CAMERON HIGHLANDS DISCOVERY CENTRE: TOURIST ACCEPTANCE AND PERCEPTION

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Abstract
Malaysia possesses a diversity of flora and fauna, which has become an advantage in promoting adventure, nature and ecotourism activities. Tourism in Malaysia plays an important role in contributing to its economy whilst raising awareness of its local cultures. Cameron Highlands, a historical hill station with agriculture and natural attractions, has great potential to become a top travel destination due to its natural and historical attractions and location. Tourism Board Malaysia information booth in Cameron Highlands closed down in early 2000, and since then little information could be delivered to the tourists from official bodies, except through their websites. Currently, tourism development and activities are monopolised and self-promoted by private entities. These activities are highly geared towards mass tourism, adventure tourism and ‘greenwashed’ ecotourism, with many having destructive effects on the environment and local community.

This research study was carried out to determine tourist impressions towards having a Discovery Center for Cameron Highlands. The research employed quantitative analysis of data obtained through questionnaires. The questionnaires were divided into two parts; part A covering demographic profiles and part B covering acceptance and perceptions of a Discovery Center. The sampling area and data collection was at the main tourist areas of Tanah Rata and Brinchang. Descriptive analysis is used in this study. The results show that having a Discovery Center in Cameron Highlands could instill a positive attitude for tourists toward nature preservation and conservation by increasing their awareness towards heritage cultural and the natural environment. It could educate people towards the importance of conserving heritage cultural, could promote the ecotourism sector, and could provide income to local communities and the Oran Asli (indigenous ethnic group).
Keywords: Economic, agri-ecotourism, nature conservation, local community, education tourism, Discovery Center, tourist perceptions

Introduction

Malaysia is a country that is rich in flora and fauna, and this diverse natural environment has become a benefit in promoting tourism activities. The tourism industry is the second largest contributor to the national economy. Tourists’ arrivals in 2012 were 25 million and this increased to 25.7 million in 2013, where the total increment is 2.7% (Corporate Tourism Official Portal – Facts & Figures). The trend shows continuous growth, and in 2014 the gross average of tourists’ arrivals in Malaysia reached 27.4 million with the growth rate of 6.7% (Corporate Tourism Official Portal – Facts & Figures). Meanwhile, the total revenue contributed from the year 2012 (RM 60.6 billion) to the year 2013 (RM 65.4 billion) is RM 4.84 billion (which increased by 8.1%) to the country (Corporate Tourism Official Portal, 2015). The Ministry of Tourism and Culture, Malaysia, launched ‘Visit Malaysia Year’ in 2014 with the theme of ‘Celebrating 1Malaysia Truly Asia’ (Majed, 2014), and the tourism promotion is continuous, organizing, for example, the ‘Tahun Festival Malaysia’ (MyFest) and ‘Festival in Malaysia’ in 2015 with the new theme of ‘Endless Celebrations’, which emphasizes the various festivals celebrated by people of all races (Ministry of Tourism and Culture, Malaysia, Official Portal – MyFest 2015). Both campaigns have become key drivers to achieve the target of 36 million tourist arrivals and tourism income of RM 168 billion in 2020, according to the National Key Economic Areas (NKEA) (Corporate Tourism Official Portal, 2015). Both 10th and 11th Malaysia Plan have recognised ecotourism and nature tourism as a unique tourism niche to be developed in Malaysia. In both plans strategies and budget on these tourism niche has been emphasised (Unit, 2010; 2015).

According to the Ministry of Tourism and Culture (2015), the Cameron Highlands, also known as the Hill Station, is one of the main tourism attractions as a hill resort located in the Titiwangsa Range 1,500 m above sea level (District and Land Office, Cameron Highlands, Official Portal, 2015). The area is characterised by refreshingly cool weather, undulating valleys, sprawling tea plantations, terraced flower gardens, vegetable farms, strawberry parks and mesmerizing highland panoramas (Zarul and Noormahayu, 2013; Othman, 2011). There are various activities of at least 10 types (Tam, 2013) that are offered to tourists, such as enjoying a cup of refreshing home-grown tea in full view of the Cameron Highlands’ sprawling tea plantations, picking fresh strawberries from the strawberry farm to take home, enjoying a game of golf in the cool mountain air with magical surroundings, and so on (Ministry of Tourism and Culture, Malaysia, Official Portal – EBrochures, 2015; Hiong, 2007). There are also agricultural activities carried out, such as planting vegetables, planting strawberries, planting tea trees, and so on, which have become major attractions for tourists, apart from nature tourism. Nevertheless, rapid development with little control and minimal monitoring has harmed and caused the disappearance of the Cameron Highlands’ natural environment (Ismail et al., 2012), especially the community of Orang Asli. This study aims to collect views and perceptions on the effectiveness of the development of a discovery centre in the Cameron Highlands.

