SUSTAINABLE CITY TOURISM
IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES:
MALAYSIA EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

This paper examines how different stakeholders in the city of Johor Bahru in Malaysia conceptualize sustainable city tourism, and identify challenges the city may face as it transforms itself into a world-class city tourism destination. Fifteen respondents from three clusters of stakeholders—government, industry, and civil society organizations—were selected for the study, using a snowball sampling technique. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using content analysis.

Our findings do not confirm the contemporary tourism concept that is based on achieving a balance between socio-economic factors and the environment of the sustainable city. Instead, we found competing objectives. Respondents from government and industry considered economic and cultural heritages to be more significant than environmental concerns; while respondents from the civil society organizations considered the environment to be more significant.

Respondents identified a number of challenges to sustainable city tourism development. These challenges include low expenditure from tourists, high living costs, loss of historical buildings, poor maintenance, cultural shocks, poor transportation connectivity, limited walkability, haze, water pollution, land reclamation, and limited governance and collaboration. Drawing on the experience of Malaysia, the study advances our knowledge of how city tourism practitioners and policy makers in developing countries perceive sustainable city tourism, and the challenges they face.

Introduction

Sustainable city tourism (SCT) is a relatively new concept, especially in developing countries where research and information are limited (Timur & Getz, 2008; Edwards, Griffin and Hayllar, 2008; Garbea, 2013). Much research and literature on sustainable city tourism has occurred in developed countries, but little research is dedicated to urban

areas and cities in developing countries—this despite the fact that most cities in developing countries are growing rapidly and becoming major tourism destinations (Page, 1995; Ismail & Baun, 2006; Mbaiwa, Toteng, & Moswete, 2007; UNWTO, 2012; United Nations, 2014). This knowledge gap requires more research by local researchers in developing countries, in part due to the unique characteristics and rapid development of cities in developing countries (Ismail &Baun, 2006).

Most cities around the world are not only tourism origin regions, but also major tourism destinations. The demand for city tourism has increased rapidly, and is likely to continue in the future (Law, 2002; Ashworth, & Page, 2011; Garbea, 2013). Cities have inherent tourism-related advantages: better facilities, better services, proximity to major airports, large populations, and generally better economies. For instance, Paskaleva-Shapira (2003) reported that in Europe, city tourism represents 30 percent of the total travel and 20 percent of the overnight stays, ranking second and third among all types of tourist expenditures. In Asia, Singapore has successfully promoted itself as a tourist capital by developing urban tourism products such as meetings, incentives, conference and exhibitions (MICE), shopping, and medical and educational tourism (Yeoh & Chang, 2001).

The growth of city tourism has led to competition between tourists and residents for access to services, facilities, and space, and may put pressure on environmental, social, and economic resources (Gospondimi, 2001; Ashworth, & Page, 2011; UNTWO, 2012; Samat & Harun, 2013). Without proper planning, city tourism can deplete or even destroy the resources that it depends on. This study will attempt to give guidance to policy makers and city planners in developing countries so they can develop their cities and tourism in ways that both residents and tourists can enjoy, and also meet the concurrent goals of environment, culture, and socioeconomic sustainability.

The research looks at how Johor Bahru, a city in Malaysia, develops its city tourism in a sustainable manner that aims to contribute economically, socially, and environmentally. As indicated in its City Transformation Plan, Johor Bahru City seeks to be a world-class tourism city by 2025, while taking into full account the economic, social, and environmental aspects of that development. The research, therefore, has two specific objectives: 1) to examine perceptions of different stakeholders on sustainable city tourism, and 2) to identify key barriers or challenges to sustainable city tourism development in Johor Bahru.

Literature review

The scholarship on sustainable city tourism spans several different bodies of literature, including sustainable urban planning, sustainable

tourism, and sustainable development. The following paragraphs discuss city, city tourism and sustainable tourism.

There are a number of criteria that define and characterize a city (Edward, Griffin and Hayllar, 2008). These include geography, demography, administration, and economy. From geographic and demographic points of view, a city must have a greater size, transportation network, and greater population than a town (Edward et al, 2008, United Nation, 2014). From political and administrative points of view, a place should be designated and given a status of a city by appropriate authorities, and it should have a long-term development plan (Chan, 2007). From an economic point of view, a city must have important economic activities as well as a financial district or a central business district (Edward et. al., 2008). In our research context, "city" is defined as an urban area with a strong and broad economic base, a significant public transportation network, a significant population with workforces, and social, cultural, political, and economic relationships.

A city is a center in which individuals and groups have social, cultural, political and economic interactions. Thus, it serves as an appropriate locale for tourism. People from different cities and regions travel to other cities for leisure or business, or to visit friends and relatives. In this sense, city tourism is as old as urbanization itself. Regarding a city as a tourism destination, the World Tourism Organization (2012) refers to city tourism as trips taken by travelers to cities or places of high population density. Edward et al (2008) defined city tourism as a web that brings people together in an urban environment. The authors added that city tourism brings people and consumption to the city, and mixes cultures, values, expectations, and experience.

Paskaleva-Shapira (2003) sees city tourism as a "development strategy" for a city. The author observed that many cities, particularly in the developed world, have used city tourism as a key to revitalize economy and generate employment in a city. City tourism brings in people from other places or countries to stay and spend on food, accommodation, souvenirs, entertainment, and other activities in a city. Expenditures by tourists stimulate the city's economy, and—as a result—generate jobs for local residents.

