INTRODUCTION

According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (2004), tourism is one of the biggest and fastest-growing economic sectors in the world. It gives a lot of positive and negative effects on human lives and the environment. In Malaysia, the tourism industry is growing rapidly until becoming the second most important industry in generating economy sector [1]. Besides, tourism industry also contributes as the second largest foreign currency exchange in Malaysia (MOCAT), currently known as Ministry of Tourism and Culture Malaysia (MOTAC) [2]. As stated in the Tourism Malaysia, Malaysia recorded 25.9 million tourist arrivals in 2017, where revenue increased to RM82.1 billion entry. It shows a remarkable position over the past few years [3]. One of the tourism sectors that generate the influx of tourists is ecotourism which also resulted in the numbers of travel agencies interested to provide ecotourism travel increased tremendously. Based on Tourism Malaysia [4], the number active licenses for travel agencies in Peninsula Malaysia for the year of 2015 to 2020 was 5,179 agencies. However, a growing ecotourism development will have an impact on the environment and social due to lack of sensitivity in planning and management. The increasing number of tourists has also give pressure towards area visitation. The National Ecotourism Plan (NEP) Malaysia that issued by MOCAT in 1990 (currently known as MOTAC) has resulted in meticulous guidelines for ecotourism development; unfortunately, it only serves as a user guide and not as a tool to certify ecotourism agencies practice. Therefore, ecotourism agencies require one best practices model for use as a tool to evaluate the environmental performance and also responsible for assisting in the planning of new ecotourism products [5].

According to Mader, it was stated that the definitions of ecotourism involved three criteria:

1. It provides for conservation measures
2. It includes meaningful community participation
3. It is profitable and can sustain itself [6].

Wildes illustrated the model of sustainable development is consisted of three elements of economics, social and environmental systems [7]. In Mohonk Agreement, sustainable tourism is defined as a sustainable tourism which it is promoted the responsible travel specifically on natural areas to enjoy while appreciates the nature. The richness of natural areas in Malaysia makes ecotourism become one of the essential industries rapidly growing in this country. The purpose of ecotourism is not only focusing on the conservation of natural area but also considered the importance of the economy and society of local people. Ecotourism practice plays a crucial role in sustaining nature area for its intended function. Therefore, there is a need to fully understand the ecotourism practice to plan, develop and manage resources sustainably and appropriately to avoid adverse impact on the environment. The objective of this study is to identify the criteria that essential to be practiced by the ecotourism agencies in Peninsular Malaysia. The result shows whether the ecotourism agencies comply with the criteria. This research had been conducted through questionnaires survey distributed to 204 respondents which are the ecotourism agencies that provide ecotourism travel in their services. It is believed that this research can directly help to identify sustainability criteria in evaluating sustainable ecotourism. It is also an attempt to develop a standard evaluation of ecotourism from the theoretical concept of sustainable development.

Keywords: Ecotourism; Sustainable tourism; Nature-based ecotourism practice

ABSTRACT

Ecotourism is defined as a sustainable tourism which it is promoted the responsible travel specifically on natural areas to enjoy while appreciates the nature. The richness of natural areas in Malaysia makes ecotourism become one of the essential industries rapidly growing in this country. The purpose of ecotourism is not only focusing on the conservation of natural area but also considered the importance of the economy and society of local people. Ecotourism practice plays a crucial role in sustaining nature area for its intended function. Therefore, there is a need to fully understand the ecotourism practice to plan, develop and manage resources sustainably and appropriately to avoid adverse impact on the environment. The objective of this study is to identify the criteria that essential to be practiced by the ecotourism agencies in Peninsular Malaysia. The result shows whether the ecotourism agencies comply with the criteria. This research had been conducted through questionnaires survey distributed to 204 respondents which are the ecotourism agencies that provide ecotourism travel in their services. It is believed that this research can directly help to identify sustainability criteria in evaluating sustainable ecotourism. It is also an attempt to develop a standard evaluation of ecotourism from the theoretical concept of sustainable development.

