

ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT FOR HUNTING AND GATHERING COMMUNITY IN MALAYSIA THROUGH ECOTOURISM ACTIVITIES IN THE NATIONAL PARK

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ABSTRACT

Kuala Koh National Park located in Kelantan is one of ecotourism destination is really beautiful with flora and fauna. This National Park is open to public since 1995. Ecotourism is a source to maintain the habitant and all live species directly including to maintain the culture of the aborigine as to increase their socioeconomic. This sector really has a good potential to develop an income for Batek Tribe which just hunting and gathering for their living. Some of Batek Tribe which live nearby Kuala Koh National Park actively participate in some area of ecotourism directly. Therefore this paper will discuss about this three objectives: (i) to explain the economic activities among Batek Tribe at Kuala Koh National Park. (ii) To determine the strength of Batek Tribe in increasing their socioeconomic through ecotourism. (iii) To explain the aspiration of Batek Tribe towards ecotourism activity. This research is conducted via qualitative method. Data is gathered by participation observation, interview and document analysis. The data is coordinated and analyze using QSR Nvivo application. Finding shows that Batek Tribe in Kuala Koh still hunting and gathering as their main economic source. Many strength and skill have been recognized on Batek Tribe to increase their economy through their involvement in ecotourism in their area. Moreover, Batek Tribe have high aspiration to gain more work and income in ecotourism activity in Kuala Koh National Park.

Key words: *Hunting and Gathering Community, Employment and Income, National Park Ecotourism.*

INTRODUCTION

Batek tribes is one of Orang Asli sub ethnics from the Negrito tribe. The Negrito tribe is the smallest and oldest Orang Asli community of the whole Orang Asli communities in Peninsular Malaysia. The Negrito tribe is said to be connected to the Haobinhians who have occupied the area between 800 – 1000 years BC (Nicholas, 2000). According to DNA studies carried out by a group of researchers, the Negrito tribe have existed since 50,000 years ago, when they migrated from the African continent to the Southeast Asia (Monash University, 2008 cited in Mee, 2009).

The Batek tribes have generally occupied the of Titiwangsa range. Many of them live in the surrounding areas of Taman Negara, namely the area of Kuala Tahan, the surrounding areas of Hulu Sungai Tembeling, Sungai Kechau and Teluk Gunung in Pahang, Sungai Gala, Sungai Chiku, Sungai Tako, Sungai Lebir, Sungai Koh and Sungai Aring in Kelantan as well as Sungai Sayap in Besut, Terengganu. Their total population is 1,447, representing approximately 0.81% of the whole Orang Asli population in Peninsular Malaysia (JAKOA, 2011).

Endicott (1979) has divided the Batek tribes into a few smaller groups as follows: (i) Batek De' in Sungai Koh, Sungai Aring and Sungai Lebir (ii) Batek Iga in Sungai Tahan and Sungai Kechau (iii) Batek Nong in Sungai Cheka, Jerantut Pahang (iv) Batek Teh in Sungai Lah and Sungai Tako Gua Musang, Kelantan. (v) Batek Te' in Sungai Sayap, Hulu Besut, Terengganu. The grouping of the Batek is based on: firstly, the difference of dialects and languages spoken whereby the dialect is the identity of a particular group of Batek. Secondly, their occupied areas although there is no clear demarcation of occupied areas between one group and another mainly due to the occurrence of mix marriages between members of different groups of the Batek (Abdullah and Kazuhiro, 2009).

The Batek tribes is among the native communities who have a very intimate relationship with the world of nature. The nature for Batek tribes is the forest. Their lives have close relationship with the surroundings of their rainforest. They sometimes called themselves as 'orang hutan' (*batek hep*) (Carey, 1976). They consider forests as their actual home; when they open up an area or the nearby open area as a settlement area, they always say that they only occupy the temporarily (*tompang*) (Endicott, 1979). The Batek tribes explains that their lives in the forest is a part of instructions by the nature that is obligated by the supernatural power (Endicott, 1979). Although an individual Batek can leave the forest for a long term period, they generally believe that if all members of the group move out of the forest, the supernatural power (*Hala Asal/Tohan*) will destroy the world. This is because, the supernatural power has instructed or give an obligation to the Batek tribes to take care of the forest and everything that can be found in it from any form of betrayal or actions that can destroy the ecosystem of the forest.

