

# Stakeholder's Engagement and Governance Practices for Sustainable Ecotourism

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## ABSTRACT

Ecotourism is one of Malaysia's most popular industries. Ecotourism arose in response to the need for nature-oriented tourists. It aims to educate visitors, tourists, and communities about ecotourism's environmental benefits. This study will provide insight into stakeholder and government partnerships and practises in ecotourism with a focus on development and sustainability. The study's goal is to ensure that ecotourism is one of the best tourism sectors attended by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), tourists, and locals. As to the study's findings, the ecotourism sector in Perlis, Malaysia, has thrived and produced numerous innovative concepts to ensure that their tourist business beneficial to locals, visitors, and government. The government ought to utilize a governance approach to protect and guide ecotourism operators, visitors, and residents using information to improve the ecotourism experience through natural habitats and biological systems, as recommended by the ecotourism industry.

**Keywords:** Ecotourism, Governance Practices, Stakeholder's Collaboration

## INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism has become a global alternative to mass tourism for the purpose to reduce environmental problems, and it also helps to improve the living conditions of local populations Baloch et al. (2023). In another word, ecotourism is a key role in sustaining ecotourism's long-term sustainability, conserving the environment, and accomplishing economic development, and social progress (Svitlichna et al., 2024). Therefore, it become one of the federal or state government's responsibilities to look into the sector, as its development relies on government financing and involvement. Ecotourism industries continue to face the challenge of achieving and maintaining sustainable development. Despite Ecotourism in Perlis Malaysia not being practically well-known through Malaysia's ecotourism operator, stakeholder collaboration, and governance practises for providing sustainable development through these years, a new initiative is required to provide new approaches to the ecotourism industry due to low levels of interest and a lack of faith in government. It will be effective and consistent decisions for the citizens. However, it was found insignificant because a lack of trust does not stimulate inclusive development, which is necessary for the ecotourism industry since inclusiveness and broad participation are crucial for progress (Samal & Dash, 2023).

In addition, the lack of emphasis on environmentally friendly and ecotourism via environmental preservation might aid in minimising adverse environmental effects. In developing countries, ecotourism promotes economic expansion and environmental sustainability (Baloch et al., 2023). The ecotourism's has it's positive

effects on environmental awareness and the potential for visitor, which has adverse effects on pollution, damage to nature, and unfavourable conditions for citizens residing in ecological regions (Ren, Su, Chang, & Wen, 2021). Moreover, in a setting where ecotourism is still in its infancy, analysing citizens' attitudes and levels of confidence in the government might lead ecotourism growth toward what is proper, acceptable, beneficial, and so required in a region (Ren et al., 2021). Within this approach, sustainable tourism and environmental preservation are crucial issues that must be embraced and internalised by all tourism stakeholders.

The focus of the study basically on stakeholders' collaboration and governance practices to construct and maintain the sustainable development of the ecotourism in Perlis, Malaysia. The qualitative case study methodology examines the potential for ecotourism in Perlis, Malaysia, concerning stakeholder engagement and governance practices.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Sustainable Ecotourism

Sustainable ecotourism may be described as the use of protected or vulnerable natural areas that emphasise environmental education and conservation while preserving local inhabitants' economic and social welfare (Burgoyne & Mearns, 2020). It has been vigorous discussions on its role in sustainable tourism as far as tourist politics, policy and policymaking, and destination management is concerned (Baloch et al., 2023; Salman et al., 2024; Wondirad, Tolkach, & King, 2020).

Sustainable ecotourism is unlikely to be the single user of resources and in the interests of sustainable development, a balance must be struck between tourism and other existing and potential activities. Inclusion of sustainable tourism, trade-offs between the governance sector may be necessary to protect eco-tourism such as natural resource conservation, environmental protection, cultural preservation, and economic enhancement (Chen, 2020; Zoysa, 2022) are some of the key positive consequences of objectives in ecotour. There is a finding criticizing of harmful incidents have been reported which highlighting the implications of tourism spots left nature in poor condition and become a dangerous (Alvarez, Bahja, & Fyall, 2022).

