

18 Dialogue with the hosts

An educational strategy towards sustainable tourism

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INTRODUCTION

Current projections suggest that world tourist arrivals will reach 666 million in the year 2000, with nearly a third landing at Asian destinations (Hiemstra, 1991, 62). This estimate anticipates an annual growth of 4.5 per cent for the whole world between 1988 and 2000, with the highest growth (12.1 per cent per annum) expected to occur in Asia. Within the Asian region, Malaysia has already started to enjoy a rapid and sustained growth in tourist arrivals: the industry has expanded at an annual average of 17.3 per cent over the last decade, and by a phenomenal 50 per cent in each of the last two years (Tourism Development Corporation, 1991, 32). Tourism has emerged from the backwaters of the Malaysian economy to become its third largest foreign exchange earner, surpassing the contributions from traditional commodity items, namely palm oil, sawn logs, rubber and tin.

The above trend has given rise to considerable concern among observers world-wide, both within and outside the industry, regarding the socio-cultural, economic and environmental effects of the tourism 'boom'. Of late there has been a noticeable convergence in areas of concern among researchers, and foremost among these is the concern for an appropriate role for the tourist industry in the world economy. Economists, anthropologists and others appear to have fallen in line with philosophers in discussing the implications of the rapid growth in tourism beyond the singular emphasis on the numeric aspect of the industry. Thus, one reads more frequent exhortations of the notion of 'appropriate', 'responsible' or at least 'sustainable' tourism (see also Chapter 15 by Parnwell in this volume). One of the core issues underlying the above notions is the question of how and to what extent can tourism benefit the host community, meaning the original (particularly the native or indigenous) residents in destination areas.

HOST COMMUNITY AS BENEFICIARIES

Although the category 'host community' has been widely mentioned in the literature since the 1960s, it was only through the more focused efforts of Peter Murphy at the University of Victoria, Canada, that the concept became a subject of popular scrutiny (Murphy, 1985, *passim*; see also D'Amore, 1983; Gunn, 1988). Whereas earlier studies tended to view the host community as a unitary receptacle, the above authors demonstrate that the host community is in fact a highly differentiated group, always with a small minority deriving actual pecuniary benefits from tourism. The benefit structure becomes conspicuously narrower when one proceeds to examine the situation in Third World destinations.

In two previous papers on the subject, I have suggested that the benefit structure may also follow ethnic affiliation (Kadir Din, 1986; 1988b), and part of the explanation lies in the lack of entrepreneurial capability of the local residents who may belong to a group that is less than adequately pre-adapted to the demands of a new type of economic activity. It follows that any meaningful local involvement in the new-found opportunities associated with tourism would have to be initiated 'top-down' through a proper assessment of the needs of the host community (Kadir Din, 1989b).

While the proposition for a 'top-down' incentive programme would readily appeal to common sense, the effective implementation of such a programme, which may range from fiscal incentives to manpower training, would require enormous development efforts which should commence by making local residents fully aware of the new force of change that is affecting their community. The purpose of this chapter is to draw attention to the relevance of an education strategy towards host community involvement in tourism. The following section provides a general overview of the Malaysian approach to tourism planning, which illustrates the lack of emphasis on community education in contemporary tourism planning. Following this, a more detailed account of the recent developments in the island destination of Langkawi is presented; the choice of Langkawi is prompted by the writer's long familiarity with the island, and its status as an emergent tourist principal destination in Malaysia.

THE HOST FACTOR IN MALAYSIAN TOURISM PLANNING

Since the late 1950s, the attitude of the Malaysian authorities to tourism development has centred primarily on two major concerns: to project a positive image of the country abroad, and to promote growth as a means of earning foreign exchange. As a result of this, there has been little attempt to include the host factor in tourism planning. The sentiment of the host community was always presumed to be positive; this assumption was well borne out by positive remarks by tourists in the media, and the high tourist ratings obtained on the friendliness of locals as indicated by results of the occasional surveys of departing tourists. As in the sectoral plans covering other economic activities, tourism planning helped to perpetuate a myth that tourism has always been a harmless activity which operates with few socio-cultural consequences.

