the villagers perceived that ecotourism development has had a negative impact on local political power and control particularly at village level.

C. THE VILLAGERS VERSUS WILDLIFE

The findings disclose that there are six main species of animals, which have been always in conflict with the villagers. These are elephants, orang-utans, wild boars, porcupines, pig tailed macaques and long tailed macaques. All six of these species eat and damage oil palm seeds, fruit and crop trees, causing loss to plantations, and they also put at risk and threaten the everyday life of local people. One of the estate managers expressed his views regarding this problem:

“The elephants are the main enemy for the oil palm seeds and trees of our oil palm plantation because a group of elephants can damage hundreds of trees a day. Other animals such as wild boars and orang-utans would not be able to damage the oil palm trees on a huge scale as the elephants did. At one time, there were 60 elephants in our estate. They damaged 300 oil palm trees within two hours where the age of these trees was mostly below one year […]. So to prevent these elephants entering our estate, we built electric fences around our plantation […] our workers will make 24 hour patrols to watch these elephants” (interview with Mr. Awang Ismail, 5/5/2003).

The orang-utans, on the other hand, also have the capability of damaging the oil palm trees. The estate manager describes this situation:
“In the early period of our oil palm plantation work in the year 1997, we had a big problem with orang-utan, particularly in the area of nearby Menanggol River and Tenegang Kecil. These orang-utan, for instance, have the capability of damaging around 50 to 100 of the young oil palms trees, aged below six months old, in a day. Therefore, our workers patrolled 12 hours a day because the orang-utans never look for food at night. When all these oil palms trees were more than one year old, then the orang-utan became less of a threat for these crops” (interview with Mr. Awang Ismail, 5/5/2003).

What became a conflict between estate managers and the NGOs regarding these wildlife related problems was the resulting illegal killing of the elephant population or the orang-utans by some of the estate workers.\textsuperscript{3} There was no concrete solution to overcome this problem between all the stakeholders in the Lower Kinabatangan area. This situation puts the survival of the wildlife frequently in danger. Because most of the oil palm plantations are privately owned, the owners (whether they are the villagers or oil palm private companies) have an authority to protect their property or their lives from the threat of this wildlife.\textsuperscript{4} NGOs, however, want to see that the local community kill all these protected animals such as elephants when there is “really no other alternative” to protect themselves from danger, and not to take for granted that they can kill, because killing these animals is a tragedy for the wildlife conservation effort in the area. This is the dilemma faced by all the stakeholders in Lower Kinabatangan, and it remains unresolved.

This is because the decrease of forest area has limited elephant movement from one location to another. As a result these elephants usually bulldozed their way through oil palms plantations and village areas in order to get to the next patch of forest or to look for food. This type of elephant activity has damaged a lot of oil palm trees belonging to the local people. Unfortunately, all the losses faced by the villagers were not compensated for by any government agency. As a result some of the villagers and the oil palm estates workers have taken matters into their own hands including an extreme level

\textsuperscript{3}There have been reports where this indiscriminate killing of animals (i.e. not for meat, such as orang-utans) were done by illegal hunters. These illegal hunters are not actually villagers but workers of the oil palm estate companies. They were responsible for many cases of this illegal killing. See Azmi (1996:15).

\textsuperscript{4}See Sabah Wildlife Conservation Enactment (1997), Number 6, Section 39 (3), p.237 stated: “the use of a firearm for defending persons or property in accordance with subsection (2) [from a direct or immediate attack by any protected animal] shall only be resorted to where no other alternative is possible”.
of illegal killing of these elephants and orang-utans. This is another negative impact of the conservation-ecotourism related programme because it could not solve properly the wild-animal related problems, which jeopardised the local community’s agricultural activities. Thus, some villagers perceived these programmes as “wildlife is more important rather than human lives”.

