

## COMMUNITY-BASED ECOTOURISM (CBE) DEVELOPMENT IN LOWER KINABATANGAN OF SABAH, MALAYSIAN BORNEO

**Velan Kunjuraman<sup>1</sup>**  
**Roslizawati Che Aziz<sup>2</sup>**

### ABSTRACT

Ecotourism related activities such as river boating, wild life viewing, jungle trekking, fire fly watching, trees planting and homestay programme have been introduced in Abai Village, Lower Kinabatangan, Sabah since 2005. Majority of the local communities are willing to participate in ecotourism activities because they believe ecotourism and homestay programmes can provide extra income for their livelihoods. Even though local communities at Abai are willing to participate in ecotourism activities, there are a few challenges faced by them in order to gain real benefits from ecotourism development. Within the context of Special Interest Tourism (SIT), this study was conducted in September until November 2014 to observe local participation in ecotourism activities. In-depth interviews were conducted with various participants such as homestay operators, forest restoration participants, head village and management of Community Abai Project (CAP). The findings have revealed that the local people manage ecotourism activities in Abai such as the Habitat Forest Restoration Project and Homestay Programme. Although the local community supports the ecotourism activities in Abai, they still encounter challenges such as (1) lack of capital resources, (2) out migration of youths, (3) lack of public facilities, (4) leadership, local capacity and communication issues, and (5) threats to wild life animals causes the local participation in ecotourism development to be uncertain.

**KEYWORDS:** ECOTOURISM ACTIVITIES. ABAI VILLAGE. LOCAL PARTICIPATION. CHALLENGES. COMMUNITY BASED TOURISM. SPECIAL INTEREST TOURISM.

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<sup>1</sup> Ph D. Tourism - Faculty Member. E-mail: velan1199@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup> Faculty of Hospitality, Tourism & Wellness, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, Malaysia.

## INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is indeed blessed with various natural and cultural resources that make ecotourism a highly beneficial, feasible, sustainable and a long-term form of tourism. Malaysia is one of the twelve mega-biologically diverse countries in the world, which boasts at least 15,000 species of flowering plants, 286 species of mammals, 150,000 species of invertebrates and 4,000 species of fishes (Ministry of Tourism and Culture Malaysia, 2014). Ecotourism activities in Malaysia are fully based on nature; and tourists can experience a range of activities such as caving, hiking, jungle trekking, water rafting, rock climbing, bird watching, diving and river cruising. The Malaysian government emphasises the concept of sustainable tourism and the concept of balancing conservation and development. The concept of sustainable tourism development is widely recognised and is a significant approach in tourism studies (Hussin & Kunjuraman, 2014).

Community-based Tourism (CBT) or Community-based Ecotourism (CBE) is a growing phenomenon in many developing countries where it is the main activity to increase rural communities' livelihoods. The essence of CBT or CBE is in line with sustainability paradigm that advocates the participation of local community for a more equitable and holistic development (Stone & Stone, 2011). As CBT emerges as an alternative to mass tourism, it encourages local community development through tourism development and provides a platform to enjoy development benefits (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009). Special Interest Tourism (SIT) is a growing phenomenon in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century (Trauer, 2006) and continuously evolves. In this paper, the authors discuss that CBT could be considered as a part within the realm of SIT and popular tourism activities in developing countries especially in Malaysia.

As noted earlier, CBT in the context of ecotourism is well-known in developing countries, including Malaysia whereby the local communities are motivated to be

involved to enhance their socio-economic status. Substantial sufficient justifications have been proposed by a majority of CBE advocates that CBE provides many benefits to the rural community, such as new jobs opportunities, new business investment, opportunities for acquiring new skills and job training, enhancement of foreign language proficiency, enhancing environmental consciousness, empowerment of local communities, conservation and preservation of natural resources and infrastructure development (Boo, 1991; Hummel, 1994; Scheyvens, 1999; Rowat & Engelhardt, 2007; Stronza & Gordillo, 2008; Stronza & Pêgas, 2008; Hussin & Mat Som, 2008; Hussin, 2008, 2009; Bhuiyan, Siwar, Ismail, & Islam 2011; Afenyo & Amuquandoh, 2014; Ahmad, 2014). However, there are limited studies on CBE projects especially in the context of Malaysia. In line with this preposition, this study aims to fill the gap in the CBE literature by carrying out a study at Abai Village, Lower Kinabatangan, Sabah, Malaysian Borneo. This study is significant to enhance the current CBE literature and is perceived to expand the body of knowledge on ecotourism for future reference and studies.