The Batek tribes also has explained that the forest is their world (*denya*). When the word world is mentioned, among other things, pictures of a big area with variety of living things including the rivers, oceans, mountains will come to mind. Likewise, in the minds of the Batek tribes, *denya* does not only comprise of the physical aspect of the world but also incorporating the spiritual aspect. The forest is considered *denya* in their lives because it has a number of meanings and functions namely: (i) as their occupation area (ii) the source of economic and livelihood (iii) the source of spiritual needs (iv) their ancestors' inheritance, (v) the place to release their loneliness and love (*haip*), the place for assimilation with the supernatural power, (vii) the place to gain healthy life (Endicott, 1979; Fatanah, 2009; Ibrahim, 2013).

The lives of the Batek tribes which is based on the surrounding nature has shaped various knowledge related to it that are both unique and dynamic. All the knowledge owned by them is the outcome of the exposure, routineness as well as the experiences with all elements of the forest and its surroundings that they have faced. The ecological-related knowledge that is owned by the Batek tribes has enabled them to arrange their lives in a more appropriate and perfect manner. The knowledge has also enabled the Batek tribes to exploit all the valuable resources and assets that can be found in the forests in the National Park area. This is especially with regards to knowledge related to flora and fauna as the source of food, economy, shelters, medicinal and many others.

They are also very knowledgeable about the elements of the forests in the National Park. The area is not only their place of birth, a place to play and look for resources to support their livelihood, but it is also an area that has become their place for occupancy since many generations. Therefore, all the secrets that are contained in the area of the Kuala Koh National Park are kept in the minds of the Batek tribes. Hence, most appropriately, they are the ones who need to be given a priority in ecotourism industry based on the knowledge they owned.

Ecotourism is a rapidly growing industry in developing countries. Nature-based ecotourism industry has the potential to generate jobs and provide lucrative income for the surrounding communities especially for the Batek tribes. This industry does not only improve the income of the local communities but also helps in improving the national economy. This is due to the readily availability of ecotourism products in the area in addition to the ability of the Batek tribes to become a tourism asset that can be an attraction to the tourists. Therefore, this article aims at discussing a number of objectives namely: (i) to explain the involvement of the Orang Asli Batek in ecotourism activities in Kuala Koh National Park, (ii) to identify the capacities owned by the Orang Asli Batek in tourism industry in Kuala Koh National Park, (iii) to elaborate the aspiration of the Orang Asli Batek towards ecotourism activities.

RESEARCH METHOD

In order to answer the concerned issue, this study was done using qualitative method. Qualitative method is used to assist the researcher to obtain a more comprehensive, accurate and clear data that would enable appropriate descriptive analysis to be made with regards to the different aspects of the issue being studied. Specifically, this study was carried out on the Batek tribes of Orang Asli in Kuala Koh Gua Musang, Kelantan within the framework of ethnographic study. The gathered data was in descriptive form. The researcher has employed three techniques of data gathering namely observation participation, in depth interview and content analysis. The usage of the three different techniques is a triangulation technique that can further strengthen the reliability of the outcome of the study.

Participation observation technique was the main technique to be used to gather data from the informants of this study. This technique was used to understand the culture and situation of the Batek tribes such as the relations between Batek tribes and the nature, the knowledge and expertise owned as a capacity in ecotourism, their involvement in the tourism industry in Kuala Koh National Park as well as their aspiration in tourism industry. In the application of the technique, the researcher has participated in all daily activities of the Batek tribes especially with regards to their knowledge on the elements of the nature. The usage of the technique is beneficial as follows:

1. Provides opportunities to the researcher to carefully analyse in a direct manner a number of issues or phenomena that are related to the problem of this study.
2. Obtains a clearer and more accurate picture on the issue.
3. Avoids the possibility of inaccurate or untrue information being provided by the informants during the interview sessions.

