

RESEARCH NOTE

Reimagining Tourism in Sarawak

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This paper is not an academic paper but is written by someone who has been a practitioner in the tourism industry for over 3 decades and is still active in the business. Experiences from the past, as part of institutional knowledge, can both encourage and caution us.

Tour operating and community involvement

I started my travel company in 1987 and over the years have been a close witness to the development of tourism in Sarawak. In those early days, many people were encouraged to get into the tourism business as “much money could be made.” Many bought into the siren’s call and almost as many floundered on the shores of insolvency. My motivation for opening a travel company came not from wanting to make a fortune but to demonstrate that tourism could be a better alternative to the prevailing practice of timber extraction as a means of providing a more sustainable economic return to local communities. It was tough going those early days, but we stayed the course even in the face of inexperience and myriad difficulties.

From the start, my company’s commitment was to responsible and sustainable tourism, which included working alongside and supporting local communities. One of the goals of our tour operating business, was to protect the natural environment with the attendant wildlife to be found there. To have success in this endeavour, we had to bring the local communities along with us and make it worth their while to protect their backyard, the jungle. The incentive for this was through the employment we generated by bringing visitors to the area.

We were fortunate that one of the local communities sitting on the edge of a pristine rainforest teeming with wildlife (including the endangered orangutan) was willing to partner with us to create a responsible and sustainable tourist destination. A large part of our efforts in those early days was to manage community expectations. When speaking with the community I frequently used the example of the durian tree to illustrate our partnership: we (our tour company) are bringing in the seedlings to grow on their land. Business, as with a durian tree, takes time to grow and bear fruit. In this, the first lesson to the local denizens, was the concept of “gestation period.” No matter how good we are as farmers and regardless of how much fertilizer we apply, it is still going to take several years for the durian tree (tourism) to bear fruit. And we counselled that since not every year would yield a bumper harvest it might be wise not to give up their “day job” (farming) but rather to use tourism as a means to supplement their basic income. In this we were proven right during the first Gulf War in 1990 when cancellations vastly outstripped bookings. As our partnership strengthened, I again referred to the durian tree to convey the concept of “carrying capacity,” when pointing out there’s only so much fruit any one tree can bear.

We also strongly believed that sustainability was not just to protect the environment but to ensure that the communities’ culture was recognized as a living dynamic culture that lived with and in the surrounding nature. Our approach is that when we bring people to the longhouse, we are bringing visitors, not just tourists. The visitors stay in the community and see it the way is - nothing is staged. This includes no *faux* ceremonial dances of welcome for each set of visitors. Our intention was to reserve the display of traditional clothes and dances for the appropriate occasions such as the harvest festival and other community celebrations. The aim was to ensure these valuable traditions were not reduced by commodification and the people of the community did not suffer from “hospitality fatigue” from having to perform. By emphasizing the abundant pristine nature, the product focus was on the setting with the community as an integral part in delivering this experience. Through our guides, we help visitors see how people can co-exist with nature, without too much disruption.

We have always seen our commitment to the community as going beyond bringing tourism dollars. We encouraged an appreciation for the long-term benefits through education by providing a small monetary inducement for families to send their children to school (which in Malaysia is free and universal); the kids were incentivized to excel with monetary awards if they could rank within the top 5 positions in their class. Over the years the community has seen over 15 graduates in a community of less than 300, and this has broken the poverty cycle in the village.

Recognizing that the local people did not have any capital (or access to capital), we introduced a “micro-financing” scheme. Our company provided loans for outboard engines or other tools they may require, and these loans were repaid over a period of time from the wages they received from ferrying visitors and other assignments.

Though it took time, the number of visitors has grown steadily and over some periods has almost reached its maximum capacity. Our idea has always been to have visitors stay in the community for at least two nights, which translates to more jobs and better economic benefits. Currently, a major threat comes from one of the local councils who wants to “develop” the area and bring more day-tripping tourists to the area. This initiative is being done without any regard for the fragility of the core attractions, the over-loading of the capacity and the havoc it might create to the very nature that we have all come to love and appreciate. Our experience over the past 35 years has demonstrated that day-trippers reduce the amount of money that stays in the local economy and subsequently bring little economic benefits.

