NURTURING SENSE OF PLACE: TWENTY YEARS OF TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN SABAH, MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

By 2025, the vision for tourism is to make Sabah one of the most liveable places in Asia. Tourism it seems is set to improve the quality of life in this East Malaysian state. Tourism can have positive economic effects on a host community but it can also change its character negatively. A key loss may be to their sense of place, the affective and cognitive bonds that they have with their home. Although a promising framework for understanding how tourism may change a host community, sense of place has been little utilised for this purpose. This paper is an initial attempt to remedy that with reference to the city of Kota Kinabalu. The paper suggests that the preservation of sense of place both enables tourist destinations to retain a uniqueness of character, and allows the local community to maintain their sense of belonging. Ultimately, to make a place liveable requires an understanding of the local response to natural and built surroundings, and its geography and history. Nurturing sense of place may just be the essential ingredient to gain a competitive advantage for this bustling tourist destination.

Keywords: sense of place, Kota Kinabalu, tourist, host, experiential authenticity

INTRODUCTION

This working paper proposes that tourism offers a way of experiencing place and of knowing place. Although a promising framework, Sense of Place (SOP) has been little utilised for this purpose within tourism literature. Therefore, this paper focuses on Kota Kinabalu (KK), the capital city of Sabah in terms of its evolving SOP over a period of twenty years, synonymous with the growth of tourism. First, the paper unravels the concept of SOP and highlights why SOP is applicable in a tourism context. Next, tourism development in Sabah is introduced, followed by a discussion on how KK has evolved from a SOP perspective and introduces the notion that best tourism places are ones where existential authenticity exists and SOP has been nurtured as tourism develops. This paper concludes with suggestions and future work that may be explored in this area.

SENSE OF PLACE

Sense of Place (SOP) is a concept only recently receiving attention in tourism, although it has a strong foundation within other disciplines particularly human geography, psychology, outdoor recreation and architecture. This paper suggests that the field of tourism has much to gain from adopting and applying this concept as an important tool to create competitive advantage for tourism destinations.
What is place? In order to understand the central quality of space versus place, the literature is clear. According to human geographer, Tuan (1977) “what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value” (Tuan, 1977:6). In any form of development, it is important to consider space, place and people. Tuan views space as the embodiment of feelings, images and thoughts of those who live, work or otherwise deal with space (Tuan, 1977). Similarly, Relph (1976: 142) citing Gussow asserts “the catalyst that converts any physical location, any environment if you will- into a place, is the process of experiencing deeply. A place is a piece of the whole environment that has been claimed by feelings”. Space is empty, but human experiences, relationships, emotions and thoughts breathe life into space, transforming it into place (Stedman, Beckley, Wallace & Ambard, 2004). Essentially, SOP examines the sentiments of attachment which humans develop in relation to physical places, and can be defined as the emotional, cognitive and functional bonds with a place. Previous research has investigated neighbourhoods, cities, recreation sites and tourist destinations (Cresswell, 2004; Schroeder, 2004). Scholars in the field of public health have begun to recognise SOP as a potential contributing factor to well-being (DeMiglio and Williams, 2008; Williams and Patterson, 2008).

Stedman (2003) suggests there are three main aspects used to consider SOP, these include the characteristics of the physical environment (setting), human use, or the interactions and behaviours within the setting, and meanings (non-evaluative descriptions of place). Additionally, a fourth aspect is to consider evaluations of place, whether these are of attachment, dependance, satisfaction or identity. Although some literature discusses the constructed nature of place, the role of the physical environment in creating place cannot be overlooked. This includes landscape attributes and nature, particularly in places which are richer in natural elements, these serve as the foundations which foster meanings and attachment (Stedman, Amsden & Kruger, 2006). Next, both Tuan (1977) and Relph (1976) asserted that SOP grows with the accumulation of experience, it is also necessary to understand the types of experiences people have with place. Is it recreational? A holiday? A workplace? Alone? With a significant other? With strangers? So although interactions do contribute to SOP, equally just the setting alone can foster SOP (Stedman, et. al., 2006). Thirdly, place meanings, often symbolic, are descriptive statements of what this place means to me, and are important for these act as the building blocks of attitude (Stedman, et. al., 2006). How someone thinks and feels about place affects how s/he behaves in place. Finally, there are four evaluative concepts with SOP literature. Place attachment is the positive emotional bond that develops between individuals or groups with their environment; place dependance is the strength of association between an individual and a specific place based on the ability of the setting to fulfil certain needs; place identity is defined as those dimensions of self that define the individual’s personal identity in relation to the physical environment; and finally, place satisfaction is a multidimensional summary judgment of the perceived quality of a setting (Stedman, et. al., 2006). Place attachment reflects how strongly people are attracted towards places, while place meaning describes the reasons for this attraction (Kudryavtsev, Stedman, & Krasny, 2012). Understanding SOP would focus on unearthing place meanings and has been researched using qualitative methods. Place meaning is defined by answers to descriptive questions such as ‘What does this place mean to you?’ or ‘What kind of a place is this?’ (Kudryavtsev, et. al. 2012).

