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The Prospects of Highland Ecotourism in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

While there are many studies conducted in developed countries, little is known on the prospects of the highland ecotourism in developing countries. This article discusses the prospect of highland ecotourism in Malaysia. This study utilized a combination of secondary data collection with the primary data collection through interviews with key stakeholders. Findings of the study reveal the importance of assessing the available tourist attractions. The understanding of tourist market segmentation has made the highland site more responsive to the needs of the existing tourists and potential tourists. Meanwhile in efforts of redevelopment, the need to undertake the needs and views of the tourists of what have been planned is also crucial. In conclusion, the study affirms for holistic prospects when highland ecotourism is considered. It is imperative to seek the changing needs and meanings of highland ecotourism to both host-guests to ensure sustainable tourism practices.

Key words: Ecotourism, highland ecotourism, Fraser Hill, segmentation, historical attraction, knowledge ecotourism, redevelopment.

Introduction

Highland attraction is not a new phenomenon to many travelers as well as tourism providers. Many of the research on the highland attractions embark on various topics including successful conversion of former colonial hill-stations into modern and flourishing destinations hill station attraction (Michaud & Turner, 2006), package mountaineering tourist (Pomfret, 2011), market agritourism on highland region (AdvancedGroup.net, 2009) and farmers perception on agritourism of highlands (Kunasekaran *et al.*, 2011) and participatory planning on highland ecotourism (Torres 1999) and scenic beauty preferences (Othman 2011). While there are many studies undertaking the highland resources as tourism attraction, little is known on the prospects of highland tourism in developing countries. In Malaysia, highland tourism is regarded as one of the increasing prospects to accelerate growth in tourism industry. Since the Ninth Malaysia Plan period 2006-2010, the Malaysian government has continued to promote and develop ecotourism as outlined in the National Ecotourism Plan. The main focus is to ensure equal growth and sustainable development, without depriving the location and types of attraction as well as the nature based highland destination.

Fraser Hill is one of the highland attractions in Malaysia. Fraser Hill has gain the attention by the British colonial since the beginning of the 20th century. During the colonial period, this destination was developed into hill station mainly for the purpose of week end leisure spot and vacation for the European residents. After the independence of Malaysia, the abandoned heritage architectural elements remain until this day. Today, even though tourism acts one of its major economy, Fraser Hill's attraction has not been fully tapped and contribute to the real capability of attracting tourists. According to the findings from the The Raub District Local Plan 2003-2015 the main problems includes; small numbers of tourist arrivals, lack of ecotourism activities, integrated management of resources and lack of promotional campaign to welcome tourists. Given the above scenario and the aims to enhance highland tourism in Malaysia, there is a need to study the prospect of Fraser Hill attraction in order to embark on its future direction in tourism. This article aims to identify the prospects of the Fraser Hill tourism.

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*Methods:**Location of Study Area:*

This study focuses on the tourism of Fraser Hill. Fraser's Hill located in the state of Pahang, lies in the central region Peninsular Malaysia. It is accessible in two hours north of Kuala Lumpur and 400 kilometers away from Singapore in the south. Fraser Hill has an average altitude of 1,200 meters high but its highest point rises at 1,500 at Telekom loop. Locally known as Bukit Fraser, it was a cooling holiday spot, popular not just to domestic tourists but also regional tourists, the Singaporean as well as the international tourists. It is one of the hill stations of Malaysia, an imprint left behind former British colonials since the beginning of the 20th century. The site had been the major relaxing hill station used by the European residents during the period 1890s. After the independence of Malaysia, the abandoned heritage architectural elements remain until this day. The historical heritage as well as its nature makes Fraser Hill as a unique place. Of the recent development, the Fraser Hill's attractions are the Pine Tree Hill, Abu Suradi, Kinderley, Maxwell, Rompin, Bishop and Mager. Nature attractions are the bird watching, Jeriau Waterfall, Allan Water and Paddock. Based on the existing attractions, Fraser Hill can be classified as an eco-tourism destination. Hence with this uniqueness, an area of 2,000 hectares has been gazetted as the Wildlife Reserve Fraser Hill and becomes a part of the Hutan Simpan Ulu Tranum and Hutan Simpan Batu Talam (Raub District Local Plan 2003-2015).