An in-depth interview meanwhile, was an important source of data that was aimed at obtaining a more complete explanation and clarification with regards to the issue that was observed, being participated by the researcher and matters that the researcher could not comprehend on his or her own. Interviews were aimed at gathering as much relevant information or data as possible. A number of informants were interviewed comprising members of the local community such as shaman/*hala'*, local leaders and the youths.

In addition, the researcher has also undertaken content analysis technique, whereby the relevant documents related to the study were analysed. The researcher has analysed the relevant previous researches that can be used as a reference in explaining the phenomena related to the issue being studied. The data of the study was analysed and coordinated using QSR Nvivo computer software. The software has assisted the researcher in transcribing, storing, coordinating and arranging the data of the study systematically.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

National park and ecotourism

The National Park in Peninsular Malaysia is a tropical rainforest area that houses various species of flora and fauna. The National Park is one of the oldest tropical rainforests in the world with an age of reaching up to 130 million years (UNESCO, 2007). The area of the National Park covers 3 states namely Pahang, Kelantan and Terengganu with an area of approximately 343,350 hectares. Gunung Tahan, with the height of 2,187 km above sea level is located in the National Park.

The National Park is administered by the Department of Wildlife and National Parks (PERHILITAN) under the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment. The National Park is bound by the state Enactments of Pahang, Terengganu and Kelantan respectively. They were gazetted separately under the different state enactments namely National Park Enactment (Pahang) No. 2 1939, National Park Enactment (Kelantan) No. 14 1939 and National Park Enactment (Terengganu) No. 6 1939 (Fatanah, 2009). Each enactment is only enforceable in the respective state. Those enactments were further supplemented by the National Park Act 1980 as well as the Wildlife Conservation Act 2010 [Act 716] to enable PERHILITAN to develop and administer the National Park area.

The National Park houses various species of flora and fauna. Flora is all types of plants naturally found in a particular area. Fauna meanwhile are all kinds of animals inhabiting a particular place. The tropical rainforest of the National Park has one of the highest numbers of flora in the world. According to Kamaruddin (1992), based on the statistics produced by the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM), there are approximately 14,500 species of floral plants in the Malaysian tropical rainforest. Out of these, there are approximately 9000 species of floral plants and out of these, whereby approximately 3000 of these are the species of trees. Out of these 3000 species of trees in the tropical rainforest, 677 are timber species from 168 genera all of which has trade values.

According to Khan (1971), the Malaysian rainforest especially in the National Park acts as a protected area for various species of wildlife. Wildlife comprises of groups of mammals, amphibians, reptiles, fishes, birds as well as invertebrates. The National Park is a habitat to approximately 600 species of birds, 200 species of insects as well as other wildlife. Among others, examples of animals found in the National Park are elephants, tigers, barking deer, mouse-deer, wild ox, rhinoceros, tapirs, bears, various types of freshwater fishes and birds. Fatanah (2009) explained that the main factors that have enabled the National Park

to hold these much fauna species in it are the abundance of food in the area, the huge range of area as well as the presence of suitable habitats for these animals.

According to Fong (1994), the National Park fulfills the various components of an attractive tourist destination namely the image and tourist attraction, availability of facilities for tourists such as ample accommodation, food, entertainment as well as recreation in addition to access facilities such as roads that would enable easy access for tourists. As a tourism center, the National Park provides various recreational activities related to nature. Among the activities provided in the National Park is jungle tracking, cave exploration, boat riding, animals watching, night walking, canopy walk, visit to the village of Batek tribes, water rafting, swimming, fishing as well as playing with fresh-water fishes etc.

The main entrance to the National Park is through Kuala Tahan in Pahang. The Kuala Tahan National Park is an ecotourism area that is most frequently visited by tourists especially the international tourists. The Kuala Koh Kelantan National Park however is not as well-known as the Kuala Tahan National Park. The Kuala Koh National Park was opened by PERHILITAN in 1995 as an alternative to balance the number and density of tourists visiting Kuala Tahan National Park every year. Tourism products that are available in Kuala Koh are almost the same as those that are provided in Kuala Tahan. Visitors can enjoy the natural beauty there in addition to watching various species of flora and fauna. There are also products that are not available in Kuala Tahan but can be found in Kuala Koh such as the presence of more than 350 species of insects inhabiting the area. (<http://www.nre.gov.my>, June 2013).