Moreover, sustainable ecotourism development necessitates to a suitable planning as well as integrated and inclusive management (Kumar, Hasija, Kumar, & Sageena, 2023) . There are three major principles in sustainable eco-tourism: it must be culturally relevant, commercially viable, and eco-friendly. Note that the term governance is used less frequently than such terms as tourism politics, policy and policymaking (Bichler, 2021). It has been a lively discussions on its role in sustainable tourism , developing sustainable ecotourism, governance and stakeholder collaboration practices (Roxas, Rivera, & Gutierrez, 2020) . Governance plays important roles for planning and handling ecotourism and attracting tourists to understand the perspective of ecotourism (Palmer & Chuamuangphan, 2021). However, the stakeholder analysis and how the operator implement the governance practices for improving the ecotourism sector are crucial for the long-term run.

### Governance in Eco – Tourism

Although the widespread use of the term governance by policymakers and researchers, there is still no agreement on its definition. Governance is "the indicative self-organization of actors involved in complex relations of reciprocal interdependence, with such self-organizing focusing on extending negotiation and resource-sharing to create productive collaborative endeavors and deal with the disagreements and challenges naturally engaged in such situations", (Keating, Katina, & Bradley, 2014).

The government has a role in the oversight and advancement of people seeking positions within the tourism industry. Since the studies focus on ecotourism enterprises in Perlis, the industry's governance systems must evolve. However, government engagement in tourism policy, development, and planning differs depending on the sector's contribution to the national and local economies, as well as the political philosophy that influences economic and social policy (Dudley, Duffy, Terry, & Norman, 2024).

Furthermore, the public sector relies heavily on accountability requirements for public aims and the impact of environmental ecotourism policies. The public sector and legislation in Malaysia show that ecotourism requires more attention. Another goal of ecotourism governance practices is to ensure that communities and ecotourism operators can achieve long-term visitor stability. Tourism governance strives to manage and coordinate destinations, as well as interact with local stakeholders in their planning and development (Presenza, Messeni Petruzzelli, & Natalicchio, 2019).

The expression of governance in ecotourism also promotes advantageous forms of commitment, synergy, and collaboration among public and private participants, as well as assisting policymakers in attaining sustainable development in ecotourism. In this study, governance approaches for managing stakeholder interactions are required to ensure the validity and acceptance of ecotourism governance practices (Wondirad et al., 2020). The appropriate and legitimate governance procedures used by ecotourism enterprises in Perlis, Malaysia, will provide evidence whenever ecotourism growth is capable of being sustained over time through government and stakeholder participation in governance practices.

### **Stakeholder's Collaboration in Eco – Tourism**

A procedure that fosters participation between two parties known as collaboration (Wondirad et al., 2020). Therefore, collaborative procedures are embraced and acknowledged as a critical component of sustainable development, especially whenever an extensive and broad range of stakeholders representing several sectors collaborate in the partnership (Eweje, Sajjad, Nath, & Kobayashi, 2021). Within the eco-tourism industries context, collaboration with similar goals would be useful to governance and stakeholder practices to increase eco-tourism's sustainable development, which would be valuable to eco-tourism enterprises in terms of operations (Chan, Marzuki, & Mohtar, 2021; Marín-González, Moganadas, Paredes-Chacín, Yeo, & Subramaniam, 2022).

A stakeholder's primary objective for eco-tourism implementation are about practising good governance, and stakeholders have the potential to influence either the destination or the project being implemented (Samal & Dash, 2024). Collaborations implement the variety of stakeholder positions along the value chain by providing unclassified and complementary information, which is critical for eco-tourism innovation (Barrane, Ndubisi, Kamble, Karuranga, & Poulin, 2021). The benefit of stakeholder collaboration is that it promotes more innovation in the eco-tourism industry's system and staff management, resulting in better productivity (Rahman, Tanchangya, Rahman, Aktar, & Majumder, 2024).

Stakeholder analysis and management studies are essential for developing sustainable eco-tourism, especially in ecological reserves (Salman et al., 2024). It also facilitates the growth of eco-tourism in establishing and managing eco-tourism businesses. Cooperation may be traced back to both the individual qualities of the individuals being engaged (such as inequality and bargaining power) and their collective expressions (such as coalition formation and other structures) (Cook & Hahn, 2021).

Lieberman (2022) suggested that eco-tourism does not necessitate such specialisation but rather synchronises the actions of all project partners at various phases. Integrating the partnership's outcomes into a complete whole is vital. Collaboration enables the division of tasks in a way that affects stakeholders; thus, these obligations must be integrated into a complete whole (Barrane et al., 2021). Productive collaboration, on the other hand, requires contemporaneous cooperation and coordination as essential parts of the relationship (Valk & Kratovitš, 2021). However, it advised that stakeholders be educated and "shaken," taking out of their comfort zone, asking for comments, and collaborating to attain satisfaction. This would result in favourable operating environment modifications. Sulkowski, Edwards, and Freeman (2018), stakeholders should be educated and "shaken" to play a proactive role. Eventually, by integrating the concept of stakeholder dynamics with the perspective of project value explaining stakeholders' activities, a contribution may be made to the frequently disregarded stakeholders' perspective on stakeholder management (Aaltonen & Kujala, 2016).

