Local communities’ perceptions on rhino-tourism in Tabin Wildlife Reserve,
Lahad Datu, Sabah

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Abstract

The host community is a fundamental component of any tourism system. Wildlife tourism and
in this paper, rhino-tourism activities have many impacts on a host community; therefore,
young in rhino-tourism as a recreational pursuit will inevitably be accompanied by a
growth in numbers of local people affected by tourism. For the purpose of this paper, hosts
are defined as those who live in the vicinity of the tourist attraction and are either directly or
indirectly involved with, and/or affected by, the rhino-tourism activities. The host community is
an important element to consider in the concept of sustainability. The sustainability of rhino-
tourism is dependent, in part, on its support from the areas’ residents. Host satisfaction is related
to both the involvement of local community members in rhino-tourism activities, and the
benefits and disadvantages of rhino-tourism to host communities. Social and cultural issues
need to be considered because of the importance of host acceptance to the overall sustainability of
a rhino-tourism attraction. Determining how to make a rhino-tourism attraction sustainable from
the perspective of the host community requires an understanding of the interplay of elements
affecting both the perception of, and support for, that tourism. This paper will be discussed on
the impacts and attitudes of local communities on regards to rhino-tourism in Tabin Wildlife
Reserve, Lahad Datu, Sabah and based on the interviews, questionnaires and observations
made, local communities living in the vicinity of Tabin Wildlife Reserve are very enthusiasm
in rhino-tourism.

Keywords: Host community, rhino-tourism, attitudes, perceptions

Introduction

Sabah possesses an astonishing array of animal and plant life, thus, making tourism in
Sabah gaining more ground as an industry that contributes towards the development of the
State’s economy. Liaw (1998) described the increasing importance of tourism in Sabah as an
income generating activity of the State, which its sustainability is related to natural products
that is readily available, seen and appreciated in the forest of Sabah, such as plants, animals and
other resources.

Being as one of the 12 mega diverse area of the World, Sabah has the quality and uniqueness
of biodiversity attractions of which is of an international standard (SDC, 2007). Due to
the unique and luxurious biological diversity of Sabah, the State government of Sabah has
setting aside natural areas known as protected areas into premier eco destination hubs. Today,
a variety of nature appreciation activities have been developed linked to the numbers of tourists
that engage in them.

When carefully planned and effectively managed, tourism can provide significant benefits to protected areas and communities
living in the vicinity of the protected areas (Eagles et al., 2002), especially those who are
strongly dependent on natural resources (Tosun, 1999; Tosun, 2000). Western and Wright (1994)
considered that the basis for conservation development through tourism is the opinions of
local communities about wildlife conservation and tourism itself. Therefore, the study was done
to look into two objectives below:

i. To investigate the rhino-tourism development impacts among the local communities living in and around Tabin
Wildlife Reserve; and
To explore the local communities of Tabin perspectives for Sumatran rhinoceroses (*Diceros bicornis sumatrensis harrissoni*) conservation.

**Study Site and Methods**

The Tabin Wildlife Reserve was established in 1984 with the aim to protect endangered wildlife. The 120,521 ha reserve is an important breeding ground for the wildlife which is threatened by logging activities and also serves as a habitat for animals from nearby plantations (Bosi, 2003). Tabin is a haven for both wildlife and humans alike as the reserve is serene and spectacular ranging from the mighty dipterocarp trees to the mysterious swamps (*Figure 1*).

Tabin was originally registered as ‘Silabukan and Lumeran’ Forest Reserve in the 1950’s. A big part of the Tabin Reserve consists of secondary forests, especially in the selected logging areas in the lower parts. However, there are untouched jungles in certain parts of the reserve, known as the Core Area. Oil palm plantations border the reserve except for the northeast region, which leads to Segama River (WWFM, 1986), the second largest river in Sabah.

Residents of Kg. Parit and Kg. Dagat originated from Kg. Tidong. Some of the residents moved to Kg. Parit after a primary school was built whilst the rest moved to Kg. Dagat after Kg. Parit was flooded and not suitable for paddy planting anymore. However, all villages fall under the administrative jurisdiction of Kinabatangan District Office (Majail, 1996).

*Figure 2: Map showing the location for four villages visited for the research*

Kg. Tidong is located along Sg. Segama, Kg. Dagat along Sg. Dagat – a tributary of Sg. Tabin, whilst Kg. Parit lies at the edge of the Tomanggong Estate and accessible by road from Lahad Datu. A channel built from Tomanggong Estate to Sg. Segama also connects Kg. Parit with the other neighboring villages by boat.

The total residents of all three villages are approximately 300 people. Majority of the people are of Tidong ethnic and are Muslims. Mainly villagers are fishermen. Their main source of livelihood is freshwater fishes and prawns. Occasionally, they will enter the forest and mangrove areas to get medicinal plants, rattans, ‘nibong’, wild vegetables such as the wild ferns and other forest products (Majail, 1996).

