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ISSUES AND CHALLENGES FACED BY VILLAGE GUIDES IN KUNDASANG AND KAMPUNG SAYAP

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Abstract:

The study aims to identify the issues and challenges faced by village guides in the highlands along the west coast of Sabah. The destinations chosen in this study were the famous Kundasang located in the district of Ranau and Kampung Sayap a blooming highland destination in the district of Kota Belud. A qualitative approach was used to identify the issues and challenges faced by the village guides. The methodology used was divided into three stages. At stage 1, the researchers hiked along with the village guides to personally encounter the experience the hiking journey with the village guide. At stage 2, the village guides were placed in groups and a list of questions were brought forward for them to express the grievances they face while performing their guide duties and the desire to obtain certain assistance from the stakeholders to improve their socioeconomic status. Finally at stage 3, the village chief was included in the discussion in providing recommendation on how to improve the services as well as the standard of living of the village guides. The study revealed that the ratio of tourist to the village guide is too high, inability to communicate in English, do not have the knowledge on the intrinsic as well as the extrinsic value of the flora and fauna, lack of facilities, the village guides

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were mainly man, changes in the weather condition, schedule is too tight and the demand is seasonal. Many of the guides did not have a village guide licence because they did not have school certificates. Thus recommendations were given to focus on capacity building, working condition, status of the tour guide, safety, security and well being of guides.

Keywords:

Village Guides, Highlands, Standard Operating Procedures

Introduction

The sustainability of eco-tourism largely depends on the tourist guide that consists of local communities. Tour guides are considered intermediaries in the tourism industry. Some researchers also refer them as brokers in the tourism industry. They play an important role in controlling the flow of information and create structural holes in the communication network. The guide usually maximizes his own capital based on the knowledge of the tourism product that he is promoting like the knowledge of the natural heritage as well as the cultural heritage. The guides usually has the inside story that enables the tourist to experiences the destination like a local. A tour guide will be able to provide information on facts, history, landmarks, figures, local customs and more. The tour guide is also able to provide insight information about the location. Knowledgeable guides may be able to make the trip memorable. A tour guide is the first and the last person seen by a tourists. There are several benefits of hiring a tour guide. They can ensure safety for the entire family who is under their responsibility. They know the unique places that you should visit. Their entire tour will be well organised and it will also be hustle free. In short they will be able to cater for all your needs.

A study by Kuo-Chien Chang (2014) claimed that perceived credibility trust, perceived benevolent trust and tourist satisfaction were the factors that influence the tourist shopping behaviour in Taiwan. Companies give guided tours to maintain the quality of the tour. The findings also supported the study conducted by Mak, Wong and Chang (2010) that supports that there are a number of issues that reduces the satisfaction level of tour guides. Among the human resource issues highlighted by the researcher were the low and unstable income earned for a 24/7 job that they need to offer, lack of recognition from their employer, high turnover rate among guides and new immigrant guides that create competition with the local guides. The guides are not receiving enough recognition seem to be the main difficulty faced by tour guides in Macau China. Employer expects the guides to receive below the cost fare. They are also treated as if they are part time workers or freelance workers but in reality they are working full time. The tour guide felt they were exploited by the employer and the financial pressure was shifted to them. Their low and unstable income adds to the burden. The tour guides are not given a basic salary. Most of their own expenses are paid from the tour guides pocket money.

Thus these tour guides who have a degree or good in English or any other foreign language opt to work in hotels and casino for a better salary and a stable income. Competition arises from tour guides who are not from that area. Oversupply of tour guide creates tour services rendered in a cheaper rate but not promising a satisfying quality service. Moreover when the tourism market has not reached maturity the tourist will negotiate for a lower cost or fee and willing to compromise a quality tour. Sometime the tour operator rip off majority of the share for the package and only provide small amount to the tour guide. The items in the itineraries will not be fulfilled leading to dissatisfaction.