To be more specific, city tourism has several attributes that make city tourism different from other forms of tourism. Varying authors describe different attributes. For example, Law (2002) argues that city tourism must have a large population, which acts as a magnet encouraging people to visit friends and relatives. Another positive attribute is that city tourism usually has the best tourism facilities and services, which are compacted and are located within a short distance (Law, 2002; Edward et al, 2008). City tourism provides a variety of accommodation, food and beverage,

entertainment, night life, travel information, transportation, communication, shopping, and many other facilities that meet the needs of many different kinds of tourists.

In term of types of city tourists, Law (2002) reports that city tourists tend to be older and more educated, tend to do more sightseeing, and are more likely to appreciate and enjoy cultural and historic resources. At the same time, he added, city tourism also attracts young people who like the kind of excitement that the city can offer, including entertainment, nightlife, and sporting events, as well as specialized technologies, shopping opportunities, and businesses.

City tourism usually entails high participation from the private sector. Edward et al. (2008) observed that there is extensive engagement from the tourism industry in city tourism planning and policy-making processes, and even in day-to-day operational management—especially when the tourism industry in the city is strong and well organized .

Another attribute of city tourism is that the economic, environmental, and cultural factors may not be equally balanced. Edward at al. observed that the natural environment is generally less important, when compared to economic and cultural heritage factors. This seems obvious, and almost inevitable: a city requires a lot of space for its large population. Thus, the natural environment is often compromised, and believed to be less significant than economic resources and cultural heritage.

Sustainable city tourism is a subset of sustainable tourism (ST), which in turn originated from sustainable development (Hunter, 1997; Hall, 1999 and Butler, 1999). Thus, it is important to first define sustainable development and sustainable tourism before addressing sustainable city tourism. The World Council for Environment and Development in the Brundtland Commission Report defined sustainable development as "meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of the next generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987, 43). This definition is based on three fundamental principles: community participation, equity, and a futurist orientation. For development to be sustainable, it should take into account all relevant sectors and stakeholders. This type of development should also provide benefits fairly to all stakeholders, including both the present generation and the next.

Brundtland also defined three goals that sustainable development should achieve: economic viability, environmental protection, and the social well-being of the community. Based on these principles and goals of sustainable development, UNWTO (2005, p.21) defined sustainable tourism as "meeting the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing the opportunities for the future." According to

Butler (1999) and Hardy et al. (2002), for tourism to be sustainable, it must balance the principles and goals of sustainable development.

However, Hunter (1997) argued that it was not possible and not realistic to balance all aspects of sustainable development at the same time. Hunter provided four approaches tp implementing sustainable tourism, ranging from a very weak sustainability level to very strong sustainability level. At the very weak level of sustainability, sustainable tourism can be developed as a tourism imperative, whereby developers focus strongly on tourism economic growth. At the weak level, sustainable tourism can be developed as "product-led tourism," which is based on market demands. At the strong and very strong levels of sustainability, sustainable tourism can be developed as "environmental-led tourism," which takes into account environmental protection.

The former (i.e., weaker) approaches might be more appealing in developing countries in which poor socio-economic conditions, political uncertainty, and weak institutional capacity are so prevalent, and where—at the same time—the resources to implement sustainability goals are so limited (Tosun, 2001). A number of empirical studies have identified several challenges for sustainable tourism, including costs, complexity, lack of market demand, lack of locus of control and lack of both environmental knowledge and awareness and information (Dodds, 2007; Tzschentke, Kirk & Lynch, 2008; Timu & Getz, 2009; Thuot, Vaugeois, Scherck & Goodwin, 2009). At the same time, it is usually very difficult to measure the outcomes of sustainable tourism, since it is complex and related to many sectors (Choi & Sirakaya, 2006; Saarinen, 2006).

In my research, I define sustainable city tourism using the three key principles of sustainable tourism (economic, environmental, and cultural) by concentrating on the urban environment. Economically, sustainable city tourism must ensure economic returns along both short- and long-term economic measures. To all stakeholders, sustainable city tourism must provide socio-economic benefits that are fairly distributed, including stable employment, income-earning opportunities, and social services to host communities. By conferring these benefits, it must make a contribution to poverty reduction.

From the environmental point of view, sustainable city tourism must make optimal use of environmental resources that constitute a key element in tourism development, maintain essential ecological processes, and help conserve the natural environment.

Culturally, sustainable city tourism must respect the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities, conserve their built and living cultural heritage and traditional values, and contribute to inter-cultural understanding and tolerance.

To summarize: for city tourism to be sustainable, it must take full account of its current and future impacts on its urban environment, economy, society, and culture, addressing the needs of the visitors, industry, and host city residents.

Methodology

I employ a qualitative approach in my research. Specifically, in-depth interviews with key stakeholders were conducted to answer the research questions. The in-depth interviews lasted 40-60 minutes. Fifteen relevant stakeholders from three clusters of tourism stakeholders—including public sector, the tourism industry, and civil society organizations (CSOs)—were chosen for the study. Five tourism and urban planners from the federal tourism ministry, state departments, and city authorities were invited for the study. Five tourism practitioners from the tourism industry, including hotel managers and tour operators, were also interviewed. Five CSO staff members who worked on conservation and handicrafts were also included in the study.

Participants were selected for the study through a snowball sampling technique, from which the researcher first identified and selected stakeholders who could affect, and were affected by, sustainable urban tourism development for the initial interviews. Ater the initial interviews, the respondents were asked to recommend other stakeholders whom they thought had relevant characteristics and knowledge about the study topics (Berg, 2004).

The interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed using content analysis—a method that enables researchers to include a large amount of textual data and systematically identify key properties of that data, such as the most-used key words (Stemler, 2001). According to Stemler, content analysis assumes that the words that are mentioned most often are the words that reflect the great concerns. In the context of this study, I categorized and classified definitions and challenges of sustainable city tourism—as identified by different stakeholders—into different themes and topics, including economic, environment, social and cultural. I used frequency analysis to identify the themes of sustainable city tourism that the most respondents expressed as their greatest concerns.

Study site

Located in the heart of Asia Pacific region, Malaysia is one of the world's most visited countries. Malaysia has received the highest number of international tourist arrivals among the Southeast Asia countries. In 2010, it was ranked 9th in the world, with 24.6 million international tourists (WTO, 2014). In 2014, Malaysia received 27.44 million international

visitors, representing an annual growth rate of 6.7 percent when compared to 2013. Through a simple extrapolotion, the country should expect some 36 million international tourists by 2020.

International tourists come from all over the world to visit Malaysia. However, Singaporean tourists represent more than half of those international tourists—not surprising, given that Malaysia borders Singapore. Indonesian and Chinese tourists are the second and third largest groups, respectively, after Singaporeans. On average, international tourists stay in Malaysia for 7 nights and spend about USD 90 per day while visiting Malaysia (Tourism Malaysia, 2015).

Tourism plays a key role in Malaysia's economy. It is the second largest foreign exchange earner after manufacturing (Mosbah & Khuja, 2014). Tourism represents about 9 percent of Malaysia's Gross National Product (Sivalingam, 2007). In 2014, tourism generated 17.14 billion USD. On average, each international tourist spent about USD 625 when visiting in Malaysia. Expenses included food, accommodation, transportation, souvenir, admission fees to tourism attractions, and various other items (Malaysia Tourism, 2015).

The key tourism attractions of Malaysia are its rich natural beauty, its cultural heritage, and the friendliness of its people (Tourism Malaysia, 2015). For nature lovers, Malaysia has many things to offer. For example, the landscape is very lush, natural, and well preserved, and Malaysia's rainforests—such as Taman Negara—are a compelling draw for nature lovers. Taman Negara is one of the world's oldest tropical rainforests, possessing an impressive biodiversity and serving as home to numerous exotic and endangered species.

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society. The country's 28 million people comprise several of Asia's oldest civilizations: Malay, Chinese, Indian, and ethnic communities in Sabah and Sarawak (Tourism Malaysia, 2015). This cultural diversity, in the context of and a harmonious and peaceful society, serve as key tourism attractions. Malaysia has promoted itself aggressively under the theme of "Malaysia Truly Asia," claiming to represent "true Asia" with a unique blend of authentic Asian cultures.

Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia, is the country's most visited and vibrant city. The Petronas Twin Towers are an iconic symbol, and the most popular tourist attraction in the city. Chinatown, Little India, shopping malls, and local markets also make the city appealing to tourists. Besides the capital city, Malaysia has other destinations, including Melaka, Penang, Langkawi, Kuching, Kota Kinabalu and Johor Bahru. Each of these locations has its own unique attractions, and some of them are UNESCO World Heritage designees.

To take advantage of these abundant tourism resources and attractions, Malaysia has developed and promoted different kinds of tourism. Cultural tourism, ecotourism, education, medical, golf tourism, MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions), rural tourism (also known as home-stay or village stay tourism): all have been developed to serve the needs and preferences of a wide range of tourists.

Though a sustainable urban/city tourism concept has not been yet well conceptualized in Malaysia (Ismail, Baum, 2006), many elements of city tourism have been developed and promoted. These include MICE, entertainment and theme parks, city nightlife, and city tours. For example, Johor Bahru City promotes itself as a world-class recreation and tourism attraction in and of itself, and also as Malaysia's southern tourist gateway destination city.

Johor Bahru is the capital city of Johor state, located in the southernmost part of the Malaysia Peninsula, adjacent to Singapore. It is the second largest city in Malaysia, with a population of a half million people (Statistics Department, Malaysia, 2010). More than half of Johor Bahru's international tourists are Singaporeans, many of whom drive to Malaysia through Johor Bahru. This points to a challenge for the city. The Iskandar Regional Development Authorities (IRDA) reported that 22.2 million international tourists traveled through the city in 2012, but only 1.1 million international tourists stayed overnight in the city in 2014. In other words, Johor is used as a crossing region, rather than a tourism destination.
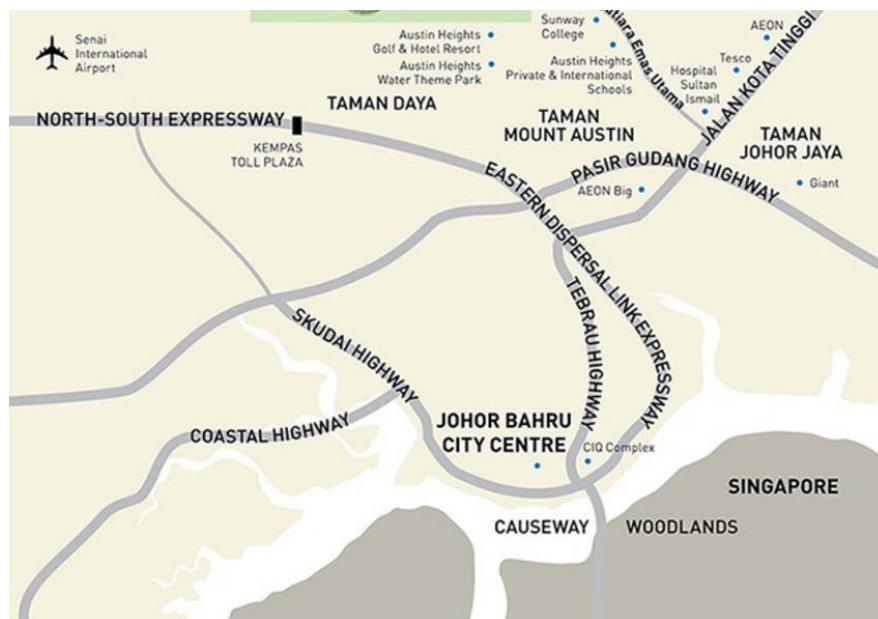