Keywords: Ecotourism; Sustainable tourism; Nature-based ecotourism practice

REFERENCE

Correspondence to: Norajlin Jaini, Faculty of Architecture, Planning and Surveying, Centre of Studies for Park and Amenity Management, Universiti Teknologi Mara, 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia, Tel: 60-3-5521-1601; E-mail: nor_ajlin@yahoo.com

Received: December 05, 2018; Accepted: January 06, 2019; Published: January 13, 2019

Copyright: © 2019 Jaini N, et al. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.
as a tourism that seeks to minimize ecological and socio-cultural impacts while providing economic benefits to local communities and host countries [8]. On the other hand, Lascurain found that the definition of ecotourism has been abused and misused [9]. Nowadays, ecotourism is seen mainly as adventure tourism and carrying out extreme sports in a natural environment, with little concern for conservation or sustainable development issues. It is clearly shows that the ecotourism providers do not really understand the objective of ecotourism. Sekharan had shown that Malaysia is lack of effective and consistent approaches for efficient sustainable management practice of the ecotourism site [10]. There is no enforcement to ensure the resources are sustained. The problem is more difficult when there are large numbers of agencies involved in ecotourism without proper guidance. This problem however can be solved by providing the mechanism to monitor their practice. This is where the certification system should be applied in Malaysia before the damage on ecotourism sites become worse and undesirable. Font and Buckley mentioned that the purpose of the certification in ecotourism is to carry out the best practice for the resources with fewer negative impacts on the environment, social and economy [5]. The significance of this research, it is looking at the standard for ecotourism practice in Malaysia and tries to assess the level of Malaysian ecotourism according to sustainable tourism indicators which it can measure our ability to establish the sustainable ecotourism. It is also help in recognizing the best practice of ecotourism in Malaysia towards environmental improvements that result in a more sustainable world. Without implementation of the best practice in ecotourism activities, it cannot help our country to achieve the sustainable ecotourism. This problem however can be solved by providing the mechanism to monitor their practice. This is where the certification for ecotourism practices should be applied in Malaysia before the damage on ecotourism sites become worse and undesirable.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To date, there is no universal definition for ecotourism as quoted by Witt et al. [11]. What we see as an ecotourism today is a new phenomenon that gives importance to the tourism industry. Ecotourism has long existed in the community where there are many definitions of ecotourism has been defined by various parties internationally. Fennell, after conducting analysis on 85 definitions of ecotourism, result shows that as a whole, ecotourism can be concluded as a form of sustainable tourism based on natural resources that responsibly give experience and learning about environmental that managed ethically so that be more low impact, not consumptive and local orientated within control, benefits and scale [12]. Ecotourism usually occurs in natural areas, while contributing to the preservation and conservation of the area. Ceballos-Lascurain, which was the first author to use the term 'ecotourism' has defines ecotourism as “a form of environmentally responsible tourism that involves travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas with the object of enjoying, admiring, and studying the nature (the scenery, wild plants and animals), as well as any cultural aspect (both past and present) found in these areas, through a process which promotes conservation, has a low impact on the environment and on culture and favors the active and socioeconomically beneficial involvement of local communities” [13]. His definition also supported and adopted by some parties including MOCAT and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN). The International Ecotourism Society also defines ecotourism as responsible travel to

natural areas to conserve the environment and improves the well-being of local people [14-16]. According to Witt et al. [11] due to the fact that ecotourism tends to occur in nature and culturally sensitive areas, it makes the need for an appropriate and comprehensive ecotourism model in such areas imperative. Meanwhile, as quoted by Jaini, et al. there are also definitions of ecotourism been misinterpreted by some authors as adventure tourism in natural areas, with little concern for conservation and sustainability [6,9,17].

Therefore, sustainable criteria should be outlined and used as a tool to measure the sustainability of ecotourism. According to Sham Sani, indicator is a measurement of criteria, it is used for two purposes that are quantification of information to explain in detail of study results and summarize of information about a complicated situation so that it is easier to understand as quoted by Jusoh, et al. According to the United Nations also stated that with the availability of these criteria will lead to an effective monitoring system as quoted by Jaini et al. [17].

