

## **The Role of Government for Ecotourism Development: Focusing on East Coast Economic Region**

Md. Anowar Hossain Bhuiyan, Chamhuri Siwar,  
Shaharuddin Mohamad Ismail and Rabiul Islam  
Institute for Environment and Development, University Kebangsaan Malaysia,  
43600 UKM, Bangi, Selangor, Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

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**Abstract: Problem statement:** This study explored the plans and strategies of government for ecotourism development in Malaysia as well as ECER. Government participation is necessary in developing economies where tourism planning and promotion tend to be controlled directly by governments. The ecotourism activity should have a strong focus on learning through interpretation of local ecosystems and cultural heritage. Malaysia has formulated separate plan for sustainable ecotourism development in the country. This plan ensures conservation of Malaysia's natural and cultural heritage. Ecotourism activities can be remaining vital tool for economic development in the ECER. The objective of this study is to examine the various plans of Malaysia relating to ecotourism development. The study also analyzes the challenges and prospects of ecotourism development in Malaysia as well as in ECER. **Approach:** The data for analysis was perceived from the secondary sources. National Ecotourism Plan, Ninth Malaysian Plan and Tenth Malaysian Plan of Malaysia have been thoroughly reviewed in this regard. **Results:** The study shows that the major activities of Malaysian Government for ecotourism development were strategies, improving ecotourism products, improving accessibility, employment and training, marketing promotion, sustainable tourism development, investment, research and planning, safety and security. The initiatives of government for ecotourism development in ECER are guidelines, market segmentation, infrastructure development, cooperation among state authorities, commercial interest and investment, local entrepreneurship and Bumiputera participation. **Conclusion:** The study reveals that some activities may be taken for the ecotourism development in Malaysia. These are ecotourism action plan, building institutional capacity; invest in ecotourism projects, creation of protected areas, image and branding, linkage to other types' tourism, advertising and publication, human resource development and SME operation. The government must be ensured the local people participation in ecotourism development for their social, ecological, economic and cultural benefits.

**Key words:** National ecotourism plan, ecotourism development, East Coast Economic Region (ECER), tourism planning, local entrepreneurship, collaborative projects

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Government participation is most visible in developing economies where tourism planning and promotion tend to be controlled directly by governments. Government agencies taking greater interest, allocating funds and time to collaborative projects and playing a vital role in the planning, development and management of tourism initiatives. The factors that have helped to change in governments' approach include: The awareness of the importance of tourism as a global, national and regional socio-

economic engine; the potential for tourism to contribute to environmental management and enhancement; the profile of tourism as a tool for international development; increased lobbying by industry. Governments are motivated to play an integral and collaborative role in tourism planning and management and the private sector requires government assistance to ensure the sustainability of tourism. Sustainability issues affecting tourism on the agenda of governments as government agencies have control over a wide range of features that affect the maximization of benefits tourism can deliver to communities (Simpson, 2008).

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**Corresponding Author:** Md. Anowar Hossain Bhuiyan, Institute for Environment and Development, University Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 UKM, Bangi, Selangor, Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

Governments are able to support tourism through marketing, information services, education and advice through public-private collaborations (Hall, 1999).

Government can play a role in the management and development of the people who aspire and work in tourism. The role of government with respect to tourism policy, development and planning varies according to the perceived importance of tourism as a sector within the national and local economy and political philosophies that inform economic and social policy (Baum and Szivas, 2008). National tourism administrations have sought to facilitate co-ordination among ministries and work in partnership with nongovernmental organizations, the private sector, professional and community groups to implement strategic tourism initiatives (Goymen, 2000). All local or national governments, they have a policy for tourism, whether it represents an active involvement for tourism development (Hall, 1994). Governments should define the substance of tourism policy. Their contract with private initiative and society in general to enhance the development of tourism must change considerably (Fayos-Solfi, 1996).