Figure 1. Map of Johor Bahru City Development Plan
Source: IRDA, 2015

Efforts have been made by the city to transform Johor Bahru from a crossing region into a world-class tourism destination, with a target of 30 million domestic and international tourists by 2025. To achieve this goal, the city has developed a number projects, including the Segget River Restoration, a cultural heritage trail, a waterfront development, the Danga Bay Water Integrated City, amusement theme parks, transportation and airport renovations, a food and shopping complex, health and wellness tourism, medical tourism, educational tourism, sport tourism, MICE, and recreational events and activities. All tourism-related projects are intended to generate income and employment, enhance the social well-being of both the local community and tourists, and ensure that the urban cultural heritage and the environment are protected and preserved.

Johor Bahru was selected for a study site for several reasons. First, Johor Bahru is the second largest city in Malaysia after Kuala Lumpur, and is one of the most popular tourism destinations. It is a gateway to Singapore. The city is a major attraction mainly for shopping for tourists from Singapore and Indonesia, since prices of goods and products with the same quality in the city are much cheaper than its neighboring countries (Tourism Malaysia, 2015). Second, as noted, the city is determined to transform itself into a world-class city tourism destination by 2025, and a number of massive projects have been launched to achieve this goal.

Finally, the researcher's familiarity with, and contacts within, the city allowed information access and data collection to a degree that might not have been possible in other contexts.

Findings and discussions

Conceptualizing sustainable city tourism

Having a common understanding of sustainable city tourism among stakeholders is an important step toward achieving the goals of sustainable tourism. When different stakeholders have a common understanding of what sustainable city tourism is, they can understand each other, and work together to achieve their common goals. A common understanding of sustainable city tourism may help better communication among city planners and policy makers, as well as the community and the industry. The following sections discuss how three clusters of tourism stakeholders—government, industry, and civil society organizations—perceive sustainable city tourism.

When asked to define "sustainable city tourism," most respondents said that the term was new to them. (Some even admitted that they had never heard it before) This was particularly true among tour operators, tourist guides, city planners, and even some tourism officers. Clearly,

among key tourism stakeholders in the city, there is lack of understanding of sustainable city tourism. As one of our respondents said,

"To me, sustainable city tourism is quite new. I used to hear sustainable tourism, responsible tourism, ecotourism and island tours, but [sustainable city tourism] is something new to me. We haven't sold it before. We normally sell tours in or about our city, but not city tours. This is something new and interesting to me."

The lack of understanding of sustainable city tourism among the stakeholders may result from the lack of a formal city tourism program in Johor Bahru, as well as in the country as a whole. True, Malaysia has promoted different types of tourism, including cultural tourism, ecotourism, education-oriented tourism, medical tourism, and community-based tourism. This does not mean that the country does not promote cities for tourism. In fact, Malaysia has aggressively promoted Kuala Lumpur and many other cities as a place for tourists to visit. The concept of city tourism, however, has not been well developed, or even well understood. As one of the respondents said, "We have promoted Johor Bahru a lot as a place for shopping, family fun, and business, but the concept of city tourism or sustainable city tourism is new to me."

Even when respondents were able to define sustainable city tourism in their own words, these definitions could be markedly different. Some stakeholders focused more on economic and cultural heritage factors, while other focused more on the environment. To the tour operators and guides, for example, sustainable city tourism simply means a steady growth in the numbers of tourists, which in turn means more business. For them, city tourism is sustainable when it continues to grow and generate income and employment.

Cultural heritage—such as old buildings, social harmony among Malay, Chinese and Indian communities, and a sense of place—appear to be significant for the tour operators and guides. In order for city tourism to be sustainable, they said, it must protect cultural heritage and the way of life of local residents, on which tourism depends, and which make Johor Bahru different from other cities in the world. The participants appear to be proud that Johor Bahru, as well as the whole of Malaysia, is a multi-ethnic, rich and diverse society. According to them, diversity of culture and ethnicity is a key attraction for tourists.

Respondents from the tourism and planning departments agree that city tourism is "sustainable" as long as it continues to contribute to the city's economic development. For them, sustainable city tourism refers to well-planned urban tourist attractions, with a variety of products and activities to serve tourists, which ultimately contribute to the economic development of the city. For them, having a city-transformation plan and a tourism master plan are key indicators of sustainable city tourism

development. The planners appeared to be proud of these two blueprints for the future. Both plans highlighted a number of tourism-related projects that have been identified and set in motion. The natural environment, meanwhile, appears to be a less important consideration for respondents from the government agencies.