Several criteria have been outlined which used as guidelines to measure ecotourism in Malaysia. All the criteria are gathered from the international ecotourism certifications especially the Mohonk Agreement [8]. This document contains a set of general principles and elements that should be part of determining ecotourism and sustainable tourism certification programs. In this document has adopted several ecotourism certifications that have successfully used to ensure sustainable tourism. The list of certifications that had been adopted to develop the criteria for this research can be seen in Table 1. As a result, this research had extract eight criteria that have been generated based on the literature reviews which at least addresses all aspects as appropriately from international ecotourism certifications. Overall, all criteria have complied with the element of social, cultural, ecological, economic and planning. These eight criteria should address standards for sustainable tourism and at least minimum standards from any ecotourism certification scheme.

Focus tour

The first criteria is Focus Tour. This is the core criteria where it met for natural area focus to ensure that the natural value of the protected area and habitat is maintained. Focus Tour is an important factor which led to sustainable practices in providing ecotourism. Focus Tour means ecotourism visitation area that been focus during the visit. It refers to destination sites or travelling places. As most of authors define that ecotourism is a nature-based tourism or travel to nature places or undisturbed area or protected area where all the term is referring to a place that have characteristic about natural environments setting. This means that ecotourism attractions should have natural and/or cultural heritage features which found in ecotourism sites. Besides, most of ecotourism destinations consist of flora and fauna, volcanoes, beaches, forests, jungles and islands.

Tourism operation

Tourism operations where it is important to have detail elements of management plans to ensure that natural diversity and ecological operations are maintained. In this factor, it indicates about the Tourism Operations, where an ecotourism agency should operate in accordance with the criteria of sustainable tourism. Good and quality plan help to identify and decrease potential and ongoing environmental impacts.
Conservation program

Conservation program is vital for some ecotourism agency to have active contributions to the conservation of natural areas or biodiversity. Since ecotourism is traveling to relatively nature areas, there is a need to conserve and preserve the natural environment. Besides, with contribution towards conservation of nature and environment can give benefits to locals. These criteria are important because conservation efforts are not only help to preserve natural resources but also the culture of the site which will give economic opportunities to locals.

Education and interpretation

These criteria focus on personal experiences of nature which can lead to greater understanding and appreciation. Ecotourism not only consists of nature, economic and social but also provide education to tourist on site. Ecotourism is a learning-based experience which focuses on the natural history [12]. Travelling to natural areas beside enjoying the attractions, tourists also can experience and learn about locals cultural and history of the place [18]. Thus, ecotourism can educate tourist to understand the cultural and natural history of the environment which then contribute to conservation of natural resources. Education on ecotourism can take in many forms, for example, nonverbal communication by interpretation through signage and lectures, or in verbal communication by personal or direct interactions with nature such as trails which designed in a way for tourist to directly exposure to others [19].

Quality, safety and health

Quality, safety and health are mostly focus on staff training where it is crucial for people that provide ecotourism know what they serve to tourist. The next factor is regarding on safety and quality control towards ecotourism areas. Travel agency is responsible for ensuring that the services provided are not only quality, but also ensures the safety of tourists. In this factor, the indicator is designed to assess the extent of ecotourism agency sensitivity towards area surrounding that could threaten tourist safety, which by providing quality services and giving sustainable experience.

Sustainable practices

Sixth criteria are about Sustainable Practices where one of the important parts of this criteria is giving minimal environmental impacts of activities at the same time provide integrated waste management. Hill and Gale illustrates ecotourism as a subset of natural area tourism, incorporating elements of wildlife and adventure tourism with different between forms of mass tourism and alternative tourism but there is still a common between them [20].