After the second mud flood incident in the Cameron Highlands on 5 November, 2014, that month, the former Minister for Natural Resources and Environment, Datuk Seri G. Palanivel, made a statement on the environmental issues in the Cameron Highlands were becoming serious. Plastics and other forms of rubbish are being dumped everywhere (Malaysian Indian Congress, 2014). There are many areas being destroyed and illegal land clearance for agricultural activities, which causes a decline in the number of local visitors and tourists from foreign countries like Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan and Japan (The Star Official Portal, 2013). He also highlighted that this illegal clearing had caused environmental issues such
as soil erosion, sedimentation and siltation in river, pollution of rivers due to effluent from agriculture activities affecting water quality, and flash floods and mud flooding (The Star Official Portal, 2013). In the interview, the minister stressed that there would be no more developments like hotels or condominiums, and at the same time announced the planting of one million trees in the Cameron Highlands to reduce soil erosion and avoid landslides (Astro Awani Official Portal, 2014). In addition, the required increase in tourist arrivals in the Cameron Highlands can only be achieved through the discovery centre.

The issues raised about the highlands’ development and land use planning should be at least taken into consideration before they cause damage to the surroundings (Lim and Lee, 1992). The main reason for reducing land use development is that the area is very sensitive and fragile, a view supported by Yee and Chan (2006) who discuss the consequences of development in highland areas, which is seen as the main reason for landslides. At the same time, modern agriculture, which permits the usage of fertilizers, pesticides and unsystematic agricultural practices, is becoming a major factor contributing to degradation of environmental quality in the highlands area (Kumaran and Ainuddin, 2006). Kumaran and Ainuddin’s (2006) research study also found that solid and rubbish waste in highland areas has become a serious issue that needs to be dealt with since it influences the environmental quality at the tourism destination. The government in the 10th Malaysia Plan has also stressed on improving the maintenance of tourist sites through multiple approaches, including through GLCs and corporate sponsorship, stronger enforcement and imposition of gate fees, particularly in environmentally sensitive and heritage sites (Unit, 2010). This would apply to Cameron Highlands as it is a prominent nature and heritage site.

Currently, in Cameron Highlands, there is no official tourist information centre. The Tourism Board of Malaysia tourist booth had closed down in 2007 Post to that many private companies open their own information booth in front of their travel agencies offering various forms of excursions in and surrounding Cameron Highland. The survey in April 2015 counted there are nine numbers of travel agencies based in Tanah Rata and Brinchang. It is questionable on the legitimacy and accuracy of information supplied as the operators are business and profit oriented. They are also possibilities of excursions labelled and promoted as ecotourism whilst it is merely adventure and tracking without certification or accreditations. The ‘green washing’ tourism activities are apparent by the signboards and advertisements.

An interpretation centre, visitor interpretive centre or eco-visitor centre is an institution for the dissemination of knowledge of natural or cultural heritage (Bino, 2011). A study by Fesenmaier (1994) states the importance of a tourist information centre, which in this case will be a discovery centre, that acts as the most important communication channel in the tourism industry and is able to educate travellers about the benefits of visiting a specific tourist destination. This is a welcoming centre that will greet tourists at a destination. In addition, this centre, by providing information to tourists, has an impact on their travel behaviour (Fesenmaier, Vogt & Stewart, 1993). Education and interpretation are two distinct concepts which are interchangeable in the context of tourism. Education is defined as ‘the structured provision of information directed towards people whose primary objective is to learn. Meanwhile an interpretation centre can be used to modify visitors’ behaviour by dispersing visitor use in time or space or teaching minimal impact practices (Brown et al., 1987, Roggenbuck, 1987). The extent of the impact is highly dependent on the nature of travel to the destination. This impact will affect tourists’ length of stay and spending manner. Repeat visits by tourists are also motivated by learning and sightseeing (Kastenholz, Euse’bio and Carneiro, 2013). In addition, staff working at the tourist information centre also play an important role. Wong and McKercher (2011) highlight the importance of the role played by the staff at the tourist information centre as the key information source for tourists, also known as knowledge brokers. Tena and Raquel (2014) also highlight the importance of having a tourist information centre as it acts as a motivational factor for tourists, and information disseminated by this
centre is the first perception that tourists have of the destination. Bahta (2003) argues that tourist-related information should be easily accessible and available to tourists.

