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Reassessment of Malaysia's Tourism Policy on Bidong Island

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Abstract

Tourism industry is an important component in the service industry and plays a key role towards the economic sustainability. However unprecedented, and continuous developments in the tourism industry have exposed to many threats such as physical destruction of fauna and flora, ocean acidification, coral mining, and invasion of species. Looking into these considerations, this study aimed to discuss the reassessment of Malaysia's tourism policy focusing on UNESCO heritage sites and underwater cultural heritage in Bidong Island, Terengganu. The uniqueness of Bidong Island creates an important value as one of Malaysia's significant assets which need to be conserved and preserved of its heritage values and amazing resources. Apart from being rich with natural resources, this incredible island has rare and amazing biodiversity, exclusively for a wealth of unique marine life. Nevertheless, Bidong Island still lags in development as one of the tourist destinations as this island has the potential to generate the economy of the state of Terengganu. Therefore, this study aims (i) to re-evaluate Malaysia's tourism policy toward Bidong Island; (ii) to analyze the framework based on the development and conservation of UNESCO heritage and underwater cultural heritage, and (iii) lastly, to examine the 360-degree application to strengthen the tourism sector in Bidong Island. This study employed a qualitative design, relying on field observation and interviews with the selected informants that are directly involved in the tourism development sector. The findings of the study highlighted the need for comprehensive action in structuring Malaysian tourism policy in Bidong Island during the unprecedented disruptions by COVID-19. These include planning strategies to encourage the sustainability recovery, fostering digital transition, and shifting to a greener tourism system, and directing for the future. Based on these claims, this study proposes action plans that need to be emphasized by the government to develop Bidong Island as part of UNESCO heritage sites and underwater cultural heritage by determining the stakeholder roles, planning executions, and identifying and evaluating cultural assets. The study also proposes a 360-degree application in the tourism industry as aligned with Malaysia's tourism policy from 2020 to 2030. Guided by these findings, this study able to provide insights in booming the tourism industry activities at Bidong Island as well as offers helpful suggestions to government officials, scholars and

tourism firms to reinvest and revitalize Bidong Island as a resilient and sustainable tourism sector.

Keywords: Tourism Policy, UNESCO Heritage Sites, Underwater Cultural Heritage, Bidong Island, 360-Degree Application

Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of international tourism globally. The World Tourism Organisation (WTO) estimated that international tourism will increase progressively from 1.4 billion to 1.8 billion tourists in 2018 and 2030, respectively (Duignan, 2019). It has been reported that international tourism growth continues to 0.4 billion which is equivalent to 28.57 per cent from 2018 to 2030. Collectively, these increases outline a positive impact on the tourism sector. This trend seems to be felt in Malaysia as Malaysia is known as one of the tourist destinations in the Southeast Asian region due to its integrated public transportation facilities and greatest communicable systems. Apart from that, this auspicious land is also blessed with beautiful islands that are rich in natural resource values and histories such as Langkawi Island, Redang Island, and Bidong Island compared to other countries in the Southeast Asian region. As a niche tourism sector, Malaysia's uniqueness has shown promising growth since its inception (Ahmad et al., 2019).

However, in 2020, Malaysia's tourism and economy disproportionately affected by the global pandemic. Malaysia's tourism sector faced a collapse in the first quarter of 2020 with a RM 3.37 billion loss (BERNAMA, 2020). As a result of this global pandemic crisis, the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture has revoked the Visit Malaysia 2020 campaign which targets 30 million tourists (Ahmad et al., 2019). This situation has plummeted in the tourism sector to suffer losses amounting to RM 165 billion in 2021. Understanding the country and social factors which have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MOTAC) joint hand together with its Minister, Datuk Seri Nancy Shukri to craft strategies for promoting Malaysia's tourism sector with a target of achieving 16 million international tourists and increasing the revenue of RM 45 billion by 2025 (Samsudin, 2021). This situation clearly shows that the tourism sector had a more significant loss compared to the Global Economic Crisis in 2009.

Looking closer, Bidong Island also was found to be one of the resort islands severely affected by the outbreak of the new coronavirus (COVID-19). This has been an alarming situation whereby the island, which is rich in natural resources and historical value, has been marginalized in terms of development, conservation, and preservation. This study, therefore, set out to assess the issues related to Bidong Island by categorizing it into three important phases. The first phase is to analyze the Tourism Policy of UNESCO Heritage Sites and Underwater Cultural Heritage. The second phase is to evaluate directly and indirectly the role played by the stakeholders namely, government, private, community as well as industry players since the beginning and post-COVID-19 pandemic phase with more specific policy and strategy making targeting Bidong Island. Particularity, it is anticipated that the support from various stakeholders is an important element in ensuring that Bidong Island becomes a major tourism centre in Malaysia. Lastly, the third phase is to propose the application of 360^o in the tourism sector.