Maintaining local culture and tradition

Criteria for Maintaining Local Culture and Tradition also included as a measure to protect the integrity of the local community’s social structure. Ecotourism also provides benefits to locals in term of employment opportunities which can help to support local’s welfare. Their participation is to gain the support for ecotourism development projects, besides improve the quality of the tourists’ experience whereas tourism is an industry that greatly reliant on the hospitality of host communities [11]. For example, ecotourism sites with culture and/or heritage features of local people or indigenous have benefits on it, especially they can earn money from tourist to revisit [21-23].

Socio-economic development

Socio-economic development, these criteria are to ensure negative economic impacts on local communities are minimise and give benefits at the same time. Ecotourism business is a way to integrate tourism development and to share the benefits at the community level. Through ecotourism business is to make sure locals and indigenous have benefits on it, especially they can earn money from it. The benefits may come from using local facilities, providing work to locals and indigenous, the purchase of provisions and local services and products, etc. However, this business should be balance between local economic development and the conservation of ecological and cultural diversity. Both combinations will provide more local revenues in short time [24-26].

Table 1: Guidelines for ecotourism certification model.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Detail Measures</th>
<th>Adopted by</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus Tour</td>
<td>Ecological</td>
<td>Area visitation that feature environment and natural resources</td>
<td>Nature’s Best, Green Globe 21, PAN Parks, CST (Costa Rica), World Tourism Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourism Operations Planning</td>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>Used existing plan or policy to controls over management</td>
<td>Blue Flag Campaign, PAN Parks, CST (Costa Rica)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservation Program Economic</td>
<td>Ecological</td>
<td>Tourists visitation to high risk area and contribution on conservation</td>
<td>Nature’s Best, Green Globe 21, World Tourism Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education and Interpretation</td>
<td>Ecological</td>
<td>Provide educational materials</td>
<td>Nature’s Best, Green Globe 21, World Tourism Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality, Safety and Health</td>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>Level of knowledge in handling risk and provide care for tourists</td>
<td>Blue Flag Campaign, Green Globe 21, World Tourism Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainable Practices</td>
<td>Ecological</td>
<td>Dealing with wastes to ensure sustainable environment and not detrimental to the environment</td>
<td>Nature’s Best, Green Globe 21, PAN Parks, CST (Costa Rica)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintain Local Culture and Tradition</td>
<td>Cultural</td>
<td>Maximize cultural benefits and minimize negative impacts</td>
<td>Nature’s Best, Green Globe 21, CST (Costa Rica)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socio-economic Development</td>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Way of contribution among ecotourism agencies towards the sustainability of the social life and economy of local and indigenous people</td>
<td>Nature’s Best, CST (Costa Rica)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
METHODOLOGY

This study seeks to assess the current ecotourism practice among the ecotourism agencies in Peninsula Malaysia. The questionnaire survey is the main instrument of data collection for this research. For data collection, several approaches had been used to select the appropriate respondents.

Screening survey

One of the limitations encountered in carrying out this study is the difficulty in identifying the ecotourism agencies. There is no specific list of ecotourism agencies in Peninsular Malaysia. The only way to identify the ecotourism agencies is by conducting the screening survey for the overall travel agencies in Peninsular Malaysia. The purpose of the screening process is to select and shortlist the eligible respondent for this study. As such, the screening is carried out through the telephone survey. A semi-structured questionnaire has been used to determine whether the agency is provide ecotourism travel or only act as the mediator who appoints other agencies to carry out ecotourism services. The agency which has fulfilled the criteria as ecotourism provider, they will be asked for their consent to involve in the next stage of the survey.

Based on the list of travel agencies obtained from Tourism Malaysia, a total of 1928 travel agencies were identified in Peninsular Malaysia. The travel agencies were screened to select the agencies that directly involved in ecotourism travel. The Table 2 shows, from 1928 travel agencies, there were approximately 279 of agencies that directly involved in ecotourism. However, only 204 agencies agreed to participate in the next survey. Thus, based on the sample size chosen and limitation that occur, 204 of ecotourism agencies in Peninsula Malaysia were selected as the respondents for this study.