## **BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

### **THE CONCEPTS OF ECOTOURISM AND COMMUNITY-BASED ECOTOURISM (CBE) IN TOURISM STUDIES**

Petrovska et al. (2009: 259) argued that 'ecotourism is a relatively new concept; however, is often misunderstood or misused'. The definition of ecotourism often differs from region to region as the aforementioned concept is viewed from various perspectives. Ecotourism is often deemed similar to terms such as green tourism, adventure tourism, alternative tourism and nature-based tourism (Fallon & Kriwoken, 2003). The Malaysian Ecotourism Master Plan (1996) adopted the official definition of ecotourism as developed by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), of which Malaysia is a member. According to IUCN, 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 (Caballos-Luscurain, 1996, p. 20).

Tourism researchers have defined the concept of ecotourism in many ways. The Ecotourism Society (1992), for instance, has described 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, p. 261).

Bhuiyan et al. (2011b) stressed that 'ecotourism should benefit conservation through improved management of visited natural areas'. Orams (1995) stated that the main features of ecotourism include conservation benefits, nature-based experience and the setting of economic and social benefits. Newsome et al. (2013) classified 'ecotourism' into five fundamental characteristics, namely (1) natural environment (conserved areas), (2) ecological sustainability, (3) environmental education, (4) locally beneficial, and (5) tourist satisfaction. The aforementioned characteristics should be observed in any form tourism activities including ecotourism. Cater (1997) has introduced two types of ecotourism. 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', where those who visit a destination for a few days are unlikely to return as they may be more interested in their travel experience and behave less responsibly towards the natural environment (Hussin, 2008, p. 74).

In addition, The Nature Conservancy adopted the concept of ecotourism as emphasising on the protection of the environment and centred on the conservation objectives. Petrovska et al. (2009) stressed that ecotourism is an ideal component of a sustainable development strategy where natural resources can be utilised as a tourist attraction without conveying negative impact to the environment. Environmental

awareness among the local community is pivotal to preserve the natural resources of the surrounding. This is because the main goal of ecotourism is to promote conservation efforts among the local communities and visitors to sustain the natural biodiversity in the long run. Several practical recommendations are mentioned to ensure the environment is safe from any form of manipulation by the negligent bodies. First, the tourism stakeholders specifically the government can formulate new relevant policies in ecotourism development as a way to boost the awareness among the local communities and tourists. Second, the local communities can use their ecological knowledge known as traditional knowledge to reduce the negative impacts of environment from the tourism development. Lastly, the tourists are also responsible to protect the environment by following rules and regulations at the local ecotourism destinations in the world.

In this paper, the concept of ecotourism is operationalized as an alternative tourism that widely relies on nature-based activities, and the involvement of the local community is crucial to sustain for the future and gain ultimate success. For the successful ecotourism development, several elements should be taken into consideration as mentioned by Petrovska (2009, p. 260) as follows:

- Have a long term impact on a protected area's natural resources;
- Involve stakeholders (individuals, communities, eco-tourists, tour operators and government institutions) in the planning, development, implementation and monitoring phases;
- Respect local cultures and traditions;
- Generate sustainable and equitable income for local communities and for as many other stakeholders as possible, including private tour operators; and
- Educate all stakeholders about their role in conservation.

## **SIT AND COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM (CBT): A CONCEPTUAL PERSPECTIVE**

The idea of SIT in tourism studies has gained attention in the early 1990s through the work by Hall and Weiler (1992). To define the concept of SIT in tourism studies, Hall and Weiler (1992, p. 5) proposed SIT as “traveller’s motivation and decision-making primarily determined by a particular special interest with a focus either on activities and/or destinations and settings”. Moreover, Trauer (2006, p. 186) argued that “SIT is the opposite of mass tourism with the focus on new forms of tourism that have the potential to meet the needs of tourists and hosts, including rural tourism, adventure and nature-based tourism, cultural and heritage tourism, and festival and event tourism”. In this paper, Trauer’s definition of SIT is supported and the proposed ecotourism can be considered as one of the SIT product especially within the context of CBT in Malaysia.

CBT concept is a new agenda in tourism studies that involves the participation of local community in tourism development within their area. This concept had emerged in the middle of 1990s (Asker et al., 2010, p. 2). CBT stresses on direct involvement of the community in any tourism development project that can empower them in the aspect of economics, social and politics. CBT provides benefits to the communities that are involved in tourism projects within an area that selected by the community. For example, the community can increase the household economy by gaining extra income, which then increases the standard of living. In this situation, the community receives profits from the tourism development and provides confidence to be independent. CBT also stresses on the active participation of the locals in the area and becomes an empowerment tool in all of the tourism opportunities (Rafee et al., 2012).

To stabilised, smoothen and systemised CBT, a few critical factors need to be taken into account in CBT as proposed by Ashley, Roe and Goodwin (2001, p. 28):

- I. Access of the poor to market: physical location, economic elites and social constraints on local producers.
- II. Commercial sustainability: product quality and price, marketing, strength of the broader destination and funding mechanisms.

