



Strategies for post-Covid-19 prospects of Sabah's tourist market – Reactions to shocks caused by pandemic or reflection for sustainable tourism?

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ABSTRACT

The covid-19 pandemic brings tragedy to all aspects of life globally, and the tourism industry has been hit hard as national borders are closed with restricted travels permitted. Based on the field research experience of more than 10 years, attending webinars and extensive desktop study, this viewpoint paper describes the strategies proposed within the industry and by the government in responding to the current crisis for a better tourism future in Sabah, a state of Malaysia located in Borneo Island. Sabah is a well-known international tourism destination for its natural and cultural diversities. This paper suggests that most of the strategies proposed require further consideration in terms of the underlying causes, tourism for whose benefits and integrated planning of sustainable tourism, mass tourism, and high-value tourism if tourism is aligned to contribute to Sustainable Development Goals. Lastly, it recommends future research to explore the nexus of tourism-poverty-environment for Sabah sustainable development.

Introduction

Tourism has grown into a phase where its importance, especially economic contribution, is too big and cannot afford to fail. As of 2019, 1.5 billion people took foreign trips, which generated 320 million jobs worldwide and accounted for 10% of the global GDP (Behsudi, 2020). Past studies show that shocking occurrences associated with stability and safety can drastically affect the industry with increased perceived risk of travel that leads to tourists refrain from deciding on travels or may change their choice of destination depending on the geographical coverage of a risk (Baker 2015).

Before Covid-19 pandemics, studies found that (1) war, kidnappers, political instability (Gartner & Shen, 1992; Loannides & Apostolopoulos, 1999; Mansfeld, 1996; Seddighi et al., 2001), terrorism (Sönmez, 1998; Aziz, 1995; Sönmez & Graefe, 1998a; Sönmez & Graefe, 1998b; Sönmez, Apostolopoulos & Tarlow, 1999), and (2) health and wellbeing factors including high crime level (Brunt, Mawby & Hambly, 2000; Dimanche & Lepetic, 1999; Pizam, 1999), exposure to natural disasters (Faulkner, 2001; Armstrong & Ritchie, 2007; Faulkner & Vikulov, 2001; Mazzocchi & Montini, 2001; Chandler, 2004; Higgins, 2005), unsafe drinking water and food, and the presence of diseases (Miller & Ritchie, 2003; McKercher & Chon, 2004; Cooper, 2006; Karabulut et al., 2020) have an inverse impact on travel decisions. It was also found that while many studies devoted to crises management and recovery, few studies

addressed health-related crises in developing countries, and fewer addressed the threat of epidemics on tourism sectors (Mair et al., 2016; Novelli et al., 2018; World Travel & Tourism Council, 2018; Maphanga & Henama, 2019; Jamal & Budke, 2020).

Covid-19, which initially spread within Wuhan, China, in December 2019, has now become one of the major pandemics recorded in modern human history. According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) (Behsudi, 2020), the pandemic has put 100 million jobs at risk due to the sharp decline in international travel. It was estimated that the decline reached between 70 and 75% in 2020 compared to 2019 (which was a level of 30 years ago) following many borders are fully closed, the uncertainty of virus containment, low traveling confidence, and travel restrictions (UNWTO, 2020a; UNWTO, 2020b). Asia and the Pacific witness an 82% decrease from January to October 2020, much higher than the world average. UNWTO Panel of Experts estimated the rebound to take 2.5 to 4 years and a return to pre-pandemic 2019 level not before 2023. Further to this estimation, it is expected that domestic demand would recover faster than international demand (UNWTO, 2020a; UNWTO, 2020b). At the same time, UNWTO develops the forward-looking three scenarios (Scenario 1: recovery in 2.5 years; Scenario 2: recovery in 3 years; and Scenario 3: recovery in 4 years) with key considerations on (1) how long the pandemic will last and when treatment will become available, (2) lifting of travel restrictions and lockdown measures, (3) consumer and business confidence, and (4) government

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measures (UNWTO, 2020a; UNWTO, 2020b).

Concerning the distressing impacts on tourism, prominent discussions in a broader context have focused on the global tourism rapid impact assessment, potential transformation within the tourism industry, and the rethinking of global mobility as well as social and ecological justices (see Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Nepal, 2020; Hall et al., 2020; Romagosa, 2020; Brouder, 2020; Cheer, 2020; Prideaux et al., 2020; Tremblay-Huet, 2020; Gössling et al., 2020; Sustainability Leaders Project, 2020). These macro-level frameworks and discourses with different scenarios provide valuable notes for reflection with necessary alignment at the destination level for strategy and action formulation, which is crucial for countries that are highly dependent on tourism.