Research Background: Bidong Island

Bidong Island is one of the islands situated off the coast of Terengganu and surrounded by the South China Sea from East Peninsular Malaysia. The island covers an area of approximately 260 ha and is located eight nautical miles from Merang Beach. Bidong Island is generally classified as an uninhabited island after being gazetted as a Vietnamese refugee camp. From 1975 to 1979, Bidong Island has been occupied by nearly 40,000 Vietnamese refugees (Asyaari & Hasrizal, 2018). Even since then, Bidong Island is known for Little Saigon (Asyaari & Hasrizal, 2018). Apart from being rich with natural resources, this incredible island has rare and amazing biodiversity, exclusively for a wealth of unique marine life. The corals found on this island are rare species and grow faster compared to other islands. Thus, this uniqueness creates an important value for Bidong Island as one of Malaysia's significant assets which need to be conserved and preserved of its heritage values and amazing resources.

Nevertheless, it has been an ongoing debate on declaring Bidong Island part of Malaysia's heritage site by UNESCO as several artefacts were not well maintained (Baco et al., 2021; Dromgoole, 2013). Most of the abandoned statues and buildings have been collapsed, damaged, and destroyed. Most of the underwater marine are exposed to danger due to a few activities which been carried out on the island such as scuba diving, sewage disposal as well as mega-development projects (Ramli et al., 2011). Undoubtedly, even though scuba diving was initiated as part of raising awareness of the underwater cultural heritage, however at the same time, it might also be a threat to the marine ecosystem. Other authors (see Musa et al., 2006; Hasler & Ott, 2008) pointed out that the rapid demand for scuba diving tourism has created congestion in dive locations. Hasler and Ott (2008) hold the view that scuba tourism threatens the coral reef ecosystem as happened in Dahab, Egypt due to its popular visit by tourists from all around the world.

In accordance with this situation, in November 1991, the Federal Government made a promise to the Terengganu State Government through former Deputy Prime Minister, Tun Ghafar Baba that the island has been handed over to the Terengganu State Government. At that time, the Terengganu Menteri Besar, Tan Sri Haji Wan Mokhtar Ahmad, was assured that the Federal Government would help repair and develop Bidong Island. Hence, only the Terengganu Museum is allowed to enter Bidong Island to conduct research activities. A proposal was proposed to preserve the artefacts and natural resources in Bidong Island, however, to this date, there has been no response from the Federal Government which has caused more damage to the abandoned buildings and monuments. Taken into consideration, the island was recently placed under the supervision of the museum (Rahman, 2021). Resulting from the interview feedback received, it was found that uncertainties in policy and management between the parties have led to the destruction of buildings and settlements of Vietnamese refugees who are living witnesses of Malaysia's success as an activist for human rights and subtle geopolitical change.

Methodology

This study is an exploratory study aimed to evaluate the tourism policy that has been implemented at Bidong Island, Terengganu, followed by examining the intensity of development at Bidong Island and thus, accessing the progress of the tourism sector at Bidong Island. This study applied a qualitative approach by conducting intensive individual interviews

with a small number of respondents. In this context of the study, all informants are individuals who are directly involved in the tourism development sector in Terengganu State. Using purposive sampling, the respondents are selected, involving the Terengganu Tourism Officer, Museum Director, Terengganu Tourism Exco and Coral Farm Director (representative of non-governmental organizations). These informants are named Officer 1 (P1) to Officer 4 (P4). The selection of sampling is supported by Robinson's (2014) claim that the rationale for choosing a purposeful sampling is to assume that all respondents or informants have a deep understanding of the topic studied, highlight a robust view of the issues from the respondent's perspective, and reveal insights that can be pragmatic to other similar situation.

Next, the analysis was processed through the verbatim method whereby, the recorded interviews were compiled and transcribed by the researchers. All interview transcripts were included and arranged accordingly to the theme that was set by the researchers before drawing the conclusion for each theme based on the research objectives of this study. The thematic analysis method was conducted as recommended by Braun and Clark (2006). Figure 1 displays the thematic analysis process. Additionally, this study also utilizes supporting documents such as past research, press reports, official government reports, and other secondary sources to further strengthen the main findings of the study.



Source: Braun & Clark (2006, p. 141 - 143).