- III. Policy framework: land tenure, regulatory context, planning process, government attitudes and capacity.
- IV. Implementation issues: filling the skills gap, managing costs and expectations and maximising collaboration among stakeholders.

The above factors should be carefully analysed so that a tourism development project can achieve success and can be sustained for a long period. Community-based tourism in the context of ecotourism (CBE) is a type of ecotourism whereby the local communities have a significant power or control over management of ecotourism activities. As a result, they receive benefits upon their participation in the project. As suggested by Scheyvens, 'a community-based approach to ecotourism recognises the need to promote both the quality of life and the conservation of resources (1999, p. 246). Moreover, community-based ecotourism also emphasises on cultural preservation, environmental conservation and local economic livelihood. Reimer and Walter (2003) indicate that these three dimensions as 'a kind of mutualistic symbiotic relationship' (p. 123). Thus, it can be concluded that human dimension, as well as socio-cultural and economic dimensions, should be in tandem with the community-based ecotourism activities in order to meet the ecotourism objectives.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This is an exploratory qualitative research. This research design was applied to investigate the experience of local community engagement in ecotourism activities in Abai Village, Sabah. Hence, in-depth interview is deemed as a relevant method for data collection. Moreover, the researchers also performed field observation throughout the fieldwork process and secondary data were used to obtain information for this study.

A purposive sampling technique (Sekaran, 1992) was employed in this study because all the respondents have experience managing ecotourism activities in Abai village. The Abai village was selected on the basis of a potential ecotourism site in Lower Kinabatangan, and several ecotourism activities are conducted by the locals. The

researchers lived at Abai village for 2 weeks in September 2014. A semi-structured interview method was employed in this study to ensure that the respondents were comfortable and provided their opinion without hesitation. Seven ecotourism project participants were selected as the informants in this study, particularly those actively involved in ecotourism activities in the Abai village. All the interviews were recorded after obtaining permission from the respondents. All the respondents were asked about their involvement in ecotourism related activities and the benefits that they have received. Moreover, the respondents were asked regarding the challenges often faced by them in managing ecotourism activities in Abai village. The interviews were conducted at the interviewee's home, as the respondents were comfortable to be interviewed within their domain. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes to 1 hour. The interviewees preferred to speak in the Malay language, as it is a common language in their daily lives. After the interviews, the raw data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY ABAI PROJECT (CAP) ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN LOWER KINABATANGAN AREA**

A CAP treasurer (Informant 1) in Abai village explained about the background of CAP in the interview. According to the informant, CAP was formed on November 27<sup>th</sup> 2010 in Abai village, and it is a community-based ecotourism initiative. The CAP project focuses on homestay programme, forest restoration and capacity building project implemented by the community members of Abai village. Furthermore, CAP is a replication effort of the successful 17-year old model known as Model Ecologically Sustainable Community-Based Tourism (MESCOT) that was pioneered by the community of Batu Puteh Village of Lower Kinabatangan. The vision and mission (CAP Brochure, 2014) of Cap is as mentioned below.



- The vision is to protect forests and wildlife, harness and build capacity among the people and to generate sustainable income through ecotourism and habitat restoration activities.

There are four main missions in CAP, which are:

- Establish the community as stewards of the forests and implementers of a conservation-based economy;
- Restore degraded forest habitats along the Lower Kinabatangan river by focusing on food sources for wildlife;
- Preserve the cultural authenticity of Abai community through various activities such as homestay programmes and ecotourism; and
- Diversify sources of income for the community livelihood.

Prior introduction of CAP in Abai village, of the community in the village encountered a few social and environmental problems. The survival of Abai village is under threat due to migration of the youths in for job hunting. Moreover, loss of local cultural authenticity and the natural environment resources of the surroundings cause extreme pressure for land conversion to oil palm plantations. To overcome these problems, CAP was introduced and aims to generate a new income stream as means of economic resource diversification by providing training, skills and related activities for the local community members through development of CBT. CAP consists of 12 core members who lead and manage the forest restoration project and ecotourism activities that benefit the locals involved in these activities. In terms of membership, CAP received a positive support from the villagers where at least 60 of them are members in this management. According to informant 1, 80 per cent of CAP members are from Abai village. The project is entirely community-based and managed by the villagers to ensure extensive distribution of project benefits. There is no any restriction from the CAP towards community participation in the projects and it is open to the entire community. Since 2011, CAP-based activities have grown and developed. As a result, Abai village is one of the core destinations for community-based conservation and ecotourism

activities and is on par with other neighbouring villages such as Sukau, Bilit and Batu Puteh. To date, ecotourism activities are managed well by CAP members and promote the activities extensively to ensure sustainability (Researchers' observation, 2014). The co-operation and collaboration from the local stakeholders towards implementation of CAP projects including forest restoration and ecotourism activities are significantly important.

