

# The importance of community involvement for sustainable tourism

June 1 2015, by Lo May Chiun

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Researchers in Southeast Asia are studying how tourism policy and local community involvement impact the tourism industry.

In 2010, the government of Malaysia launched its Economic Transformation Programme (ETP), aiming to turn the country into a high-income economy by 2020. Eleven industry sectors were prioritised under the ETP, including [tourism](#).

Meanwhile, the Philippines launched the Philippine Tourism Act in 2009 to restructure and boost tourism. Among other provisions, the act increased the budget of the Department of Tourism; restructured the office and agencies attached to it; institutionalised public-private partnerships; rationalised tourism areas, zones and spots; and granted generous fiscal incentives to investors.

Researchers in Malaysia and the Philippines are looking into the impacts of tourism policies and how they affect local communities.

In Malaysia, researchers from Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) and Taylor's University surveyed 350 international tourists at Kuala Lumpur International Airport to assess their perception of Malaysia's tourism industry in light of the country's ETP. They found that shopping, business, family holidays, historical heritage, local culture and cuisine were among the top reasons of travel to the country. On the other hand, only a relatively small percentage of tourists were visiting Malaysia for sports activities, events, spas and entertainment, leading the researchers

to recommend further development in these areas.

In the past, tourism strategies have been developed based on the needs of tourists. UNIMAS researchers believe that local communities should be consulted as the [tourism industry](#) depends on local support. Therefore, in 2015 the researchers plan to interview members of local communities to explore the strengths and weaknesses of current strategies for rural destinations in Malaysia.

In a previous survey of 80 families living in Annah Rais Longhouse, a large communal village house, the researchers found that community members believed cultural attractions and natural resources significantly contributed to the competitiveness of rural tourism. The researchers will also investigate tourism's impact on the local community and how relationships developed by communities with tourists create sustainable rural tourism.

Someone who knows well the consequences of not consulting with local communities is Dr Edieser Dela Santa from the University of the Philippines Diliman. He investigated more than three-decades-worth of ecotourism policy implementation in Pamilacan, an island in the middle of the Bohol Sea in central Philippines. Pamilacan is known for its rich marine environment. A top-down approach was taken by the government to implement conservation policies on the island in order to benefit local tourism. However, [local communities](#) were not involved in this process and the new policies negatively affected their livelihoods that depended on marine mammal and manta ray hunting. Later, Dr Dela Santa also analysed the process behind the government's implementation of the Philippine Tourism Act of 2009, focusing on the dynamics among organisations involved in setting up tourism enterprise zones across the country.

In 2015, Dr Dela Santa plans to expand his studies on tourism policy into

Japan and conduct a policy network analysis of postdisaster tourism governance. He will be analysing the rejuvenation of tourism in earthquake-affected areas in Tohoku, Japan. "The project is envisioned to shed light on important theoretical issues on post-disaster network governance as well as provide practical lessons for countries, such as the Philippines, which are recovering from devastating natural disasters," he says.

Provided by Universiti Malaysia Sarawak

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