According to Hall (2008) "Government helps shape the economic framework for the tourism industry although international economic factors relating to exchange rates, interest rates and investor confidence are increasingly important, helps provide the infrastructure and educational requirements for tourism, establishes the regulatory environment in which business operates and takes an active role in promotion and marketing. Again, governmental financing institutions have opened special credit programs for private sector tourism enterprises (Becker, 1995). As Page and Thorn (2002) argued; national tourism plan was needed to achieve more balanced, equitable and beneficial patterns of tourism activity and development for destinations and local communities.

In order to promote regional tourism, local governments are required to improve tourist spots and to disseminate regional tourism information at home and abroad (Ishikawa and Fukushige, 2007). Local governments, regardless of their political orientation, view tourism as a way to develop the economy. From this assumption, they strive to look for elements and come up with images that could be used for the purposes of tourism to contribute both to local income generation and economic growth and also subsequently benefit them socially and politically (Ballesteros and Ramirez, 2007).

Ecotourism is one of the boosting and promising tourism segmentation in the world today. Many countries of the world build up their economic

advancement by using this types' tourism (Bhuiyan *et al.*, 2011). Ecotourism has emerged under the rubric of sustainable tourism as one solution to help protect the ecological and cultural resources of tourism sites, provide local economic opportunity and give travelers greater environmental awareness. Ecotourism can incorporate elements of 'nature-based', 'adventure', 'alternative' or 'green' tourism (Fallon and Kriwoken, 2003). The Ecotourism Society (1992) has defined ecotourism as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people". According to Orams (1995), ecotourism consists of the following components: conservation benefits, the nature-based experience, the setting and economic and social benefits. Ecotourism should benefit conservation through improved management of visited natural areas. The core precepts of ecotourism are conservation of natural and cultural heritage; empowerment and provision of financial benefits for local communities; minimal environmental impact; environmental and cultural education and respect for tourists (Ah-Choy, 2010).

Tourism industry is a key foreign exchange earner for Malaysia, contributing to over 40% of the country's balance of payment on 2005 (Rietbergen-McCracken and Abaza, 2000). The industry has provides an important source of income generation and employment opportunity to the country. Tourism is the second largest foreign exchange earning sector for the country after manufacturing. The industry provides an important source of income, employment and economic development to the country. Tourism industry effects positively on the economy of the country by increasing in foreign exchange earnings and employment opportunities. The Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism had established in 1987 and later upgraded it to the Ministry of Tourism in 2004. The government allocated significant amount of fund to tourism industry besides providing sufficient basic infrastructure. Malaysia has ranked 16<sup>th</sup> in terms of global inbound tourism receipt, capturing approximately 2% of global market share in 2008. The tourism industry employs 1.7 million workers or approximately 16% of total employment in 2008 (Malaysia Unit Perancang Ekonomi, 2007). Tourism industry in Malaysia has been growing considerably in recent years. On the world scale Malaysia, is ranked 31st, with good ground transport infrastructure and excellent price competitiveness (Mohebi and Rahim, 2010). Despite these achievements, several issues need to be addressed, including the need to develop ecotourism, nature tourism, cultural tourism and other potential tourism products for attracting the tourists. In order to the tourism

development, Malaysia give emphasize on ecotourism for tourism promotion. Malaysia has formulated separate plan for sustainable ecotourism development in the country. The Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism has formulated The Malaysian National Ecotourism Plan. The Plan was drafted in 1995 and was accepted by the government in 1996. This plan ensures conservation of Malaysia's natural and cultural heritage.