The districts of Kota Belud and Ranau were classified as the poorest district in the Malaysia. Thus poverty eradication is made as a priority in these areas. One of the avenue considered as a way of eradicating poverty is encouraging the ecotourism activity in the rural areas of these districts. The road towards boosting the ecotourism industry along the west coast of Sabah in order for it to be strong and sustainable future growth requires in depth understanding and careful re-evaluation on the issues and challenges of the industry. Moreover, ecotourism is a distinctively service based one, which relies to achieve a strong and sustained future growth in Hong Kong's tourism industry heavily in high quality service delivery. As there were concern about the quality of the service provided by the main stakeholders who were the local community especially the village guides potential problems and challenges faced need to be addressed. Village guides do not have the same credentials as a tour guide in terms of licence, education, exposure and resources (funding) to obtain the required training and licence. This lead to the study to be initiated.

Literature Review

Tourism has become an essential tool to promote socioeconomic status for communities. Like any other goods and services the growth of the product totally depends on the satisfaction of the customers. Guides have a direct link with these customers known as tourist. Tourist guides have various roles in projecting the right image about a destination. According to World Tourism GoI (2020), a tour guide needs to provide the right information with facts and figures. This can include the history culture, the architecture, scientific reasoning to support the facts and figures. The guides need the tourist to feel like a local to embrace their experience. They need to make sure the tourist are always save 24/7 and fully satisfied during their visit to a destination.

Unfortunately when a search engine is used to identify the level of satisfaction obtained by customers in certain destination, 95% of the dissatisfaction is due to untrained, unlicensed, casual and fake guides in places like India preferably known as village guides. Thus the trained and licenced tour guides and the domestic tourist does not treat the village guides with respect and does not consider a guides job as a prideful one. In India they are always looked down.

According to Chowdhary and Prakash (2008), the vulnerable position of a tour guide can be seen in the tourism supply chain. In order to understand better the position and the bargaining power, a business setting for a tour guiding job should be analysed. There are three main players in the business scenario. Government is the main facilitator. Government promotes tourism within and outside the country with themes or brands like Visit Malaysia, Colourful Indonesia and Incredible India. These brands sends out a message of a promised quality that will be experienced by the tourists. Since tourism is service based industry, government cannot be totally monitoring or controlling the tourists experience. Thus to facilitate this experience the government depends on the tour operator or tour agencies who delivers the experience of using the product. The government assess the demand for the products or services or even the facilities at various locations like museum, zoo, parks, eco-trail, worship places like temple, church and mosque, sanctuaries, heritage sites like palace. The government train the guides and provide the licence for interpreting the experience and escorting the tourists. The guides complements the tour agencies and operators in providing the itineraries.

The tour agencies or the operators take over the role of the government that promotes tourism experience at the macro level to a micro level. The agencies or operators manage the resources by taking the role of an entrepreneur. They design the itinerary for the company, the transport, food, accommodation in the form of a tour package together with the right tour guide that has the experience and language skills needed in the tour. The tour packages are the tourism products put for sales.

The third link is the tour guide. They are usually independent workers who are employed or engaged by the tour companies. They are train and licensed. They can be engaged full time or part time. Guides always face the dilemma of conflicting interest between the government and the tour company. Government wants to gave the tourism experience as promised in its promotion but the tour company is too profit orientated.

Most of the study conducted on guides were focused on the licenced tour guides who has the funding and the basic skills required for a guide. They received the training from either authorized government institution or a private institution assigned by the government. These enables the number of tour guides trained or in business is constantly under control. Oversupply of tour guides can destroy the market in terms of remuneration. Unfortunately, in this process of providing the local experience, the local village guides are often forgotten. These village guides who have the knowledge to survive with the ecosystem around them are found to be neglected by the tourism industry because they do not have neither the basic education nor the funding to enter the tour guide courses. The natural and cultural heritage is their only source of knowledge. They need to use this knowledge to earn a living but there is no support to complement their skills.

Research Objective

The overall research objective was to determine the issues and challenges faced by the village guides in Kampung Sayap and Kundasang. The specific objectives of the study was as follows:-

- a. To describe the current standard in the services provided by the village guides based on the observation of the researchers in the hiking activity in ecotourism.
- b. To identify the issues or problems as well as challenges encountered by the village guides in providing the services required by the tour operators or the tourists.
- c. Finally to recommend some suggestions on how to overcome the problems encountered by village guides in providing a standard service and at the same time boost their socioeconomic status.