By focusing on a case study with a specific market and geographical context, this viewpoint paper offers some emerging perspectives attempting at reflecting the post-Covid-19 tourism development in the Sabah state of Malaysia, which has the highest rate of poverty in the country but is a renowned tourism destination. Sabah had China as its most important inbound tourism market before the disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. This paper will first describe the importance of international tourism to Sabah, especially its Chinese inbound market and the recent issues on the high influx of tourists to the state. It then describes the trends of Covid-19 infected cases in Malaysia and Sabah before discussing the potential measures to rebuild the confidence among the holidaymakers. Lastly, by reflecting on the pre-existing issues and challenges as well as the adverse impacts arising from the pandemic, which is still active, it raises suggestions for further reflection on the ongoing proposed multi-phase recovery of tourism in Sabah.

At the local level, the viewpoint provides an overview of the tourism-related issues that need to be tackled by relevant agencies. These arising issues are embedded within and resulted by the interaction between a larger context of social justice, resilience and coping capacity of the Sabah tourism industry, and public health responsibilities.

Methodology

This paper draws from five virtual dialogues and webinars¹ held among and between the government tourism agencies, tourism industry players, and university tourism experts. Secondary data include published academic research studies, published reports on tourism statistics 2013–2020 (Sabah Tourism Board, 2021), and 48 current media sources, shortlisted from the screening exercise through google search using keywords ‘Sabah’, ‘tourism’, ‘Covid-19’, ‘local community’ and ‘undocumented people’ as Malaysia has experienced its third wave of the pandemic.

The author has been conducting research in Sabah since 2004, started with doctoral research focusing on sustainable tourism in a terrestrial protected area (Goh, 2008; Wan Mohamad Ariffin & Goh, 2019; Goh, 2018; Goh, 2015a; Goh, 2015b; Goh & Zainol, 2014; Goh et al., 2010). This research then expanded into interdisciplinary research focusing on land-sea interaction in the coastal region, where tourism is part of the key components (Boey, Wan Nur Syazana, Lim, & Then, 2018; Cheung et al., 2021; Azzeri et al., 2020; Maznah et al., 2020). This paper is the output of several years of experience with the state’s development.

Note-taking was made when attending dialogue and webinars, and content analysis was performed on the shortlisted media sources. A

¹ (1) ‘Johor Tourism in the not so normal future: Are we prepared for a recovery?’ on 18 May 2020; (2) ‘Perak Tourism: Getting our priorities right for a recovery’. 4 June 2020; (3) ‘Strengthening the links between ecotourism and conservation in Malaysia’. on 8 August 2020; (4) ‘Ecotourism and agility in the face of shocks and uncertainties’. on 3 December 2020; and (5) ‘Sabah Maju Jaya engagement session with Sabah Tourism stakeholders’ on 12 January 2020.

descriptive analysis of tourist arrivals was performed to see the trend of tourist arrivals over the years to Sabah.

Tourism development in Sabah

Tourism significance

Located at the northeast of Borneo Island, Sabah is the second largest state of Malaysia in terms of land cover. It has a total population of 3.5 million as of the 2015 census (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020).

Tourism is an important economic sector being the state’s third-largest after agriculture and manufacturing, supporting more than 80,000 jobs (Sabah Tourism Board, 2019). In 2019, total tourism receipts at RM8.342bil and RM12 million in tourism tax revenue, with a total of 4.1 million tourist arrivals recorded (Fig. 1) (MySabah.com, 2020). Between 2013 and 2020, more than half of the tourist arrivals to Sabah contributed by East Asian markets, where 38.3% of the tourists originated from China and 21.4% from Korea (MySabah.com, 2020). In 2019, 40.7% of international visitors in Sabah were from China (Karia, 2020).

Tourism generates substantial financial revenue for Sabah for its economic development. According to a study conducted by the Institute of Development Studies (2018), Sabah has the highest unemployment rate in the country, recorded at 13.5%, and half of the country’s poor people are found in Sabah (Lajjun, 2018). A report indicated the highest poverty rate in Sabah at 19.5%, involving 99,869 households (Geraldine, 2020).