The relevance of having a tourist information centre may be questionable given the current technological advances in disseminating information through the Internet and social media. However, Lyu and Hwang (2015) have indicated that there is a negative relationship between the use of the Internet and the demand for visitation of the tourist information centre. Technology may assist tourists to obtain more information about a destination. However, tourists will still visit this centre to gain more information from the experts (Tena & Raquel, 2014). Furthermore, the availability of the tourist information centre is important not only as an information source but also for the use of other amenities such as toilets and convenience centres (Fesenmaier, 1994). Furthermore, it is argued by Roggenbuck (1987), Bright (1994) and Beckmann (1999) that the existence of an interpretation centre can be a cost effective, light-handed approach to tourism, and can allow visitors freedom of choice, enhancing visitors’ experiences and satisfaction.

This study concurs with the literature and strongly believes that the distribution process of information is important, and that information should be offered effectively and easily to tourists in the form of an interpretation centre which can also act to attract visitors to the Cameron Highlands. This echoes Prentice et al. (1998) who stated that a ‘Discovery Point’ is concerned with the experience of gaining information, education and entertainment at the visited places. Meanwhile, the ‘Discovery Centre’ theme that was used in Lepp’s (2009) research recognizes conservation in the biological as much as in social (which involve community development) and ecological (which focus on environmental education) processes. So, when both definitions of ‘Discovery Centre’ are applied to the Cameron Highlands, it is important to stress the development of basic infrastructure facilities (roads, electricity, water, etc.) and other built environment development (hotel, restaurants, administrative buildings, etc.) (Kunasekaran et al., 2011) in promoting the tourism industries. At the same time, conservation programs are to be carried out towards the sustainability of the environment and community based in the Cameron Highlands.

Methodology

This study concentrates on tourists’ perceptions, employing quantitative methods with data obtained through a questionnaire. The questionnaire is designed in two main parts: Part A will obtain information on the demographic profile of visitors, whilst Part B collects information pertaining to the visitors’ perception of the development of the Cameron Highlands discovery centre. The questionnaire that is set for this research consists of ‘open-ended’ and ‘close-ended’ questions. The close-ended questions are in the form of five-point Likert scales as well as multiple choice answers to give a selection of answers. There are only two open-ended questions available for respondents to further comment on the issues particularly connected with the development and role of a discovery centre. The questionnaire underwent a pilot test in July 2014 followed by two actual surveys in September and October 2014. After the pilot study several questions were omitted and some questions were reworded and simplified so as to shorten the time taken for each respondent to answer. An average of 15-20 minutes was taken to complete each survey form, including the verbal introduction to the study.

A structured questionnaire was distributed targeting more than 300 respondents including local and international tourists who visited Tanah Rata or Brinchang areas. These two areas are the main hotspots for tourists. The survey was done over two times including one pilot study, each time spending about two to three days on site. The number of responses to be collected is determined by the study of Krejie
and Morgan (1970), who suggested that samples of 200 to 300 respondents are acceptable. The analysis for this study was conducted using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 19. Descriptive analysis was used to examine the demographic data as well as tourists’ perceptions of the discovery centre.

Results and Discussion

The result for the analysis of demographic profiles of respondents in Part A will be show in Table 1, and the respondents’ perception about having a discovery centre in the Cameron Highlands analysed in Part B will be shown in Table 2.

According to the demographic analysis, the majority of respondents were Malaysian tourists (85 %) with slightly more respondents tending to be female (54.2 %). Most of the respondents who took the time to answer this questionnaire consisted of those who have a tertiary education level (51.8 %), and had planned to visit the Cameron Highlands for a holiday of between two and three days (53.6 %) with holiday expenditure between RM 500.00 and RM 1000.00 (40.5 %), while 176 respondents were backpackers. The findings from this study found that almost half the tourists who came to the Cameron Highlands are very satisfied with the services for the provision of information. This can be proven by the fact that most of the respondents agreed (49.4 %) that they found sufficient pre-trip information pertaining to the Cameron Highlands. However, the survey did not collect data on where and how the information was obtained. On the other hand, more than half of the respondents strongly agreed (56.5 %) that a discovery centre should be developed in the Cameron Highlands, believing that it would be beneficial for tourists to gain information on the Cameron Highlands. They also think this programme will develop a positive attitude in tourists towards nature preservation and conservation. This is consistent with studies done by Fesenmaier (1994) and Tena and Raquel (2014), in which they emphasized that the existence of this centre will educate and motivate tourists in relation to a destination.