Research Questions

The overall research question of the study was as follows:-

“What are the issues and challenges faced by the village guides along the west coast of Sabah?”

The specific research questions were as follows:-

- a. What is the current service standard offered by the village guides in the location of study (Kundasang and Kampung Sayap) based on the observation made by the researchers during an ecotourism activity like hiking?
- b. What are the issues and challenges faced by the village guides in providing services to the tourist as well as the tour operators?
- c. What are the suggestions that can be recommended for the village guides in providing a standard service and at the same time increase their socioeconomic status?

Methodology

The study adopted the qualitative approach in identifying the issues and challenges faced by the village guides along the west coast of Sabah. This was considered the most appropriate method due to the nature of the study which was exploratory in nature.

The study adopted a case study approach. The study setting was Kampung Sayap and Kundasang. The data collection for this study was obtained through in depth interview conducted on the key players involved in tour guiding activities in the locations of study. The collection of data was carried out by enumerators using a set of open ended questions. The interview was held from the 28th of August 2020 to 31st of August, 2020.

The data collection unstructured interviews. Unstructured interviews does not involve any preconceive ideas or theories. There is no organization or with very little organization. The interview began with very simple question and direct. The unstructured interview was very time consuming, difficult to manage and lack of predetermined questions made it difficult to direct the questions to answer the objective of the study. Since a significant depth was required, the unstructured interview was deemed suitable. The researchers embraced various methods to extract the information from the village guides, like hiking together with them while collecting the information, personal interview and also using focus group.

The data collection took place in three stages. At stage 1, the researchers went on hiking as the main activity of ecotourism in these areas. Based on the observation, the researchers identified the strength and the weaknesses of the tour guides involved in the activity of hiking. At the second stage, a group discussion was carried out with the hikers to identify the issues and challenges faced by the hikers. Finally at stage three, personal interviews that lasted for one and a half hour with the village head who is also a licenced tour guide to provide suggestions on how to ensure that the guides can provide a standard service and at the same time increase their socioeconomic status.

The interviews were all tape recorded and fully transcribed. The questions asked were as follows:-

1. What was the problem the village guides encountered when the tourist arrive at your place?
2. Who prepared the itinerary for the tourist? Is it the village guides responsibility or the tour operator that decides the itinerary? Are the village guides comfortable with the itinerary prepared?
3. How do the village guides work out the costing? What were the factors considered when they work out the costing? Did the village guides look at their competitors pricing and decided to impose a cheaper price? Did the village guides just estimate the cost and place a certain percentage hike in the price to gain profit?
4. Does the village guide need to pay the tour operator if he or she brings the tourist to their place? Is the remuneration given to village guide sufficient to cover their cost of operation?
5. Does the village guide explain to the tourists about the rules and regulation and the safety measures before they start any activity?
6. What is the ratio of guide to tourists? Does the village guide think this ratio is good enough? Or they should be in smaller groups?
7. Does the village guide have sufficient knowledge to communicate with the tourists to explain basic things? Does the tourist ask the village guide any questions related to the

- natural heritage, cultural heritage and their way of living? If they ask the village guides questions, does the guide understand the questions and make the correct response?
8. Does the village guide have the intrinsic and as well as the extrinsic knowledge on flora and fauna in the places they bring the tourists to hike?
 9. Does the village guide find the income that they get in line with the effort they put?
 10. Are the village guide doing this tour guide job as a part timer or full time?
 11. Does the village guides have the knowledge to do first aid when a tourist is hurt?
 12. Is there immigrant of tour guides or village guides from outside their village that they deem as a competitor?
 13. Does the village guides have a tour guide licence? If no what is the obstacle of getting one?

These 15 questions were asked in a focus group but the following questions were enquired to the Village Chief who is also a tour guide and a hiker.

1. What type of training is required by the village guides in their village?
2. What are the suggestion that can be given to boost the quality of the service provided by the village guides?