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## METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative case study. The qualitative case study involves participant observation and in-person interviews to examine individuals in their surroundings. Face-to-face and interviewing approach are suitable because the study could obtain the interviewee's perspective and response by observing the ecotourism industry in Perlis, Malaysia.

These research initiatives investigate how ecotourism sector might improve their environmental sustainability. The semi-structured interview approach adapted inclusive of the multi-level of participants such as officers, managers, local communities, tourists, ecotourism operators, state and federal government officers. **Findings**

### Governance Practice for Sustainability

Understanding the rules that encourage sustainability is the first stage to be explored within the sustainable governance process. Although legislation is inherently unstructured, any sustainable governance needs to incorporate a mechanism for being educated and reminded with the law requirements expecting of the company being governed to comply. The eco-tourism region was widely recognized within the government and among related organizations working to encourage the expansion of eco-tourism. The Jabatan Perhutanan Negeri and the Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture (MoTAC) have given financial resources to assist the growth of Perlis eco-tourism through the construction of many initiatives. Researchers used glamping under the Bukit Ayer as an example; it will increase visitor interest and encourage them to join when glamping completes its development.

In addition, Taman Bukit Rimba represented as Perlis State Park at the MATTA Fair in April 2020. This was done so that tourists from other states, locals, and foreigners could be sure that eco-tourism places are safe and clean. The activities promote an eco-tourism environment and attract potential visitors from other states and overseas countries. The activities of Taman Negeri Perlis on eco-tourism in Perlis are commendable since they have created the enjoying nature concept as a tourism destination. Based on the information from tourism officer in Perlis, Perlis State Park is the first conservation area established in the northern most portion of Peninsular Malaysia. The Taleban National Park near Satun, Thailand, also functions as a border buffer zone. In Perlis State Park, tourists may participate in a variety of activities. The Setul limestone, or calcium carbonate deposit, where Kelam Cave and Wang Burma Cave are situated, is around 500 years old. Most of the park's most popular attractions are in these cases.

Gua Kelam is one of the most promising prospective governing strategies. It is because the concept of transforming the natural cave into a tourist attraction and allowing a new visitor to obtain information and experience by trekking from Kaki Bukit to Gua Kelam 1 and 2 are viable options. Following the Nakawan Range of Thailand-Malaysia, several remote regions may be discovered attributable to the region's solid governance methods in redeveloping its tourist industry. Gua Kelam is associated with the cave because before it was renamed, tin miners who worked in the region had to use lamps to extract the mineral because it was so dark. From the government's perspective, the term was employed to entice travellers to explore the tourism region.

### Stakeholder Collaboration Practice for Sustainability

The terms of the collaboration between the government and several Non-Governmental Organizations have the potential to support the development and sustainability of ecotourism. Most of the adopted ecotourism collaboration methods increased the development of communities' and tourism operators' awareness of nature and the recycling of land that was not being used properly. Ecotourism in Perlis is gaining information about natural habitats and the significance of preserving the ecosystem due to collaborations such as NGOs' charitable contributions.

The NGOs that shared the same objectives and goals as the organization of the ecotourism sector in Perlis also demonstrated their motivation and integrity. It is to ensure that the ecotourism environment could attract tourist interest to learn and experience the nature of the forest and the land of ecotourism, such as Taman Ular Perlis,

Bukit Ayer, Taman Negara Perlis, Taman Rimba Herba, and Wang Kelian View Point. NGOs such as Universiti Malaysia Perlis, UiTM, Trash Hero, and others might be recognized for their contributions to improve ecotourism's development and environmental and geographical sustainability. The sustainability of ecotourism happens when both sides share the same positive values, such as assisting tourists and locals in experiencing the ecotourism environment. Moreover, the governance practices of the stakeholders, such as Non-Governmental Organizations, assist them in realising that ecotourism might also improve their structure and members' the understanding of the natural forest and new environment around ecotourism.

