

Volunteer Tourism Development in Malaysia: A Case Study in Bukit Belungkor, Johor

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Abstract

Volunteer tourism is a relatively new tourism sector that is being actively promoted in Malaysia nowadays. Volunteer tourism acts as a link between nature-based and community-based tourism. This creates a mutually beneficial connection that encourages responsible tourism. Volunteer tourism generally holds a low level of awareness in Malaysia. This study aims to investigate ways volunteer tourism can help empower local communities and tourists at Bukit Belungkor, Kota Tinggi, Johor. These communities should work together voluntarily to help sustain and conserve the natural ecosystem within Bukit Belungkor. This study gathered data from a questionnaire, stakeholder engagement, and interviews with volunteers. Data from the survey were analyzed by using Microsoft Excel to evaluate the results of pre- and post-program questionnaires. The mean value of each question was calculated and compared via a *t* test to gauge the tourist's level of knowledge and experience after volunteering at Bukit Belungkor. Our study discovered eight stakeholders from government and non-governmental organizations that are directly involved in the volunteer tourism initiative. Twenty-four respondents who joined the volunteer tourism program at Bukit Belungkor answered the survey. From the survey, we discovered that the knowledge of volunteer tourists on volunteer tourism, biodiversity, and stingless bee increased after joining the program. Volunteer tourism acted as a platform for the participants to deepen their knowledge through hands-on activities and engagement. From the survey results, we suggested an improved volunteer tourism package for Bukit Belungkor. The new tourism package is an advanced package with the addition of activities, a new price range, and a longer program duration to attract more volunteer tourists to Bukit Belungkor.

1. Introduction

Volunteer tourism, often referred to as 'voluntourism', involves people travelling to places with the primary intent of taking part and participating in volunteer activities that meet the needs of the local community [1][2]. This unusual style of tourism combines philanthropy and adventure, giving participants the chance to interact with people from different cultures, help with community projects, and learn more about the destinations they visit. Tourists are also able to build their network with other volunteers, researchers, local authorities, and community while volunteering at their destination [1].

Volunteer tourism has evolved over the years. Nowadays, it focuses on environmental and humanitarian initiatives assisting underserved communities [3]. These activities include, but are not limited to, environmental protection, scientific research relating to wildlife, the environment and water, medical care, economic and social development (including agriculture, building, and education), and cultural restoration [4]. Local communities are usually involved in volunteer tourism activities as they gain direct and indirect benefits from it. This is because volunteer tourism not only contributes to the personal pleasure of the tourists, but also to the development of the host community [5]. Local communities are not passive recipients, but they are an active partner in volunteer tourism endeavors. Their participation encourages a sense of reciprocity, cross-cultural interaction, and shared responsibility, resulting in outcomes that are more significant and long-lasting for all those involved.

The concept of volunteer tourism is closely related to ecotourism and nature-based tourism [6]. If previously volunteer tourists often helped raise the standard of living of the people affected by natural disasters in an area, now the concept of volunteer tourism has evolved where it emphasizes sustainable and responsible tourism [7]. Volunteer tourism often takes place in nature-based environments where participants work on environmental initiatives that have a direct positive impact on the environment. This concept of volunteer tourism is actively carried out nowadays as natural ecosystems encounter critical challenges such as deforestation, habitat degradation, and climate change. A volunteer tourism activity at Batu Puteh Village in Sabah, which is managed by Batu Puteh Community Tourism Cooperative Limited (KOPEL), focuses on habitat and nature conservation as well as community work. Their 20-day nature conservation projects include seed collecting, forest habitat restoration, tree planting, and lake restoration, which help the community to improve their ecosystems in their living area [8].