Findings based on the Themes

Cultural and Heritage Tourism

Cultural tourism is still a complex and difficult process to explain due to the interaction of man-made with nature. Ultimately, Anwar and Zulyati (2011), opined that cultural tourism is related to heritage, traditional, and old legacy as well as identified the present living life of society as part of the products in the tourism market (Gardiner & Scott, 2018). Cultural tourism is a type of tourism activity involving visitors' eagerness to learn, experience, participate, and discover what is been offered as a part of cultural products. Meanwhile, heritage is known as a national heritage treasure conserved and preserved as an asset from previous generations that have been owned by a group of people at present or previously (Yusoff et al., 2011, 2013; Bailey & Flemming, 2008). While a variety of definitions of heritage have been suggested in the literature, in this study, heritage is defined as expertise and knowledge inherited through the way of life and beliefs that symbolize the civilization of a society.

In Malaysia, there are several locations for cultural and heritage tourism such as Mulu National Park, Kinabalu National Park, George Town, Melaka, and Lembang Lenggong. All these locations are recognized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Hence, these places indirectly have their own uniqueness and strength to encompass the participation of visitors in the cultural experience. As a result, cultural heritage is becoming a vital resource for tourism development as tourists reflect the interconnectedness with a deep sense of belonging in time and space to explore and gain experience by themselves (Yusoff et al., 2013; Giovine, 2009). Heritage cities like Paris in

France; York, Bath, Cambridge, and Oxford in England; Amsterdam in the Netherlands; and Pisa, Venice, and Florence in Italy are well known as centres of attraction among tourists all around the world. Conversely, the Malaysian government is aware of the significance of heritage as a source of tourist attractions in promoting Malaysia as the finest tourism destination. The Eighth Malaysia Plan (2001-2005) has implemented several projects to preserve cultural and heritage sites. As a result of this implementation, more than 60 monuments and 25 historical sites have been upgraded as tourist attractions. This creates a pathway to showcase traditional Malaysian arts and crafts including *batik*, *pua kumbu*, and *songket*. This achievement can be seen in the Ninth Malaysia Plan (2006-2010) whereby heritage tourism has been recognized as one of the important agendas. Therefore, through these efforts, the conservation of historical sites, buildings and artefacts will continuously be one of the measures to preserve the country's historical relics as well as to increase the number of tourist attractions in Malaysia. Equally, the government is also taking more proactive measures to strengthen the tourism industry. This is because the tourism industry is a major contributor to foreign exchange earnings and importantly, the spillover effects of tourism throughout the economy can be significant.

Looking at the booming economy in the tourism industry, the government took the initiative to revitalize the tourism sector in the 12th Malaysia Plan (12MP) by accelerating the development of strategic and high-impact industries to propel the growth of the economy. The 12MP focuses on propelling several potential growths by emphasizing safety and hygiene aspects to fulfil the requirements of tourists during their visit to Malaysia. Through these initiatives, it can restore tourist confidence, provide better quality products and services, enhance the sustainability of tourism products, strengthen branding and promotion, institutionalize governance reforms, and intensify domestic tourism. The measures will formulate a comprehensive move that will ensure continuous growth, greater investment, wider local community participation and more sustainable industry.

Despite the number of acts implemented such as the Treasures Act (Act 542) and Antiquities Act 1976 (Act 68) to revive the tourism sector, however, another weakness is these acts do not cover all the parts especially in protecting, preserving, conserving and maintaining the cultural heritage (Baco et al., 2021). Based on these evaluations, this study suggested that the government should formulate a comprehensive policy or act in preserving and conserving heritage and culture to facilitate against issues of conflict in urban planning and development. In order to implement this strategy, several historic sites and buildings need to be identified for conservation and preservation during the period of enactment of the plans.

Therefore, this study suggests Bidong Island as one of the important islands in Malaysia that need to be conserved and preserved due to its historical heritage value. The historical value of this island can be seen through its expansion on 18 August 1978. The island was made as a shelter for Vietnamese Drifters (OHV) by the Malaysian government in collaboration with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) through an initiative program by the United Nations to protect and safeguard the welfare of these refugees. Since then, this island has been a haven for boat refugees fleeing Vietnam's communist rule until 1991. There are many important treasures and heritage left on the island has heightened Terengganu State Government to take steps to preserve and manage the administration of this island as a potential tourism centre. As a result of their distinctive cultural heritage value, the island

has attracted tourist development, especially by the visit of their grandchildren to commemorate the hardships of their ancestors once upon a time. Hence, Malaysia Government needs to gear up to conserve key resources in Bidong Island, especially the OHV settlement and the artefact monument left by the refugees. Photo 1 till photo 3 display one of the artefact monuments left by the Vietnamese refugees.