## **COMMUNITY-BASED ECOTOURISM ACTIVITIES IN ABAI VILLAGE**

### **i. CAP HABITAT RESTORATION PROJECT**

CAP Habitat Restoration Project is one of the ecotourism activities under the responsibility of CAP management. Environmental-based ecotourism activities such as forest restoration play a significant role in promoting local knowledge, importance of natural resources and simultaneously provide economic benefits to the locals who are actively involved in this project. Recently, a bio-diversity project was carried out in Abai village. The project was supported by LEAP SPIRAL, which was based at Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. This project began in July 2012 and ended in April 2014. The significance of this project is that it is fully managed by the community in Abai village and CAP management. This project benefited 76 members in Abai village, consisting of 30 male participants, 36 female participants and 10 children of the members. On the other hand, a total 52 local communities of villagers have taken part in capacity building and training programmes. These activities were organised by CAP's Habitat Restoration Project to enhance empowerment among the members. This project focused on environmental, socio-cultural and political issues, for an improved livelihood of the locals in the Abai village. There are several objectives of this project, which are (Community Abai Project (CAP): Forest Restoration & Ecotourism Progress Report July 2014, p. 5):

1. To plant 25,000 trees over 10 hectares of degraded forest areas to provide a critical food source for wildlife such as orang-utan and other wildlife;
2. To enhance local capacity and skills in areas such as bookkeeping, organisational management, nature guiding, food and beverage and leadership issues;
3. To increase sustainable sources of revenue through forest restoration and ecotourism, including seedlings collection, nursery management, planting, homestays, guiding, and ecotourism services;
4. To increase community involvement and increase shared benefits of this project, especially in leadership positions through a community-based model, in which all project coordinators are community members and restoration and ecotourism activities are open to the entire community;
5. To protect and restore critical wildlife habitat and forest connectivity in the Lower Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary with a focus on indigenous tree species and fruit trees that will serve as sources of food and shelter for wildlife.

According to the CAP's report, a total of 19,900 trees from 27,400 trees covering an area of 10.13 hectares were planted. Moreover, the remaining trees were planted with support received from other funding, ecotourism programme and participation of volunteers throughout the duration of this project. A local organisation known as KAPOK as well as households in Abai village that owned nursery plots were involved in the planting of the seedlings. To sustain the local culture and heritage, eleven native species were planted whereby nine plants were planted along these restoration areas. The trees were planted using gap planting method with an approach to avoid planting under canopy within the degraded riparian areas of Lot 1 and Lot 2 of the Lower Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary. The members of the project were given the responsibility in maintenance work, which involved the removal of vines and climbers that was done between 3 to 6 months after the seedlings were planted in the respective

areas (Community Abai Project (CAP): Forest Restoration & Ecotourism Progress Report July, 2014).

Based on the observation data during the fieldwork at Abai village, the ecotourism activities via CAP management have contributed to the effort of the restoration. The unique package offered by the management ensured that the visitors and local community contribute and understand the importance of this restoration work as well as a platform to provide awareness to those who involved in it. In this project, CAP welcomed the tourists to participate and provide a different experience to the visitors. Previously, both large and small tourist groups have visited the site and contributed their time and manpower voluntarily in the tree planting work. It is estimated that throughout 2011 until present (February 2014), over 3,000 trees were purchased and planted by tourists (Community Abai Project (CAP): Forest Restoration & Ecotourism Progress Report July 2014). Thus, the ecotourism activities through forest restoration activities are widely supported by the local community and the tourists.

In terms of experience in forest restoration work, the respondents were asked regarding tourist expectation and their preferences in participating in this activity. Informant 2 stated:

There are tourists who are keen to visit here just because of the tree planting activities. They are allowed to write down their names on the trees they planted. Moreover, some of them told me that they would revisit in the future to see their trees. In addition, some of them asked my contact number and called me to ask the growing process of the trees.

Thus, it is noted that forest restoration activities in Abai village is a favourite activity and contributes physiological impact to the tourists who participated in the activities. On the other hand, forest restoration programme is an opportunity to enhance and understand the importance of natural resources among the participants, whereby environmental sustainability aspect could be cultivated.

## ii. HOMESTAY PROGRAMME

During an interview session, a homestay coordinator explained about the implementation of the homestay programme and its current progress in Abai village. According to the coordinator, homestay programme is one of the ecotourism activity under the management of CAP and that apply community-based tourism concept. Furthermore, the coordinator stated that the introduction of the homestay programme in her village was under her responsibility for the past 14 years. She shared her opinion about the homestay programme and its current progress to date as follows:

Homestay programme started to operate in Abai village in 2001 and was introduced by WWF. We are aware that homestay programme is under the responsibility of the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Environment Sabah but in Abai village, it was introduced by WWF. With the introduction of this programme, we are interested to participate and the main reason of our involvement in this programme is to enhance our livelihood and economic achievement. Our homestay is known as 'Moido Walai Tokou Homestay' meaning 'our house' (Informant 3).