Pilot test

Before collecting the actual data, the researcher has conducted a pre-test to determine the appropriate items before being used to collect the actual data. In this pretest researcher has conducted a study on 20 travel agencies in Selangor which were randomly selected. Data collected were tested for its reliability of the 24 items for the eight criteria of ecotourism practices derived from the Literature Review. This test is to determine whether the items in the ecotourism practice achieve the level of reliability. The results indicated that the Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient is .847 (n=24). It is concluded that there is a good reliability of the Questionnaire.

Questionnaire survey

The primary data were gathered through the questionnaire survey. It was carried out by approaching the 204 agencies that were selected through screening survey. As the respondents were scattered around Peninsula Malaysia, a face-to-face data collection was likely to be the best method to approach them to get the answer. This technique also can produce more quality data, where research can explain and clarify to respondent about the study and any unclear questionnaire. Through questionnnaire survey, respondents were asked about their practices on the eight criteria of ecotourism that had been developed in the literature review. These parts of question were assess using Likert-Scale.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Through literature reviews, 8 criteria and 24 indicators had been formed. All of these features are repeated used from previous ecotourism study in worldwide which should be practiced by ecotourism agencies. Table 3 is the compendium of the 8 criteria with 24 indicators which are formulated throughout this study. Each indicator were assessed among the respondents using the Likert-scale technique (1= Never, 2= Rarely, 3= Sometimes, 4= Often, 5= Always). Followed by Table 3, indicate the result of data collection that been conducted to the 204 ecotourism agencies as the respondents. The result of the survey were gathered for each criteria and analyze using mean.

In the literature review, the criteria of ecotourism were comprised of eight criteria. These criteria are in line with the elements of ecotourism that had been discussed in the preceding literature review. Based on the result of the survey, the mean of the eight criteria of ecotourism practices has been ranked as shown in Table 4. The primary objective of this study is to develop criteria for ecotourism certification for Malaysia. To determine critical aspects that should be included in the model, a set of ecotourism sustainable criteria which be used to survey to determine ecotourism agencies practice. The criteria were identified from a study are based on Mohonk Agreement and the working list of criteria of sustainable development listed for national use [8]. After data were obtained a Cronbach Alpha (1=very reliable) and Pearson’s Correlation reliability tests were conducted in which all the criteria proved to be mostly reliable. Among the eight criteria, only three of it has been successfully practised by the ecotourism agencies without a doubt. As can be seen in the table, the three criteria had gathered the mean value more than 4.00 which has confirmed that the respondents “often” in practising the criteria. The criteria

Table 2: Total number of travel agencies for screening survey.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>No. of Travel agencies screened</th>
<th>Agencies involved in Ecotourism</th>
<th>No. of response</th>
<th>Ecotourism Area Covered</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kuala Lumpur</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1. Recreational Forest Reserves 2. River, Waterfalls or Lakes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perak</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1. National Parks, Reserves or Forest Area 2. River, Waterfalls or Lakes 3. Island, Limestone Hills or Cave Sites 4. Montane Areas 5. River, Waterfalls or Lakes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1928</td>
<td>279</td>
<td>204</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
were Focus Tour (mean=4.11), Education and Interpretation (mean=4.09), and Quality, Health, and Safety (mean=4.06).

From the result (Table 3), it can be identified that ‘Focus Tour’ was the highest mean (4.11) among the eight criteria practised by ecotourism agencies. Based on the survey, it was confirmed that the ecotourism agencies had focus and ensure that tourist visitation area was a nature-based area which is the undisturbed and protected area. It also ensures the area include the indigenous culture and local history. Based on the literature review, Focus tour is a significant factor which led to sustainable practices in providing ecotourism. Education and Interpretation is one of another factor that obtained a high mean value (4.09) which shows the ecotourism agencies often in practising these criteria. The result proved that the ecotourism agencies had conveyed the information related to sustainable tourism to the tourist. The information was disseminated continuously to tourist before, during and after visitation through the attractive interpretation. However, based on the survey, it was identified that the vital information on the environmental and socio-cultural education programs is still insufficient. Quality, Health, and Safety are also one of the highest criteria with the mean obtained 4.06. Based on the survey, the ecotourism agencies often bring along the safety equipment and notify any danger during the trip. It shows that they as agencies were concern about the tourist safety. However, they still lack in attending training for safety, health and emergency which is essential to ensure that they understand on the Quality, Health, and Safety which will lead to the quality of good ecotourism agencies.