The East Coast Economic Region (ECER) consists of three states of Malaysia- Kelantan, Terengganu, Pahang and District of Mersing in Johor. It covers 51% of the land area of Peninsular Malaysia and represents 14% of the national population. The region remains the least urbanized at 41.3%, compared to other regions in Peninsular Malaysia. Ecotourism activities can be remaining vital tool for economic development in the region. Because of the region is famous for its natural attraction- unspoilt beaches, serene, coral island and lush rainforest; Malay culture and handicrafts. All of these attractions are suitable for ecotourism development in this region. The aim of the study is to examine the various plans of Malaysia relating to ecotourism development. The study also analyzes the challenges and prospects of ecotourism development in Malaysia as well as in ECER.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

**Data attainment:** The data for analysis is perceived from the secondary sources. The secondary data has been collected from the government documents, tourism plans and scholarly publications provided information on state policies on ecotourism. Tourism plans, government documents, newspapers and journal articles have been examined to identify issues in ecotourism and in order to accumulate secondary data. National Ecotourism Plan, Ninth Malaysian Plan and Tenth Malaysian Plan of Malaysia have been thoroughly reviewed in this regard.

**Ninth Malaysia plan:** The Ninth Malaysia Plan was adopted for 2006-2010 period. During the plan period, vigorous efforts have been geared towards realizing the full potential of the tourism industry in order to enhance its contribution in the economy. The prime focus gave to enhance Malaysia as a leading global tourist destination as well as promote domestic tourism. More coordinated efforts have been undertaken to mobilize and channel resources to upgrade the requisite tourism infrastructure and facilities as well as to develop more innovative tourism products and services. High priority has continued for achieving more sustainable tourism development. In the plan period, greater emphasis has

given to ecotourism through the preservation of natural attractions such as wildlife sanctuaries, national parks, highlands and islands.

**Tenth Malaysia plan:** The Tenth Malaysia Plan will be formulated for 2011- 2015 period. In the plan, several issues will be addressed for tourism development. The major issues are to develop vibrant and iconic tourism products, improve maintenance of existing tourism sites and adopting focused tourism promotions. During the plan period, the target is to improve Malaysia's position to be within the top 10 in terms of global tourism receipts. For this purpose, promoting differentiated strategies for ecotourism development and needs such as for nature adventure.

**National ecotourism plan:** The National Ecotourism Plan was intended to provide a general framework to assist the government to develop the country's ecotourism potential. It aims to maximize the economic, socio-cultural and environmental benefits that can be gained from the tourism sector. To ensure the success of the eco-tourism plans, collective efforts between the various levels of government, the private sector and the local communities were planned and carried out to maximize the economic, socio-cultural and environmental benefits. MOCAT (Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism) acts as a single coordinating body to the overall implementation of the National Eco tourism plan. Now, Ministry of Tourism is the authorizing body to implement the ecotourism plan.

## RESULTS

Table 1 shows that year-on-year increase in international tourism to Malaysia and other Asian countries for 2005. The year-on-year increase rate of Malaysia is 4.6% which is the less than other countries of Asia. Neighboring countries of Malaysia such as; Thailand and Singapore posses 16% and 7.4% increase rate respectively.

Table 1: Increase in international tourism to Malaysia and other Asian countries, 2005

Country	Year-on-year increase rate (%)
Malaysia	4.6
Thailand	16.0
Vietnam	18.4
Cambodia	20.0
Singapore	7.4
Macau	16.0
China	19.6
India	13.0

Source: ECER Master Plan, 2007

Table 2: Share of tourism revenue in total earning of the services in Malaysia, 2000-2010

Year	Number of tourist arrivals (million)	Total earnings from tourism RM (billion)	Share of tourism revenue in total earning of the services
2000	10.2	11.2	32.7
2005	16.4	18.1	43.0
2009	23.6	53.4	67.1
2010	24.6	59.4	NA

**Source:** Ninth and Tenth Malaysia plan

Table 3: Selected Tourism Indicators of Malaysia, 2000-2010

Indicators	2000	2005	2010
Per capita expenditure (RM)	1.696	1.890	2.417
Average length of stay (Night)	5.800	7.200	8.700
Number of hotels	1.492	2.256	3.218
Number of hotel rooms	124413.000	170.873	247.008
Average occupancy rate of hotel (%)	59.200	63.500	66.400
Employment	390.600	451.000	520.700