Government agencies in tourism

In Sarawak, there are many government-linked agencies that are major tourism players. The SEDC (Sarawak Economic Development Corporation) has probably the largest inventory of hotel rooms in Sarawak, and the SFC (Sarawak Forestry Corporation), formed in 1995, is the custodian of the largest number of tourism attractions and products to be found within the National Parks that comes under their purview. As such, both corporations play an important role in the development of tourism in Sarawak.

These two big corporations do not take kindly to criticism (even constructive ones). I remember well when SEDC ventured into tour operating in the early 90’s, their rationale being to improve the standards of the industry. I protested strongly and publicly, as I felt this was patently unfair for a government-linked company to compete directly with existing private tour operators. Ultimately, the blazer-clad guides proved not to raise the standards and that ventured failed but not before disrupting the industry.

So too, when the SFC (Forestry Corporation) was established in 1995, they mooted the concept of providing “park guides” to improve standards (in spite of the fact that there had been little or no complaints about the standard of guiding). SFC would undertake to provide the guides so that tour operators could show up with their clients and SFC would handle all visitors to the park - a proposition that was completely acceptable to tour operators. However, within a few months of implementation, the SFC admitted that they would not be able to commit to this arrangement. Instead, they offered to train and to license private guides as park guides, initially *gratis* but later for a fee. The tour operators welcomed the training initiative – until the training fee imposed by SFC became prohibitive.

Park rules were amended and any visitors entering the park on a tour were required to have a licensed park guide. However, independent visitors were permitted to enter without any licensed guide. What was particularly irksome was that some non-guided independent tourists got lost in Bako National Park incurring great expense to SFC for their search and rescue. In one of their “meet the tour operators” sessions, SFC had the temerity to lecture tour operators about the cost of their search and rescue operations and threatened to impose extra charges on operators, who

have yet to lose a single tourist under their care as they complied with SFC's requirement of having a licensed guide to accompany visitors to the park.

In Sarawak, guides not only have to meet Federal requirements, but they also have to qualify to guide in the National Parks in Sarawak, needing a separate SFC qualification for each of the many parks, incurring a heavy investment of time and money. Is it any wonder that the number of working licensed guides in Sarawak are a fraction of the numbers in neighbouring Sabah?

Tourism planning and implementation

Too often it seems, government-led tourism projects in Sarawak are developed based on perceived rather than actual market demand. It is also rare for the government to meaningfully consult private sector players or to pursue ground research before embarking on new tourism projects. Tour operators have a wealth of market information gathered from years of dealing with tourists and tour companies from around the world, all of which could be helpful to validate the viability of projects and to confirm existing industry capabilities. Unfortunately, tourism programs and projects in Sarawak are frequently developed by academics, technicians, and policy makers with little, if any input, from those actually operating in the tourist industry. As a result, there is a tendency to envision grandiose plans that are often very much at odds with the reality of tourism in Sarawak, whether the industry's interest or tourist demand.

Owing to poor tourism planning, weak feasibility assessment and insufficient engagement with the private sector, numerous government-led and funded tourism projects in Sarawak have not produced the expected returns. While the SEDC continues to build up its inventory of hotel rooms, there is no robust analysis of visitor demand to help guide development or marketing efforts; and the SFC brings up its own restrictive measures for visitors without analysis of visitor needs and trends.