On the other hands, there were another five criteria that seem to not be sufficient enough practised by the ecotourism agencies. The criteria are Maintain Local Culture and Traditions (mean=3.89), Sustainable practices (mean=3.85), Conservation Program (mean=3.81), Socio-economic Development (mean=3.72), and Tourism operation (mean=3.08). As can be seen in Table 1, these criteria attained mean value below 4.00 which indicate that the ecotourism agencies sometimes practised the criteria. Based on the survey conducted, these five criteria show that ecotourism agencies mostly involve local people. The interaction between tourist and local people were encouraged, but there was no continuity in any activities with local people. There is also no restriction on the code of ethics of tourist while visiting the local people. Concerning sustainable practice, the tourists were always encouraged to manage their waste and to use eco-friendly accommodation. However, the choices depend on tourists. Ecotourism agencies can only offer them the best sustainable services while tourists sometimes request for a better service which is not eco-friendly type. Conservation programs are one of the important criteria in ecotourism where it was one of the vital elements in ecotourism. As an important element, it is supposed to be practice wisely by the ecotourism agencies. However, it took only sometimes be practised by them. These criteria indicate that the tourist was not always encouraged to be conservation members. It may depend on the tourist interest.
In their conservation programs, animals’ sanctuary and indigenous settlements are not the main areas of conservation activities. The Socio-economic Development criteria also not consistently practice by the ecotourism agencies. They always ensure tourist to buy and use local produce and services, but in the aspect of fund rising from the tourist for the local people, they were not strictly applied. It shows that the concern and awareness of the local welfare were not important to be taken into their consideration. Tourism operation is the lowest criteria that practised by the ecotourism agencies. These criteria are looked crucial where it is the criteria that show the practice of agencies for themselves. Compare to others criteria, and mostly the criteria were about how the ecotourism agencies manage their tourist in ecotourism travel. However, this tourism operation is directly on how the agencies prepare their organisation towards the ecotourism. The results show that they were not strictly using the sustainable management plan and rarely adopt any environmental plans or policies in their management system.

Based on the above discussion, it can be concluded that the practice of ecotourism among the ecotourism agencies is crucial. Only three out of eight criteria practised wisely by the agencies. Most of the criteria do not present a good practice on ecological categories. Thus, there is a need to have some effort to increase the best practice of ecotourism agencies which comprises the elements of sustainable tourism.

CONCLUSION

Presently, ecotourism is one of the potential tourism segments to go forward. It can help to develop and boost the tourism industry in Malaysia where the ecotourism sector is a social and environmentally friendly as well as economic benefit. The development of policy and planning on ecotourism in potential areas, where certain parties or stakeholders should integrate the concept of sustainability in planning to make sure the industry will continue to survive for decades. Failure to do so will not only give impact on the environment but also make the ecotourism industry will not last long. Besides, with sustainable guidelines generated in this study can help to improve the practice among ecotourism agencies where it will be more sustainable and environmentally. As results show that ecotourism in Malaysia still needs improvements, not all ecotourism agencies in Malaysia practices ecotourism accordingly. Although all criteria show a higher mean but still consider the result achieved satisfactory level only. However, the successful criteria practiced by ecotourism agencies are mostly based on the ecological element which shows that environmental is the number one priority in providing ecotourism. Thus, incorporation of the certification system should be taken into the international level, to ensure better development of the sustainable tools. This would benefit and enhance the ecotourism industry where it can ensure a better operation on ecotourism resources.

REFERENCES