Findings

At the entrance of the hiking trail, payment was collected and briefing was given on how to behave in the forest. Among the advice claimed by the researchers were as follows:-

“Do not mention certain names in the forest like bears and other wild animals because it is the believe of the locals that the animals whose name is mentioned has good hearing ability and might attack you when you are in the forest.” “ Follow the guides and watch the steps carefully because the trails are slippery due to the rain on the previous day”. The payment included the guides’ fee as well as the payment for the food which is lunch. The researchers observed that since the hiking took place as soon as the movement control order relaxed and allowed movement of people between districts, the inflow of tourist to the location of study increased. Thus the ratio of village guide to tourists was high. Since the tourists consists of Malaysian who knew the local language or even the national language, Bahasa Malaysia, it enabled them to communicate with the guides easily. But unfortunately the guides were unable to communicate in any other language other than Malay and the local language like Dusun and Kadazan. They were unable to communicate in English.

The second issue was the village guides who hiked with the hikers were not able to explain the intrinsic as well as the extrinsic value of the flora and fauna in the area. They were unaware of the endemic species found during the hiking. This made the entire experience of hiking incomplete. They were just guiding the tourists to make sure they follow the correct path. In some cases the researchers themselves identified the unique species in the jungle.

The village did not have a shop or the facilities to sell the equipment needed for the hiking. Some of the tourists did not have the proper shoes for hiking, thus the tourist was not able to follow the rest of the tourists in hiking. The researchers felt that the guides can sell local hiking shoes like “addidas kampung” to the tourists who were not equipped with the right equipment. The hiking sticks made out of wood were provided. This can enable the village guides to earn extra income.

The path way for hiking was still fresh. It was not paved for the hikers to climb. Moreover since the village or the hiking spot is along the Crocker range of Mount Kinabalu, it is always exposed to the change in weather condition. If it rains, the path becomes muddy and slippery, which is dangerous to the tourists. In addition, all the guides were male, there were no female village guides. Thus it becomes uncomfortable if a female wants certain safety favours from the guides especially for a Muslim woman.

The guides are usually considered ambassador for the natural and cultural heritage. Unfortunately, the local village guides were unable to explain the natural heritage as well as the cultural heritage as expected. The lunch prepared was a local cuisine wrapped up in leaves like "nasi bungkus". The guides fulfilled the requirement of keeping the environment clean as required in ecotourism but not allowing rubbish or plastic water bottles to be thrown in the jungle. The guides also followed the stipulated time of starting and completing the hiking according to time.

Overall the researchers felt the hiking as an adventurous activity, more towards keeping one self fit and to be relaxed seeing the scenic mountain view, sun rise and sun set with the right temperature. Unfortunately it did not give them the element of education or knowledge transfer about the natural heritage and the cultural heritage in the location of study.

At the second stage of the exploratory study, a focus group was formed. The focus group consists of village guides, researchers who followed the village guides as hikers and tourists. The focus group was aimed to have the opinions on the issues or problems encountered by the tour guides. This will help them to argue and debate in putting forward their views.

All the village guides collectively agreed that they can communicate in Malay as well as Dusun or Kadazan language easily. Unfortunately their English is not good. Some tour guides are able to understand English but lack the confident to respond. Thus they claim that they are able to handle the tourists with confident if the tourists come from Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore compared to foreign countries. The guides also claim that the itinerary for their stay in Kampung Sayap or Kundasang is prepared by the tour operators if they booked through the tour operating company. But if they have booked personally through their websites the itinerary will be prepared by the local tour guide. The guides claim that tour company usually cramp their itinerary to make maximum profit from the tourists. They bring the tourists in the tour bus. By the time they reach the destination, it is 2 to 3 p.m. in the evening. The tourist are exhausted. They decide to do the hiking the next morning. They return from the hiking around 4 p.m. before it gets dark. Some tourists will check out and leave to Kota Kinabalu on the same day. Some will leave the next day. This does not give the tourists enough time to fully explore and increase their understanding about the natural as well as cultural heritage. For those tourists who do not want to hike will go for a swim at the rivers and waterfalls in the area like Kampung Sayap or visit the cattle farm and organic plantation in the area like Kundasang. The souvenir shops in both the places are not outstanding as the souvenir shops in other tourist destination. The pricing strategy implemented by the village guides were cost based pricing. The wage of the village guide plus the cost of the lunch were included. After estimating the cost, a small percentage was used to hike the price to gain profit. The small percentage of the profit is used to upgrade the facilities and the infrastructure for the hikers. If the tour operators bring in their tourist they only pay for the wages of the village guide and cater food based on the need of the tourist. The cost is similar with the cost they incurred without a tour operator. Sometime the

local village guide will be escorted by a tour guide arranged by the tour company to enable the tourist to communicate effectively.