The SEDC first developed the Damai Beach Resort in the 1980s and the hotel struggled with low occupancy rates that were only slightly improved when the resort was connected to Kuching by road. A decade or so later SEDC decided to expand the room inventory at the Damai Beach Resort when the hilltop suites were added and then went on to build a second hotel – the Damai Lagoon Resort. Both hotels still register low occupancy and room rates. Struggling with maintenance issues, both hotels in Damai do not meet international standards and cater mainly to the domestic market. Recently, it was announced that more beach hotels will be built in Lundu/Sematan. The potential to negatively impact the economic viability of these Damai hotels, under the charge of SEDC, might not be insignificant.

Needed development and maintenance for known and popular attractions continue to be underfunded. In the case of the SFC, funding is provided for construction of new buildings and park accommodation, but there is little or no provision for the maintenance and upkeep of the accommodation or the trails in the park.

Development of Mulu

In the 2nd Tourism Master Plan (1993) key area development proposal for Mulu, it was suggested that a resort township be established, with attendant municipal services like waste disposal and basic amenities like electricity and clean water. Unfortunately, recommendations in this and many other plans that have been prepared, have not been implemented fully. This is perhaps due to politically connected operatives with personal interests. The 2nd Tourism Master Plan had also tabled the construction of an airstrip in Mulu but only after the completion of other fundamental developments in the area. But policy makers jumped the gun and proceeded with constructing the airstrip.

Before the airstrip was built, the arrival numbers to Mulu hovered around 20,000 annually, with a minimum stay of 2 nights in small lodges and facilities established by the local community to

accommodate visitors. However, counter to what was expected, after the airstrip was opened the arrival figures fell, the average length of stay dropped, and it took several years before the arrival numbers picked up.

In addition, the advent of the airstrip in Mulu had the unintended consequences of dampening many downstream economic activities related to the river access. Local transport and service providers in Mulu saw a loss of income as the length of stay was reduced. Marudi, which had benefited from transiting visitors to Mulu, also saw a decline in economic activities; both tourism-related and other local business had to contend with rising cost of all supplies as the frequency of deliveries by boat was reduced.

In the meantime, an international class hotel was built in Mulu in anticipation of all those additional tourists the airstrip would facilitate. For many years, the occupancy rate at the hotel was at a low level. With the advent of tourism, the local Berawan community had started to lay claim to their “ancestral lands” (though, it must be noted, there were some contentious overlapping claims). Within this atmosphere of conflict, the hotel was connected to a 24-hour electricity supply while the locally owned and operated lodges had to rely on generators for electricity, which proved not only expensive but also unreliable. Mulu is just one example of attempts to improve tourism industry that have faltered because the implementation of projects was based on insufficient and misguided understanding of local community conditions and needs, as well as the failure to have a holistic approach by taking in the big picture and to consider the interest of the many rather than just a few.

Inter-departmental collaboration

In Sarawak, there often appears to be no apparent coordination between the various government departments, especially those involved in tourism. As a consequence, each department or agency works at advancing its own agenda and at promoting their own achievements rather than working together with others to produce a positive result. By straying from their core objectives of formulating and adhering to good policies in order to advance tourism, government agencies involved in tourism seem to have lost their direction: focusing either on the minutiae, such as the qualification for guides, or on vanity projects that negatively impact the industry, which these government agencies are mandated to facilitate and help.

Policy makers sometimes send out conflicting messages: on one hand, there is talk of “sustainability” and on the other hand there is very little regard for the environment as roads are planned through areas of prime forest and habitat that should be protected. A case in point is the Samunsam Wildlife Sanctuary, which is a totally protected reserve with many unique species of wildlife and potentially could have been as popular as Danum Valley in Sabah. A major highway has cut through the northern boundary causing not only disruption to the habitat and wildlife but also brought easier access to illegal poachers.

Government agencies and the private sector

The private sector in Sarawak tourism (this includes tour operators, hoteliers, and other tourism related businesses) has long recognized that there is a need to work together and accordingly has coalesced under the umbrella of the STF (Sarawak Tourism Federation); the Federation is made up of various tourism-related associations that focus on the roles and functions of their members. Regular meetings are scheduled for the associations to communicate openly and to share and seek solutions. Invariably, the greatest challenge facing the private sector is to make the various government agencies understand us (by extension, the tourism industry), so that they can be of help instead of being an impediment.