Tourism resources in Sabah and its international inbound tourism

Sabah is well-known for its natural and cultural diversity. It offers a diverse range of important resources for tourism development. There are more than 30 indigenous groups in Sabah, with the largest indigenous group being the Kadazan-Dusun people, followed by Bajau, Murut, and Rungus (Sabah Tourism Board, n.d.). Sabah Tourism’s slogan ‘from the mountain top to the underwater paradise’ perfectly describes the natural resources in the state that offer a wide range of (eco)tourism opportunities to benefit the state economy and for the enjoyment of the tourists (Bagul & Bahar, 2009). Among the prominent natural resources significant for tourism include the Sabah Parks, consisting of four terrestrial parks and five marine parks. These parks feature the country’s highest mountain and one of the world’s most diverse sites in terms of flora and marine species (Sabah Tourism Board, n.d.).

In recent years, Sabah Tourism has been heavily promoting community-based tourism to encourage and empower the local ownership and management of tourism resources and facilities in the attempt to distribute the tourism economic impacts more widely within the state (Sabah: Exploring nature and homestays, 2020). It has also diversified its international tourism promotion to focus on natural resources and urban tourism, especially shopping, which captured a strong market segment—the East Asia market, especially China (Sabah Tourism Promotion, 2020).

A significant increase in Chinese tourists to Sabah was observed in 2012. The arrival of tourist from China is contributed by several factors (1) many direct flight routes between Kota Kinabalu (the capital city of Sabah) and various major cities in China (Chan, 2019; Thiagarajan, 2018), (2) the proximity of Sabah to China (More China Tourists Headed to Sabah Over the Next Two Months – Satta Chief, 2017), (3) the new 3S (sun, sand, and selfies) attraction (Chok, 2018; Jaipragas, 2018; Ralon, 2018), (4) the opening of the Chinese Consulate in Kota Kinabalu (Wade, 2013), and (4) the perceived cultural familiarity, especially language, as Kota Kinabalu is populated by local Chinese and many non-Chinese speaking Chinese (Barnes, 2018).

While the strong growth of international tourists over the past years contributed substantial economic income to the state, the heavy influx of tourists also created uneasiness and tensions in Sabah due to cultural

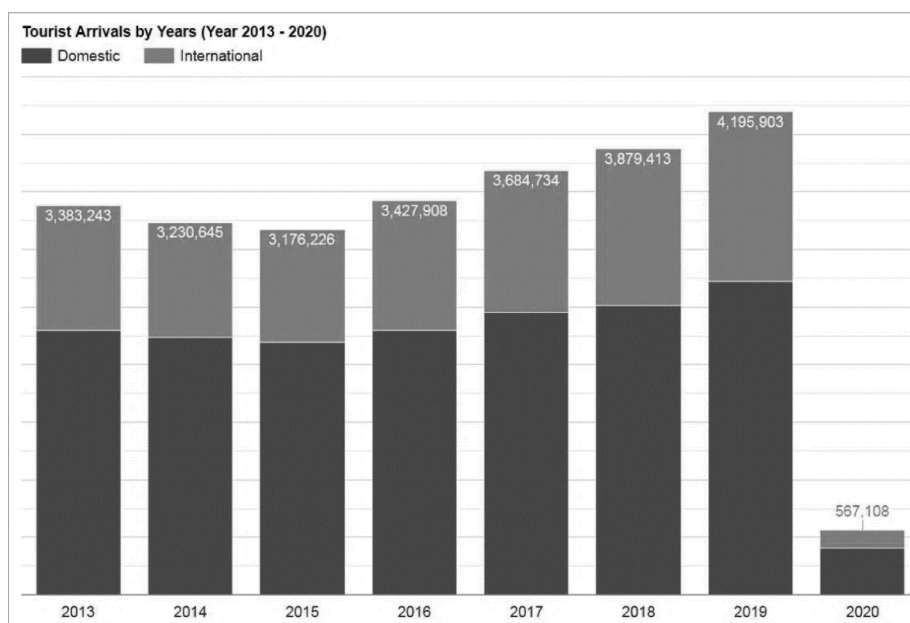


Fig. 1. Tourist arrivals to Sabah in 2013–2020 (Source: MySabah.com, 2021).

differences and barriers. Among the incidents captured in the local newspapers include the disrespect of the holy ground by filming a dance video in front of a mosque (Asia Times, 2018); the destroyed corals due to ignorance and the notorious reputation about Chinese tourists for their ‘uncivilized’ behavior when traveling abroad (Ruxyn, 2016); the breach of immigration rules, where between 2018 and 2019, more than 20 cases of Chinese tourists were detained and fined for missing immigration endorsements (Sin Chew Daily, 2020; BERNAMA, 2019). In fact, the increase in illegal hunting of protected wildlife, including turtles and pangolins (by the locals/tour operators to meet the demand for exotic meats and ‘hunting for your own dinner’ tour arranged for the tourists as a game) is thought to be associated with the demand among the Chinese tourists (Chan, 2017; Clean Malaysia, 2017).