Respondents from civil society organizations—especially those who have lived in the city since it was a small town—appear to value cultural heritage conservation more than they value economic factors. For them, sustainable city tourism must protect the cultural heritage and the environment on which it depends. When asked which specific cultural heritages sustainable city tourism should protect, they responded that tourism should protect and promote old culturally significant buildings, a sense of place, the arts, and museums. A chairman from one of the local NGOs argued that cultural heritage tells people who they are, and where they came from:

"Johor Bahru used to be a small and quiet town with a few thousand people. The city has experienced a lot of changes in the last five or seven years, after IRDA launched its Comprehensive Development Master Plan to develop and transform the city. From home to my work place, I see a lot of high-rise buildings being constructed. Old historic buildings are disappearing and being replaced by high buildings. For example, in the area of Danga Bay, there used to be beautiful river fronts. I could see sunsets and hang around with my friends and enjoy nature. But now there are a lot of high buildings and expensive apartments. For whom are they building? We Johoreans can't afford to buy those expensive and luxurious apartments. This is very sad."

The environment is least often mentioned as a key foundation for sustainable city tourism. Water conservation, energy savings, and river beautification are the environmental factors most often mentioned as important. According to our respondents, the tourism industry should reduce consumption of water and energy by adopting and using new and green technology. They suggested that the installation of new light bulbs and air conditioners might help save significant amounts of energy.

True, the natural environment (such as green space, parks with forest, river fronts, wetland areas, and other urban ecosystems) was occasionally mentioned by the respondents. One respondent argued, for example, that sustainable city tourism should make the city livable, including spaces to live, work, and play. According to her, sustainable city tourism should create more green space for local residents as well as tourists to enjoy. She further asserted that when all these conditions exist, both local residents and visitors alike will love the city, have a stronger sense of place, and will visit the city more often and stay longer. She said:

"I think green space is important for tourism in the city. We should have enough greenery space and parks. I think cycling, family outings, and things like that [are] important for sustainable city tourism. There is a master plan in Johor Bahru. We are restoring the Segget River and beautifying waterfronts for recreation and tourism purposes. This is good news for us."

Table 1 summarizes three factors of sustainable city tourism along with their elements perceived by three clusters of stakeholders: government officers, industry representatives, and civil society staff.

Stakeholders/Criteria	Economic	Cultural	Environmental
Government officers	Significant	Significant	Less significant
Industry	Significant	Significant	Less significant
Civil Society	Less significant	Less significant	Significant

Table 1. Important criteria of sustainable city tourism among stakeholders: government, industry and civil society organizations

Again, it could be argued that sustainable city tourism grows out of a balance among socio-economic and environmental factors. The present study, however, does not support this hypothesis. Economic and cultural heritage factors of sustainable city tourism appear to be more important to the government and industry representatives, while the environment is less important to them. For the respondents from the civil society organizations, environmental factors appear to be more significant than the economic and cultural heritage factors. Overall, the natural environment—including as green space—tended to be less significant to most respondents.

Challenges

The following sections discuss the challenges that face sustainable city tourism development in Johor Bahru City. Respondents were asked to assess sustainable city tourism based on their own criteria, and what challenges grew out of those criteria. The study found that Johor Bahru has a long way to go to achieve sustainable city tourism, due to a number of challenges involving economic pressures, cultural heritage, environmental issues, physical development, and governance.

Economic challenges

Tourism generated USD 18 billion and 2 million jobs in 2014, making it the second-largest foreign exchange earner for Malaysia after manufacturing goods (MoT, 2013). At the same time, tourism also can be said to have a negative impact on the local economy. The economic challenges include low expenditures on the part of tourists and high living costs. Tourists spend about 130 USD when visiting the state of Johor, based on the facts that tourists spend about 90 USD per day at the national level and stay only 1 night in Johor. These low daily expenditures on the part of tourists may result, in part, from a lack of variety of in night-life activities. Tourist guides and tour operators reported that there was not much to do and see in Johor Bahru besides shopping for cheap products and visiting theme parks. They added there were not many night activities in Johor Bahru—unlike, for example, Singapore, where "the city never sleeps." In contrast, they said, Johor Bahru is quiet at night, and people go to bed early.

The overall lack of things to do and see in Johor Bahru may lead to the short length of stay, which in turn contributes to the low expenditure of tourists. Respondents reported that the city has a hard time prolonging the stay of its visitors. A hotel manager reported that on average, his clients stay 1.5 days in his hotel. Tourist guides and tour operators added that they would be lucky if they could get their tourists for a half-day city tour. They said that most of their guests are day-trippers from Singapore: coming in the morning and returning to their country in the evening. They reported that many Singaporean tourists who came to Johor Bahru arrived with their Singaporean tour operators, who organized their trips for them in the city. As one tour operator put it:

"The majority of the tourists into Johor Bahru are mainly from Singapore and the majority of them are daily trippers. Singapore is taking advantage of us. All the travel agents from Singapore come to Johor Bahru and take the tourists to the hotspot places. So all the income from the tourists goes to the travel agents. What do we get? We get nothing."

Lack of night life, cheap products, and the typical short length of stay collectively result in low expenditures by tourists in the city. But this low rate of tourist expenditure in Johor Bahru is actually in keeping with experience on the national level. Tourism Malaysia reported that on average, each international tourist spends about 620 USD visiting Malaysia. Malaysia in 2015 had twice as many foreign tourists as Singapore, but earned less tourism revenue. Thailand had more foreign tourists—around 29 million annually, compared to 26 million in Malaysia— but those tourists in Thailand spent USD 44 billion, while their counterparts visiting Malaysia spent only USD 17 billion.[i] Why? Because in Thailand, tourists indulge themselves, spending money on night life and other entertainment activities, whereas in Malaysia, they spend more than

half their money on shopping and accommodations (Tourism Malaysia, 2015).