At present, four households are actively participating in the homestay programme. These four homestay operators have successfully implemented the programme because they believe that this programme is a good mechanism for them to improve their livelihood. Moreover, these four homestay operators in Abai village are officially registered with the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Environment Sabah and they provide accommodation services to the visitors either from local or overseas. In terms of the facilities in the homestay programme, a homestay operator (Informant 4) stated that in her house, there are three rooms, six mattresses and four beds. Another homestay operator (Informant 5) had similar views in terms of electricity and water supply. Both informants (4 and 5) used generator for providing electricity, and river is used as a main source of water supply as well as from rainwater.

In a homestay programme, there are a number of products that are tourist attractions such as river cruise, wildlife viewing, firefly watching, boat service, tree

planting or restoration activities, local traditional foods, cultural performances, showcasing traditional method of catching prawns, showing mass flowering of *Mangifera* (a prominent species around the Lower Kinabatangan Sanctuary) and others. When asked pertaining preferred activities in the homestay programme p by the tourists, the homestay operator added:

Here, we prioritise activities in the homestay programme because the tourists prefer to go outside for activities such as wildlife viewing and river cruise. Moreover, indoor activities like eating traditional foods are among the popular activities to them. The tourists prefer to eat our traditional food because they have never experienced them in their lives. Many tourists liked outdoor activities and they enjoyed their time by viewing wildlife animals namely Orang Utan and elephants (Informant 5).

The same informant also mentioned that the tourists are extremely happy during their stay in homestay and are being taught about the culture of the local community such as serving local traditional food, cultural performances and having meals using hands. These are the preferred activities in the homestay programme, which are based on local culture and can be rarely found in urban areas.

On the other hand, other tourist attraction activities conducted by the homestay operators such as River Cruise along the Ramsar Site, Balat Damit Wildlife Reserve, Lower Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary, Irrawaddy Dolphin Cruise and Firefly River Cruise are among the activities undertaken by the locals in order to attract the tourists. These activities target researchers, wildlife enthusiasts, student groups and independent travellers both local and international travellers. The ecotourism activities in Abai village through the homestay programme have gained successful support by the participation of youths. The youths in Abai village have served more than 500 tourists over the past three years, including the first few months of the year 2014. Moreover, out of twelve local tour guides under the homestay association of Abai village, two individuals have successfully obtained the green badge from the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Environment Sabah (Community Abai Project (CAP): Forest Restoration & Ecotourism Progress Report July 2014). Ecotourism activities through the homestay

programme do not only support households' livelihoods of Abai village but also benefits the younger generation who resides in Abai village. This programme assists in the decrease of outmigration of youths, which is a dominant issue in the Abai village recently.

In terms of promotional activities, the CAP management assists the homestay programme in Abai village. Among them, a website [www.moidowalahomestay.com](http://www.moidowalahomestay.com) for the community project was launched in April 2014. As a result, this website seems effective as CAP received numerous inquiries from independent travellers. A couple of international tourists from Spain claimed that they are independent travellers and stayed at homestay programme for a couple of days where they obtained information regarding Abai village through CAP's website. In addition, the website is also linked to CAP's Facebook page and has built a considerable amount of 'likes'. The revenue generated from ecotourism activities is small, but the fund is usually for the annual maintenance of the website as well as other maintenance of the homestay programme. It is hoped that the arrival of free independent travellers is expected to increase with the launching of the new website in 2014. CAP also has a strong partnership with various local tour agents, namely Adventure Alternative Borneo and Sticky Rice Travel. They undertake significant roles to promote ecotourism activities to ensure the arrival of tourists to Abai village is sustainable.

## **BENEFITS OF ECOTOURISM ACTIVITIES TO LOCALS AT ABAI VILLAGE**

Research findings showed that there are some benefits of ecotourism activities gained by the villagers in Abai. These cover some aspects of economics, social and politics. In terms of economic aspect, the participants who are involved in CAP management and ecotourism activities through the homestay programme received positive impacts such as additional household income, advancement in materials and ownership and entrepreneurship. During interviews, the informant agreed that ecotourism activities through the homestay programme under the management of CAP

provide economic benefits and is a great mechanism to enhance the villagers' livelihood. The homestay coordinator explained why they were involved in the homestay programme in Abai village:

Since 2001, the homestay programme is in operation to date and the main reason why we involve in this programme is because it would enhance our livelihood (Informant 2).

The homestay operator stated similar view where her husband is a fisherman. Currently, both of them agreed that homestay is an alternative economic activity:

Whenever the homestay was set up here, as a homestay operator, our economic status has increased. Previously, marine resources like fish resources had increased but currently it became worse. Thus, community-based tourism activities (homestay programme) have helped us to get some income. On the other hand, many of us tend to involve in this programme because of the potential income from the programme (Informant 4).