**Source:** Economic planning unit and ministry of tourism

Table 4: Development Expenditure for Tourism, 2001-2010

Program	8MP (RM million)	9MP (RM million)
Environmental protection and beautification	243.1	652.1
Facilities, infrastructure and maintenance	459.4	1,034.8
Accommodation	31.7	115.0
Others	49.4	46.0
Total	783.6	1,847.9

**Source:** Economic planning unit

Table 5: States of Malaysia visited, 2004-2005

State	2004 (%)	2005 (%)	Growth (%)
Selangor	58.5	46.1	-12.4
Pinang	34.7	34.4	-0.3
Pahang	21.8	17.8	-4.0
Sabah	11.8	12.2	0.4
Melaka	19.2	11.2	-8.0
Sarawak	6.5	11.2	4.7
Johor	12.6	8.2	-4.4
Kedah/Perlis	5.7	5.2	-0.5
Terengganu	3.1	3.2	0.1
Perak	2.8	2.3	-0.5
N. Sembilan	1.6	1.8	-0.2
Kelantan	3.4	1.4	-2.0

**Source:** Tourism Malaysia, 2005

Table 2 reveals the foreign tourist arrivals, total earning from tourism and share of tourism revenue in total earning of the services of Malaysia. Over the period 2000-2010, foreign tourist arrivals to Malaysia increased from 10.2-24.6 million and total earnings from tourism increased 11.2-59.4 billion. The share of tourism revenue in total earning of the services was 32.7 and 67.1 in 2000 and 2009 respectively.

Table 3 illustrates some selected tourism indicators of Malaysia. Over the period 2000-2010, per capita expenditure in tourism increased 1,696-2,417 and employment increased 390,600-520,700. In the same period, hotel rooms increased 124,413-247,008 and occupancy rate increased 59.2-66.4%.

Table 4 shows the development expenditure for tourism in Malaysia. Malaysia has spent 783.6 million

and 1,847.9 million under the 8 Malaysia Plan and 9 Malaysia Plan respectively for tourism development.

Table 5 reveals the growth rate of states visited in Malaysia during 2005-2004. The growth rate of three ECER states- Pahang, Terengganu and Kelantan were -4.0, 0.1 and -2.0 respectively.

Table 6 illustrates the existing and targeted market segmentation of three states of ECER. The table shows Kelantan and Terengganu give emphasize on foreign tourists increasing. On the other hand, Pahang give priorities on the domestic tourists for target market.

Table 7 reveals the ecotourism attractions of ECER under three states. ECER is full of natural attractions- park, recreational forest, waterfall, forest reserve, spring, coastal beaches, islands and water bodies. These are valuable resources for ecotourism development.

Table 6: Existing and targeted market segmentation by states of ECER

State	Market segmentation	Targeted markets
Kelantan	Domestic (86%)	Domestic (70%)
	Foreign (14%)	Foreign (30%)
Pahang	Domestic (64%)	Domestic (65%)
	Foreign (36%)	Foreign (35%)
Terengganu	Domestic (89%)	Domestic (70%)
	Foreign (11%)	Foreign (30%)

Source: ECER master plan, 2007

Table 7: Ecotourism attractions in the ECER

State	Attractions
Kelantan	Kuala Koh National Park, Gunung Stong, Nenggiri, Kulai Krai- Dabong, Jelawang, Gua Musang
Pahang	Taman Negara, Sungai Relau, Kenong Rimba Park, Gunung Tapis Park, Senyum Recreational Forest, Tasik Bera, Tasik Chini, Jeram Besu, Kuala Gandah Elephant Sanctuary, Deerland Park, Tekam Plantation resort, Pulau Timon, Coastal beaches, Highland areas
Terengganu	Tasik Kenyir, Tanjung Mentong, Gunung Gagau, Sekayu Recreational Forest, Pasir Raja Forest Reserve, LA Hot Spring, Seito Agro Resort, Waterfalls, Islands, Beaches

Source: ECER master plan, 2007

## DISCUSSION

The main attractions of Malaysia to visitors' are wildlife, scenery, forests and beaches. Some tourism spots are famous to the tourists for ecotourism development in all over the country. Again, some sites have potentiality, but they attract fewer visitors. The large number of tour operators and guides are interested to ecotourism for capturing the global tourism market. There have been as many as 571,000 ecotourists visiting Malaysia in 1994 and revenue yielded RM655 million. About 20 sites in Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak probably account for the vast majority of ecotourism by foreign tourists (National Ecotourism Plan, 1996). The major activities of Malaysian Government for ecotourism development are discussed as below.