The price of goods may be relatively low for tourists, but that is not true for local residents. Johor is well known in Malaysia for its high cost of living . The city is adjacent to Singapore, which is a far more developed country than Malaysia. Many Singaporeans come to buy cheap goods and products in Johor, which drives up prices. Some local products, such as quality seafood, are exported to Singapore, because Singaporeans are willing to pay more. One respondent complains about luxurious houses and apartments built as second homes—homes that local people cannot afford to buy:

"Richer second home owners from Singapore and China are buying cheap houses in the city. Local residents can't afford to buy houses and apartments. Many luxurious houses and apartments and condominiums have been built for foreigners from Singapore and China. Tourism products such Legoland and other theme parks have been designed for foreign tourists. Local residents can't afford to use the facilities. I think this is not right."

The current economic challenges for sustainable city tourism in Johor Bahru are to ensure that tourism economically contributes to the city's economy, and that the economic benefits are fairly shared with the local community. A greater number and variety of tourism activities, especially night-life oriented, should be fostered to persuade tourists to stay longer and spend more in the city. At the same time, tourism pricing policies should be developed to ensure that the high prices associated with tourism products do not increase living costs for local people.

Cultural heritage challenges

As noted, social and cultural heritages are key resources and attractions for sustainable city tourism development, making cities different from each other, and therefore appealing to tourists. To some extent, this holds true for Johor Bahru. The city can boast of, for example, the Sultant Abu Bakar Mosque, the Sultant Ibrahim Building, the Sultant Abu Bakar Royal Palace Museum, a venerable post office and train station, and various Chinese and Hindu temples.

This study found, however, that there are a number issues with heritage buildings and similar resources. Most troubling, many such heritage buildings have been replaced with high buildings, condominiums, and apartments. As one tourist guide reported:

"We are losing a lot of our heritage. Our historical buildings are disappearing. New and high building are going up. I usually bring my tourists to see some historical buildings in town. When we arrive there, the buildings are no longer there. This is very difficult for us as guides to

explain to our visitors. That's something quite worrying for me as tourist guide. We do not have a body to save and protect historical buildings. It's unlike Malacca or Penang where, there are very active bodies looking after heritage buildings."

Maintenance of historical buildings is also an issue. Respondents reported that many historical buildings are in poor condition, and need urgent maintenance. They point to the lack of any single agency responsible for conserving historical buildings. They also point out that many historical buildings are not yet on the list for historic conservation, mostly because the unlisted buildings are private properties over which the city has little or no jurisdiction.

Khamidi and Sodangi (2010) found that maintenance of heritage buildings in Malaysia was a major challenge. The authors argued that at least three factors—a lack of general guidelines for custodians of heritage building to maintain their buildings, a lack of effective legal protection, and a deficit of local institutional capacity—complicate the maintenance challenge. Clearly, as a first step, general conservation guidelines need to be developed for listing and conserving historically significant buildings. Private owners of such buildings should be encouraged to conserve their buildings, either through tax incentives or access to a dedicated building-conservation fund.

Tourism holds the strong potential to promote cultural interaction and understanding between a host and guests. On the flip side, tourism can lead to social and cultural shock and conflict between tourists and local people. This has already happened in Johor Bahru. Respondents complained that some Singaporean tourists did not behave well while in Johor Bahru city. They frequented bars and night clubs, and some were clearly drunk in public. This is contradictory to Malay and Muslim culture, and resident reported that it was very hard for them to see tourists behaving this way. As one respondent complained:

"Singaporean tourists come here by driving. There is no enforcement in terms of regulation. They can throw rubbish in Malaysia, but they can't throw rubbish in Singapore. So they will throw all the rubbish in Malaysia. Just drive across the border for less an hour and throw their rubbish in Malaysia. They can drive the speed more than the 100km/h but they can't do that in Singapore. So they bring their expensive cars to Malaysia and start speeding. Night clubs and bars are full of Singaporeans, some of whom get drunk and walk on the street."

Environmental challenges
Respondents reported two key environmental issues that affect the tourism industry. Concerns about haze and water pollution and land reclamation topics emerged most often during the interviews. The haze—a

persistent fog of smoke emanating from forest fires in Indonesia—is a serious environmental concern for countries in Southeast Asia, affecting people's health and interfering with some industries.

Tourism is one of the sectors that is vulnerable to the haze. During our data collection phase in October to December, there was bad haze all over Johor, Malaysia, and Singapore. Tour operators and tourist guides reported that more than 50 percent of their tourists canceled their travel plans with them during heavy haze months of November and December.

Water pollution was often raised by many respondents as a key environmental issue in the city. Strong odors often arise out of the sewage system in the heart of the city. The Segget River—used in the past as a sewage river—flows through the city center, and even today, untreated water from home residences and industry is discharged into the river. As a result, the Segget River one of the most polluted in Malaysia. In 2005, in an effort to solve the problem of strong odors arising from the river, the city decided to cover it up—a "solution" that was largely a failure.