The 1970s saw occasional criticisms by observers, mostly of the protest genre, directed against what appeared to be negative issues surrounding the impact of tourism on society. These issues included environmental deterioration, moral decadence, and certain kinds of unacceptable behaviour by the stereotypical tourist. By the late 1970s some consideration was given towards addressing these concerns (for example, see Anonymous, 1976, 7, 46), and by the early 1980s concern over the abrasive consequences of tourism projects on the local residents became recognised and was subsequently embedded in planning laws as found in the provision of the Town and Country Planning Act (1976) and the Environmental Quality Act (Amendment 1985). Whereas the former calls for the submission of Structure Plans which, where applicable, address the impact of tourism on local residents, the latter makes mandatory the submission of Environmental Impact Assessment reports on tourism impacts (including the socio-cultural impact of tourism), prior to the approval of projects of certain scales and at certain locations.

The above explicit injunctions on the host factor in tourism development is a far cry from the earlier 'presumed acceptability' of tourism among residents in destination areas. The position prior to this was well reflected in a statement made by the Kedah Chief Minister that 'we do not have to consult with the local people; we know what is good for them' (*Dewan Masyarakat*, 1984). The need to increase resident awareness of tourism as a new force of change was considered a non-issue so that, so long as there was potential for

development in an area, tourism projects were presumed to be beneficial to the host community.

HOST PARTICIPATION IN MALAYSIAN DESTINATIONS: THE EXAMPLE OF LANGKAWI

Since the Dutch decided to treat Langkawi as a destination for the recuperation of their soldiers serving the region in 1642, Langkawi has undergone three discernible stages in its development as a tourism centre. The inception stage began in 1948 when the first hotel on the island (Fairwinds Hotel) was built. A number of rest-houses was built in the 1950s and 1960s. During the subsequent stage (1970s), Langkawi grew to become a popular destination among domestic tourists until the island was proposed for a US\$1 billion resort development in the early 1980s. By the late 1980s, Langkawi was poised to become the largest single resort destination in the region, following the government's decision to turn the island into a free port.

Throughout the above three stages, tourism development proceeded without any consideration being given to its acceptability to the local population. In the early 1980s there were frequent complaints concerning outside intrusion; a number of protests surfaced, including two against the government's decision to acquire land for the extension of the existing airstrip, and the exploitation of Telaga Tujuh mountain stream as a source of water supply. These two complaints later extended to complaints on environmental pollution, moral decadence, and inflation (especially land prices – see Bird, 1989). It was only in the late 1980s that efforts were made to implement the provisions of the Environmental Quality Act and the Town and Country Planning Act, mentioned earlier.

The Langkawi Structure Plan, 1990–2005

The Survey Report for the Langkawi Structure Plan was completed and displayed to the public for one month after 25 February 1990. Subsequently, pursuant to the Town and Country Planning Act, the Structure Plan was launched by the Prime Minister and exhibited in Kuah on 5 January 1991. As three years have now passed since the island was conferred the status of a free port, it will be useful to examine planning considerations affecting tourism – in particular, considerations of host involvement in the planning process itself. Although the public had the opportunity, on two occasions, to express

their views and make representations on matters with which they disagreed, as provided in the Town and Country Planning Act (1976, Section 9/2 and 3), it is usually during the second review after publicity of the draft plan that members of the public become more effective in airing their protests.

The effectiveness of the review process depends to a large extent on two main factors: how literate and vocal are the community, and how objective is the conduct of the review process. It is often claimed that the public are usually apathetic, partly because of their own ignorance of the subject, and partly because of their lack of familiarity with the procedures involved (Jafari, 1991, personal communication). It seems more likely, however, that the method of canvassing residents' opinions does not involve creative efforts seriously to obtain information on their reactions to the proposals contained in the plan. The standard procedure in the review process is to begin with the appointment of a Public Reactions Sub-Committee which then arranges for a meeting with the representatives of the resident community. The minutes of the meeting are then used as a source for making necessary alterations to the draft plan before it is submitted for approval and assent by the State Executive Council, following which the Structure Plan comes into effect.