Data collection and Analysis:

This study utilized a combination of both data collection needed in assessing the prospects of Highland tourism in Fraser Hill. The secondary data source are the Ninth Malaysia Plan and the 2003-2015 Raub District Local Plan. The secondary data sources provide the existing development in Fraser Hill and the future development and the aspects taken into consideration in the planning of Fraser Hill as an environmentally sensitive area. Another data source was the interviews conducted with the officials at the District Council (Fraser Hill's branch). Their views allow an assessment made for the prospects of eco-tourism development in Fraser Hill. All the information gathered were analysed using a qualitative approach.

Result And Discussion*Assessing the Fraser Hill Ecotourism Attraction:*

Being a highland rich in nature and biodiversity, Fraser Hill is generally recognised as an ecotourism destination. Even though several range of ecotourism activities can be explored and experienced when visiting this destination, there are three major attractions that have ample prospects. First is the nostalgia attraction. This is in tandem with the the Raub District Local Plan 2003-2015, that emphasizes the concept of English Village. This concept focuses on the existing products with the addition of several new products that do not portray the differences with other highland such as Genting Highlands and Cameron Highlands. In this case it is impossible for Fraser Hill to be the second most important highland for Malaysia by competing with the Cameron Highlands which is renowned as one of the major vegetable crops and tea. Therefore in an effort to rebrand the Fraser Hill in the tourism map, there are two clusters of nature tourist that can be developed, particularly the adventure eco tourism and soft ecotourism. The most important soft ecotourism that distinguishes Fraser Hill from other highlands is its historical heritage.

i) Gazing the Historical Attraction:

In tourism promotion, Fraser Hill is normally recognised as the colonial-based attraction. The Fraser Hill was used by the British as a retreat during the summer. Until now Fraser Hill is a tourist destination that portrays the buildings with British architecture design. The use of Fraser Hill as a resort for British officers in Malaya clearly showed when the road linking the Kuala Kubu Baru to Fraser Hill has started to be built since the 20th century. As the road to Fraser Hill is a way one lane, traffic is restricted to one direction at one time. In addition, on October 6, 1951 a British officer, Sir Gurney was murdered at the downhill of Fraser Hill when he was on his way home after attending a meeting at Fraser Hill. Soldiers ambushed by guerrillas of the Malayan Communist Party shows the opposition of Communist Party towards Great Britain. It is clear evident that Fraser Hill has its own history.

Moreover, the name of Fraser Hill was derived from the name of the English man who was lost and has not found until now. The British also built the first resort here to avoid the officers returned to England. Thus, Fraser Hill was used as the main resort area of British officials in Malaya during at that time. Historic monuments related to Fraser Hill should be built. The small town with a clock tower in the middle clearly reflects that there was no highland resort can be compared with Fraser Hill before. In this case Fraser Hill can be called as The Heritage of Fraser Hill or The Pearl on The Hill. The construction of monuments and special gallery of the British are two potentials of attracting more visitors from local and international tourists, especially the nostalgia British market. Therefore, construction, preservation and conservation of monuments can restore the glory of the existing Fraser Hill.

ii) *Highland Outdoor Adventure:*

The adventure tourism is another prestigious highland outdoor activity that can attract tourists. Fraser Hill has several trails, and among the popular sites are the Trail Bishop, Rompin, Maxwell and Kindersely trail. Nevertheless these trails have limited facilities, and therefore, upgrading the infrastructure is crucial. These trails also can be used to organise local, national and international events, such as walkaton and bicycleton-trail across the existing trail. The hosting of the biennial event will able to put this destination as a new venue for adventurous outdoor challenge. Besides that, in order to maintain their eco tourism niche, the combination of hard, soft and adventure will be an important indicator for the formation of Fraser Hill's niche. This ultimately helps the authority in rebranding the Fraser Hill's niche in the country's tourism map.

iii) *Knowledge Ecotourism:*

Another unexplored attraction is the knowledge ecotourism. The knowledge based attractions allow the Fraser Hill to have its own identity in research and soft-ecotourism activities. In addition, education based ecotourism activities can be developed as the identity of Fraser Hill is education. Apart from being a research site, Fraser Hill can be a venue for young schoolchidren to visit and observe themselves the monuments related to the tourist center of high officers of the colonial time.