Economic activities among Batek tribes at Kuala Koh National Park

The Batek tribes who were part of the eco-system in the Kuala Koh National Park have not been directly involved with tourism activities in the area since the park was open to public. Only one or two persons of the Batek tribes have ever been employed as contractor workers for building and providing facilities works in the area of the National Park. They seemed marginalized from the development and ecotourism activities in Kuala Koh National Park. This is despite the area being their settlement area since many generations ago (Ibrahim, 2013). The main occupation and income earnings for Batek tribes have mainly depended upon activities such as hunting and gathering of forest produce such as gaharu, rattan, honey, medicinal plants etc. They are still lagging behind compared to other Orang Asli communities. The entire member of Batek tribes in the Kuala Koh settlement area falls under the category of hardcore poor (E-Damak, 2011).

This situation is far different from the Batek tribes residing in the area of Kuala Tahan National Park. Although their involvement is still minimal, they have slowly been engaged in the development of ecotourism in the area. Until today, more and more teenagers and youths from the Batek tribes have engaged themselves in ecotourism related activities as their occupation. There were members of the Batek tribes in Kuala Tahan who have worked as porter to carry things while climbing up Gunung Tahan, tourist guide, boat driver, resort workers and many others. They have also provided cultural tourism products such as handicrafts, tree roots for medicinal purposes, traditional houses to be visited as well as performing cultural demonstrations (Fatanah, 2009).

The strength of Batek tribes in increasing their socioeconomic through ecotourism

As explained, a life based that is based on forest ecology shapes various knowledge that is related to its surrounding. People who live these life have very high amount of knowledge and expertise in the process of manipulating plants and animals as sources that are useful to their life. They are very knowledgeable about the plants that can be used as medicines. Their knowledge about the various types of herbal plants that can be found in the National Park is not only limited to the types of those plants, but this knowledge is also useful in determining the geographical location of those plants based on the natural characteristics of those plants. The Batek tribes community has a very high expertise about the process of extracting the raw plants into medicine that is ready to be used. This expertise is seen as a capacity that is very highly potential as tourism a product at the entrance of the Kuala Koh National Park.

The knowledge that is owned by the Batek tribes would enable them to exploit the various types of plants as a source of food. These food resources comprise of various types of wild fruits, tapioca, shoots as well as mushroom. They are capable of processing the various types of yam and poisonous fruits as important source of food. Their expertise of processing various plants especially poisonous fruits and yam as a source

of food is a capacity that is available and can be exhibited to the tourists visiting the Kuala Koh National Park. The extremely high expertise related to this matter that is owned by the Batek tribes would definitely be an attraction for the tourists who come to know in deep the traditional knowledge of the Batek tribes.

In addition, there are more traditional elements that are still being practiced in the life of the Batek tribes. The Batek tribes is seen as a community that is still preserving the identity and the selfness of the Orang Batek. There is almost no erosion or external influence on the elements of their culture. Their traditional life can be simply observed especially through their settlement and shelter building process. The majority of them build their permanent and temporary houses using natural resources comprise of trees, bamboos, and the leaves of Palma trees (cucuh, bertam, salak, etc). While they are in the forest carrying out their economic activities, they will build a temporary settlement. This settlement looks almost like a camp and their houses are built close to each other. It is an extremely interesting place to visit and be part of tourist product.

When the Batek tribes are in a temporary settlement area, they practice a very simple life. Their traditional lifestyle is practised to adapt their life with that particular environment. For example, they would apply a traditional method of cooking. Sometimes, the Batek tribes would use bamboos to cook rice, yam or even dishes. They would apply grilling and boiling techniques in the process of preparing food. The Batek tribes would use various types of plants in the forest as tasty ingredients in their food. In the deep forest, they would easily find various types of herbs such as forest galanger, Gantang tree, Kulim fruit etc. Forest galanger and the leaves and shoots of Kulim trees can be used as a good additive that can improve the taste of the food. Kulim fruit meanwhile can be used as a replacement for garlic. This application of the traditional life is a very huge capacity in the life of the Batek tribes that can be showcased as a cultural expression and thus can be part of tourist product in the Kuala Koh National Park.