Moreover, a homestay operator (Informant 5) also managed to receive at least MYR 1,000 per month and this is a side income besides the main income from fishing activities. By managing the homestay programme in Abai village, some villagers received an opportunity to enhance their daily lives compared to previous. Thus far, four households who manage the homestay programme are able to increase their monthly income and are still actively involved in the homestay programme with more enthusiasm. In terms of the facilities, the homestay operators have basic facilities for daily homestay operation. The homestay operators have tried to fulfil the tourist expectation towards their homestay programme. A homestay operator agreed that the homestay programme has benefited her by able to have another new house in Abai village.

My achievement in this homestay programme was that I managed to save some money and build a new house near to my homestay. I bought some plywoods and so on (Informant 5).



Despite benefits from the homestay programme, the participants involved in the forest restoration activities also gained some additional income to support their daily livelihoods. Since 2012, Community Abai Project: Forest Restoration and Ecotourism grant had spent a total MYR 115,525.90 for the pilot forest restoration activities in Abai village. The main objective of this grant is to implement forest community project. The participants received some payment from the restoration activities such as payments for seedlings, site preparation, tree planting and maintenance work, where its total amount was MYR 71,029.75. In addition, a total of MYR 33,754.70 was utilized for investments, for instance in radio communications, camera, storage room, water tanks, water pumps, grass cutters, poly bags, machetes, spades, measuring tapes, outboard engine and a 30-foot boat for forest restoration and river cruise activities. These investments were made with the intention of sustainability and would give long-term benefits to the ongoing and future forest restoration activities in Abai village. Moreover, a total of MYR 84, 804.25 was generated in 2013 from all activities as mentioned above and was distributed among 37 households. This amount includes seedlings and payments for tree planting and maintenance from the GEF-SGP grant that benefitted participants who participated in the project (Community Abai Project (CAP): Forest Restoration & Ecotourism Progress Report July 2014, p. 13).

In terms of the social aspect, there are benefits gained by the locals by participating in ecotourism activities in Abai village. Abai's head of the village agreed that the villagers gained social benefits from the ecotourism activities since a few years ago. One of the positive impacts in terms of social aspect is enhancing communication between villagers themselves. He added:

In terms of the communication, we have our own strategy. For example, we do hold weekly meetings with the CAP management, ecotourism participants and villagers to discuss issues regarding our ecotourism development programmes. Moreover, we need their support to gain success in our programmes such as homestay programme and conservation activities. By involving in these activities, I am sure their economic level would be enhanced (Informant 6).

The treasurer of CAP had a similar view. She mentioned that every member of the project participated in weekly meetings and workshops conducted by their management. The leadership of the village grants autonomy in decision-making process of the projects in Abai village. The members of the project are able to provide suggestions during their meetings and deliberated by the CAP management. Moreover, the CAP management always encouraged the members to participate and avoid any misunderstandings among them (Informant 1).

In forest restoration activities, prior the implementation of the project, the participants lack knowledge and skills in tree planting and managing the project systematically. As the participants are inexperienced in tree planting activities, most of the prior years' training focused on germination of seedlings and setting up the nursery. The nurseries were relocated to the home of the participants. This makes it easier for participants to take care of the nursery. Tree species planted in the nurseries varied. The participants gained valuable practical experience on selection and planting of seedlings. Moreover, the project coordinator received valuable feedbacks for improving tree planting methods and other related works in restoration activities from the visitors at the sites. Foresters also offered their advice on applying organic mulch mat for tree planting, and maintenance should be done regularly. From this situation, the knowledge and skills among the participants in the projects were improved.

It is obvious in Abai village that most participants actively involved in ecotourism activities are women. There are four homestays in Abai village that are fully managed by housewives or women. However, participation of husbands in ecotourism activities is still important, where they support their wives to manage the homestay. The participation of women in the restoration and homestay programmes is significantly important because they have performed extremely well in the project. Moreover, the KAPOK organisation is composed almost by women in Abai village and their support should be praised. The importance of women's involvement in ecotourism activities can be seen in several ways. For example, women lead the CAP management. Women in Abai village also represent other positions such as treasurer and tourist guides. In other

words, the role of women in forest restoration project and homestay programme in Abai village will be continuously important in supporting their family and local community sustainable livelihoods.