Johor has many natural resources that can be protected and conserved, but the conservation effort through volunteerism is still insufficient. This study aims to investigate ways volunteer tourism can help empower local communities and tourists at Bukit Belungkor, Kota Tinggi, Johor. Bukit Belungkor is a natural lowland dipterocarp hill forest. There are two types of main ecosystem here, namely lowland forest and mangrove ecosystems. The hiking trail to the peak of Bukit Belungkor and stingless bee farms are located in the forested area. Meanwhile, places and activities such as mangrove nurseries, mangrove tour, and kayaking can be found in the mangrove area. All these activities are generally conducted by local communities. They actively participate in the tourism activities management there, such as being tour guides who share their knowledge about the area's history during hiking and stingless bee farm tours, offering homestays and guest houses, and being environmental conservationists who conserve the mangrove ecosystem in Bukit Belungkor.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Study Site

This study was carried out at Bukit Belungkor, Kota Tinggi, Johor, a hill with an elevation of 184 m (about 603.67 ft) [9]. It is located near Tanjung Surat and small village communities like Kampung Sungai Ambat and Kampung Seri Jadi. One of the popular activities there is hiking, which is conducted by local guides. Tanjung Belungkor is approximately 28 km (about 17.4 mi) and 30 minutes away from Desaru, making it a popular tourist destination. One of the attractions besides unique local flora and fauna is a stingless bee farm managed by the local community in Bukit Belungkor. Tourists can enjoy a demonstration of how honey is collected, and they will be given a sample of stingless bee honey to taste. Another popular nature tourism activity available in Tanjung Belungkor is a mangrove tour.



Fig. 1 An overview of Bukit Belungkor and the nearest town at the area, Tanjung Surat

2.2 Stakeholder Engagement

Several stakeholders were engaged to gauge their interest in volunteer tourism at Bukit Belungkor. Stakeholders refer to the people and organizations that are directly or indirectly involved in the decision-making process and who are impacted by a policy action. Stakeholders in environmental and conservation planning often include government representatives, corporations, scientists, landowners, and local users of natural resources [10]. Involving stakeholders such as the local community, businesses, government, and non-government organizations ensures that this study is rooted in the specific needs and objectives of the study area. The engagement that is being made often benefits the stakeholders whether directly or indirectly. The stakeholder engagement process started by identifying focus groups that can collaborate and cooperate throughout this study. Stakeholders are divided into several focus groups, ranging from government agencies and local community to tourism operators. Regular consultations and discussions were held to gather input and feedback from each focus group. The primary data sources are semi-structured interviews with the person in charge for each focus group. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with organizations such as Tourism Johor, Koperasi Belungkor Berhad, Hard Rock Desaru Coast, and Blerong Services. These interviews were used as a platform for the focus groups to express their opinions freely and openly to ensure the success of the collaboration. All the interview sessions, aside from one, were recorded and transcribed for data analysis.

2.3 Onsite Questionnaire

Questionnaires were used to collect data on how this study can help the communities know more about volunteer tourism and other tourism products that are being promoted at Bukit Belungkor. The questionnaire also surveyed the knowledge gained, the willingness to join volunteer tourism in other time, and other improvements that can be made. In the questionnaire, the main point of this study was highlighted, which is the respondents' prior knowledge about volunteer tourism. Questions about biodiversity and stingless bees were included to gauge their level of knowledge about the natural attractions at Bukit Belungkor and the capability to promote these attractions as one of the tourism products there. Clear and concise questions were formulated to avoid any biases that can influence responses. Respondent demographics were collected, and specific questions were asked about volunteer tourism, biodiversity, and stingless bees. The questionnaire was distributed before and after the pilot program to determine if the respondents' knowledge increased after joining the program. Open-ended questions were added to the post-survey questionnaire to allow respondents to share their thoughts, experiences, and recommendations that can improve the program.

2.4 Execution of Volunteer Tourism Pilot Program

A volunteer tourism pilot program was conducted at Bukit Belungkor, Kota Tinggi, Johor where a variety of activities were carried out to support long-term involvement and strengthen the local communities. Activities in

the program included hiking, planting the trees that are foraged by stingless bee, guided tour to stingless bee farm, knowledge sharing about stingless bee, and seed bomb-making workshop. Youth volunteer tourists were the target participants for this program. From this volunteer tourism program, the perspectives, and opinions of the participants about the introduction of volunteer tourism package at Bukit Belungkor were surveyed and their answers for the questionnaire were analyzed.