The covid-19 pandemic trend in Sabah and its implication on the tourism industry

The pandemic trend in Sabah

Combined with the expected promotion of Visit Malaysia Year 2020, an optimistic projection of tourist arrivals to Sabah in 2020 was made in lieu of the momentum from the strong growth in 2019. However, the unfolding of Covid-19 in the country starting February 2020, which resulted in the immediate enforcement of national movement control (Movement Control Order or MCO) and the closing down of the international borders, has completely shut the arrival of international tourists. The tourist arrivals in 2020 were recorded at 567,108—a sharp decline from 4,195,903 in 2019 (–86.5%).

Sabah emerged as the most infectious state in the 3rd wave of the Covid-19 outbreak in the country, with total cases making up almost half of the country total in November 2020 (Murphy, 2020). The worst-hit district was Semporna, called ‘Little Wuhan’, implying the Chinese city where the virus was first detected at the end of 2019 (Poo, 2020).

Based on the projection for September 2020 to May 2021 by the Ministry of Health Malaysia, the infected cases will escalate in the first half of 2021 (Ministry of Health [MOH], 2021). The resurgence and the latest projected trend indicate further extension to recovery for the tourism industry in Sabah. Although this may sound pessimistic, it also provides a window of opportunities to address and reflect on the pre-existing issues of tourism development in the state discussed in the

following section (MOH, 2021).

Implication on the tourism industry and current response for the resilient tourism industry in future

The impact of the pandemic on Sabah tourism started in January 2020. The impact was felt even before the national Movement Control Order (MCO) came into enforcement in March 2020. This is due to the entry ban of Chinese tourists by the Sabah government (there were over 100 flights weekly from China to Kota Kinabalu, the capital city of Sabah) to contain the spread of Covid-19 at that time. As January and February are the peak travel seasons for inbound Chinese tourists to Sabah, a sharp decline of international tourist arrival by 52.7% was recorded, combined with a decline of 21.3% domestic tourists (Sabah’s Tourism Industry, 2020).

However, it became worse after the national restriction on domestic and international flights in April and May, witnessing tourist arrivals plunged to an all-time low at 98%, resulted in travel companies facing zero income (Chan, 2020). During the third wave (September 2020 onwards), the occupancy rate at hotels which had slowly recovered to between 10% and 25% after the replacement of the initial MCO to Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO) in June–July 2020, has again hit the industry to sink to 5% and below (Poo, 2020).

At the time of writing this paper, Malaysia recorded almost 265,000 cases in total, with daily cases are constantly recorded at an average of 3000. In China, approximately 90,000 accumulated cases were counted, and daily cases are below 700 (Worldometer, 2021). The prolonged periods of lockdowns with closed borders anticipate an extension period for international tourism recovery—at least until 2022 (Chin, 2021). This recovery will very much depend on the availability of reliable vaccines and the subsequent rebuilding of confidence to travel for a holiday, as indicated by UNWTO.

In a nutshell, four categories of strategies were highlighted, focusing on the medium- to the long-term recovery plan, namely (1) review of current approach and re-branding for sustainable tourism, (2) capacity building, (3) enhancement of technological application, and lastly, (4) immediate mechanism to assist the industry players for short term relief.