## **CHALLENGES FACED BY THE COMMUNITY IN ECOTOURISM ACTIVITIES OF ABAI VILLAGE**

Although the implementation of ecotourism activities has positive impacts, there are also some challenges that could become barriers to community participation in ecotourism activities in Abai village. The challenges that have been identified in this study are as follows:

a) *Lack of capital resources*: As mentioned by a homestay operator, most of the participants lack capital resources to set up homestay facilities such renovating houses, preparing additional rooms, building new toilets, room facilities and others. The income received from the homestay programme is only sufficient for their daily expenses and there is not much saved. The Abai village is considered as a poor village in Lower Kinabatangan, where almost 90 per cent of the residents are fishermen. According to the head of village, Abai village comprises of 60 families and only four families are involved in the homestay programme. This is because majority of the Abai households are less capable of involving in the homestay programme due to financial constraint. One of the informant supports this:

In this village, there are only four households participating in the homestay programme. Majority of the villagers do not want to involve in the homestay programme maybe because of the capital resources (Informant 3).

b) *Outmigration of youths*: Over the past years, the youths in Abai village tend to go outside for a better future and to secure job opportunities. The growth of revenue from tourism, although increasing every year, is still not sufficient to create job opportunities for everyone in the village. Some youths who have stayed in the village are

great fishermen. However, some of them without fishing skills have to go to the city to seek a job for their survival. Therefore, if ecotourism activities in the village such as homestay programme and other related activities grow sustainably, it will be able to attract some of the educated youths as well as less-educated youths to return and support the village's ecotourism development wherever they can to earn some income and stay in the village.

c) *Burden of multiple tasks for women:* It is also noted that women in Abai village are full-time housewives. For that reason, they carry huge responsibilities such as doing housework, taking care of children and being good wives to their husbands. At the same time, homestay operators in Abai village are mainly managed by women and supported by their husbands. Majority of these women feel so glad for having homestay programme, as they believed that homestay is a kind of rural business that should be engaged by them. An interview with the homestay operator indicates that even though she works part time as a worker at the school canteen, but at the same time, she is happy to run the homestay programme to support her household. Family commitments or 'dual tasks' for women participants in this context remains a challenge to women's participation in ecotourism activities in Abai village.

d) *Wildlife animal threats:* This is the main challenge faced by the participants of ecotourism activities mainly in forest restoration activities in Abai village. Many young planted trees often have high mortality rates due to wildlife animal threats. Abai village is quite popular as a wildlife-watching destination in Sabah and Sambar deer is one of the animals that can be found in this area. These deer ate trees that were planted in several blocks. At least 30 per cent of the trees that planted were damaged due to a high presence of Sambar deer and other animals like monkeys and elephants. Commonly, these animals disturbed young trees that were planted. This is a continuous challenge for the ecotourism related activities in Abai village. CAP members admit that wildlife watching is one of the favourite ecotourist products in Abai village. Therefore, any decision that opposed the existence of the animals must be avoided.

e) *Security and regional conflicts*: The intrusion of Filipino militants or gunmen into Sabah in February 2013 has had a negative effect on tourism sector in eastern Sabah including Abai village. The area of Abai is listed in the ESSCOM zone and security issue is a serious factor to be addressed. Prior to this, the state and Malaysian government have established 'Pasukan Gerakan Am' sub-stations along Kinabatangan River including Abai village. Currently, all visitors are required to report at the nearest police stations or have their names submitted by tour operators prior arriving in Abai. The CAP management has given serious attention on this issue. They consider security issue as the main agenda for villagers' daily lives and safety as well as for the tourists.

f) *Leadership and villagers' relationship issues*: The study indicates that there are communication problems between some project coordinators of CAP with other participants of the project. The relationship among them does not take place effectively. Moreover, the communication between the project coordinators and the forest restoration participants is also weak. As a result, some tree planting processes have stagnated. As facilitators, Land Empowerment Animals People (LEAP) and Model Ecologically Sustainable Community-Based Tourism (MESCOT) continue to work with the local community to enhance leadership and communication issues. Both NGOs are supporting and grooming leadership potentials among new members in the project.

g) *Lack of public facilities*: Abai is a poor village in terms of public facilities but rich with natural resources. From Sandakan Town to Kinabatangan, it would take 2 to 3 hours journey by a speedboat. Majority of the villagers are still expecting some facilities to be provided by the authorities in order to make their daily lives easy. To date, Abai village only has a primary school and other facilities are still in progress. Water supply and electricity remains a major challenge for Abai where majority of the villagers fully depend on rain and generators to fulfil their daily needs. In addition, the river alongside Abai is fully utilised by the residents to wash clothes and cleaning plates. A homestay operator (Respondent 2) claimed that water supply and electricity are the main problems in Abai village. They are still imploring that one day, these problems would be resolved. She also stated that the visitors who stay at her homestay did not really

encounter this issue because they prefer natural setting activities like bathing in river and other. However, homestay operators do care about these problems and try their best to seek for solutions.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In Abai village, ecotourism activities have a great potential to be developed and grow well because active participation by the local community is significant for its future development. The research findings indicate that the ecotourism activities are mainly focused on the homestay programme. Under the homestay programme, several products are identified such as CAP Habitat Forest Restoration Project, wildlife watching, firefly watching, boat service, tree planting or restoration activities, serving local traditional foods, traditional cultural performances, demonstration of traditional method of catching prawns, showing of mass flowering of *Mangifera* (a prominent species around the Lower Kinabatangan Sanctuary), River Cruise along the Ramsar site, Balat Damit Wildlife Reserve, Lower Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary, and Irrawaddy Dolphin Cruise. All these products are the major tourist attractions in Abai Village because most of the products are unique and naturally authentic.

