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More than recreational eco-tours

Anak Enggang

ANAK Enggang was extremely pleased with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's pertinent comments about tourism during an interview with Lebanese television. He went on record to say that the basis of successful tourism is to have attractive products.

He was using accurate industry parlance, wherein a 'product' means a destination, an ambience, experience, souvenirs and other factors all rolled into one.

For example, Malacca is just a destination. But a package tour that provides visits to historical buildings, a boat ride down the rustic Malacca river, a cultural show, great shopping opportunities, superb Nyonya cuisine and a host of unforgettable memories is an attractive product.

Similarly, Taman Negara is just a resort destination on the edge of a forest. But if visitors get to walk through the jungle, watch sufficient numbers of exotic birds, spend a night in a hide and actually see some wild animals, then that tour will become known as a worthwhile product.

One of the key qualities of a good tourism product is the "novelty factor". The main reason people travel is to see and experience things which they do not get at home. The more vivid and unique the product, the more valuable it will be. At one time, just being in Asia was enough for many tourists, but with globalisation, demand has become more specific.

It is not enough to plunk visitors down in a jungle-fringed resort - they might be able to access a cleverly-landscaped imitation closer to home. What they want is authenticity. They do not want pretty gardens and heaps of hawkers stalls like the scene that greets them at the entrance to Taman Negara.

What genuine ecotourists want, Anak Enggang believes, is to be able to walk through the forest, examine the natural exotic plants, see the bright butterflies and strange insects, watch beautiful birds flit through the shadows, and - most exciting of all - spot a wild beast or two.

It is this allure that draws millions of tourists to world-famous ecotourism destinations such as Kenya, Nepal, South Africa and India, and if developed wisely, can attract more people into the jungles of Malaysia.

Unfortunately, Taman Negara seems to have been designated by local authorities as a recreation forest site instead of a wildlife sanctuary. Hordes of joggers, hikers and campers throng the place.

Crowds of noisy holiday-makers splash in the streams and queue along the aerial walkway as if they were in an amusement park. Some companies even have their business meetings here along with government departments sending their staff on khusus.

What a waste of our most valuable and rare tourism resource! All these activities can easily be held at the numerous hill resorts, golf clubs, recreational forest parks and beach resorts.

Foreign eco-tourists are only interested in experiencing the adventure, excitement and wonder of the jungle's natural glory.

Eco-tourists would be willing to pay premium prices for quality products - this means educational, authentic tours with erudite tour guides who are knowledgeable about everything from wild orchids and ferns to butterflies and birds.

Slides showing the larger beasts and snakes in vivid colour can be a part of this presentation, instead of the boring documentary-videos

screened at the moment.

There should be strict control on the do's and dont's of jungle-life - unlike many Malaysians, visitors do not see these rules as restrictions, but as part of the excitement of the experience. Some of the most basic roles include:

* NO TALKING - Silence is necessary if you want to get up close to wild creatures;

* NO SMOKING - Cigarettes and mosquito-coils are warning signals to the animals;

* NO AROMAS - This specifically means artificial smells like perfumes, insect-repellent or disinfectants;

* NO LIGHTS - Many animals are nocturnal and use darkness as a cover to feed and forage.

These rules and regulations should be adhered to strictly in the hides and camps away from the main resort or park head-quarters, especially around salt-licks and drinking pools.

If stewarded prudently, the jungles will become our most valuable ecotourism asset, and places like Taman Negara, Kinabalu Park, Niah, Mulu, Belum, Endau-Rompin, Danum, Kuala Selangor, Matang and Kuala Koh will continue to generate precious foreign exchange for generations to come.

Anak Enggang pleads with the authorities to work closely with experienced and knowledgeable local and international bodies to set up factors like carrying capacities, rejuvenation periods, waste disposal, behavioural guidelines and other paradigms to ensure that the jungle and its denizens will always be an active and dynamic part of our natural heritage!

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