In this sense, the Batek tribes is also very expert in almost all areas or aspects of the Kuala Koh National Park. This is because it is where they were born, being raised, playing around as well as a place for them to wonder around and obtain all useful experiences in life. All the interesting places in the National Park area are in the minds of the Batek sub ethnic. For example, they can easily explain about the locations where pakma and the various types of orchid flowers are found. They can also clearly explain the exact period for the orchid flowers to bloom. In addition, they are also very knowledgeable about the locations of a number of beautiful waterfalls, the locations where wild animals come to feed and rest as well as the deeps of a river that have become the habitats for various types of freshwater fishes. The Batek tribes are also very knowledgeable about the specific tracks to be used to reach a particular destination in the National Park. Fatanah (2009) explained that the Batek tribes use their mind process to memorise all signs that have become useful reference for them while wondering about and around the forest. Thus, the knowledge and expertise owned by the Batek tribes in the National Park is a very valuable capacity. They can be manipulated or utilised either as a tourist guide or boat driver.

The Batek tribes can also produce various handicraft products that can be an ecotourism product. The elements of art related to nature can be etched on the bamboos, knitting, accessories, etc. The handicraft products are part of products that can be marketed for economic purpose to gain good returns for the Batek sub ethnic. Visitors who come to Kuala Koh National Park would definitely be interested in buying those handicrafts as souvenirs if the Batek tribes are given the opportunity to market their products at the entrance of the National Park.

The aspiration towards ecotourism

Although tourism activities have yet to yield lucrative profits and returns for the Batek tribes, they however, have shown a very high aspiration to be involved in ecotourism activities. They seem to have pictured some capacities that they can show and share with other communities. The majority of the informants agreed that ecotourism activities can improve their income. Some of the informants who were interviewed have also shown their interest in actively involved in those activities to further increase their income.

Only a small informants who were interviewed felt that they are not yet ready and thus have no interest in grabbing the opportunity to involve in ecotourism activities as a career to further improve their income and economy. The researcher has identified a number of factors contributing to the moderate aspiration of these informants towards these activities. Among those factors influencing their interest is communication problem. This has become a barrier for them to actively involved especially as a tourist guide. Understandably,

they do not have a good conduct of Malay language let alone in English communication. This situation has instead been manipulated by the nearby Malay communities.

In addition, the lack of self confidence is among the dominant factors identified as influencing the interest of the Batek tribes towards ecotourism. Based on their explanation, they are reluctant to come face-to-face with the tourists whether they are local or international tourists. They are still dominated with shyness and low self confidence as they see themselves as inferior to the other social groups.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The life of the Batek tribes that is based on natural ecology has shaped various knowledge and expertise that are both very useful and highly valuable. The knowledge being practiced in that particular life environment is an outcome of experience, norms as well narratives from others. The traditional knowledge related to natural elements that are found in the forests such as flora, fauna, waterfalls, hills and mountains is a very huge capacity that is owned by the Batek tribes to enable them to engage themselves in ecotourism activities in the Kuala Koh National Park. The involvement of the Batek tribes in ecotourism is seen as a huge potential for them to generate job opportunities and income. It can also help change their socioeconomic status. In relation to this, efforts to enable the members of the Batek tribes to generate opportunities in the related ecotourism activities can be done through improving their capability either through training and skill improving programs or exposure from the other successful Orang Asli communities.

Therefore, it is hoped that the relevant parties can undertake the relevant initiatives to seriously engage the Batek tribes in tourism sector in the area. Time has come for the Batek tribes to be given the opportunity to increase their income and socioeconomic status with the traditional knowledge that they have. Among others, the relevant opportunities include employing them as a tourist guide. It can be realized by training them either through communication or self-motivation courses. As a tourism product, the relevant party can work together with the Batek tribes in building their traditional settlements in the National Park to be visited by tourists. In the settlement areas, the Batek tribes can showcase various cultural expressions such as building of houses using natural-based resources, methods for food processing as well as the processes for preparing food using various techniques. In order to market their handicraft products and the medicines from the forest, it can be realized by building and providing spaces and facilities as a place for the Batek tribes to market those products to tourists who come to visit Kuala Koh National Park.

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