The public exhibition for the Structure Plan for Langkawi was announced in the newspapers over a period of three days in early January 1991. Further publicity was given through announcements on the radio and two television channels, plus a display of 100 posters and ten large cloth posters at strategic locations in Kedah. The event gained extended publicity since it was announced by the Prime Minister, who for some time had taken a special interest in the development of the island. A total of 1,000 copies of the report was printed in English and Malay. Out of this only 93 copies of the English version were sold, as compared to the sale of 189 Malay version copies, representing some 5 per cent of the attendees (4,577 people, mostly Malays). Altogether, 39 protest letters were received by the Sub-Committee. Although 32 of the complainants indicated their willingness to participate in the meeting, only 14 showed up in three separate sessions. The total number of disagreements received was significantly more than the total received during similar public exhibitions held for Alor Setar (31 letters) and Kangar (23 letters) two to three years previously.

It is significant to note that membership of the Sub-Committee clearly represented the government (state politicians and administrators), with four of the members bearing conferred titles. Questions

can be raised as to whether the members realistically can be taken as an independent body to oversee a public review process. The complainants, however, represented a wide range of interest groups, six of which have pro-government connections. The only group which is known for its vocal criticism of government projects is the Consumers Association of Penang (CAP), which does not have a home base in Langkawi, and which therefore may not represent the true sentiment of the local population. The majority of protests, mostly less sophisticated in presentation, came from individual farmers, fishermen and chalet operators, who can claim to have their stake in the future of Langkawi.

From the protest letters, it is evident that tourism-related issues predominate. These include:

- 1 Land reclamation for tourism-related projects.
- 2 Acquisition of land from local residents for development.
- 3 The development of golf ranges.
- 4 Soil erosion problems at the hill sites for tourism.
- 5 Quota for *Bumiputera*¹ involvement in the new projects.
- 6 Relocation of fishing communities.
- 7 Increases in ferry fares.
- 8 Problems relating to improper conduct of tourists.
- 9 Erosion of spiritual values as commercialism creeps in.

As one might expect, the Sub-Committee's comments on many of the complaints raised concerning tourism was a simple 'outside the scope of the study', meaning that such complaints will not be heeded to. In particular, nearly every complaint on moral issues relating to tourism development was declared to be outside the purview of the Sub-Committee.

THE ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY ACT (AMENDMENT, 1985)

Pursuant to Section 34A of the Environmental Quality Act (Amendment, 1985), the Department of the Environment published the *Handbook of Environmental Impact Assessment Guidelines* which contains specifications for tourism-related projects. These include 'any area with tourism potential'. Activities which fall under the aegis of the Environmental Impact Assessment legislation include:

- 1 construction of coastal resort facilities with more than 80 rooms;

- 2 hill station resort or hotel development covering an area of 50 hectares of more;
- 3 development of tourist or recreational facilities in national parks;
- 4 development of tourist or recreational facilities on islands in surrounding waters which are gazetted as national marine parks.

One of the three components contained in the Environmental Impact Assessment checklist for studies covers the human aspects, which include aesthetic, cultural, socio-economic, health and safety aspects. At the time of writing (February 1991), I am not aware of any serious attempt to observe these provisions (first published in 1987), in all the new tourism projects on Langkawi. It should be emphasised at this point that the problems relating to environmental deterioration on the island of Langkawi also arose from the rapid growth of chalets which were not built with proper sewage disposal and beach protection measures. Although individually these premises may fall outside the scope of the relevant Acts (being less than 50 hectares, or having fewer than 80 rooms), when the combined effect of dozens of operators is taken into account, the gross effect can be a tyranny of the small, and clearly leaves room for concern.

OVERCOMING THE FREE-RIDER SITUATION

The above account of the failure in the implementation of the provisions of the two relevant Acts towards achieving sustainable goals in tourism development suggests that full cooperation is needed from local residents, who can act as complainants and who can provide the basis for effective control programmes. A prerequisite for such cooperation calls for a sensitive and informed public because, without their cooperation (through protests and participation), it may be difficult to enforce the regulations contained in the relevant control Acts. To achieve the desired effect, it is therefore important that the local residents be made aware of the implications of changes brought about by the rapid growth of tourism, so that they will be in a position to assist in addressing the risks associated with such rapid changes.