The tour guides explain the rules and regulation before the hiking begins. But it is very brief. They also explain the beliefs and norms to be followed. Unfortunately the village guides claim there are many tourists who are not discipline in following the rules and this creates negative spill over effect for the guides. Sometime the tourist might get injured but the hikers are not trained to provide first aid services to the tourists. During low peak season, the ratio for guide to tourists is low. Thus the entire activity is very personalized but during high peak season, the ratio is very high. This is the only way for them to make extra income. Thus the rules and regulation on the ratio is usually ignored. The village guides also claim that tourist never reveal their actual health condition before hiking. This is because in certain areas like Kampung Sayap the steepness of the mountain is almost 85 degrees. This requires good stamina and fitness. During the journey, many tourists were unable to complete the activity because the tourists were not fit. They need to be brought back to the village with assistance from more village guides. Even though the service was rendered with more guides but the extra village guides will not be paid. Their service will be considered as a humanitarian gesture.

Since these guides do not have the knowledge to explain the historical aspect of the area or the cultural heritage or the natural heritage, the tour company uses their heritage to make money. The tour operators just pay the entrance fee. They bring their own tour guides who can communicate better, explain the heritage of the area more effectively. Thus these guides brought by the tour company become competitors to the local guides. Therefore the low income and instability in income leads the youth to leave the village and go to the nearby town looking for more stable jobs. The village guides also try to get the licence for tour guides unfortunately they are told that they don't qualify for it.

The third stage of the exploratory research was to interview the Village Chief who also works to a licenced tour guide and a hiker. The Village Chief supports the claim by the guides that they need to be trained in communication skills, knowledge about their natural heritage and cultural heritage. They are also require to have basic first aid skills. Once these skills are required maybe the government would be lenient in giving the Tour Guide Certification for the village guides. This can help the villagers to earn their income through ecotourism. Moreover the Village Chief also highlighted the fees to obtain the certificate is very expensive but the villagers cant afford it. The Chief expressed his gratefulness if the government can subsidized the fees. Many villagers are also being constantly affected by the changes in the land slide.

Discussions on the Findings

Bases on the observation and the interview conducted with the village guides and the village chief, the following discussion was stipulated into subsections for better understanding.

Capacity Building

There are inappropriate and insufficient infrastructure for training and continuous learning for tour guides. Guides know that professional attitude and training is essential especially in the village to provide superior service quality. But there is no avenue for these local community to demand for such training. They are deemed not suitable because they do not have school certification. Schooling certification is the entry requirement for the courses and the licencing. Thus for the guides that originate from the local community, not only licencing has become an