2.5 Data Analysis

The questionnaire results were thoroughly analyzed using a methodical approach. Quantitative analysis methods were used to identify patterns, links, and trends. The data were imported into Microsoft Excel, sorted, and cleansed to remove errors. Descriptive statistics, such as frequencies, percentages, mean, and median were calculated to provide an overview of the survey demographics and key variables. The patterns and trends were visualized using Excel's pivot tables and charts. A *t* test was used to compare the means between the pre- and post-program questionnaires to determine the significant difference between both datasets. The findings were thoroughly analyzed to ensure the connections to the research questions and objectives of this study.

2.6 New Tourism Package

A new tourism package was developed as a continuous effort to introduce and promote volunteer tourism in Malaysia. Constructive suggestions from the participants were considered in the development process with the goal of addressing areas for improvement and producing an even more enjoyable experience for the volunteer tourists. The updated package includes cutting-edge components that improve the program's overall effect while also considering the changing demands and preferences of the previous participants.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Stakeholder Engagement

The stakeholder engagement in this study is characterized by a diverse range of organizations, each playing a crucial role in the promotion and implementation of this volunteer tourism study. Key stakeholders included prominent organizations such as Tourism Malaysia and Tourism Johor, which contributed to the support and financial aid throughout the program. Collaborative efforts were made with government entities, such as Johor State Forestry Department (JPNJ). JPNJ donated specifically selected trees to serve as a vital food source for stingless bees, which play vital roles as pollinators in preserving biodiversity and the health of ecosystems. The trees selected by JPNJ not only support the reforestation efforts at Bukit Belungkor but also provide a long-term food source for the invaluable stingless bee population. This proves that should volunteer tourism be replicated in other areas, tourism operators can gather support from government agencies. For instance, the government agencies and college administrators in China organized volunteer tourism programs that focus on education for children in rural areas with limited resources [11]. The provision of such legally binding support fosters a conducive environment for volunteer tourism to thrive, enabling better coordination and integration of these initiatives into broader national development strategies.

In this study, Hard Rock Desaru Coast is one of the stakeholders that contributed to the development of volunteer tourism in the area by generously donating seed bombs. Seed bombs are an easy and durable way to propagate native species because they provide the perfect conditions for seed germination that allow for more time for seedlings to proliferate [12]. This is useful for the local community to enhance natural landscapes at Bukit Belungkor. Other stakeholders involved in the volunteer tourism development initiative include Blerong Services that supported and guided in the seamless running of the program; Belungkor Venture, Koperasi Belungkor Berhad, and CO & Wan Enterprise that provided necessities throughout the program, such as food and tools needed for the activities; and Stingless Bee Farm Bukit Belungkor that provided an opportunity for the participants to learn about stingless bee. The involvement of these corporate bodies and organizations has helped in the successful implementation of this study. Corporate involvement in volunteer tourism initiatives offers a range of benefits to the participating communities as well as the firm. The cooperation of these companies often aligns with their corporate social responsibilities goals, thus enhancing and improving the reputation of their brand image [13]. Moreover, corporate involvement in volunteer tourism may provide staff members special chances for skill development, team building, and a sense of purpose, all of which can improve worker happiness and retention [14]. In Selangor, various volunteer tourism programs have been executed since 2018. For instance, Tenaga Nasional Berhad (TNB) is one of the corporate bodies that directly participated in the Kampung Kuantan Firefly Preservation Project, which is also a component of TNB's corporate social responsibility [15]. All these collaborations and contributions ensured the program's smooth implementation, fostered local ownership, and added an ecological dimension to the initiative, showcasing the power of collaboration in volunteer tourism.

3.2 Data Analysis

3.2.1 Perspectives of Volunteer Tourist on the Volunteer Tourism Program at Bukit Belungkor

A total of 24 participants answered the questionnaire, providing a variety of viewpoints and invaluable insights for this study. The demographic profile offers a thorough overview of the people participating in Bukit Belungkor volunteer tourism program. The demographic profiles, namely age, gender, race, educational level, and current employment status are shown in Table 1. Most of the participants were female (66.70%). The age group between 17–27 years old had the highest participation in this study (83.30%), followed by 28–38 years old (12.50%), and 39–49 years old (4.20%). There were no participants who are above 50 years old. This may be because some of the activities included do not attract the interest of people in that age group. All participants are Malay and most have a bachelor's degree.

