

## **THE ATTRACTIVENESS OF TAMAN NEGARA NATIONAL PARK, MALAYSIA AS PERCEIVED BY LOCAL VISITORS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study was to assess the attractiveness of Taman Negara National Park in Malaysia as a tourism destination. The study sought to determine the types of attraction that were perceived as the most and the least important by local visitors in their decision to visit the park. Through the use of the multi-attribute model, thirteen attractions were evaluated (i.e. oral history; local culture and lifestyle; flora; fauna; building architecture; nature trails; shopping opportunity; canopy walkway; caves; stream; fishing; mountain; and adventure activities). Hiking along the Mount Tahan trail was found to be the most important attraction while shopping opportunity was perceived as the least important attraction in the visitor's decision. However, it was also found that the most important attraction does not mean that it is the most available attraction in the park and this might affect the visitor's travel experience and satisfaction.

**Keywords:** Attractiveness, Taman Negara National Park, tourism destination, multi-attribute model, visitor's travel experience.

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## INTRODUCTION

In tourism, the real pulling power of a destination remains in the presence of interesting or unusual attractions in that area (Azlizam, 2002; Hafizah *et al.*, 2013). Attractions are the key to tourism growth. Attractions provide motivation for people to visit and represent the core product of the ‘experience’ in any one place. Attractions also provide economic value to a destination by increasing the average time spend by visitors at the destination (Tasmania, 1999). In Malaysia, there are many tourism attractions in the form of cultural places and natural sites that attract visitors and generate various social and economic benefits to the country. As one of the mega-diverse countries in the world, Malaysia is endowed with forested areas with ecosystems that are millions of years old and home to at least 15,000 species of flowering plants, 306 species of mammals, 150,000 species of invertebrates 4,000 species of marine fish, 832 species of mosses, 700 species of fungi, 2,012 species of ferns, 3,000 species of orchids (Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment of Malaysia, 2016). These resources in turn helped to turn Malaysia into a popular destination for ecotourism activities. In order to ensure continuous protection of such resources, most of the forests have been gazetted as protected areas (PAs) including protection forest reserve, state parks and national parks (WWF Malaysia, 1996).

Ecotourism has been commonly acknowledged to have positive benefits on initiatives to protect resources at natural areas as it provides economic incentives in exchange for conserving and enhancing bio-cultural resources (Lindberg & Johnson, 1994) which is quite evident in one of the most popular ecotourism destination in Malaysia–Taman Negara National Park (TNNP). The park was originally gazetted under the colonial British government in 1925 as a wildlife sanctuary named Gunung Tahan Game Reserve. Initially, it only covered 1,300km<sup>2</sup> of forested land area and subsequently expanded to cover 4,343km<sup>2</sup> (almost 6 times of Singapore) straddling across Pahang, Kelantan and Terengganu borders (FDPM, 2009). After Malaysia achieved its independence in 1957, the park was renamed to TNNP. TNNP has four entrances, which are Kuala Tahan and Merapoh (Pahang), Kuala Koh (Kelantan), and Tanjung Mentong (Terengganu) (DWNP, 2013). Kuala Tahan, the oldest entrance to this national park was selected as the study site since it was regarded as the most visited ecotourism site in the country.

Ecotourism is now an important component of TNNP management with increasing tourist arrivals. However, the increase in tourist arrival has limitation

in order to achieve a balance between satisfying visitor's needs and resource protection of the park (Chin *et al.*, 2000; Backhaus, 2003). Although, the park has been open to tourists since its designation in 1939, the development of the Kuala Tahan as entry point of the park for ecotourism activities was enhanced in early 1990s with the privatization of the visitor facilities (DWNP, 2013). Since then, ecotourism activities in TNNP has provided various work opportunities to the locals including boat operators, restaurant operators, nature guides, and chalet operators (Azlizam *et al.*, 2012). Since then it has become one of the major ecotourism destinations in Malaysia. The Department of Wildlife and National Parks (DWNP), that manages the park, has a great responsibility to ensure ecotourism activities would assist in increasing the conservation awareness among the visitors and while providing economic opportunities for the local communities.