The participants of the programme such as CAP management, homestay programme and forest restoration projects have received mutual economic, social and political benefits. The research findings demonstrate that the participants received economic benefits such as an increase in household income, part-time jobs and materials advancement. These findings are in line with previous studies by Hussin (2008); Yacob et al., (2008); Karmakar (2011), where ecotourism activities can provide economic benefits such as job opportunities and income generation to the local people in rural areas. Interestingly, these findings support Reimer and Walter's study in 2013, where gender dimension is an important key analytical component in community-based tourism. As mentioned earlier, Abai women's participation is a significant component in ecotourism activities. The findings also noted that serious attention is given to the

environment in Abai village, where CAP management and homestay participants fully depend on natural resources as main economic sources as well as tourist attraction. This is supported by Skanavis and Giannoulis (2011), where environmental issues should be given priority and should be understood, as well as to promote responsible environmental behaviour.

Finally, the findings also revealed that there are some challenges faced by the participants in ecotourism activities in Abai village such as lack of capital resources, out-migration of village's youths, burden of multiple tasks for women, wildlife animal threats, security and regional conflicts, leadership and villagers relationship issues and lack of public facilities. These challenges remain as big obstacles to community participation in ecotourism activities. Therefore, serious proactive measures should be taken by related authorities in order to overcome these problems. A study undertaken by Hussin in 2008 at Sukau village Lower Kinabatangan indicated that lack of capital resources and public facilities are similar problems encountered by the villagers of Sukau and consistent with these research findings.

The study recommends the following actions based on the research findings, such as:

- i. The community interested to involve in the homestay programme should be supported by the development agencies (private and public agencies) in terms of financial support, public facilities such as 24 hours electricity supply and a clean water supply.
- ii. To enhance skills and knowledge of the homestay operators through short term courses in the village in order to provide good services to the guests.
- iii. To strengthen teamwork and co-operation between JKKK Leadership and the villagers in order to increase mutual understandings and respects.
- iv. To enhance NGOs networks – CAP network among the villagers along Kinabatangan River in order to build strong relationship and benefits for the community regarding Habitat Restoration Project and ecotourism activities.

The present study has provided meaningful documentation of community-based ecotourism development in Abai village, Lower Kinabatangan where most of the studies only focused at Sukau village. This study has had explored the potential of ecotourism activities managed by the locals at Abai and in line with the vision of Malaysian National Ecotourism Plan (1996) where Lower Kinabatangan was highlighted as 'an ecotourism hotspot' in Malaysia and could be promoted as popular ecotourism destination in Malaysia. Further studies can enhance the value of this research. For example, feedback from both government agencies and tourists (domestic and international) needs to obtain deeper regarding the ecotourism activities in Abai village for sustain the sustainability for the long run. Finally, within the realm of SIT, this study expands the current body of knowledge of SIT and ecotourism and proposed more similar studies are needed in other developed and developing countries.

**EL DESARROLLO CENTRADO EN EL MODELO CBE (ECOTURISMO COMUNITARIO): EL CASO DEL LOWER KINABATANGAN EN SABAH, MALASIA**

**RESUMEN**

El eco turismo se encuentra relacionado a diversas actividades como navegación en ríos, avistamiento de fauna salvaje, caminatas en la jungla etc. Desde 2005, la villa de Lower Kinabatangan se ha transformado en un punto de encuentro para todos aquellos visitantes que buscan estas experiencias. La mayoría de las comunidades locales de la zona se comprometen en este tipo de segmentos asociados al eco-turismo no sólo por las remesas económicas sino también por su bajo impacto ecológico y social. No obstante a ello existen riesgos en esta clase de turismo que ameritan ser discutidos. Tomando como eje temático el turismo de interés cultural conocido como SIT (Special Interest Tourism) el estudio se centra en 104 entrevistas llevadas a cabo en Noviembre de 2014. En perspectiva, los hallazgos revelan que los pobladores locales manejan programas de eco-desarrollo aun cuando deben enfrentar desafíos como falta de recursos financieros que les permita la auto sustentación, la migración de jóvenes, falta de infraestructura pública y carencias en el tipo de liderazgo.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** ACTIVIDADES DE ECOTURISMO. ABAI VILLAGE. PARTICIPACIÓN LOCAL. DESAFIOS. COMUNIDAD. TURISMO DE INTERÉS CULTURAL.



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