issue but learning and capacity building has been given the least importance. Training that are not scheduled in a regular basis. The educational institution that is involved in the knowledge transfer does not provide the training at a consistent time interval. Therefore the knowledge transfer is not carried out in a consistent manner. There is time interval of 6 months to a year, which is considered too long. The training is inconsistent because lack of funds for the traveling expenses restricts the trainers to make frequent visits to the village. The effectiveness of the training is not evaluated in a consistent manner too. This can help to modify the module of training according to the needs of the villagers. The guides are lost whether what they were taught are implemented in a proper manner. There is no monitoring and supervision like hands on. If monitoring and supervision needs to take place the trainers need to stay in the location for at least 6 months. This can be done by engaging our undergraduate students to do their intern in the village. Modules should be prepared and the students should be trained on how to carry out the modules effectively. They are required to monitor and supervise the villagers and show the significant impact before and after the training. Follow up training can be carried out based on the requirement. The students should be able to measure the effectiveness of the training. There is no consideration of imparting knowledge based on hands on approach for those who do not have school certificate. Therefore a separate licencing should be designed just for villager guides endorsed by the Tourism Guides Association. The separate licencing requires the guides to do certain basic modules in order to get the licence. The modules should be designed together with the requirement to be fulfil by the Tourist Guide Association and the trainers from the institution of higher learning. The modules must be further distinguished based on the niche in ecotourism like highland, islands and so on. The modules for ecotourism are not clear and yet to be created. modules on niche tourism should be conducted based on the demand. Ecotourism modules should cover the knowledge of flora and fauna. The modules should include the QR Codes that contains picture and also explanation in various languages. Thus the students and researchers across field like IT, Tourism and Forestry can work hand in hand to develop and create the support system needed by the villagers. This is supported by the study conducted by Manggot, Zain and Jamaluddin (2018), Singh (2016) and Roy (2017). An institution of higher learning should complement the community to make knowledge transfer more effective. The postgraduates and the undergraduates can do their internship around 3 months in these areas. The internship will work in a two way process, where the students can transfer the knowledge to the guides and also at the same time the guides can train them about the natural and cultural heritage in the area.

Working Conditions

The second important category is the working conditions of the village guides. The guides felt that proper interview should be conducted to recruit village guides from the destination. They should be trained and given the licence to operate in a specific area. This is like the taxi permit given to taxi drivers on the location they can provide their taxi services. Authorities should also stipulate in the licence the location where the guiding services can be given by the guides. This can create demand and fair competition. Thus the authorities can control the amount of licence issued for village guides in a location. If guides are needed for a niche tourism, added training should be given to them. The village guide can also request permission from the local authorities to do the niche tourism. There should also be a mechanism established by the government or the local tourism authorities or even the Tour Guide Association association to contact the village guides directly instead of going through the tour company. Thus the government agency like Tourism Malaysia needs to have a separate section in their tourism service to build portals related to ecotourism in the villagers. This portal is free. The

information can be updated upon needs. The portal can provide the information on who to be contacted based on the needs of the tourists. By digitalizing the role of the middleman in tourism, the village guides can earn a higher profit margin.

Status of The Village Guides

Village guides are known as cultural ambassadors. But unfortunately they do not get the respect or the recognition from the tourists especially the domestic tourists. Up to date there is no tourism policy or act that supports the dignity of this group. Thus it is the responsibility of the government or the tour company to create awareness on how a guide should be treated. Firstly in the area of safety, security and well being of guides. There is no job security. The demand for them is seasonal. Sometime they can go for a long period of time without any job. Low remuneration because their wages are not set by the government. They are set by the tour company. Many claim that they are not paid fairly. Some say they need to do jobs outside their job description that can be classified as crimes or antisocial element.

In addition their safety especially when dealing with foreign tourist are questionable because they do not know the background of the tourists. The guides do not get subsidized food or accommodation. Sometime the tourist or the hotelier give them a place to stay or treat them in a restaurant as a friendly gesture. Payment is also delayed and no official receipt given for the transaction. The guides do not have any medical insurance or benefits if they are injured during their work.

Moreover village guides are pressured to take up assignments which they are not prepared. Operators pressure the guides to convince tourists to buy products from them or stay in their accommodation. If the guides fail to convince the tourist, they will lose their extra income. The villagers promise the guides that the accommodations has the promised facilities. But when the tourist arrives many facilities are not provided plus not in a working condition. This disrupts the mood of the tourist who will later take it out with the tour guide. They reduce the payment given to the guide. Tourists like to disobey rules and regulation which puts them in danger and the credibility of the guide questionable. Domestic tourists have little faith with local guides. Prejudice opinions and poor listeners. They pay less attention to advice.

Therefore Tourism Malaysia needs to work hand in hand with the village guides and design the rules to be followed by the tourists as well as the tour operating companies. They rules should list out the job description and the activities allowed and restricted by both the village guide and the tourist themselves. This is done to stress on the element of sustainability. If the village guides or the tourists were found to bridge the rules and regulation, the village guides licence can be revoked and the tourists can be heavily fined.

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