As a popular ecotourism destination, it is also important for TNNP to sustain the number of visitors to the area. One way of maintaining this appeal of a destination, at least from a marketing perspective, is by understanding how the visitors decide on their holiday destination (Shifflet, 1999; Azlizam, 2002). Effectively, this is done by assessing the attractiveness value of a destination – finding out which elements or attractions encourage people to visit the destination. An attractiveness study of TNNP is essentially measuring the park's performance and knowing which of its attractions are being perceived as the most important and available to the visitors when visiting the park. Many previous studies had stated the evidence of a relationship between the perceived attractiveness of destination and the visitor's decision to visit that destination (Shifflet, 1999; Azlizam, 2002; Aswad *et al.*, 2013).

Promoting TNNP as an ecotourism destination without knowing what attracts visitors is not cost effective (Sparks & Pan, 2009). It is vital to identify significant attractions and attributes of a destination which influences tourists' decision (Shifflet, 1999; Hafizah *et al.*, 2013). Marketing the wrong activity or facility can be damaging to the natural area (Suhaimi, 2003; Rahim, 2004; Faiz, 2008; Sharon, 2009), especially when there are too many visitors if the area fails to attract visitors because the attraction is unsuitable for visitors. Therefore, this study is designed to identify the resources and activities that attract most of the visitors to TNNP. Additionally, this study also identifies the most and the least important attraction influencing visitors' decision when choosing the park as their ecotourism destination.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Study Site**

This study gathered information from respondents who visited Kuala Tahan, Pahang, and the main entrance for the TNNP. This study was conducted between July and August of 2015. Kuala Tahan has been chosen as the study site due of its popularity when compared to other entry points to the park (FDPM, 2009). Since it was first established, the accessibility to Kuala Tahan has been improved; visitors can take a three-hour boat-ride along the Tembeling River or access through the tarred road from the town of Jerantut to Kuala Tahan. Economic benefits to the local communities have increased with the development of the road access. The road access has also brought about more development especially tourism facilities and accommodations adjacent to the park. Many locals have ventured into lodging businesses, which provide many options to the visitors to choose their preferred type of accommodation.

### **Sample and Participants**

A total of 172 local visitors were surveyed. Stratified random sampling technique was employed in this study to collect data during the study period. In this study, all visitors had an equal chance to be selected which includes all respondents who were willing to participate in this study. Each participant was rewarded with a notebook from Tourism Malaysia after participated in the study. The token served as an appreciation gift and was also useful to attract more visitors to participate.

### **Questionnaires**

A questionnaire was developed and used to obtain the information needed for the study. The questionnaire was constructed in two languages - Malay and English. The main sections of the instrument include socio-demography, trip characteristic of visitors, ratings on attractions that are important in their decision to visit the TNNP and their belief on each of the attributes' availability after experiencing it.

The seven-point Likert scale was used to evaluate the level of judgments from the respondents as per shown in Table 1. A scale with all points labelled effectively minimizes response bias, maximizes variance when the scale length is set at seven points (Eutsler & Lang, 2015). The scale is used to elicit the respondents' responses regarding the level of importance of the attributes that influence them to visit the park. It is also important to mention that the

following scale was also used for the responses on the availability of each attribute after experiencing it.