Furthermore, in order to promote the Fraser Hill as an education area, Fraser Hill can be gazette as a learning destination of the country's highland. The uniqueness of the flora and fauna that can be found with height allows it to match with the Danum Valley Research Centre in Sabah. Later, Fraser Hill will known as a hotspot for scientific research in Malaysia. Besides working with local and international universities in monitoring climate change, new research on issues of highland tourism can be explored in this area, thus, permitting a wider collaboration between local and international universities.

Tourism infrastructures and Services:

Highlands normally are areas having limitation in spatial development when the principle of sustainable development becomes the guidance of the overall tourism industry. Even though Fraser Hill is a colonial destination, existing tourism facilities ranging from hotels and places of attractions still facing infrastructural constraints. Added to this, pressing tourism issues in this destination comprising the following:

- i) The number of tourist is uncertain with the average of hotel occupancy decreasing.
- ii) Lack of tourist activities.
- iii) Although Fraser Hill was emphasized in the Malaysian National Ecotourism Plan, not much development has been developed to meet the objectives of the plans.
- iv) Community, tourism facilities and the trail have not been upgraded. Accessibility not reall roads and public transport is also not good.
- v) Population size too small to support and enhance local economy. Lack of basic facilities such as schools and the lack of home ownership.
- vi) Lack of proper solid waste management system.
- vii) New architectural and landscaping setting not compatible with the image of "English Village".

While there are several views concerning the standard of the facilities on offer at the destination, the overall principles of 'no more development' to some providers can mean a limitation in the offering of international standard facilities. Thus, in terms of competitive edge, Fraser Hill can lose some of the tourists who have never compromised their quality of ecotourism.

Segmenting the Tourist Market:

In tourism, segmentation of tourist market must be ensured and track not only at the planning purposes but also utilised by the tourism providers. As mentioned that Fraser Hill has ample ecotourism resources, tourist segmentation must be determined by the orientation of the ecotourism activities. Although there are many tourist typology that can be used, the available profile of the tourist arrival suggests the existence of thematic segmentation. Using classification of ecotourists introduced by Wright and Backman (1994), Honey (2008) as well as Kusler (1991), the ecotourists in Fraser Hill can be classified as the follows: (Table 1).

Table 1: Tourist segmentation in Fraser's Hill.

Tourist segmentation	Types of tourist	Activities	Interest	Attraction Classification
Group identified	Do it yourself	Jungle trekking, bird watching,	Nature	Adventure
	Ecotourist on tour/tour group	Historical tour, shopping	Nature and man made built	Soft
	School or scientific group	Scientific research	Nature	Hard
Types according to orientation of ecotourist	Hard Core	research and environmentalist, conservation	Explored hard activities	Forest and biodiversity
	Dedicated	Soft – hard core activities,	Historical, knowledge, landscape, conservation and green tourism	Natural, Human activities and scenic
	Mainstream	Softcore activities, tours,	Unique environment and original experience	Nature and activities
	Casual	Leisure tour,	they are more like exploring the place	Softcore and leisure

Undertaking to explore tourist behaviour will allow the tourism providers to package their products that meet the customer's need. Based on our field observation, the hard ecotourists were seem to support and involved in ranges of activities. According to our key respondents, most of hard ecotourists had their personal connection with conservation and environmental protection. They normally had diverse outdoor activities offered and managed not only by tour guides, but also by the botanical and geological society or associations. Added to this, environmental friendly activities including conservation of forest reserves and wildlife reserves add more values to the destination. Soft ecotourists on the other hand, pay more attention to the soft environment friendly activities including cultural (heritage), event (festivals, carnivals) and health.