### **Governance and Stakeholder Collaboration Practice**

Governance practices are intended to assist stakeholders in defining their thoughts and objectives for promoting ecotourism in Perlis, this study aware that governance and stakeholder participation has several challenges and drawbacks for ecotourism operators and the region. The first issue in practice is that the operator is unaware of the ecotourism structure's limitations, such as climate, geography, and ecosystem. The governance practices are intended to assist these stakeholders in identifying the ethics and tactics congruent with the aims they were urged to pursue.

Aside from that, the approach assists the stakeholder in identifying the ecotourism function that might facilitate governance collaboration to the mutual advantage of all parties. The government sector in Perlis should provide stakeholders and operators with a clear explanation of respective legal and ethical responsibilities towards the ecotourism environment. However, in terms of funding, the government, including MoTAC, KeTSA, Perlis Government, and other corporations in Perlis, should improve the approach to the projects more productive, as this would aid ecotourism in accelerating its development campaign in Perlis, Malaysia.

## **DISCUSSION**

As a provider of ecotourism services, escorting visitors on tours to educate them about the natural and cultural history of a place while protecting the natural environment is a specialty. It is the responsibility of ecotourism operators to educate visitors, government officials, and residents in Perlis, Malaysia on the ecotourism industry, as they are experts in the field. Moreover, they are responsible for advertising, such as on social media, and marketing to clients and potential tourists via the physical platform. In the situations of ecotourism engagement in Perlis, Malaysia, Taman Rimba Herba has demonstrated that MATTA Fair 2022 is an effective means of promoting Taman Negeri Perlis, Bukit Ayer, and Taman Rimba Herba. They were active in determining ways to teach and promote MATTA Fair 2022 through partnership with governance practises. As suggested by Barrane et al. (2021) collaborating allows for the division of work in an arrangement that affects stakeholders; therefore, these responsibilities must be integrated into the larger picture.

A stakeholder's key priority for eco-tourism development is to uphold good governance, and stakeholders have the ability to affect either the destination or the project being implemented (Samal & Dash, 2024). As commented by Mr. Afandi, "I enjoy learning and researching ecotourism topics, such as forest habitats and other development in Perlis, Malaysia." Mr. Afandi is in charge of managing the Taman Rimba Herb and others. The participation of ecotourism operators such as Taman Ular and Bukit Ayer in governance and collaborative practises is beneficial because they participated in a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) rehabilitation effort for the ecotourism industry in Perlis, Malaysia. In line with a suggestion from Chan et al. (2021) collaboration between the eco-tourism operators may foster eco-tourism's sustainable development, which would be beneficial for the industry in respect to their operations. It demonstrates that the governance procedure allows them to assist and the campaign that was developed in these regions are certain to strengthen the ecotourism industry.

## **CONCLUSION**

In furtherance of enabling policymakers achieve sustainable development in ecotourism, the manifestation of governance in ecotourism fosters beneficial forms of dedication, cooperation, and synergy between public and private stakeholders. In guarantee that the legitimacy and acceptance of ecotourism governance strategies, this study recommends governance ways for regulating stakeholder interactions. However, there are several

limitations to the study such as the interview questions are excessively formal and may alter depending on the interviewer's expertise. Therefore, asking the questions more conversationally and emphasizing their formality is essential. In addition, specific data and information regarding the Corporation and Government of Perlis, Malaysia, are confidential and private. Since all those documents include the funds invested in ecotourism. It is crucial to keep these records confidential, as some individuals may use them to assert their legal rights. The government finances and future projects considered as confidential. Instead of conducting a study on Perlis, northern Malaysia, the other researcher could focus on East Malaysia. East Malaysia has numerous unexplored areas of forest habitat, flora and wildlife, and tourism potential, whether by researchers or tourists. Critical topics in ecotourism may have been missed until now, as unresolved controversies in the literature should be brought to the future study. East Malaysia is more significant than Northern Malaysia in size and land area. Gunung Kinabalu, the largest mountain in Malaysia, is located in East Malaysia; it might be the most attractive location for visitors and the government to invest in ecotourism industry. Mount Kinabalu, which towers 4095 meters (13,448 feet) above the surrounding area and is featured on the flag of the state of Sabah, has strong cultural ties to the indigenous peoples of the region. Due to the limited number of hikers permits available, places to climb the mountain typically fill up months in advance. Borneo is an ecotourist's dream due to its vast expanses of pristine primary rainforests, unusual animal and plant species, and abundant marine life.

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