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### The Involvement of Indigenous Peoples in Promoting Conservation and Sustainable Tourism at Lower Kinabatangan Sabah: Common Issues and Challenges

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#### ABSTRACT

This paper will highlights issues and challenges the involvement of local indigenous peoples in conservation and sustainable tourism at Lower Kinabatangan Sabah (LKS), Malaysia. As tourism in rural areas are interrelated with indigenous peoples, it is crucial to ensure that these people are not exploited, their culture and heritage is well protected and that they are involved in development opportunities and benefit financially. Apart from traditional economic activities, tourism could probably be one the very few ways of allowing some indigenous groups to become economically empowered. Since the exposure of tourism in 1980's at LKS, many conservation attempts are carried out to improve the LKS tourism but without realizing the main problems, these efforts will be meaningless. In addition to the failures of conservation works at LKS, some indigenous peoples are vulnerable to external challenges that threaten their cultures and unique identities, though they might have overcome internal obstacles. As such, several pertinent issues and challenges that hinder the participation of these peoples in LKS tourism are identified and discussed in detail. These findings can be applied to formulate integrative and sustainable approaches for local tourism improvement as well as effective guidelines for future conservation works.

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#### INTRODUCTION

Nature-based and sustainable tourism has always correlated with local indigenous peoples that reside at particular areas. As local and international tourists' main attraction is watching authentic flora and fauna at its natural habitat, preserving these wild biodiversity is crucial for long term tourism revenues. However, local indigenous peoples encounter many challenges in living their traditional lifestyles (e.g. farming, hunting and fishing) while making sure they do not overuse natural resources. Many studies regarding the involvement of indigenous people in sustainable tourism shed light on the possibility of using tourism as a way to empower the indigenous monthly income. Nevertheless, without understanding the common problems, it will difficult to accomplish such goals. The tourism industry in Kinabatangan floodplain is entirely dependent on both the environment and wildlife along the Kinabatangan River. To date, Kinabatangan district has become the focus of many local and international tourists because it harbours several types of rare wildlife species. However, without proper protection, its flora & fauna will

cease to exist and perish. In addition to improving indigenous peoples' economy, their cultures should be preserved parallel to protecting their surrounding natural resources.

#### MATERIALS AND METHODS

As studies on indigenous peoples, its interrelation with tourism and conservation in Lower Kinabatangan Sabah (LKS) were limited, this study utilized the beginning of researches conducted in LKS to the recent (1996 to 2014). Previous research articles that focused on tourism in LKS area (from 1996 to 2014) were selected based on different disciplines including tourism development, biological conservation, psychology of indigenous people and stakeholders, sustainable development and socio-cultural environmental. Computerized searches were conducted using online databases from Scopus, Science Direct, SAGE, Wiley and Springer. Several combinations of the following key words were used to guide the search: tourism, indigenous people, and the roles of stakeholders in tourism, sustainable, conservation, issues and challenges. These literatures were chosen to illustrate the issues

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and challenges regarding the participation of local indigenous people in tourism. A greater emphasis was placed on literature that addressed the relationship between individual (local indigenous people, government and private sectors) in conserving natural resources and practicing sustainable tourism.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this study, we found three pertinent problems. The main issue is the attitudes and perceptions of stakeholders in preserving biodiversity and improving tourism in LKS, particularly local indigenous peoples. For instance, the River peoples choose to work at agricultural and oil palm industry because it offers quick profit compare to tourism industry (Fletcher, P., 1996), have little interests on tourism particularly older generations (Husin, R. and A.P. Mat Som, 2008) and they ranked wildlife conservation projects below (Latip, N.A. and N. Badarulzaman, 2014) (Table 1). Even worst, some villagers are not satisfied with the crop-raiding elephants and illegally kill them. In 1996, local government agencies at LKS presence during policy decision-making but absent during planning stage (Payne, J., 1996). After eighteen years (2014), the forest management in LKS (policy and law) is still weak (Center for Orang Asli Concerns, 2012).

The second issue is prolonging destruction of forests due to impaired planning of forest management in LKS. In 2004, the number of Orangutan declines due to habitat loss resulting from the conversion of extensive tracts of lowland forests to agriculture (Ancrenaz, M., 2007). Subsequently, in 2006 and 2008, logging, oil palm and agricultural industries have caused forest degradations, pollutions

and flooding in LKS. Large areas of forest land traditionally used by local indigenous people have been expropriated and several logging companies have often used oil palm plantations as a justification for harvesting timber. In addition to weak planning of forest management, some villagers have lost their rights in land ownership. The loss of land as a result of dispossession leads to the ever-present burden of not being able to fulfill ritual responsibilities and loss of native language, which effectively means that the ability to pass on beliefs in an authentic way has been destroyed. Additionally, they will also feel homeless, displaced and cut off from their spirituality and identity (Center for Orang Asli Concerns, 2012).