It is proposed that instead of relying solely on spontaneous involvement by locals, planners can act more effectively by first introducing measures which would serve to educate the public so that they can become more involved in shaping the future course of their community (see for example Hall, 1988). Although such an approach assumes a 'top-down' posture in terms of source of initiative, the end result may produce a blend of both 'top-down' and 'bottom-up'

approaches in participatory planning. Granted this proposition, what would be the best approach towards encouraging more locals to participate in the decision-making process?

Bennett (n.d., 124) suggests that we ought to create 'agents of change' who can educate the public about the 'sources' of change – in this case tourism. To be effective, such agents should comprise local 'knowledgeables who are politically independent, or at least are impartial to political considerations'. Once such agents are identified, Murphy recommends that workshops should be held to familiarise locals with the nature and implications of tourism development (Murphy, 1988, 135–38). To avoid ineffective conduct of meetings such as these, it is necessary that parallel workshops in the form of focus groups be organised to provide opportunities for improving awareness among different interested parties in the host community. Through such workshops, it is possible to canvass the views, preferences and grievances of all the different groups in the locality. A delphi technique can then be introduced to determine the needs and priorities of the host society. To achieve this, a bigger forum should be organised which can amalgamate both the contending and common viewpoints among the different 'focus groups' in society, so that debates can be held to determine the needs and priorities of the larger group – i.e. the entire community.

A key consideration to the above goal is that the viewpoints synthesised in the end would represent the collective sentiment of the local population, and not just 'top-down' pronouncements as evident in the current practice, especially when such pronouncements come from outsiders who may not fully be able to empathise with the predicament of the locals. This approach, however, does not reject the policies decided at the centre. It merely attempts to translate them through a dialogue with the receiving communities so that they can understand the perspective of the policy-maker and vice versa, and will be in a better position to provide the support in the implementation of the relevant policy. Whenever there are disagreements, they can be sorted out at the combined forum before a particular ruling is adopted for enforcement.

IDENTIFYING THE NEEDS OF THE HOSTS AND THE GUESTS

An optimal tourism planning decision is one that takes into consideration the needs of both the tourists and the resident population. It is only through careful articulation of these needs that the future of the

industry can be sustained, and local resentment can be averted. Whereas the needs of the locals can be identified through the above-mentioned workshops and fora, the needs of the tourist are easier to determine: regular questionnaire surveys or focus group workshops on their preferences and complaints are sufficient to solicit their points of view.

As for the residents, tourism represents an economic opportunity which should not be by-passed simply because residents are not ready to participate in the opportunities that arise. In a study among longhouse dwellers in Limbang, Sarawak, and on the local residents in Penang, Langkawi, Tioman and Taman Negara, I found that local residents are more knowledgeable than they are commonly presumed to be. They were enthusiastic in desiring to participate directly in tourism businesses, although they may have little prior experience in the conduct of a business.

In most new destinations, the religious leaders appear to be the least receptive among the locals since tourism has for long been associated with certain immoral behaviour, both among the locals as well as the tourists. Rather than by-passing them or ignoring them, prudence suggests that they should be allowed to express their views, and should be given some consideration before the planners proceed with the tourism projects.

CONCLUSION

A sustainable mode of tourism development is one which considers both the ecological and the social carrying capacity of the destination area. I have argued that, because tourism involves an encounter situation, between the values of outsiders and insiders, it is important to pay attention to the needs of the host community who are the rightful custodians of the area. Their needs, in the final analysis, cannot be superseded by outside interests, nor can they be determined by outsiders. They must come from locals and be in touch with local sentiments. Local 'knowledgeables' and other members of the local community must be given a greater say. The main weakness of the current 'top-down' strategy is that it fails to solicit the 'objective' views of the locals, who in any case will inevitably have to accommodate all the impacts arising from tourism development. Local sentiments are also dynamic in nature but are critical in a successful hospitality industry. This calls for a trial and error approach at the beginning, but in the long run as more locals become aware of the consequences, the host community will be in a better position to address whatever

problems may arise in their midst. If the planner is seriously intent on realising the good of sustainable tourism, it is imperative that the concept, and the spirit of law behind it, be made intelligible, so that these values ultimately become a part of the local ethos.

NOTE

1 Literally 'sons of the soil'; term applied to the Malays and other indigenous peoples of Malaysia.