Table 1 Demographic profile

Survey	Answer Option	Frequency	Percentage
Age	17–27	20	83.30%
	28–38	3	12.50%
	39–49	1	4.20%
	Above 50	-	-
Gender	Male	8	33.30%
	Female	16	66.70%
Race	Malay	24	100%
	Chinese	-	-
	Indian	-	-
	Others	-	-
Educational Level	Secondary School/SPM	-	-
	STPM/Diploma/Foundation	3	12.50%
	Bachelor's Degree	13	54.20%
	Master's Degree	7	29.20%
	PhD	1	4.20%
Current Employment Status	Employed	7	29.20%
	Unemployed	-	-
	Retired	-	-
	Student	17	70.80%

3.2.2 Descriptive Analysis of Volunteer Tourism

Volunteer tourists' knowledge about volunteer tourism, biodiversity, and stingless bee and their opinion about the volunteer tourism package were measured on a five-point Likert scale, where a higher score (5) denoted higher agreement about the questions asked. Sixteen questions were asked for pre- and post-program and the mean difference for each question was calculated. The mean for the post-program questionnaire is higher than that for the pre-program. As indicated in Table 2, the mean score for each question increased, and this indicates that the participants' level of understanding improved for each question after joining the pilot program. The highest level of understanding is from 'the community's spirit of volunteering can be increased through volunteer tourism' question where most participants agreed with the statement. The mean score for knowledge about stingless bee food source and natural attractions in Bukit Belungkor was the lowest for the pre-program survey but drastically increased after the program. This shows that this volunteer tourism program had a positive impact on the participants. This is because volunteer tourism offers participants an incredible opportunity to get a deeper understanding of biodiversity and the environment via practical involvement in conservation initiatives. A study by Polus and Bidder on volunteer tourists' motivation and satisfaction, A Case of Batu Puteh Village Kinabatangan Borneo, also involved nature as the main activities for volunteer tourism. The study revealed how volunteer tourism affects volunteer tourists' motivation and satisfaction. In their study, 20 days of volunteer work on nature conservation projects such as seed collecting, trail restoring, trail cutting, forest habitat restoration, lake restoration, and tree planting gave major impacts on the volunteer tourists' commitment to nature. The interactive elements in volunteer tourism enable participants to witness the tangible impact of how their efforts affect

biodiversity preservation, forging a long-lasting bond with environmental stewardship [16]. Participants get practical insight into the local ecosystems, plants and animal species, and the delicate balance of biodiversity by being immersed in real-world ecological settings. Volunteer tourists who actively engage in conservation initiatives, such as habitat restoration or animal monitoring, get a sophisticated understanding of the interdependence of ecosystems and the significance of protecting biodiversity for the welfare of people and the environment [17]. From this study, the hands-on education activities with stingless bees and plants promoted a deep comprehension of biodiversity and natural ecosystems in the area.

Table 2 *Descriptive analysis of volunteer tourism survey*

Survey	Mean (pre-program)	Mean (post-program)
1. Knowledge on volunteer tourism		
I'm well aware about volunteer tourism	3.5417	4.5000
Volunteer tourism is able to help the social and economic development of the local community	4.3333	4.6667
The community's spirit of volunteering can be increased through volunteer tourism	4.4167	4.7500
More tourists will come to Bukit Belungkor through volunteer tourism program	4.1667	4.6667
Participants need to spend money and energy to participate in volunteer tourism	3.6667	4.3750
2. Knowledge about biodiversity and stingless bee		
I realize there are many natural attractions at Bukit Belungkor that need to be protected and preserved	3.2917	4.6250
I know the types of plant that act as the food source for stingless bees	3.2917	4.5833
I know stingless bees are not harmful to human	4.0833	4.7500
Every stingless bee produces different tastes of honey according to its food source	3.9583	4.7083
Stingless bees are important to the ecosystem	4.2917	4.7500
3. Volunteer tourism package development		
Volunteer tourism should be promoted as one of the tourism packages in Malaysia	4.2917	4.5833
Bukit Belungkor has a unique natural attraction	4.1250	4.6667
The uniqueness of culture and nature at Bukit Belungkor can be promoted through volunteer tourism	4.2083	4.7083

Volunteer tourism can generate income for the local community	4.2917	4.7083
The fee charged to participants is reasonable with the activities offered	4.1667	4.5417
Stingless Bee Farm can be the main tourism attraction at Bukit Belungkor	4.2917	4.8333