Third issue is policy and law makers. The implementation and enforcement of regulations related to protected areas, however, are sometimes very rigid. This situation may foster confusion and resentment in the local people who are accustomed to using such lands and resources. As a result, the local people may become opponents of tourism and conservation projects, thereby undermining its operations (Schulze, H. and S. Suratman, 1999). Due to local people do not have control over (agreed-upon access) to the resources they require, this particular problem hinder the success of tourism management processes toward sustainable local community participation (Husin, R. and A.P. Mat Som, 2008). Ironically, in many cases in Sabah, when it comes to policy decision-making and implementation, the views of local people in Kinabatangan floodplain are not taken into serious consideration. The decisions made have regularly favoured "those who are in power at the local level but do not represent the true wishes of the people" (Sherlock, K.L., 2002).

**Table 1:** A comparison lists of common issues and challenges of indigenous tourism and conservation at Kinabatangan floodplain.

Year	Problems	References
1996	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poor integration between local government, private sectors and local indigenous peoples               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tourism largely depends on private sectors</li> <li>• Low participation of local communities:</li> </ul> </li> <li>• The leadership (JKKK) at each village does not play effective role in tourism development               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dissatisfaction over low local employment in tourism</li> <li>• Dissatisfaction over water pollution caused by oil palm estates.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Local villagers support new economic which give them quick profits (tourism takes time to see its profits/results).               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of communication over three stakeholders</li> <li>• Communication and collaboration within the village is weak</li> <li>• Access difficulties to reach Abai and Bilit village.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	Fletcher, 1996
1996	<p>Formal tourism policy, planning process or plan exists specifically for lower Kinabatangan;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• government agencies exist for decision making on specific tourism projects on alienated land, for enforcement of national tourism legislation and for tourism promotion, but not for planning; following two pioneering tourism products dating from 1991 (lodge and river cruise based at Sukau, and jungle camp at Girang lake),</li> <li>• Development of new products and services has been slow, and has apparently halted during the past year;</li> <li>• Involvement of local residents in tourism is limited and shows no sign of significant increase in the absence of government or NGO initiated projects or capacity-building activities; and</li> </ul>	Payne, 1996

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Integration is weak both within and between the stakeholders (government agencies, villagers, private companies) in the lower Kinabatangan.</li> </ul>	
2004	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The decline of Orangutan is mainly due to habitat loss resulting from the conversion of extensive tracts of lowland forests to agriculture.</li> </ul>	Ancrenaz et al., 2004
2006	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The capacity of the various government departments specifically on enforcement works in the area is still need to be strengthened and enhanced.</li> <li>Financial losses resulting from wildlife crop-raiding activities were a major impediment to building local support for wildlife conservation</li> <li>Upstream logging activities and development of oil palm estates have contributed to constraints such as fragmentation of forests, degradation of wildlife habitats and flooding. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Decline in biological diversity in that area.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	Majail and Webber, 2006
2008	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>lots of boatloads of tourists going to the same spot (to see the proboscis monkeys) and this affects the carrying capacity issue there</li> <li>Majority indigenous people want to develop the land around Lower Kinabatangan area for agricultural activities but less of them were interested in the conservation programme, particularly the older generations.</li> <li>Illegal killing of the elephant population or the <i>orang-utans</i> by some of the estate workers.</li> <li>oil palm plantations and factories surrounding the Sukau area are the major cause of environmental pollution.</li> </ul>	Hussin and Mat Som, 2008
2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The main concerns of peoples (government, private sectors and local indigenous) are flood and water pollution whereas wildlife conservation is ranked as fourth.</li> <li>The Lower Kinabatangan has a weak forest management system in terms of policy and law.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Latip and Badarulzaman, 2014</li> </ul>

Considering all of these issues, we suggest future tourism and conservation projects in LKS area to focus on tourism development which meets the needs of all stakeholders. Each stakeholder need work together towards everyone's needs and understand other's different interests. Besides that, it is crucial to encourage integrated tourism development, resolve conflicts between local governments, private sectors, as well as reform for a better legislation, enforcement of laws and policies. Most importantly, each stakeholder should be willing to adapt and change their perceptions on tourism and conservation – so that they can succeed in conserving existing resources in LKS area.

#### Conclusion:

In conclusion, these three problems, namely attitudes of all stakeholders, impaired planning of forest management and policy enforcement hindered conservation and tourism development in LKS area. Unless the stakeholders at LKS changed their attitudes and perceptions, it would be difficult to successfully implement new conservation projects, although it has good planning

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