One of the major highlights for more sustainable tourism in Sabah is to review and shift the current mass approach to tourist arrivals to high-value tourism to protect the environment and at the same time to further

enhance the revenue generated from tourism activities (Fong, 2020; Sabah Tourism Board, 2020). At the same time, it aims to focus on domestic tourist arrivals because the domestic market is predicted to recover faster than the international market. The prediction was made based on the caution of cross-country travel and the international border, which would be opened much later than interstate travel. A total of US\$484,000 stimulus package was introduced by the Sabah Ministry of Tourism, Culture, and Environment in September 2020 to boost domestic tourism (Yusof, 2020). The package aimed to subsidize additional costs incurred by the tour operators due to the implementation of health and safety protocols and provide the licensed tour operators a RM50 subsidy per traveller for each tour with a minimum 3-day-2-night program state. Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for tourism activities, hotel, and community-based activities was also put in place by the Ministry during the Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO) to build confidence among domestic tourists to Sabah (Sabah's Ministry of Tourism, Culture, and Environment, 2020; CMCO: Sabah Issues Guidelines, 2020). Within the industry, diversifying and exploring new revenue streams, strengthening value propositions, and enhancing skill development have been vastly accepted to be the way forward to improve competitiveness.

Closely responding to more sustainable tourism in Sabah emphasizes human resource capacity building covering all service providers within the tourism value chain to ensure the quality of services is matched with the expectation of high-value tourists. Digital skills are prioritized, especially recognizing that today's tourists are digitally savvy; hence, digital knowledge and skill will be essential in the future tourism industry.

Apart from the medium- and longer-term measures, the immediate and short terms proposals were put forward to establish a travel corridor. The establishment facilitates the entry of short-term visitors, such as Singapore (Medina, 2021), calling for more rapid testing at the airport and creating lower-risk countries with special quarantine requirements by creating regional travel bubbles (Behsudi, 2020). Further to that, the recent announcement of the tentative arrival of Covid-19 vaccines in Malaysia has brought some practical ideas in reviving the tourism industry, as suggested in the letter 'how the travel and tourism industry can help with Covid-19 vaccination' (Praveen, 2021). The writer, Praveen (2021), suggested to include hoteliers as frontliners to receive the first stage of vaccination rollout and to use hotels as vaccination deployment centers designated tourist guides to coordinate groups of vaccine recipients. Subsequently, vaccinated people should be allowed to travel without the need to quarantine, and vaccinated international travelers should be allowed to enter Malaysia (Praveen, 2021).

Despite the uncontested negative impacts, the pandemic has opened an opportunity to reflect on the pre-existing issues of tourism and reset the current approach for a more responsible and sustainable tourism industry in the future. While these strategies seem to be generally focusing on the restart of tourism in Sabah, to a great extent, it targets attracting the Chinese tourists back to Sabah, for it is the largest inbound market segment which in the medium term, would be difficult to be replaced. Whether these strategies are sufficient for the new normal, be it for resilience or transformation, further reflection is required at a more fundamental level and in an integrated manner.

What are the underlying issues?

It is said that the outbreak of Covid-19 during the 3rd wave in Sabah was closely linked with its socioeconomic conditions, including poverty, lack of development, and poor infrastructure and accessibility, as well as poor health infrastructure in most of the parts within the state (Poo, 2020). In 2019, Sabah ranked sixth, contributing to the national GDP where this second largest state in Malaysia recorded the GDP per capita the third lowest in the country (Poo, 2019) and the highest poverty rate at 19.5%, according to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (Lo, 2019;

Lim, 2020; Up to 2.4m Malaysians, 2020). While tourism has been highlighted to be hit hard by the pandemic, the stimulus package launched by the government recently was criticized for using taxpayer money. At the same time, there are people within the state who are more in need, thus raising the issue of social justice (Yusof, 2020), confirming the general critics of tourism being exclusive (Biddulph & Scheyvens, 2018).

It has been noted that poor health infrastructure can be the main driver contributing to the low demand for tourism in lower-income countries (Karabulut et al., 2020). While it is impossible to reduce the rate of poverty in the state—especially when tourism activities, which is the key economic sector, has been halted almost completely during the pandemic—the health care assurance provided not only to the holidaymakers but its citizens become a key factor contributing to the rebuilding of vulnerable confidence among the prospect travelers in choosing a destination. One of the major concerns centered on this issue is that the Covid-19 outbreak exists among Sabah citizens and the undocumented migrants who were fearful of being detained or deported (In Malaysia's Sabah, 2020). The issues of undocumented migrants in Sabah have a long history with contested discussions, which remain resolved until the present (Pak, 2015; Human Rights Commission of Malaysia, n.d.; Lee, 2020). Many of the undocumented migrants live at popular tourist destinations, including Semporna and Sandakan. The hidden risk of being in contact with the carriers with no symptoms may rise to be one of the major concerns in the post-pandemic tourism recovery period. It would require the authorities' attention.