**Table 1** The description of the seven-point Likert scale

Scale	Description
1	Not important at all / not available at all
2	Not important / not available
3	Slightly not important / slightly not available
4	Neutral
5	Slightly important / slightly available
6	Important / available
7	Extremely important / extremely available

### Statistical Analysis

The average index for the statements of attraction will be measured by multiplying the intensity (Si) of individual statements to the number of persons who are having the same intensity (Xi). The total from multiplying Si and Xi will be divided by the total number of sample (N). By totalling the index for each statement and dividing by the number of statements, the average index can be obtained. This can be shown in a general formula as below for each statement:

$$IA = \frac{\sum Si.Xi}{\sum N}$$

Where;

IA = Index for statement

Si = Intensity of persons taking discreet values

Xi = Number of person having intensity preference Si

N = Number of respondents

The overall index of attractiveness can be measured with the formula shown below for an overall statement:

$$Ioa = \frac{\sum (Ia1 + Ia2 + Ia3 + \dots)}{N}$$

Where;

Ioa = Overall Index Attractiveness

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results for the overall (perceived) attractiveness of available resources at TNNP indicated that the park was ‘quite attractive’. This could be due to majority of the respondents spent less than two days at the park and therefore they did not have a chance to experience all the available attractions. Table 2 shows the percentage of important attractions in the respondents’ travel decision in visiting the park.

**Table 2** Attraction rank based on travel decision in TNNP (Kuala Tahan).

Attractions	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)	6 (%)	7 (%)
Oral history	4.7	4.7	12.8	25.0	18.6	16.3	18.0
Local culture and lifestyle	2.3	4.7	20.9	19.8	19.2	19.8	13.4
Diversity of flora	1.2	2.3	3.5	11.6	16.3	36.6	28.5
Diversity of fauna	0.0	2.3	3.5	8.1	17.4	40.1	28.5
Architecture of buildings in Kuala Tahan National Park	2.3	10.5	18.6	14.5	29.7	11.6	12.8
Nature trails	0.0	0.0	4.7	9.3	20.3	34.3	31.4
Shopping opportunity	27.3	17.4	19.2	14.0	8.1	4.7	9.3
Canopy walkway	0.0	1.2	7.0	11.0	25.0	25.6	30.2
Caves	3.5	1.2	9.9	12.8	25.6	25.0	22.1
Streams and rapids	0.0	1.2	3.5	7.0	22.7	27.9	37.8
Fishing attraction	3.5	12.8	2.3	16.3	26.2	18.0	20.9
Mount Tahan	0.0	1.2	2.3	8.1	19.2	28.5	40.7
Adventure activity	2.3	2.3	5.8	4.7	30.2	14.0	40.7

*Note:* 1= extremely not important; 2= not important; 3= slightly not important; 4= unsure; 5= slightly important; 6= important; 7= extremely important

Adventure activity (40.7%) and Mount Tahan (40.7%) gained the highest percentage as important attractions for local visitors. The second highest percentage for important attraction for local visitors was the streams and rapids (37.8%), followed by canopy walkway (30.2%).

Out of thirteen attractions that are available in TNNP (Table 3), Mount Tahan was perceived by the local visitors as the most important attraction in their travel decision to visit the park with an index score of 6.94. This is followed by streams

**Table 3** Index score for important attractions travel decision in TNNP (Kuala Tahan)

Attractions	1	s1x1	2	s2x2	3	s3x3	4	s4x4	5	s5x5	6	s6x6	7	s7x7	TSiXi	SIXi/172
Oral history	4	4	8	16	22	66	43	172	32	160	28	168	31	217	971	5.65
Local culture and lifestyle	4	4	8	16	36	108	34	136	33	165	34	204	23	161	966	5.62
Diversity of flora	2	2	4	8	6	18	20	80	28	140	63	378	49	343	1141	6.63
Diversity of fauna	0	0	4	8	6	18	14	56	30	150	69	414	49	343	1161	6.75
Architecture of buildings	4	4	18	36	32	96	25	100	51	255	20	120	22	154	937	5.45
Nature trails	0	0	0	0	8	24	16	64	35	175	59	354	54	378	1167	6.78
Shopping opportunity	47	47	30	60	33	99	24	96	14	70	8	48	16	112	704	4.09
Canopy walkway	0	0	2	4	12	36	19	76	43	215	44	264	52	364	1131	6.58
Caves	6	6	2	4	17	51	22	88	44	220	43	258	38	266	1065	6.19
Stream and rapids	0	0	2	4	6	18	12	48	39	195	48	288	65	455	1180	6.86
Fishing attraction	6	6	22	44	4	12	28	112	45	225	31	186	36	252	1009	5.87
Mount Tahan	0	0	2	4	4	12	14	56	33	165	49	294	70	490	1193	6.94
Adventure activities	4	4	4	8	10	30	10	40	52	260	24	144	68	476	1134	6.59