The private sector in Sarawak tourism is increasingly concerned that government bodies and agencies appear not to involve the private sector in any meaningful way. At best, the private sector is used to lend credibility on some concocted project; mostly, the private sector is considered just

not “good enough.” As a result, we are often lectured or offered solutions that, more often than not, are not needed or helpful. When their suggestions are met with bland resignation, we have to put up with a long rant running along the lines of “You are not grateful.” Government agencies often act more like competitors than facilitators, which puts the private sector at a disadvantage. No individual in the government agencies has had to take responsibility for any bad business decisions as public funds are being utilized (often without oversight). The rap on the knuckle, if it comes, is gentle: they only have to bear the embarrassment of being called out for any inadequacies or poor judgement.

Who indeed is accountable for negatively impacting a local community’s tourism business, for creating hotels that have very low occupancy, for putting highways through protected nature preserves, for not fully understanding why visitors are drawn to our destination?

Speaking as a tour operator, I feel there is little understanding or appreciation for what tour operators do and the role we play. A big part of tour operating is unseen, namely, the mundane parts that involve developing viable products for us to market, communicating with clients, processing requests and then finally, organizing the logistics of the actual tour. All these tasks require a modicum of professionalism, organization, and investment – of time, staffing and money. Tour operators offer the essential link between visitors and the local Sarawak communities. Policy makers do not seem to appreciate the effort involved or the intricacies of actually landing business; the impression we usually encounter is that too frequently government inspired policies and programs are based on the assumption “just open your doors and business will beat its way to your door.” After decades in the tourism industry, I can attest that our business success definitely took significantly more effort and acumen than just opening our doors.

While not all tour operators in Sarawak are angels, by and large we do act responsibly, especially with anything connected to our tourism products as our livelihood depends on the longevity of these products. At one of our association meetings, inbound operators requested that the Forestry Department levy a charge for visitors to the Semenggoh Rehabilitation Center; and after the charges were released, we advised increasing the entrance fees as we deemed it too low. As noted, most of Sarawak’s tourism products come under the ambit of government agencies. Sadly, many operators often are timid and afraid to speak up for fear of being “black marked”, even when a government sponsored initiative or project is clearly not in the industry’s best interest.

In 2012 news reached our ears that there were two outstanding timber licenses for logging in the Batang Ai area (where we bring visitors to an area known to be valuable habitat for the orangutan). To address this situation, we rallied the longhouse dwellers and approached and invited the SFC (Sarawak Forestry Corporation), Forestry Department and other NGOs with environmental interests to a meeting.

In the end, the group we gathered to decide that the best approach would be to focus on why that area should not be logged (the fact that the area is important orangutan habitat). We organized an expedition to the area to conduct a survey of the orangutan population. Leadership of the expedition was deferred to the Forestry Department while we coordinated the ground logistics. Our collective field surveys confirmed what we already knew but provided scientific evidence that the area was indeed home to up to 200 orangutans, a significant population. Based on the information gathered, in 2014 the timber licenses were revoked by the State government.

This small example illustrates how working together cooperatively towards a common objective could bring about a positive outcome. However, in the ensuing years our role in achieving this historic move has largely been airbrushed and hardly been acknowledged. Nonetheless, it is encouraging to note that it is possible to lead without heading a project and that much could be accomplished if everyone would pull together in the same direction.

Marketing of Sarawak

To be sure Sarawak does not have great monuments like the Angkor Wat in Cambodia, great beaches like Bali or Sabah, or big shopping malls as in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. However, what we do have is distinctive. We are a special secondary destination that has very unique features that have drawn and continues to draw the interest of travellers from around the world.