D. THE VILLAGERS VERSUS GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

The findings of the research reveal that disputes occurring between the villagers and some government agencies were commonly related to issues of illegal hunting, illegal logging, and collecting forest resources in sanctuary areas. Hunting wild animals for meat, and collecting forest resources such as wood to make small boats or houses, rattans to make fish traps, collecting herbs for traditional medicine and collecting jungle fruit have been traditional activities for the orang sungai for a long time. The local people, however, were not satisfied with the way that some government officers enforce the Sabah Wildlife Conservation Enactment 1997 very rigidly on them, “unfairly”, in comparison to the private companies particularly in case of cutting timber. One of the village committee members argued this as follows:

[About the role of Sabah Wildlife Department] … “I think they give more priority to those things that can bring them some benefits […] like Gomantong that is profitable. Areas of the sanctuary which have timber trees, they control. It has been like that since I have lived here. For instance, if elephants have destroyed 15 acres of oil palm and we call them for help, they never come. But if the sound of chainsaw cutting timber is heard, they’re guaranteed to be here quickly” [laughs] (interview with one of the Village Development and Security Committee members, 18/4/2003).

He continues about the role of Sabah Forestry Department in conservation enforcement as follows:

“They’re the same. If the local people go into the forest and just take one piece of wood to make a small boat, they will complain. When the timber companies go in, they don’t do anything” (interview with one of the Village Development and Security Committee members, 18/4/2003).

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5Gomantong cave is of the Sabah government properties in which the main activity is collecting edible birds’ nests for export to Taiwan and China. It also as one of the tourist attraction sites in Sukau area.
The Sabah Forestry Department officer in Kinabatangan, however, has claimed that their role is to ensure that the ecotourist areas such as the reserved forest and the wildlife animal habitats are sustained [monitoring and control], and not damaged by illegal loggers or illegal hunters, which in the end could destroy the wild animal habitat. He stated that:

“Our department never totally prohibited the villagers from using forest resources, but they must not overuse all these resources to ensure that there are still forest areas whenever they wake up the next morning. If we do not visit a certain area at two or three-month intervals, intruders will take advantage and cut down the trees in the sanctuary area. They were also logging illegally, and collecting the other forest resources such as rattans and woods for their houses without a permit. This type of action is prohibited because they will damage the forest habitat” (interview with Mr. Patin, 21/5/2003).

The villagers, however, are never concerned about whether to apply for a permit or not because the forest area surrounding the village is traditionally their habitat. It is common practice among the villagers to get verbal approval from the Sabah Wildlife Department to hunt. For instance, they just meet the officer in charge and inform him they are going into the forest to hunt (interview with Mr. Pastor, 18/4/2003). This type of practice, however, confused the NGOs and the tourist industry who categorised this hunting activity as illegal. Thus, the conflicts of interest between all these stakeholders continue.

The findings also indicate some other issues where the villagers were not satisfied with the role of some government agencies, as follows:
• they are not satisfied with how these government agencies tackle elephant-related-problems;
• they are not satisfied with the lack of improvement in social facilities for the village such as no clean water supply, no 24-hour electricity, no asphalt road going to Sukau, no local handicraft training centre and so on;
• they do not have very clear information regarding the “Integrated Rural Development Project” (IRDP) in Sukau; how this new settlement area will be implemented and how much compensation they can get if they have to move from their current traditional house locations.
E. THE VILLAGERS VERSUS ENVIRONMENTAL POLLUTION

The research findings disclose that the villagers realised that those private and semi-government owned oil palm plantations and factories surrounding the Sukau area are the major cause of environmental pollution or disasters. There are three stages where the oil palm estate development process and activities caused environmental pollution or disasters; first, land clearing caused destruction to rainforest, flora and fauna and increased surface erosion; second, the growth period (fertiliser and pesticide runoffs polluted the rivers and lakes); and third, processing of oil palms (organic and solid effluents from factories largely dumped into rivers).

Fishing is traditionally an important village activity for food and a source of income. Thus the pollution of rivers and lakes by oil palm estates’ activities has put the life of the villagers, fish and other wildlife in danger because they are still using and drinking the water from these rivers. The villagers want the relevant government agencies and local authorities to take effective action to overcome this problem. Unfortunately, the local authorities could not do much about this problem. Thus, the environmental pollution caused by the oil palm estates’ activities continues to threaten the villagers’ daily lives. Sukau’s Village Security and Development Committee stressed its view about the main causes of pollution as follows:

[For the river pollution] “I feel it’s because of the plantation people. Because they make factories and their factories discharge their waste into the rivers. Yes [the JKKK have discussed this matter with the estate owners]. But they couldn’t care less. Sometimes the District Officers calls them but they don’t even show up” (interview with Mr. Pastor, 18/4/2003).

