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Islanders' views on development

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TIOMAN, Sun. - Undoubtedly, the plan to further develop Pulau Tioman to boost tourism has generated a lot of interest among the islanders.

Interviews with several residents show some positive feedback.

They say there is no reason not to further develop the island if they can benefit economically. They also want the greenery to be kept intact and the environment preserved.

They say the residents must get a share of the job market and business opportunities, and enjoy better income and quality of life.

Most of them appear unwilling to part with their property although they could become millionaires if they sell their land.

"Please model it after any island town in Greece or Italy, as long as the benefits go to the people here," says 60-year-old Abu Bakar Ahmad.

He says although the Government is eager to bring in more tourists, the development must not be at the expense of the Tioman people.

"For example, they should not take away land which belongs to us."

Many villagers echo his sentiments, saying that it will be unfair if further development does not improve their economic standing.

"I am sure the Government means well. As long as we benefit, by all means go ahead and develop the town," says Azman Abdul Razak, 36, of Kampung Tekek, Tioman's largest village among the six.

"But if it is going to turn out to be like an ordinary town where jungles have to make way for concrete structures ... no."

It was the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad himself who recently directed the Pahang Government to further develop the island.

Although Tioman is regarded as one of the 10 most beautiful islands in the world, it has yet to exploit its tourism potential.

Statistics show that not more than 150,000 tourists visit the island a year, and tourist expenditure is estimated at less than RM100 million.

According to Menteri Besar Tan Sri Mohd Khalil Yaakob, the Prime Minister had also directed the authorities to build a road linking the east and west of the island.

Tioman's settlements are concentrated mainly on the west of the island.

Transportation and communication links between the east and west of the island are hampered by the hills that separate them.

The only tarred road is found in Kampung Tekek. Stretching about three kilometres, it links Tioman airport with Berjaya Tioman Beach Resort, the island's only international-class hotel.

Khalil had said a marina and other projects aimed at giving tourism a shot in the arm would also be implemented, but without any clearing of jungles or cutting of hills.

The environment would be taken into consideration, he had said.

There are few details about the proposed development plan for this stunning island which boasts of shimmering beaches, cool forest and coral gardens set in crystal-clear waters.

But some residents reckon that the magnitude of the development will affect their daily life, which has hitherto been at a slower pace than that in Langkawi.

And all agree that the cutting of hills and clearing of jungles must be avoided at all costs.

Ahmad Billah, 83, voices reservations at the plan to build a town, huge hotels and other massive projects.

"Yes, hotels will provide jobs. But will they employ our people or bring in foreign workers?"

Ahmad, who lives in Kampung Juara on the east coast, says he is concerned about the possibility that foreign tourists will be put up only at international-class resorts by travel agencies and tour operators.

"What will happen to the 70 or so chalet owners here? As it is, they don't get business except during the peak period.

"So, I am worried that even a town in the likes of an Italian island will not serve any purpose for the majority of the 2,000 people in Tioman."

Abdul Wadi Abdul Razak, 30, says while off-season tourists come in small numbers, the existing accommodation cannot cope with the demand during the peak season.

"You need to book your rooms in advance during public holidays. In the past, some boat operators were too busy chasing after commissions, so they would always tell their passengers that rooms were aplenty.

"But some of the visitors ended up sleeping on the beach. Things like this gave Tioman a bad name indeed."

Abdul Wadi feels more flights into Tioman are necessary to promote tourism, because the waters are too choppy for the boats during the monsoon.

Halimah Adun, 55, is strongly against development on land belonging to the islanders.

"My view is simple. I will agree to any project which is good for Tioman and the people of Tioman.

"Please build a town, roads and other facilities. But the rights and livelihood of the people cannot be neglected. You cannot oppress them and take away their land."

Mohamad Idrus, 52, talks about the RM50 million upgrading works on the Tioman airport.

"The compensation issue for the acquired land has not been settled," he says.

"In the first place, the airport should have been built elsewhere, not a stone's throw away from our houses," says another villager, Wan Ayub Wan Man, 54.

"Not that we are benefiting from it. Firstly, the majority of the islanders cannot afford the air tickets. Secondly, tourists who arrive by air are taken straight to the better hotels, not the chalets operated by the people here."

Wan Ayub says development in Tioman must help improve the socio-economic status of the residents.

"I don't mind a town here if it means cheaper goods and services. Believe me, food items here are more expensive than in Mersing," he says.

Just how development should take place from the viewpoint of the tourists?

Ergun Bolen, 25, who is involved in real estate business in Sydney, Australia, says:

"Don't clear the forest ... the bush walk is simply beautiful. Keep (projects) near the coast, and build smaller hotels. Maybe shuttle buses are a good idea to make it easier for tourists to move around."

Bolen, who is on a honeymoon in Tioman with wife Donna, 22, adds: "You have to develop this place because it can contribute well to the economy.

"And you need to really publicise this island more aggressively abroad.

"But, I repeat, please don't clear the forest."

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