Table 1: Demographic profile of respondents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nationality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1) Malaysian</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) German</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Canadian</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Singaporean</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Pakistani</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) British</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(7) Indonesian</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(8) Russian</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(9) Danish</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(10) Turkish</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(11)Swiss</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(12)Iranian</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1) Male</td>
<td>45.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Female</td>
<td>54.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Level</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1) University</td>
<td>51.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The rapid development in general along with the flourishing of mass tourism in the Cameron Highlands has had a great toll on the environment. According to the situation in the Cameron Highlands, there are various negative impacts, especially towards the environmental (e.g., rising temperatures, water supply pollution, flash floods, erosion and landslides), disruption of settlements of Orang Asli, and accretion of rubbish (Astro Awani Official Portal, 2014) (Bernama, 2013) (Ismail, 2013) (Ngah et al., 2006). Thus, developing a discovery centre in the Cameron Highlands is important because it could bring various benefits in sustainability for tourism industries and activities. The importance of having a similar centre is highlighted in studies done by Fesenmaier (1994) and Fesenmaier, Vogt and Stewart (1993). This study found that a discovery centre is believed to increase awareness about heritage, cultural and natural conservation (85.1 %). At the same time, the existence of a discovery centre also means a very high probability of promoting ecotourism in the Cameron Highlands (60.7 %). However, a slight majority of respondents chose to agree that an educational link can educate people about the importance of conserving the Cameron Highlands heritage (54.8 %). This is because most respondents believe that when there are too many tourists at a particular place, this will affect the heritage ambience of the Cameron Highlands through direct and indirect disruptions such as noise pollution.

Table 2 (I): General information of tourists’ perception toward discovery center.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-trip information is delivered sufficiently in Cameron Highlands.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>19.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normal</td>
<td>19.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>49.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A discovery center may develop a positive attitude of tourists toward nature preservation and conservation.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normal</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>56.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>29.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The study also found that the respondents do not agree when giving their opinion about whether the discovery centre could provide income to local communities and Orang Asli (56 %) because the interruption of having too many tourists can lead to negative impacts on the heritage and natural environment itself (bin Nasir & Nasir, 2013). Although tourism gives a slight advantage to the local communities through business or job opportunities, it could also be destructive to the Orang Asli, especially for their settlements and livelihood.

Overall, respondents strongly agree with having a discovery centre in the Cameron Highlands. The main purpose of developing the discovery centre is to promote and develop tourism activities, but at the same time sustain the environment’s natural (e.g., ecosystem) and cultural (e.g., Orang Asli community) resources, on which all depend.

Conclusion

The Cameron Highlands can regain its popularity as one of the most popular tourism sites that promotes activities at higher altitudes and cooler temperatures in Malaysia. The tourism activities that should be promoted in the Cameron Highlands are along the lines of cultural heritage and natural environment themes. The expansion of mass tourism should be curbed. Therefore, an approach is needed to continuously reduce the negative impacts, for example by having a discovery centre. The purpose of the discovery centre is to share knowledge, information and education about the natural environment, the Orang Asli and their settlements, and agro-eco tourism. For example, tourists and tourist companies should be aware of the carry capacity of the hills and have a controlled peak season for a particular area, which will help prevent harm to the natural environment and excessive exposure of the Orang Asli which would interfere with their traditional ideas and beliefs. According to the analysis, the majority of respondents agree with having a discovery centre in the Cameron Highlands in order to conserve and preserve heritage, cultural and natural resources (85.1 %), promote the ecotourism sector (60.7 %), and educate people through the educational link (54.8 %).

A fully functioning discovery centre will help to organize tourism management solutions such as the use of public transport (e.g., shuttle buses) to avoid traffic congestion and pollution, promote the development of agro- and ecotourism, and supply up-to-date information. The majority of tourists are hoping that the discovery centre can act as a catalyst to conserve and preserve heritage and the cultural
and natural environment through educational links, while providing a sustainable income to the local communities and Orang Asli, and promoting ecotourism in the Cameron Highlands.

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