A *t* test was done to compare the means between the two groups and their statistical significance. From the analysis, these two means have $p < 0.05$. A two-tailed test yielded a p value of 4.034×10^{-7} and a t value of 2.0423, giving substantial evidence that the respondents' knowledge increased after the survey. The p value of less than 0.05 proves that the mean values from the pre- and post-program surveys were significantly different. The t test functioned properly even for a small sample size of 24 respondents explains that the study objectives were successfully achieved. Engaging in the volunteer tourism initiative in Bukit Belungkor was a life-changing experience for the participants, increasing their understanding in three principal domains: volunteer tourism, biodiversity, and the distinct function of stingless bees in the local ecosystem.

3.3 Recommendations

In the post-program questionnaire, the participants mentioned their most valuable experiences from the program, improvement, and suggestions that they think can be applied to the new tourism package. The participants gained a myriad of valuable experiences that profoundly enhanced their understanding of and appreciation about stingless bees and biodiversity services at Bukit Belungkor through the hands-on activities. This program offered a platform for skill development, enabling participants to get real-world experience in tree planting, seed bomb making, and community engagement through the guided tour at the Stingless Bee Farm. This valuable experience left participants with not only a sense of personal development, but also advocated for biodiversity conservation, sustainable practices, and improving the well-being of the communities they engaged with in this program. The respondents recommended to improve the safety of the hiking trail where more safety ropes should be added, and for more guides to participate in guiding volunteer tourists during the hiking activity, if this activity is to be included in the future. It is important to prioritize volunteer tourists' safety by updating safety procedures and having more certified guides and emergency response plans for the hiking activity. The participants also suggested to add sustainable volunteer activities to benefit the local community in Bukit Belungkor so that it can be a continuous conservation effort.

3.4 New Volunteer Tourism Package

We developed and proposed a new tourism package by considering the improvements and recommendations made by the participants of the pilot volunteer tourism program at Bukit Belungkor. Some new activities were added in the new tourism package to give volunteer tourists greater and more valuable experience. Volunteer activity is the main aspect highlighted in this package where we recommend mangrove nursery restoration activities in Pulau Tanjung Surat and building an insectarium for tourists that visit Bukit Belungkor. These two activities would act as a continuous conservation effort that can help the local community to preserve their natural ecosystem. Other tourism activities that will be added to the package are hiking, mangrove tour, and guided tour to stingless bee farm. The previous package's price was only RM10 as it is a half-day program, does not include many activities, and provides just one meal. In this new tourism package, we recommend RM300 per person as it includes accommodation for 3 days and 2 nights at Tanjung Belungkor Homestay. This will indirectly help the local community to promote their local tourism products, which are homestays and guesthouses, to the volunteer tourists. The increase in stay duration will ensure that the tourists get full experience on various tourism products and experiences in Bukit Belungkor while volunteering. Volunteer tourists, especially youths, are the main force in the development of volunteer tourism as they have the potential to drive sustainable growth of this tourism industry. We hope that this package can be an example of responsible tourism that is carefully crafted to combine nature, community development, and environmental protection.

4. Conclusion

Volunteer tourism can be a popular choice for tourism in the future. People are slowly getting acquainted with volunteer tourism over the years, so a massive effort to promote this type of tourism should be made actively. The volunteer tourism program at Bukit Belungkor is one of the efforts to introduce volunteer tourism to the community, but many improvements can be made in the future. The activities, which include guided tours of the stingless bee farm that are eye-opening, vigorous hikes that help people connect with nature, and tree-planting

activities that support reforestation efforts and increase the number of trees as a food source for stingless bee in the area, have all come together to provide a comprehensive and memorable experience to the participants. The limitation of this study is the sample size, where only 24 respondents participated in this study. It is possible that the low sample size has impacted the validity of some constructs in this study. The study can be replicated with improvements in many aspects. The study showed a positive reception and response from both participants and the local community as they gained many benefits directly or indirectly from this program. The survey respondents showed an increase in knowledge and experience after joining the program. All these data helped this study to create a new tourism product and promote volunteer tourism in Malaysia while highlighting the biological conservation and preservation efforts.

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