**Strategies:** In order to promote the ecotourism sector, the government has continued to facilitate the global and regional strategic alliances among governments, tourist organizations and the industry. This partnership has foster greater cooperation with other countries, tour and travel services, transport services providers and tourist destinations. The government is promoting differentiated strategies to cater for unique and distinctive travel patterns and needs for ecotourism. The government should be mechanisms for inter-sector participation and building on existing institutions and strengths.

**Improving ecotourism products:** The government continued to promote and develop ecotourism in 48 priority sites, as guided by the National Ecotourism Plan during the period of 2006-2010. Government has given greater emphasize to ecotourism through the preservation of natural attractions such as wildlife sanctuaries, national parks, highlands and islands. They should be encouraged for the establishment of ecotourism sites in natural areas, owned by governmental or privately.

**Improving accessibility:** The government continued to expand and upgrade infrastructure and communication facilities, which supported the growth of the tourism sector. Air, surface and sea transportation infrastructure and facilities have been upgraded to facilitate the development of tourism industry. Improvements have continued to be made to facilitate hassle-free travel, online visa applications and multiple entry permits.

**Employment and training:** The government has influenced the entrepreneurs to increase the employment opportunities in ecotourism sector. Government has improved the quality of tourist services by extensive training through the supervision and coordination of the National Tourism Human Resource Development Council (NTHRDC) and the National Vocational Training Council (MLVK). Tourist guides have encouraged learning foreign languages, particularly Arabic, German, Japanese and Spanish.

**Marketing promotion:** In an effort to Malaysia as a premier tourist destination, the government in collaboration with the private sector intensified promotional and marketing activities. The theme; 'Malaysia Truly Asia', 'Think Tourism' and 'Malaysia Welcomes the World' have capitalized it as a distinct and identifiable image recognized by the international tourism community. Multi-pronged marketing and promotional activities, active participation in trade shows, exhibitions and sales missions have pursued in this regard.

**Sustainable tourism development:** A more integrated approach to tourism planning and implementation has undertaken to ensure sustainable tourism development in Malaysia. Emphasis has given to preserving and enhancing existing natural assets to minimize environmental damage. The government is giving importance to ecotourism development in the country for preventing natural damage.

**Investment:** In order to continue promoting tourism destinations, the private sector have encouraged

developing innovative tourism products and services. For this purpose, the provision of incentives have considered for the development of special interest products in ecotourism. Bumiputera participation and SME in tourism related business have encouraged for ecotourism development in the country.

**Research and planning:** The government is giving emphasizes on research and impact evaluation of ecotourism related programs and projects. Tourism Satellite Account (TSA) has been fully developed in this regard. The TSA mechanism is supporting to subsequent policy making and readjustment of strategies and programs for the tourism industry.

**Safety and security:** Malaysia has increased efforts to ensure the country as a safe and pleasant place to visit. The tourist police have strengthened to increase security to tourists. The country has capitalized its' political stability and diverse racial harmony to foster the country's image as a tourist- friendly destination.

Government initiatives for ecotourism development in ECER.

Tourism is outlined in the National Physical Plan of Malaysia as a key sector for the ECER where ecotourism is considered to have excellent potential. The initiatives of government for ecotourism development in ECER are as below.

**Guidelines:** Comprehensive guidelines for sustainable ecotourism development in ECER have been drawn up in the National Ecotourism Plan. These guidelines are giving proper instructions to develop ecotourism in this region.