Not like Kg. Tidong, Kg. Parit or even Kg. Dagat, Kg. Tungku is located at the southern part of the reserve and is quite far from the three mentioned villages above. Kg. Tungku is located near FELDA Sahabat (Federal Land Development Authority), Sahabat Agricultural Settlement Scheme. Kg. Tungku can be accessed by road from Lahad Datu town. The total number of Tungku’s villagers is about 450 people. Majority of the people are of Dusun Begahak ethnic and...
are Christians. Mainly villagers are farmers. Their main source of livelihood is vegetable growing/farming. Occasionally, they will enter the forest to get medicinal plants and other forest products (Payne, 1990).

The methodology adopted for this research consisted of two distinct sections: data collection and data analysis. Data collection was based on observations, interviews and questionnaires. Observations are a valid means for collecting data among a community. They provide information on culture, behavior and environment (Kirk and Miller, 1986). Formal interviews and informal conversations were used to gather data from locals in their community. A questionnaire was used to collect data from local villagers who happened to be not around in their houses during the survey was done. Data analysis was done with non-parametric tests, frequencies and salience reason methods.

Results and Discussion

Locals were examined according to their perceptions of the impacts of rhino-tourism. In the research social, economic and environmental outcomes were considered.

Objective 1: Local Communities Perspectives on Rhino-Tourism Development

Locals were questioned about their perceptions of rhino-tourism development on their community. Perceptions of locals on rhino-tourism impacts were grouped into two categories that are villages that already practicing tourism and villages that have not yet in the sphere of tourism.

From the four villages selected for the research, only one village that is presently active in tourism. Kg. Dagat is presently participating in home-stay program. The community has entered into a joint venture with a conservation entity known as Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) under its Bornean Biodiversity Ecosystem Conservation (BBEC) project in partnership with the state department – Sabah Wildlife Department under an agreement through which the community as land owner also receives additional payments for each visitor-night, gains employment in tourism operations and opportunities to supply goods and services to tourism while Kg. Parit, Kg. Tidong and Kg. Tungku have not yet experiencing tourism development in their vicinity.

When asked about rhino-tourism development in Tabin Wildlife Reserve (TWR), majority of the respondents have positive perspectives for rhino-tourism development in TWR with 73.5% stated strongly agree and 22.7% stated agree. Only 3.8% of the respondents stated not agree (Figure 3).

![Figure 3: The percentage of respondents who stated that rhino-tourism would contribute to economic upturn.](image)

Local communities in TWR stated that physical building development is really needed to develop and improve (88%), and about 12% is not agreed (Figure 4).

![Figure 4: Respondents perspective on the physical development for rhino-tourism in TWR](image)

A mini seminar was conducted specially for local villagers as all identified villages, namely: Kg. Dagat, Kg. Parit, Kg. Tidong and Kg. Tungku have been visited and approached by other research students on similar study that is eco-tourism. Therefore, to avoid villagers of being not interested with the interviews.
and questionnaires, a mini seminar consist of PowerPoint presentation on Sumatran rhinoceros (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis harrissoni*) and group discussion was conducted. During the group discussion, several activities were carried out with a purpose of collecting view of villagers on rhino tourism. These activities were repeated in all four villages.

During the intensive discussions at all four villages, authors note that the local communities have positives perspectives towards rhino-tourism development. Interestingly, they stated that Tabin Wildlife Reserve (TWR) should be promoted as rhino-tourism icon to generate a lot of tourists going to TWR as Tabin Wildlife Reserve was thought to have the largest viable of the critically endangered Sumatran rhinoceros (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis harrissoni*) on the island of Borneo.

**Objective 2: Local Communities Perspectives on Sumatran Rhinoceros Conservation**

The local communities of Tabin Wildlife Reserve stated that Sumatran rhinoceros (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis harrissoni*) should be conserved for tourism purpose (89%) and biodiversity conservation (11%) (Figure 5).

(Figure 6).

![Figure 6: Respondents' perspective on government role in protecting and conserving the Sumatran rhinoceros.](image)

Respondents were also asked about their knowledge on Sumatran rhinoceros (*D. sumatrensis harrissoni*). Majority of the respondents agree that the species was presently facing the brink of extinction due to poaching activities (68.6%) and habitat destruction for oil palm plantation (31.4%) (Figure 7).

From the intensive discussion at four villages, majority of the local communities agree that rhino-tourism can have significantly contribution in the effort to save the last remaining population of Sumatran rhinoceros (*D. sumatrensis harrissoni*) in Borneo especially in Tabin Wildlife Reserve as rhino-tourism can provide an introduction to Sumatran rhinoceros (*D. sumatrensis harrissoni*) facts and figures through education and interpretation in the context of tourism. Moreover, the tourism industry can be a worldwide platform to promote the plight to save the rhino species to potential tourists around the globe.

(Figure 7: Respondents' perspective on the factor for Sumatran rhinoceros declining in population)

**Conclusion**

The findings show that link between local communities and wildlife was closely related particularly wildlife that has economic values. Local communities in Tabin Wildlife Reserve especially in the northern part of the reserve (Kg.
Dagat) are very dependent on wildlife species for their livelihood, and it leads community appreciation to the wildlife.

Even though, further research is required to understand host community perceptions of rhino-tourism. An assessment is needed to identify the elements that affect host attitudes and levels of involvement, as well as factors that affect impacts on the community.

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References