How would the distribution of tourism work within the state which suffers from poverty be one major question to be responded to with thoughts on tourism prioritization in the large context of socioeconomic and socio-ecological consideration? The pro-poor tourism strategies in developing countries may be different and occur to be more complicated from the models of tourism impacts formulated in developed countries (Hall, 2007; Mbaiwa, 2017). The recent quest for inclusive tourism² may be further explored in the context of Sabah tourism for a nexus thinking to its potentials and limitations for tourism to generate wider social and economic benefits to the host destination (Biddulph & Scheyvens, 2018), moving away from the original idea which is tourist-centered.

For whose benefits?

At the global level, UNWTO (2020) calls for coordination and partnerships to restart and transform the sector towards achieving Sustainable Development Goals by ensuring tourism's people-centered restart and recovery in a responsible and coordinated manner. In reality, either optimizing or maximizing growth in meeting sustainable tourism is always a challenge (Gössling et al., 2015). Shifting from mass tourism to high-value tourism will contribute to a more responsible and sustainable tourism future for Sabah. However, the interpretation of high-value tourism referred to high quality or high profit. This shift, although possible, will not take place without a more nexus thinking put in place, the question of who will benefit from tourism? By shifting from mass tourism, would that mean more exclusive industry players who have access to better-digitized skills and infrastructure will benefit? Monopoly and contentious tourism practices were witnessed in the past in Sabah, which includes the issue of monopoly in Kinabalu Park accommodation, the mountain climbing booking in 2008–2009 (Drizad, 2008), and the Zero Tour Fare of which the majority of the local tourism

² Inclusive tourism refers to creating an environment where everyone feels welcomed and included. It aims to reduce the uncertainty around what to expect from a destination or service in tourism industry. According to Münch and Ulrich (2011:159), inclusive tourism is also referred to as 'accessible tourism' or 'disabled tourism', which is about 'making it easy for all people irrespective of their gender, age or physical status to enjoy tourism experiences'.

players did not benefit from the tourism activities (Crackdown on 'Zero Dollar' Tourism, 2018; [No More Zero Fare, 2018](#)). The existing influx and high demand of tourists and promotion of Kota Kinabalu (the capital city of Sabah) under the 'Malaysia my second home program' have raised the issues of properties prices to rocket and waterfront development beyond the affordability of the locals ([Samad, 2020](#)), doubled with the development pressure in the city, which witnesses the adverse impacts of traffic congestion and the issues of gentrification.

Today's advancement and rapid growth of information technology have made the search for information online more convenient than ever. Potential tourists can now surf the web to find information on travel and holiday destinations, plan for vacations, make reservations, and pre-pay for travel goods and services. In the longer term, the mobile web will be the pillar to support and promote e-tourism, which is expected to become the key driver of future tourism growth spreading to all aspects of the industry ([Oğuz, Gordon & Cruz, 2020](#)). The importance of information technology and digital infrastructure was proven further during the lockdown caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Whether the use of technology or the tourism industry can be isolated to be exclusive in having such privilege may not be socially justifiable ([Sabah Will Use Technology, 2020](#)).

Connecting sustainable tourism, mass tourism, and high-value tourism with SDGs

The recent launch of the National Tourism Policy by the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture Malaysia highlight the importance of tourism contributing to Sustainable Development Goals by emphasizing the inclusivity and sustainability of tourism. While this looks ideal on paper, it is challenging to define and prioritize each approach that seems to envision the same goal. It may be contradicting in practice due to the dynamic of demand and supply of different sectors within the tourism industry, and its impacts always represent the double sides of a coin. At the same time, benefit to one would be harmful to another.

Until before the pandemic, a total of 444 flights were connecting Peninsular Malaysia, Sarawak, and Labuan to Sabah with a weekly seating capacity of close to 75,000 with non-scheduled flights of 343 from China, South Korea, and Japan ([Vanar, 2019a](#)). As of 2018, there were 26 destinations by 12 foreign carriers connecting Sabah internationally ([Vanar, 2019b](#)). Shifting from mass tourism to high-value tourism requires more thorough and industry-wide consideration. This means lesser flights are generated as the airline is responsive to the demand of routes created.

Furthermore, mass tourism is not necessarily unsustainable ([Weaver, 2012](#); [Peeters, 2012](#)), and there could be a better symbiotic interaction created between ecotourism, mass tourism, and protected areas ([Weaver, 2001](#)). It is worth to revisit the argument on ecotourism and ego-tourism published by Munt (1994) to ensure inclusive tourism development and to define the meaning of high-value tourism. Whether it means quality tourism, which response to responsible tourism, or merely high revenue (profit) tourism?