In other words, river pollution caused by oil palm factory waste is a very serious problem for the lives of the majority Sukau population but the government cannot do much about it. What the local people can do is just complain about the matter to the media but the problem is still unresolved. One informant stressed his view about this situation as:

“I don’t know for sure [about what the government has done on the river’s pollution issue). Previously we cooperated with one of the NGOs, we called TV3, and there was some response but only up to a point. We can see in the Rasang river, many of the fish seem to have died […]” (interview with Mr. Pastor, 18/4/2003).
F. THE DIVISION AMONG THE VILLAGERS

The research findings indicate that ecotourism development has not created major divisions between local people. An argument, however, occurred between a group of village youths working for the KOCP and some JKKK committee members. The JKKK committee members criticised the role of KOCP as “neo-colonialism” because the KOCP successfully influenced the minds of the youths to cooperate with them. The village youths, however, perceived the conflict between the JKKK and the KOCP management as threatening their jobs with the KOCP. Thus they warned the JKKK committee with the following statement: “[…] if the KOCP no longer exists in this village…we will bring our rice bowls to your home […].”

As a result, there was a gap in the relationship between some of the KOCP volunteers and the JKKK committee members. Therefore, the negative impact of ecotourism development on the local community in Sukau accorded with Doxey’s Irritation Index. It describes the negative impact as a phase of annoyance and antagonism of reactions because of the outsider investors’ influence on local development decision-making, their goals being far different from the local community’s development goals (Doxey, 1975; and Mowforth & Munt, 1998:276). Meanwhile R. Butler (1980) described this negative impact in his tourism resort/destination life-cycle model as occurring in the phases of exploration (the early phase of tourist destination development), involvement (tourism industry leads to the provision of basic services but limited interaction with local residents), and development (greater control of the tourist trade by outsiders, number of tourists increased at peak season, followed by a rising antagonism of local people to the tourists and tourist operators because of certain factors) (Mason, 2003:23).

The findings of the research on the negative impacts of ecotourism on everyday life of the local community are quite similar to the research findings of B. Rudkin & M.C. Hall (1996) in the case of the Solomon Islands, which indicated that the lack of consultation over development led to opposition and dissatisfaction among the local community. If every stakeholder in Sukau village does not properly manage this negative impact, the prospect of achieving sustainable ecotourism development in this area is blurred. Thus, active participation by the majority of the local people in ecotourism development is fundamental for future sustainable development.

It was reported by one of the JKKK committee members, 20/4/2003.
CONCLUSION

The Lower Kinabatangan area, including Sukau village, was declared a sanctuary area by the Sabah state government in the mid-1990s to support ecotourism initiatives. This effort, however, has increased misunderstanding between the villagers and the related government agencies in terms of access to natural resources. As a result, the relationship between local people in the sanctuary border surrounding Sukau and conservation officers was characterised by mistrust, specifically because the conservation officers implemented what R. Scheyvens (2002:89) called the “fortress conservation” approach, which created national parks as islands of anti-development which are not acceptable to Third World countries. The participatory approach, on the other hand, demands parks management to improve the livelihoods of local communities by allowing them to gain some benefits from the conservation of wildlife and other natural resources, because, traditionally the local people of Sukau are also inhabitants of this natural environment. In other words, the relationship between ecotourism, the protected area and the local community in Sukau’s case can be classified as a *win-win-lose scenario* (Nepal, 2000:74-76). Whilst the ecotourism planners and ecotourism providers have benefited from the conservation efforts, the local community has experienced disempowerment socially, economically, psychologically and politically (Schyevens, 1999) compared to the others stakeholder in this ecotourism development process. This is because the types of participation which they involved are *tokenism* (Arnstein, 1971).

In terms of sustainable development, ecotourism development in Sukau can be classified as having *weak sustainability* (Carter, 1997:201) or “weak sustainable community participation”, because the negative impacts of the development are more dominant than the positive impact expected by the policy makers, protected-area managers, and the villagers of Sukau. Thus, it is time for the Sabah state government to seriously revise their role and policy towards the “participatory approach” in order to give a real meaning to “sustainable ecotourism development” that could give “real benefits” and “minimise the negative impacts” on the local community of Sukau in the near future.
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