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Research paper



Tourism Supply Side: The Case of Niah Cave's Swiftlets

Khairil Wahidin Awang [1]*, Mazlina Mustapha, Hasan Abdullah[3]

[1] *Faculty of Hospitality, Tourism and Wellness, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan*
[2] *Faculty of Economics and Management, Universiti Putra Malaysia*
[3] *Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Puncak Alam*
**Corresponding author E-mail: *khairil.w@umk.edu.my*

Abstract

Often studies on tourism come from the consumer perspective. However, this study focuses on the supply side of the industry using the wonders of Niah Cave which is located in interior Sarawak, Malaysia. Amongst others, Niah Cave has hundred thousands of swiftlet population and the world's famous archaeological site to attract tourists. This article explores a venue whereby the tourism's supply side, in this instance, the swiftlet population could be bridged with the industry's consumer side. The evolvement of sustainability conscious consumers, particularly in the millennium era results in the advocation of consumption in a more sustainable manner, irrespective whether the products are man-made or in the forms of the natural environment. An interpretative research method with the like of observation and semi-structured in-depth interviews formed the data gathering tool. The Niah Cave was explored in late January 2017. Findings show that Niah Cave was literally on the tourist map due to its world's famous archaeological site. The huge population of swiftlets with their nests attracted harvesters for decade. The processes of harvesting these nests which remarkably endured through climbing bamboo ladders and dangling ropes from cave ceilings, hundreds feet from the cave floor, charmed tourists

Keywords: *Edible Bird Nest; Interpretative; Niah Cave; Sustainability; Swiftlet; Tourism Supply Side*.

1. Introduction

Commodities consume by travelers shall be referred to as attractions and activities in the forms of recreation or cultural or entertainment, accommodation, food service, transportation, travel services and retail goods (Smith, 1988). The focus of this paper is on the attractions and activities using Niah Caves as the setting point. It focuses on the dynamism of place as an identified tourism destination and as such considered as focusing on the supply side perspective. Gua Niah is considered as a Tier 1 form of tourism commodities. According to Smith (1988) Tier 1 form commodities would cease to exist without visiting travellers.

The Niah Caves site is not only visited by travellers but also tourists. Thereafter, this paper will use tourist(s) or tourism as the form of reference. Although the meaning of a tourist is often contested, this paper uses the World Tourism Organization (WTO)'s definition of tourism or tourist which is the most commonly used by literature on tourism.

"Any person residing within a country, irrespective of nationality, travelling to a place within this country other than his usual place of residence for a period of not less than 24 hours or one night for a purpose other than the exercise of a remunerated activity in the place visited. The motives for such travel may be (1) leisure (recreation, holidays, health, studies, religion, sports); (2) business, family, mission, meeting"((WTO), 1981)

On a different perspective, Malaysia recorded 25.7 million tourist arrivals in 2015 (Malaysia, 2016), with a total expenditures of RM69.1 billion. By 2020 the country is expected to received 36 million arrivals with an expected expenditures of RM168 billion. Increasing number of tourist arrivals entails the development of new products and revitalizes existing ones so as to accommodate the number.

2 Methodology

This paper utilized an interpretative research approach whereby phenomenology was the method used. *"Interpretivism asserts that natural reality (and the laws of science) and social reality are different and therefore require different kinds of method"* (Gray, 2009). Phenomenology deals with human experiences of "life-world" (Tesch, 1994). As such the authors used in-depth interviews with respondents seeking to understand the phenomenon under study. Data collection types were based on observation, in-depth interviews and secondary data. Interviewees are given fictitious names to protect their anonymity. Data from interviews were analysed based on emerging themes. Open coding and axial coding were applied. Developing categories and comparing and contrasting evolving themes were done. A phenomenology case study of Niah Caves is one way to arrange social data so that the character that binds a social object studied can be maintained.

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3 Results and Findings

3.1 Accessing Niah Caves

It took us one and half hours, driving from Miri, a coastal "oil" town in Sarawak to reach Niah National Park where Niah Caves are located within. Miri was the site where the first producing oil well in Malaysia was found. The Niah National Park which was gazette in 1974 is comprised of 31.4 km^2 of rainforest and limestone hills, and is under the jurisdiction of the Sarawak Forestry Corporation. The Niah Caves are agglomeration of caves in the Niah Subis limestone formation (according to a signage found at the archaeology site, at the entrance of the caves). The largest chamber known as *Lubang Kuala* has a floor size of 10.5 hectares.

"*The park's main claim to fame is its role as one of the birthplaces of civilisation. The oldest modern human remains discovered in Southeast Asia were found at Niah, making the park one of the most important archaeological sites in the world*" (Corporation, n.d).

Arriving in the afternoon of 31 January 2017 at the National Park Visitor Centre, we explored the surrounding areas, including nearby Batu Niah town which was 3 kilometres away. The centre's ground was not that well-kept. Overgrown grass filled the compound, with vehicles tracks scarring the lawn. Though, the staffs were friendly. The centre had a staff of 15 (personal interview with a public relation officer, Hazimah). Some had their families staying with them at the staff quarters of the centre.