Photo 1: Vietnam refugee memorial built by Vietnamese refugees



Source: Photo taken by the researcher

Photo 2: Primary school site for Vietnamese refugee children



Source: Photo taken by the researcher

Photo 3: Worship area



Source: Photo taken by the researcher

Underwater Cultural Heritage Tourism Policy

Malaysia is one of the countries in the Southeast Asian region that has a few beautiful underwater tourist spots. Submerged heritage around in Malaysian islands has provided a long-term opportunity for cultural and recreational activities, as well as tourism and urban development. According to the Ocean Health Index report, Malaysia ranked 143rd out of 221 countries with clean seawater health.

Nevertheless, it was a serious problem that needs to be looked into, where the seawater was polluted. One of the factors of seawater pollution is due to uncontrolled presence of local and international tourists (Adam et al., 2019). This is an alarming situation that has not only caused damage to the marine ecosystems, especially the destruction of coral reefs but also to the mobility lifespan of the endangered species such as dugongs, seahorses and turtles which eventually have been leading to the extinction of marine life. There is a large volume of published studies also found that the damage, destruction, and extinction of marine life are not only due to global warming but also influenced by the overflow of tourists as in a few other famous islands in Malaysia such as Pulau Perhentian, Pulau Redang and Pulau Langkawi (Mustafa, 2017).

Tourist overflow occurs when a tourist centre receives a number of tourists that exceeds the capacity than has been set. There is a consensus among the World Trade Organization (WTO) that tourist overflow is due to the highest number of people visiting a location and intending to travel, however, at the same time these tourists do not cause any physical damage or destruction and destruction of flora and fauna (Duignan, 2019). This statement has conclusively shown environmental destruction is not solely due to the overflow of tourist arrivals but is due to ineffective tourism management. A more comprehensive solution would include the competent bodies and policymakers initiating a clear plan and strategy. This is to ensure a balance of valorization in the tourism sector towards enhancing the sustainability of the preservation and conservation of the environment, especially the marine eco.

One of the efforts in preserving and conserving marine ecosystems as well as fostering underwater tourism is by establishing Underwater Cultural Heritage Tourism (UCHT). Through the implementation of UCHT, it can be seen in developed countries that UCHT plays a crucial role in attracting more foreign and local tourists. This view is supported by the UNESCO (2013) report that the implementation of UCHT has accumulated nearly 40,000 to 1 million visitors a year (Dromgoole, 2013). Coupled with the growth in tourism, heritage tourism has emerged as a potential alternative to tourism. For example, underwater museums and art galleries create opportunities for scuba divers to explore the underwater heritage and observe underwater marine life. Conversely, Mapjabil and his research teams (2012) reported indirectly, that heritage tourism was able to build up scuba diving tourism in Malaysia which accumulatively able to provide a profit of RM 250 million. Similarly, Museo Subacuático de Arte (MUSA) in Mexico is known as one of the countries that had succeeded in applying UCHT (see photo 4). Photo 4 displays sculptures of carved human statues, dining tables, fruits and so on which have been placed in the 420 -square -meters at the MUSA sea in Mexico.

Photo 4: Underwater sculptures



Source: Rodriguez (2016)

Increasing attention is given to the importance of the application of UCHT and it has been proven to strengthen economic synergy, especially in the tourism sector. Despite this, little progress has been made in Malaysia due to the lack of expertise and exposure in UCHT (Rahman, 2021). These initiatives will doubtless be much scrutinized, but there are some immediate actions that need to be taken by the Terengganu state in developing UCHT in Bidong Island especially in-situ experience at an underwater archaeological site, aiming at creating public awareness and including recreational divers about the appreciation natural resources under the sea. In this investigation, the aim was to assess the structured policy and blueprint that focuses on the application of UCHT in Malaysian seas. However, the limited studies on UCHT need to be broadly accessible in situ by the government, non-governmental organizations, public agencies, and local communities who are directly involved in the thorough development of the tourism sector, especially under the sea.

The pace of recovery remains slow and uneven in Malaysia due to varying degrees of COVID-19 virus mutations, vaccination rates, and travellers' confidence. A reasonable approach to tackle this issue is through establishing an online tourism platform as a vital mechanism for virtual tourism experiences. Malacca has been one of the initial states that implemented Virtual Reality (VR) through the zoom application (Afzal et al., 2017). This has created a transformative e-tourism to revolutionize the distribution of tourism information, sales, and virtual travel experience. However, tourist seems to have less real-world experience compared to the usage of the 360-degree application.