Efforts have been made to clean up Johor Bahru under the theme of "SMART CITY." One such effort is the Segget River Restoration, which aims to build water treatment plants and flood mitigation systems, and—at the same time—beautify the river for recreation and business. Mr. Abdul Halim, a project management officer from the Iskandar Regional Development Authority (IRDA) explains the rationale behind this initiative:

"This project was initiated in 2006. We successfully secured federal government funding of 240 million Riggit for the project. The plan is to make Johor Bahru city more sustainable, a city to live, to work and to play."

As Johor Bahru's population grows and the city spreads out, wet lands and water front areas such as Danga Bay have been gradually filled in, thereby providing more space for the growing population, as well as for business and industry growth. This creeping land reclamation along the river has been a great concern for respondents from conservation organizations, who argue that it is destroying the natural beauty and ecosystems of the bay. One respondent put it this way:

"It is very sad because the high buildings have blocked a good view of Danga Bay. When I was little kid, I love to play in Danga Bay. I went there with my friends to see a sunset, hang out, and enjoy the natural view there. Now, it's no more. It is a pity that they build high buildings in this beautiful area."

To summarize: haze and water pollution are two environmental issues that deeply affect sustainable city tourism. Other environmental issues related to the natural environment—such as limited green space, parks, and trees—were not expressed as issues by the respondents in this study.

Infrastructure challenges

Limited and poor tourism facilities and inadequate transportation networks are key challenges for sustainable city tourism development in Johor Bahru City. Most respondents complained about limited transportation connectivity and limited walkability, old public buses and taxis, and traffic jams —especially at rush hours, and on the Causeway linking Johor Bahru to Singapore.

Traveling to and from Johor Bahru is relatively easy, since it is well connected with the rest of the country and its neighbor Singapore by land, air, and water. Traveling within and around the city is not easy, however, especially for tourists who do not have their own means of transportation. There are limited public bus systems from the main bus station to major tourist destinations such as Legoland and the cultural center. Buses are old, are often dirty, and generally do not have air conditioners. Information about bus schedules, and where they go and stop, is limited at the main bus station. Bus drivers try to provide information to their passengers at that bus station, but they are competing against other drivers for those passengers. As a result, it is noisy and chaotic at the station, with drivers trying to raise their voices above the din to attract potential passengers.

Metered taxis are widely available, but many of them are old and rusty. The taxi drivers usually do not turn their meter fare on unless their passengers tell them to do so. Without the meter fare on, passengers do not know the exact fare. This makes it easier for the taxi drivers to demand unreasonably high fares.

Traffic congestion was also frequently raised as an issue by the respondents. The respondents reported that traffic jams are getting worse in recent years, as the city gains more and more people and more industry comes in. As noted, congestion is especially bad at the 8:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. rush hours downtown, and on the Causeway that serves as a link to Singapore.

Clearly, Johor Bahru is not a pedestrian-friendly city. Most of the roads in the city center were designed for cars. There are very limited pedestrian walkways in the downtown area. Many of those walkways steer people out onto the pavement, where they compete with cars. Where there are sidewalks, cars often park on them. Pedestrian walkways sometimes are interrupted by large, gaping holes. One tourist guide reported that two of her clients fell down into one of these holes during a walking tour—a disaster for her business.

Successful city tourism requires reliable, well-connected public transportation. Tourists rely on public transportation to get them around town; they also need a safe way to walk around downtown. By all accounts, these conditions have been yet been met in Johor Bahru. At the

time of this study, the city was planning to provide free public bus service for both local residents and tourists, and to build safe walking spaces in the city centre. The free public bus plan aims to encourage tourism, encourage local people to use more public buses—thereby reduce reliance on individual cars, and reducing traffic jams—as well as improving the environment.

Governance and collaboration issues

Although the relationship between sustainable city tourism and good governance may not be immediately apparent, there is in fact a strong correlation (Timur and Getz, 2008). Good governance provides frameworks, guidelines, and clear roles and responsibilities for tourism management and planning. Conversely, poor guidelines and lack of governance can serve as a barrier to sustainable city tourism development.

Figure 1 shows how tourism in Johor Bahru is developed and managed by different organizations at different levels. At the federal level, there are two main agencies: the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, and Tourism Malaysia. The ministry is responsible for drafting, implementing, and monitoring tourism policies. Tourism Malaysia is responsible for marketing and promoting tourism both in and outside the state. At the state level, tourism is managed by the tourism department. That department is responsible for managing and promoting tourism in its own state, with support and guidance from the federal agencies.

Unlike many cities in developed countries, cities in developing countries do not have a specific agency responsible for city tourism development and management. Johor Bahru is in that category: it doesn't have a city tourism bureau or office. There are many tourism players—from the public sector to the federal and state levels—but there is no specific agency dedicated to city tourism at the city level. The tourism sector is under an economic unit that oversees investment and planning in the city, but this unit usually lacks both people and resources for carrying out its various assignments.
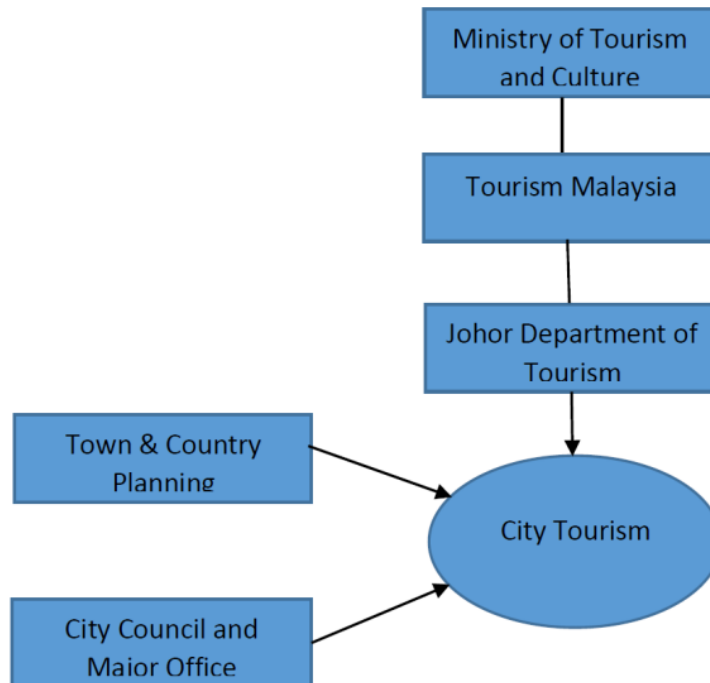
Figure 2. Government agencies involved in city tourism in Johor Bahur