The morning of 1st February 2017, we crossed the not-so-wide Niah River on a boat steered by a boatman, Mr Jamak. Jamak acknowledged that a couple of days back he saw a crocodile, a juvenile, soaking the sun on the riverbank just a bit upstream from where we crossed. A sign nearby the embarking jetty with a drawing of the reptilian also served as a precautionary measure for visitors. Figure 1 shows the jetty where the authors disembarked on the other side of the river, whereby the Archaeology Museum was located. Meeting our guide Mr Sani at the Archaeology Museum on the other side of the river, we rented head lights from the museum, and borrowed rain coats and umbrella from the staff who manned the museum.



Fig. 1: Jetty where one disembark to continue tracking to Niah Caves

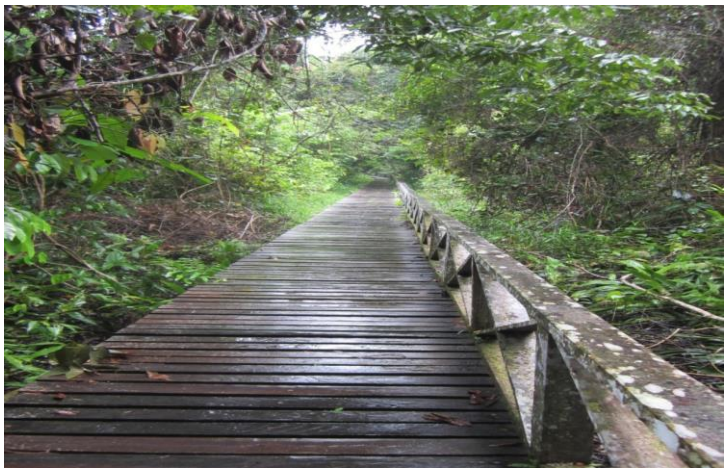


Fig. 2: Plank boardwalk in relatively good condition

It was raining incessantly right from day break. An extensive boardwalk of three kilometres long took us to the mouth of Niah Caves. The boardwalk was relatively in good conditions (Figure 2). We did not encounter any wildlife during the more than one hour walk, perhaps due to the rain. Unlike in the Gomantong Cave's expedition 14 to 17 April 2015, wildlife such as gibbons and mousedeer were seen during a much shorter tracking journey (Awang, Hassan Zaki, Ismail, & Abdullah, 2016). Gomantong Cave is located in Sabah, the other Malaysian state located on Borneo Island.

Accessing Niah Caves would be a bit difficult or even a hindrance for ordinary mass tourists who want to patronize Niah Caves because they have to walk for kilometres to reach it from the main jetty. However, this would be a natural mechanism to keep Niah Caves in pristine condition. While mass tourists would bring in negative elements apart from their dollars, eco-tourists or nature lovers with their relatively higher awareness on sustainability issues of the environment would be more than welcome

3.2. World Famous Archaeological Site

Niah Caves contain a world famous archaeology site (See Figure 3). Excavation from the site starting from the mid-1940s resulted in the re-write up of early human or Homo sapiens settlement in Southeast Asia (Corporation, n.d). Bone, stone and clay-made cooking utensils and tools, and ornaments found at Gua Niahs indicated a civilization has existed since the early part of the Palaeolithic (geological stone age period) there. A human skull of a young girl estimated to be 40,000 years old found entombed at the site, propelled Niah Caves as one of the important archaeological sites in the world. The skull is in the collection of the Sarawak Museum. However, 122 human remains excavated from the site are still in the United States (Ling, 2017). The remains brought there in the 1960s for study would be returned back to Sarawak in 2019, following the signing of agreement between the Sarawak Museum and the University of Nevada. Niah Caves were still being used as a burial site even as late as the 19^{th} century whereby boat-shaped coffins which symbolized the journey for the decease after deaths or during afterlife made from timber were found (Corporation, n.d). Cave wall paintings also depicted the same story



Fig. 3: The world famous site where a young girl skull dated 40,000 years ago was excavated

The excavation site which had fence around, however, was closed to visitors. Only a signage (Figure 4) wired to the fence indicated the site importance. There was no more excavation. If an interest from the Sarawak Museum to carry further exploration exists, they simply didn't have the money to fund it (Personal interview with Sani). The guide was actually a staff of the Archaeology Museum which was located next to the jetty. He takes turn with his colleague at the Archaeology Museum to clean the excavation site, particularly from fallen leafs as the site is at the western edge of the main entrance to the cave complex



Fig 4: A signage wired to the excavation site fence, narrating the site importance