**Market segmentation:** Government already set up new market segmentation of tourism in ECER. In this target, government has been giving emphasize on ecotourism development in beaches, highlands, forest areas and natural attractions.

**Infrastructure development:** Upgraded communication and infrastructure facilities are necessary for boosting the ecotourism activities. The federal and local government spent a lot of allocation for infrastructure and communication development in ECER which ensures ecotourism development in this region.

**Cooperation among state authorities:** Cooperation and coordination are remaining amongst state government and relevant official agencies as well as between state and federal institutions for ecotourism development. Various activities and initiatives are performing among them in this regard.

**Commercial interested and investment:** The government has created a pro-business environment in tourism with financial packages and other incentives. This initiative can attract the suitable investors from within the country and overseas for ecotourism development.

**Local entrepreneurship:** Government has facilitated small scale ventures and family businesses related to tourism. These facilities give opportunities to the local communities for involving business activities relating to ecotourism.

**Bumiputera participation:** Government giving emphasize on Bumiputera participation for ecotourism development in ECER. They get financial assistance from Special Tourism Fund and Tourism Infrastructure Fund. Government intervention, capacity building, training and access to microcredit facilities have increased the role and share of Bumiputeras in the ecotourism industry.

## CONCLUSION

Ecotourism is one of the potential tourism industries in the world today. Many developed and developing countries has been enhancing their economy by ecotourism development. Malaysian has given emphasize to tourism development for highest foreign exchange earnings. Ecotourism may be the main tourism destination in this regard. ECER is one of the economic potential areas of Malaysia. The government may be taken proper planning and necessary development activities for ecotourism development in this area. Again, the government must be ensured the local people participation in ecotourism development for their social, ecological, economic and cultural benefits.

Malaysian government is giving prioritize in the tourism industry for economic advancement of the country. Ecotourism is one of the key elements in this regard. Government initiatives are necessary for ecotourism development in the country. The following activities may be taken for the ecotourism development in Malaysia.

**Ecotourism action plan:** National ecotourism plan already formulated in Malaysia. An ecotourism action plan is must for proper ecotourism development.

**Building institutional capacity:** Ministry of Tourism is concerning authority for tourism development in Malaysia. Again, other institutional bodies are engaging for ecotourism development in the country.

So, it is necessary to build up institutional capacity and coordination among the bodies for ecotourism development.

**Investment in ecotourism projects:** Government encourages the foreign investors to invest in ecotourism projects in the country. Government also creates suitable situation for the local entrepreneurs. Public-Private Partnership projects may be implemented in this regard.

**Creation of protected areas:** Ecotourism needs pollution free and environmental friendly sites. It has limited environmental degradation and negative impact. Government can create protected areas in ECER and other parts of the country for ecotourism development.

**Image and branding:** The countries of the world that can create proper image in ecotourism would be successful in this tourism. So, Malaysia needs developing strong image and branding for ecotourism.

**Linkage to other types' tourism:** Ecotourism can ensure the sustainable tourism development in any country. For this reason, Malaysia can develop ecotourism inter related with other types' tourism such as, nature tourism, heritage tourism, education and culture tourism.

**Advertising and publication:** Government must be intensified marketing and promotional activities related to ecotourism. Tourism offices in home and abroad can play an active role for this promotional activity. Attractive publications also be printed and circulated for ecotourism marketing.

**Human resource development:** Efficient human resources are necessary for ecotourism development. Malaysia has been lacking trained human resources for ecotourism. Tourism Ministry and Education Ministry can be taken crash programs for fulfill the shortage of efficient manpower in ecotourism sector.

**SME operations:** Small business enterprises can help the ecotourism in many ways. Government can take initiatives to develop small and medium enterprise in ecotourism sites. It will help to develop ecotourism as well as business operations.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Financial assistance provided by the *Arus Perdana* (AP) Research Grant, Institute for Environment and Development, University Kebangsaan Malaysia (Ref.

No. UKM-AP-PLW-04-2010) headed by Prof Chamhuri Siwar is gratefully acknowledged.

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