Sarawak is an extremely attractive destination by virtue of our history, geography, and cultural diversity. We have our unique history, cultural richness and diversity, and can offer authentic experiences in an increasingly “fake” world. Contrary to what some government officials may think, our tour guides do not have to be speaking the Queen’s English to be able to communicate intelligently with their clients (though it helps to have some fluency). One of our great marketing assets in Sarawak (as far as community tourism is concerned) has long been our local, especially native, guides. Their knowledge of their cultures and communities, the stories they have inherited, and their home-grown hospitality is tourism gold. Ironically, we make it very difficult for these guides to obtain a license and to enter the industry, as the guide courses are invariably lengthy, difficult, and costly. Many of these courses focus extensively on knowledge, sometimes levels of knowledge well beyond the demands (or interests) of the visitor. While it is important to have good basic knowledge, the direction to take is to develop in the guides a greater thirst to dig deeper for knowledge. In the realm of local cultural tourism who better than our local guides to impart stories from their own lives. Moreover, good guiding requires high EQ (emotional quotient, or ability to deal maturely with others) rather than just plain IQ. Stories from the heart are much more stirring than dispensing sterile knowledge.

Over the years, I have come to appreciate that visitors to Sarawak come in many shapes and form. However, many people, who either do not have a direct channel to the market or who are not even involved in the industry, are ever ready to tell us the kind of tourists they expect us to entertain. In their opinion, these “idealized” tourists range from those keen on golfing to food lovers, to shoppers, to those wanting to visit a bird park; in other words, activities they probably would like to do themselves. Ideas and suggestions are well and good but do not necessarily reflect what really will attract travellers to choose to visit Sarawak. Tour operators usually obtain market information from industry partners overseas and from the clients we deal with on a daily basis. The fact is, most tourists are on holidays and while their interests will certainly vary, they are essentially coming to relax, enjoy themselves, and to discover and experience our unique local sights, food, and lifestyle.

Speculation by the private sector as to what tourists want does no harm (except to the investors who read the market wrongly). These entrepreneurs acting on their hunches (to open a business to cater to tourists) can only add to the local economy. However, when government agencies, acting on their beliefs get involved in tourism there may be some untoward consequences.

In the case of the SFC (Sarawak Forestry Corporation), they seem to think that all tourists are botanists seeking a lecture on the scientific name of every plant in their national park: I feel sorry for the hapless tourist being bombarded with the genus name of some dipterocarp when all they want is to just enjoy a quiet stroll through a spectacular park.

Stemming the loss of institutional knowledge

Tourism business is much like any other business venture: identify your core assets, determine what you can do there, provide access and accommodation and then present this to an identified and interested market. Over the years, there have been good initiatives and good plans in Sarawak, but unfortunately, we do not seem to be able to keep to the plan or complete the whole plan.

The 2nd Tourism masterplan of 1993, which resulted in the formation of the Sarawak Tourism Board (STB) in 1994, gave focus to Sarawak’s major tourism assets: primarily in the area of Culture, Nature, and Adventure. The plan identified core tourism products and the recommended

direction of development of such products. This plan also emphasized the economic advancement of rural communities and how government could play a part in coordinating the overall development.

Looking even further back in time, it was in 1985 that Sarawak seriously began to set its sights on tourism when the “Ministry of Tourism and Environment,” was created, headed by Datuk Amar James Wong and steered by his Permanent Secretary, Dennis Hon. Those were heady days when visitors were few and the learning curve was steep. Intuitively, it was reckoned that the low hanging fruit of an increase in tourism arrivals could come, initially from Singapore and then Kuala Lumpur. Accordingly, the Sarawak Tourism Center was set up in Singapore, circa 1987. Part of the strategy was to bring in what are now called influencers (travel-related writers from the mainstream media). Established Singaporean travel agents were also invited to meet their counterparts in Sarawak even though, at the time, there was just a handful of tour operators in the State. One of the efforts by the Ministry and the Tourism Center in Singapore in 1989 included a “mini-Sarawak festival” where local artisans joined hands with tour operators and hoteliers to promote the State. All the efforts bore results as Sarawak experienced a sharp increase in arrivals from Singapore. While conditions and situations may have changed over the years, the principle of working cooperatively together remains the same.