Planning for Ecotourism Redevelopment:

Based on the analysis of the ecotourism resources and ecotourist market, the need for planning the redevelopment of niche ecotourism is highly needed. The Raub District Local Plan 2003-2015 has suggested that Fraser Hill should be developed with the English Village concept in order to enhance the destination even though considerable issues need to be attempted:

- i) The environmental conditions favored and meet the visitors desire.
- ii) The size of groups involved
- iii) Activities offered by the local tourist guide
- iv) Infrastructural support for visitors
- v) Type of satisfaction and experience while visiting the area

Although the existing ecotourists has helped the tourism providers to know their potential market, improvisation of ecotourist segment is another friendlier approach in customerisation of products. Based on the ecotourists' records, it is suggested that Fraser Hill should classified as the three groups of travelers (Refer Table 2) who have ample influences on the formation of eco-niches, as follows:

a) Self-reliant ecotourism:

Involving individuals or small groups that not more than 10 people. They tend not to use the vehicle while in the area visited. They prefer to experience by themselves. This group typically like an outdoor type and activities that adventure. For example, jungle tracking, kayaking, and rafting down the path.

b) *Small group ecotourism:*

This types of eco-tourists relatively involves few individuals or in small groups also. They tend to use services such as 4-wheel drive vehicle or small boat to visit the places of interest. This type of visitors is preferred on the activity that is simple and unadventures. They will select the activities depending on the age of their team members.

c) *Popular ecotourism:*

This travellers, local and internationals, know such destination as popular natural attractions. Prefer many mediums of transportation as mode of travel and they demand outdoor activities - adventurous and semi-adventurous outdoor activities is very low. The visitors tend to use support services such as tourism centers, dining facilities, a sidewalk to sightseeing. This type of popular tourist areas is suitable for a wide range of ages and physical capabilities. For example there are activities such as aquaria, agricultural park, zoo which displays flora and fauna. All this can be a source in the learning component which related to ecotourism.

Table 2: Proposal of new eco-niches travellers of Fraser's Hill.

Group traveler	Types of ecotourism	Activities
Self-reliant ecotourism	Adventure	Jungle tracking
Small group ecotourism	Soft to hard	Visited places and historical
Popular ecotourism	Hard to adventure	Sidewalk to sightseeing

The proposal for the Fraser Hill redevelopment utilising the concept of English Village will involve several phases of development until 2015. Some of the tourist attractions will be developed in order to support the concept of English Village will include;

- i) Bird Protection Park and High Land Natural Flora - gazette of wildlife in Fraser Hill wil be reserved under the Wildlife Protection Act 1972, establish surveillance towers, put a Natural Floral
- ii) Introducing a new component, such as theme parks, extremes games, cross-country circuit, wildlife museum
- iii) Extreme games village
- iv) Hill climbing, abseiling, bath, swim, picnic, fishing, camping, sight seeing and bird watching, cycling and camping spirit

However, results from visitors interview affirm that they love the Fraser Hill's weather as it was comfortable and fresh. Nevertheless the new component of man-made concept for Fraser Hill such as theme parks, cross-country circuit and extremes games were not agreed in total. The proposed man made development will become a distraction for instilling fresh air and experience comfortable surrounding and good weather. Therefore the concept of English Village should be attempted in a holistic manner with Isoing the natural attraction of Fraser Hill. Also important, the redevelopment of Fraser Hill will have to bear of not becoming a replication of existing highlands in the country.

Conclusion:

The study affirms that the highland ecotourism development should outline the possible prospects. Three aspect of ecotourism had made the prospects of Fraser Hill more promising. In assessing the highland ecotourism, besides conventional typology of ecotourism normally used by the tourism providers, highland ecotourism should become the acceptable norm of the site, especially in creating the knowledge and heritage based ecotourism. While the tourism services and facilities need to be enhanced and upgraded, the limit of carrying capacity of tourists and tourism activities should be set up, regulate and practice among the local stakeholders as well as the tourists. In conclusion, the prospects of highland should be managed in sustainable manner. It is imperative that the tourists' survey be carried out to strengthen what highland ecotourism really mean as tourism product. This is because without a balance prospect from either supply and demand or host-guest, a sustainable highland ecotourism will not be a reality.

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