3.3 Huge Population of Swiftlets



Fig 5: Ropes dangling from caves' ceiling and holes

As such the nests have high commercial value. However, not all species of swiftlets produce nests that are edible. Out of 24 swiftlet species that are found in this world, only a few produce edible nests (Lim, 2011). The same signage found at the entrance of the cave as mentioned earlier noted that there were five species of swiftlet in Sarawak, but only three produce edible nests. The species that produce edible nests are *aerodramus fuciphagus* (white-nest swiftlet), *aerodramus maximus* (black-nest swiftlet) and *collocalia esculenta* (glossy-nests swiftlet). The swiftlets in Niah Caves are predominantly of the black-nest swiftlets

3.4 Trading of Nests had been going on for Ages

Trading for edible bird nests has been going on for decades at Niah Caves. One section of the Niah Caves known as the Trader Cave (Gua Dagang) are full of old timber structures resembling former makeshift stalls where trading on the edible nest was made (see figure 6). A photo taken in 1959 encapsulated in a solitary signage at the Trader Cave shows traders who stayed and lived in these premises almost 60 years ago. This tells us that the place was busy during its heyday. Malaysia produced 135 metric tons of edible birds' nests amounting to RM1 billion from 2010 to 2012 (Manan & Othman, 2012). However, the nests are mainly produced from swiftlet farms and houses constructed specifically to house the swiftlets (Awang, Hassan, & Abdullah, 2013, 2014; Wong, 2017). These houses dotted the urban and rural landscape in Malaysia. The houses, nonetheless, are not open to public. Visits, apart from occasional harvesting periods would have the tendency to disturb swiftlet's habitat and possibly induce the birds to leave the houses.



Fig 6: Trader's cave, a name synonymous to heyday activities

In a different perspective the Malaysian Government has emphasized the nest's contribution to the country's economy. Furthermore, the government wants to increase revenue from the swiftlet industry. Under the government's National Key Economic Area transformation plan, revenue from the industry is set to reach US$3.6 billion in 2020 ((ETP), 2012). This is part of the government's plan to intensify the country's agriculture sector. Niah Caves as one of the biggest producers of nests in Malaysia would be important to the government's initiative.

3.5 At Owe At the Height Harvesters Had to Climb

The swiftlet nests were located high up in the cave's ceilings and holes. *"I am at owe to the dizziness height these people had to climb [to reach the nest]… I am a climber [mountain] myself"* (personal interview with Curt, an American tourist from Hawaii). Curt was referring to the harvesters who had to climb and simply rely on ropes and bamboo, and thus defying gravity. On the other hand, as a mountain climber, Curt would climb on solid ground or rocks, not much in the act of defying gravity. Curt and his travelling female partner were owed at the physical appearance of long poles reaching the cave's ceilings and many ropes dangling from

ceilings to almost the cave's floor. They were on a holiday in Malaysia. They were enticed to travel to Niah Caves, initially drawn by the archaeological significance of the site. However, they went home with a new finding that was the phenomenon dealing with swiftlet nests harvesting activities.

The "owe" behaviour has also a remark of extreme dangerous condition harvesters faced. Fiddling with deaths, harvesters have the risks of falling. But what made them do the jobs? According to Zamri, the person engaged as a guard by the one of the harvesting operators, "1 kilogram of nests is priced at RM500… 1 kilogram may composed of 10 nests, depending to the sizes of the nests" (Personal interview with Zamri). The high priced of the commodity, and the associated high salary paid to the harvesters for the dangerous jobs, answered such question. We came across Zamri while walking on the boardwalk to reach Niah Caves. Zamri was about to start his 4-day working shift of guarding the compartment (caves'section), his operator was licensed to harvest. He was in his early eighties, and came from the nearby village.

4 Conclusion

Niah Caves, although valued at the global stage because of its archaeological significance which forced the re-writing of history of civilization in Southeast Asia, the caves also produced another wonder. Empirical evidence provided by this study suggests that the caves' big swiftlets population could also draw in tourists. However, the rates the nests are harvested should be sustainable, that is there should be a balance among the social, economic and environmental cost. If this happens the quality of existing resources would not be deteriorate (Marzo-Navarro, Pedraja-Iglesias, & Vinzon, 2015).

On other matter, Malaysia on having China as a fast significant emerging origin tourist market may use Niah Caves as a destination within the tourism circuit visited by Chinese tourists, linking the ethnicity of the tourists who have the social preference of having edible birds' nest as part of their menu. There were 1,613,355 Chinese tourists in Malaysia in 2014 who spent RM4.94 billion (Malaysia, 2014). Nonetheless Malaysia which has a component of ethnic Chinese in its demography, does not show a strong preference to consume the edible nests. Only one out of 10 respondents surveyed in Malaysia consumes one form or another of the nest (Manan & Othman, 2012).

Finally, this study could be a manifestation of the evolution of Niah Caves as a destination. The all too familiar archaeology-laced visits changing gradually to nature-based visits, the latter anchored by the complexity of interchanges between the avian species and men. Hereby, the authors borrow Jovicic (2016)'s notion of conceptualization of tourism destinations, "… a more recent conceptualizations of tourism destinations treat destinations as complex adaptive systems that adapt to ever-changing economic, political, and social trends".

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