The emerging role of VR in the context of virtual tourism technology has enhanced the accessibility of cultural heritage sites. This holistic approach has been utilized by the Great

Zimbabwe National Monument which is one of the world heritage tourism centres to allow visitors to explore major archaeological sites and monuments such as the Great Enclosure. A broader perspective of VR in the tourism sector has been embraced in the 13th Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of the United Nations with the aim of minimizing the carbon emission reduction effect.

Monitoring, Evaluating, and Coordinating Tourism Policy

Monitoring, evaluation, and coordination are essential management functions in ensuring that a project achieves its objectives and minimizes risk. Collectively, the tourism policy describes the milestones that the parties need to be involved in and work together with stakeholders such as the government, researchers, and the community to monitor, protect, and conserve UNESCO heritage sites. It is a widely held view that there are some sensitive issues between Bidong Island and Vietnam in terms of past refugee history and humanity issues which eventually triggered the Terengganu state government to destroy several heritage monuments made by Vietnamese refugees during the period of their stay over (Interview: P4). Nevertheless, this conflict did not seem to be an issue between Vietnam and Galang Island.

A comparison of these islands reveals Galang Island, Indonesia receives 150 thousand Vietnamese refugees, meanwhile, the Philippines had 29 thousand refugees followed by Palawan Sumatra with only 18 thousand refugees (Azmi, 2021). There were no objections from the Vietnamese government neither nor Vietnam has ever protested or urged Indonesia to demolish or destroy the relics (Azmi, 2021). Therefore, the historical relics in Galang Island are preserved to this day. In the case of Bidong Island, it was different as the remaining artefacts were only monuments and graves. Meanwhile, in the Philippines and Sumatra, the Vietnamese refugee sites have been turned into residential areas (Interview: P4). This urged the government to formulate or employ more stringent policies in preserving and conserving the country's cultural heritage.

Over time, Malaysia has succeeded in solving the external issue of human security and human rights, although the remaining artefacts in most of the Malaysian historical sites were only relics of monuments, houses of worship and graves. With regards to Bidong Island, this study proposes a reconstruction or replica of Vietnamese refugee monuments such as boats, galleries, mini hospitals, and so on as privileging some aspects of Vietnamese refugee culture to tourists. On the other hand, the Terengganu Museum was only able to preserve the remaining artefacts. Notwithstanding the significant distinctions between heritage and societal values able to expose the uniqueness of Bidong Island by providing heritage experiences as well as exploring the beauty of underwater around Bidong Island.

Few marine researchers from Universiti Malaysia Terengganu have conducted research at Bidong Island and have found that the island has the fastest coral growth rate compared to other islands around the state of Terengganu (Jamhariah, 2021). The island's natural environment in particular its beaches and coral reefs constitute the main attraction for tourists. Therefore, this island needs to be preserved from any threat of extinction and further damage. Further, replicas that were placed on the island need to be monitored and inspected periodically by skilled contractors to ensure the replicas' safety, stability, and worth being visited by tourists. Following the addition of safety and worthiness, a significant increase

when proper accessibility of tourism facilities exists in terms of clear information, signage, and rules in efforts to monitor and protect artefacts and monuments from being damaged or decaying as well as the living marine around the Bidong Island. In other words, cultural heritage resources play a substantial role in the sustainable cultural, social, and economic development of communities (Calderwood & Soshkin, 2019; Graham et al., 2001). Interestingly, studies also found that social networking plays an essential role in disseminating the picture and information about cultural heritage on social media platforms. Eventually, through social networking, people can discuss scholarly and raise awareness about preserving the heritage.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, based on the opinions that have been analyzed, it was found that the existing policies need to be re-evaluated to establish a comprehensive action coherently and effectively. For example, preliminary work on the UCHT action plan should consider several aspects based to preserve the cultural heritage and facilitate harmony and understanding among people concerning heritage development for tourism. Undoubtedly, the world is facing unprecedented global health issues, social, and economic due to the emergency of COVID-19, however, with a proper execution plan, the tourism industry able to revive back. One of the key challenges in managing and promoting cultural heritage tourism in Malaysia is the development of a system or management that takes into consideration every stakeholder's concern. In keeping the view of the emergence of online technology, this study suggested the need for Malaysian tourism policy to focus on lucrative opportunities for diverse local businesses and efficient connectivity mainly in travel, transport, and services. Other key factors such as underwater museums, art galleries, and archaeological and geological sites play a crucial role in uplifting and rejuvenating the Malaysian tourism industry for present and future generations. It is crucial to find a proper solution to settle the conflicts that arise during managing and promoting cultural heritage tourism. This creates a pathway to preserve the cultural and historical heritage for enrichment and education.

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