Note: 1 = extremely not important; 2 = not important; 3 = slightly not important; 4 = unsure; 5 = slightly important; 6 = important; 7 = extremely important

Note: Si: Index score intensity of persons taking discreet values (1-7 scale).

Note: Xi: Number of person having intensity preference of attractions.

Note: TSi\*Xi = Total Si\*Xi

and rapids (6.86), and nature trails (6.78). Being the highest peak in Peninsular Malaysia, Mount Tahan has always been in the mind of avid mountaineers and also among visitors who hike in the forest trails and this was reflected reasonably in the results. The respondents indicated that their reasons of visit were mostly for recreation (61.0%) and resting and spending free time (65.7%). Even though not all the tourists visiting TNNP choose to climb Mount Tahan, the mountain's status as the highest peak in Peninsular Malaysia, probably attracted many of them to visits the park (Ihsan, 2004). Visits for recreational purposes also reveal why streams, rapids and nature trails were also chosen as important attractions in the park. Attractions that were seen to be the least important at this park was shopping opportunity with a score of 4.09, architecture of building (5.45) and local culture and lifestyle (5.62). Being surrounded by vast natural forest and traditional Malay and Orang Asli villages, TNNP is quite obviously not considered as a shopping destination.

A comparison between important and available attractions was made to identify if there are any differences between the important attractions and its availability. From Table 4, the results show that the importance and availability of the resource were both equally important to the local visitors' decision. Mount Tahan was perceived as the most important attraction in their travel decision and it was also the most available attraction for them in this national park. This was followed by streams and rapids and nature trails. For Mount Tahan, while it was considered as highly important (6.94) in their decision to visit, it was perceived as less available (5.94). The same scenario is observed for streams and rapids where both were perceived as important but were less available in the park.

Evidently, local visitors who came to TNNP were attracted to the natural attractions which the park has in abundance as compared to man-made attractions (see Table 5). Overall, even though diversity of flora is the most important attraction that influences the majority of the respondents' travel decision to the park, nature trails was indicated as the most available resource. Most of the visitors who visit the site attractions have become increasingly discriminating and had high expectations (Kim, 1998). Through this study, the results show that visitors were influenced mostly by the diversity of flora when making their travel decision to visit TNNP. However, as cautioned by Kim (1998), the decision made is not only an indication of a destination's performance, but also by the personal perception of its personality or image.



**Table 4** The differences between important attractions and available attractions among respondents.

<b>Attractions</b>	<b>Important</b>	<b>Available</b>
Oral history	5.65	4.65
Local culture and lifestyle	5.62	4.59
Diversity of flora	6.63	5.62
Diversity of fauna	6.75	5.75
Architectural of building	5.45	4.42
Nature trails	6.78	5.78
Shopping opportunity	4.09	2.82
Canopy walkway	6.58	5.58
Caves	6.19	5.16
Streams and rapids	6.86	5.86
Fishing attraction	5.87	4.83
Mount Tahan	6.94	5.94
Adventure activities	6.59	5.60

## CONCLUSION

Through this study, a better understanding of the concept of decision-making in destination choice among visitors can be provided to the park management. The essence of this study can be used to develop sound alternatives in attracting more visitors and to suggest ways for preserving the natural resources in the park. Assessing the attractiveness is a fundamental need for better management and marketing of ecotourism destinations as destination performance can be measured and the needs and preferences of eco-tourists can be met.