Flushed with some success in the Singapore market, air routes to Hong Kong, Osaka, Seoul were opened up. Unfortunately, load factors on these flights were low resulting in their cancellations. This may have been due to several factors, including the lack of market research to direct positioning and promotion in the target markets. This has been compounded by not committing to target markets for a period long enough to gain a foothold and see results. And in subsequent years policy makers, driven by their hunches, have diverted attention even further afield to India and the Middle East.

Over the years, I have seen policy makers flit from one fad to another without the resolve to see things through. We’d do well to heed and internalize the sage words of Sir Charles Brooke the 2nd Rajah of Sarawak who said, “The life of a country is a long one; we who serve it may best do so by curbing our impetuosity and by building slowly and surely.”

Presently, the current buzzword, within the Tourism Ministry and its various agencies, seems to be “responsible tourism.” To these government agencies, responsible tourism is novel and the local tour operators cannot and do not know or understand the concept. The reality is that many of the local companies have been operating along these principles for years, especially in community tourism, and should be called upon to share their experiences. Instead, government tourist agencies continue to suffer from a mistaken idea that we locals are not good enough to provide the expertise required and so continue to bring in foreign consultants and lament that we are not as good as Cambodia or Thailand, or even Sabah.

Conclusion

A while ago, some friends in the tourism industry facetiously and perhaps cynically concluded that tourism as espoused by policy makers in Sarawak could be encapsulated in three memorable broad categories: “Build it and they will come,” “Don’t talk about it, it will go away,” and “There’s no masterplan, only the master’s plan.” Or, in other words, tourism projects are implemented with no concern for the viability (in terms of funding and resources) or for any regard to the unintended consequences of these undertakings; repelling and avoiding all criticism or critical thinking, the one who shouts loudest or has the ear of decision makers gets to pilot and direct the industry.

A strategic vision for tourism in Sarawak has to recognize that the tourism industry is a part of an overall development plan. There are many competing agendas out there and if tourism players want to advance their goals and objectives, they will have to vigorously promote the appreciation,

nurturing and maintaining of core tourism products, and the understanding why tourists will visit Sarawak. The public sector has to fully accept that the private sector (especially tour operators) is an integral part of the tourism ecosystem and therefore has an important role to play.

Institutional amnesia has to be remedied; when a rookie policy maker (ranging from Ministers to Directors and Officers of tourism-related departments, including the planning divisions) assume office, more often than not, he or she is unaware of what their predecessors have accomplished and are only too eager to bring in something new and different with little knowledge of historical precedence. Too many government initiatives have come, gone and just as quickly forgotten.

Research and remember, understand, and learn from our past experiences, both good and bad ones. Otherwise, we are condemned to reinventing the wheel or doing the “same old,” and expecting different results. To avoid overlap in roles and responsibilities, everyone, including (and especially) government agencies should “keep to their own lane.” Clear definable roles and goals are needed to stay the course.

Who is doing what and for whom and why? Who benefits from these undertakings? As for projects, especially government-initiated ones, follow the money. There have been many projects undertaken in the name of a local community that have brought minimal or no benefit to them, only to outside contractors.

Much welcomed would be policies anchored on the realities of our destination and of our markets. A genuine appreciation of home-grown expertise and experience would greatly encourage local tourism players. Healthy leadership grounded in common sense and respect and based on a spirit of open cooperation can overcome and overturn any toxic working environment riddled with emotions and remonstrations. This will not only make for a better society to live in but also make it easier for all parties to come together to forge a viable, sustainable, and vibrant tourism industry in Sarawak. We would have succeeded in making Sarawak a premier destination of choice for everyone. And that is how I reimagine tourism in Sarawak.

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