Meanwhile, targeting high-value tourists to the state also indicates higher expectations in tourists' experience and whether the existing human resources are ready for such expectation. How will high-value tourism exclude the rights of many relatively unaffordable domestic tourists from enjoying a similar holiday experience?

With regards to domestic tourism, Amran Hamzah, via an interview with [Sustainability Leaders Project \(2020\)](#), also highlighted a hidden risk of revenge tourism³ among the domestic travelers when travel becomes permitted with confidence, which would create a harmful shock to the destination environmentally and culturally.

³ The term "revenge tourism" describes the huge desire of people to travel after being stuck at home due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Malaysia banking on 'revenge tourists', 2021).

According to the World Travel and Tourism Council, the pandemic shifts the tourists' focus to nature and outdoor destinations associated with lower risk (Behsudi, 2020). This projected trend would benefit Sabah tourism which branded 'Enchanting Sabah' as an ecotourism destination. The issue, however, arises where there is a mismatch of the international tourist experience preference, especially among the East Asian tourists (Sun, Sea and Selfie, and Shopping) ([Barnes, 2018](#)) and the branding on nature and wildlife ([Thiessen, 2019](#)). Despite the high influx of tourists to Sabah, more alerting is lack of indication of repeat tourists as indicated by hoteliers in Sabah ([Fong, 2018](#)). This is crucial as studies indicate the linkage between tourist experience and satisfaction with the trend of revisiting ([Shavanddasht & Allan, 2019](#); [Park et al., 2019](#); [Dyk et al., 2019](#); [Suzan & Mohammad Soliman, 2021](#); [Correia, Serra & Artal-Tur, 2016](#)).

With the anticipated enlargement of marine protected areas in Sabah responding to the Aichi Target, more comprehensive planning for livelihood diversification would need to take place, physically, economically, socially, and culturally ([SABAHitz On9 TV, 2021](#)). The issue of over-reliance on the East Asian market, especially the Chinese market, has captured the attention of the Sabah Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Environment and the industry players since 2018, with efforts and urge made to diversify the existing inbound markets to ASEAN, Europe, and domestic markets ([Fong, 2018](#); [The Star/Asia News Network, 2020](#)). Although this is alarming, it is equally important to carefully identify the targeted markets to match the call for more responsible and sustainable tourism in Sabah. A similar question arises where the regional markets like ASEAN and domestic markets would be able to meet the requirement of 'high-value tourism' in replacing the 'mass tourism', and whether long haul markets like Europe would fit and align with the prioritized 'neutral carbon' in the roadmap to transform tourism ([UNWTO, 2020a](#); [UNWTO, 2020b](#); [UNCTAD, 2020](#)) in meeting the principles of sustainable tourism concerning the carbon footprint generated by the tourism and travel industry in long haul travel.

Conclusion

The formulated strategies to revive tourism in Sabah are still largely a series of reactions to shock caused by pandemic and, only to a minor extent, a response to future sustainable development.

Post-COVID 19 remains speculative. While the tourism crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic crystallizes the importance of tourism to Sabah, at the same time, it magnifies the issues of over-dependence on tourism as the economic sector. The confidence rebuilding among the holidaymakers requires an integrated approach at the destination level. Despite the uncontested negative impacts, the pandemic has opened an opportunity to reflect on the pre-existing issues on tourism and reset the current approach for a more responsible and sustainable tourism industry in the future. It is also a period to establish supportive policies and defend mechanisms from over-dependency on tourism and reverse the impacts of over-tourism both culturally and environmentally.

More detailed segmentation and careful planning integrating tourism into part of the sustainable development of Sabah would be essential to ensure the meaningful sustainability of tourism, for who and what. More inclusive planning of infrastructure to benefit the society in general, which would naturally benefit tourism, would be the way forward to ensure social justice than creating tourism development which would merely aim at enhancing the experience of elite tourists. It reflects a more sustainable future for Sabah, a more sustainable tourism approach, contributing to Sabah's sustainable future. A call for a more integrated approach to relieve the over-dependency of tourism requires the diversification of livelihood options in the state. Other livelihoods would equip the communities for resilience in the crisis of such. A nexus mapping of tourism-poverty-environment would be a way forward for Sabah in responding to SDGs.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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