Various promotional resources have stated that TNNP offers many activities and facilities for visitors' enjoyment. Activities like crossing the canopy walkway, jungle trekking and cave exploration may convince visitors who love to participate in adventure activities to visit the park. As for visitors who are less adventurous, they can opt for sightseeing and bird-watching or just simply relaxing and enjoy the freshness of the green surroundings. In other words, TNNP is the place for nature lovers and for those who want to escape from their daily routine. However, this study also found that tourists visited the national park for

**Table 5** Index of overall (perceived) attractiveness of attractions at TNNP (Kuala Tahan).

Attractions	1	s1x1	2	s2x2	3	s3x3	4	s4x4	5	s5x5	6	s6x6	7	s7x7	TSiXi	SiXi/172
Oral history	8	8	8	16	22	66	43	172	32	160	28	168	31	217	799	4.65
Local culture and lifestyle	4	4	8	16	36	108	34	136	33	165	34	204	23	161	790	4.59
Diversity of flora	2	2	4	8	6	18	20	80	28	140	63	378	49	343	967	5.62
Diversity of fauna	0	0	4	8	6	18	14	56	30	150	69	414	49	343	989	5.75
Architecture of building	4	4	18	36	32	96	25	100	51	255	20	120	22	154	761	4.42
Nature trails	0	0	0	0	8	24	16	64	35	175	59	354	54	378	995	5.78
Shopping opportunity	47	47	30	60	33	99	24	96	14	70	8	48	16	112	485	2.82
Canopy walkway	0	0	2	4	12	36	19	76	43	215	44	264	52	364	959	5.58
Caves	6	6	2	4	17	51	22	88	44	220	43	258	38	266	887	5.16
Stream and rapids	0	0	2	4	6	18	12	48	39	195	48	288	65	455	1008	5.86
Fishing attraction	6	6	22	44	4	12	28	112	45	225	31	186	36	252	831	4.83
Mount Tahan	0	0	2	4	4	12	14	56	33	165	49	294	70	490	1021	5.94
Adventure activities	4	4	4	8	10	30	8	32	52	260	24	144	70	490	964	5.60
														Total	11456	66.60*

*Note:* \*the overall (perceived) attractiveness for available resources at Kuala Tahan, TNNP was attractive for local visitors

*Note:* 1 = extremely not important; 2= not important; 3= slightly not important; 4= unsure; 5= slightly important; 6= important; 7= extremely important

*Note:* Si: Index score intensity of persons taking discreet values (1-7 scale).

*Note:* Xi: Number of person having intensity preference of attractions.

*Note:* TSi\*Xi = Total Si\*Xi

many reasons; one of which is resting and spending free time. Most local visitors found it possible now (as compared to 15-20 years ago) to easily visit the national park on any day or during holiday season, and even during the monsoon season. One primary reason was due to the establishment of the land-access roads from the nearby town of Jerantut to Kuala Tahan instead of using the more strenuous three-hour boat ride along the Tembeling River as in the past.

TNNP has many unexplored resources that can be converted into new ecotourism attractions, but further discourse is needed to identify the need for resource protection to ensure the sustainability of the industry in the area. Through this study, the available attractions at TNNP (Kuala Tahan) were evaluated on their importance and how accessible they are to the visitors before the overall perceived attractiveness of this park was actually measured. Out of the thirteen available attractions, the majority of respondents chose adventure activities as the most important attraction when making a decision to visit TNNP. This is not surprising, considering the amount and diversity of natural resources available in the park and perhaps this suits the type of visitors the park is currently receiving. As indicated by the study, most of the visitors to the national park belong to the age group of between 21 to 30 years old and in tandem with the demographic, it is expected that they would lean towards something challenging and fun. TNNP is commonly recognised as the most popular area in Malaysia for such activities and synonymous with activities such as rapid shooting, rafting, canoeing, hiking, climbing Mount Tahan and observing wildlife.

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