Like good governance, collaboration is also important for sustainable city tourism. As in many complex undertakings, different stakeholders can achieve their common goals better when they work together. This study identified collaboration among different stakeholders as an issue for sustainable city tourism development in Johor Bahru City. Respondents from the government agencies, for example, complained that their plans and projects are sometimes ignored by their counterparts from other agencies with. As one respondent from the Tourism Malaysia complained:

"Sometime our stakeholders do not inform us about their events. This made it difficult to promote and market their events and products for them. We don't have the organizer event schedule. They don't tell us. Normally, the tourists get to know from the website. Suddenly, the event just happened. I think the distribution of information sometimes does not reach us through the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. How can we want to respond to them?"

Similarly, one planner complained of lack of collaboration in overall planning:

"Sometimes, we have been ignored. Sometime we do not know what other departments and agencies plan to do. So, if we don't know their plans, how can we put their projects in our plan?"

Respondents from the industry and civil society also had similar issues. They complained that the government often ignored them and did not involve them in policy-making. They acknowledged that the government often invited them to their workshops or conferences, but their goal was either to disseminate some information or tell them what to do. They did not just want to be told what to do, they said; they wanted to be involved in sharing concerns and shaping policies.

To summarize: the successful promotion of sustainable city tourism requires good governance and collaboration from all relevant stakeholders. Like many cities in developing countries, Johor Bahru lacks a specific agency responsible for developing tourism in and for their city. There are some helpful offices—such as the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and Tourism Malaysia—but their scope is broad, and they are expected to cover tourism development at both the national and state levels. Some individual government officers complain that even when it comes to key issues, their agencies are sometimes ignored by other government agencies. Concurrently, respondents from the private sector report they have not been involved or consulted on policies that are very important to their own businesses.

Conclusions

This paper presents findings from a qualitative study of sustainable city tourism in Johor Bahru, Malaysia. The study examined how three clusters of tourism stakeholders—from the government sector, industry, and civil society organizations—conceptualized sustainable city tourism, and what challenges the city faces as it transforms itself into a world-class destination.

The study found that definitions of sustainable city tourism do not focus equally on the three principles of sustainable tourism. It found that to many players, economic factors are more significant than cultural heritage factors, and that both economic concerns and cultural heritage are more significant than environmental factors. These findings confirm those of Edward, Griffin, and Hayllar (2008), who found that when it comes to urban and city tourism, the natural environment is considered less significant than economic and cultural heritage factors.

The study found a number of challenges for sustainable city tourism development in Johor Bahru. The challenges are categorized into five groups: economic, cultural heritage, environmental, infrastructural, and governance. In terms of economic challenges, the city has a hard time persuading tourists to stay longer and spend more in the city. On average, tourists spend only 1 night in Johor Bahru. Although the city is famous for low prices on brands found at higher prices in, for example, Singapore,

those products are not inexpensive by local standards. Participants report that tourism has increased living costs for them.

Respondents have expressed their concern about the loss of cultural heritage and historical buildings. Some old historical buildings are maintained badly, while others have been replaced by high-rises, including luxurious apartments that foreigners purchase for holiday homes. Some respondents expressed their irritation about bad behavior by tourists, including being drunk on the street, improper disposal of trash, and speeding.

Haze, water pollution, and land reclamation are the three main environmental concerns. Haze from forest fires in Indonesia has significantly affected the tourism industry in Johor. Untreated water from residential houses and industry is discharged into the Segget River, which flows through the city. At the time of this study, the city was restoring the river by building water treatment plants and flood mitigation systems, and beautifying it as a recreation and business areas. But waterfronts such as Danga Bay have been developed, and much of its wet areas have been filled up and reclaimed. Respondents from conservation organizations have expressed their concerns about the loss of natural environment and ecosystems as a result of haphazard land reclamation.

Participants complain of poor transportation options—including poor system connectivity—lack of parking, and limited walkability in the city centre.

Last but not least, governance and collaboration among stakeholders are limited. There are various tourism stakeholders at different levels of government, but none is specifically responsible for the development of tourism. As a result, collaboration among tourism stakeholders suffers. Respondents from the tourism industry feel their voices and concerns are not heard by the policy-makers. Some respondents from government agencies complain that they have been ignored and excluded from some tourism policy-making and planning processes. Sustainable city tourism requires strong governance and collaboration with all relevant stakeholders who are affected by tourism development.

This is a long list of challenges, but all will need to be addressed to ensure the development of sustainable city tourism in Johor Bahru.

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NOTES

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