**WHOSE SENSE OF PLACE?**

Who is more likely to possess a sense of place? Between hosts and guests, it is more likely the hosts who will harbour stronger sentiments towards place. Relph (1976) suggests a
continuum of the experience of the insideness of places. At the deepest level there is an unselfconscious association with place, an at-homeness, “where your roots are, a centre of safety and security, a field of care and concern” (1976:142). Whereas at the shallow end is the experience of being in a place without attending to its qualities or significances. Moreover, “for those who are swayed by the easy charms of mass culture or the cool attractions of technique this does seem to be the primary, perhaps the only, way of experiencing environments; and consequently they feel no care or commitment for places; they are geographically alienated” (Relph, 1976:142). Consider then, if this to be a tourists’ only form of experience of place, this “denotes a real failure to ‘see’ or to be involved in places...they are geographically alienated” (Relph,1976:142). To avoid this, nurturing sense of place could provide the feeling of intimacy missing for so many travellers and visitors. In a Turkish study on the town of Didim, Yuksel, Yuksel and Bilim (2009), discovered positive emotional and cognitive bonds with a place affect an individual’s assessment of a destination and also loyalty to place. This supports the premise of the paper that SOP should be nurtured within tourism development here because it may even be the very factor that causes repeat visitation. SOP is said to nurture a sense of belonging. Nurture in this context is applied as a verb, to support and encourage as during a period of development, here this refers to the period of tourism related development in Sabah (1992-2012) and is presented next.

TOURISM IN SABAH

The Sabah Development Corridor (SDC) Blueprint (2007) pinpoints tourism as a key contributor to the economic growth experienced by the State. Statistics within the last 10 years show dramatic changes in terms of increase of visitor numbers. Tourist arrivals to Sabah in 2012 peaked at 2.8 million of which over 941,765 were international tourists (www.sabahtourism.com). Key markets to Sabah include China, South Korea, Europe, Oceania, United Kingdom, North America and Singapore. In contrast, ten years ago, tourist arrivals to Sabah had just hit the 1 million mark of which 528,264 were international arrivals (www.sabahtourism.com). Tourists have always been attracted to Sabah and it was twenty years ago, that the industry began to actively promote and market Sabah as Borneo’s Paradise. Promoted as a nature, adventure destination, promotional material has remained attached to Borneo as a brand (once ‘Sabah – Malaysian Borneo’, now ‘Sabah, Malaysia - Best of Borneo’. As with tourism development elsewhere, the necessary, supporting infrastructure has been improved including more hotels, ranging from 5 star to backpacker and ‘eco’ lodges. There has also been an unparallel increase in the number of modern shopping malls catering for the needs of locals and visitors. Additionally, in the capital city, a new airport is in place with modern facilities and added capacity for aircraft landings, and downtown, a dedicated jetty was built to ferry visitors across to the islands. In tandem, the supply side of the equation consists of established and new tour operators, as well as hotel chains catering to the needs of the various markets. New products have been developed to complement key attractions for example cultural villages, wildlife viewing, activity based tourism, and the MICE market is growing as well. In 2012, 71.2% of visitors stated their purpose of visit was for a holiday, 82.3% stayed in paid accommodation, and 51.1% were repeat visitors. These are very encouraging statistics particularly repeat visitation. Twenty years of active tourism promotion and development has seen the tourism industry evolve to become the third most important contributor to the local economy. What of the future?

Tourism it seems is set to improve the quality of life in this East Malaysian state. The SDC blueprint states “the vision for tourism is to make Sabah among the most liveable places in Asia by 2025...a bustling metropolis within a tropical paradise” (Institute of Development
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Studies, 2007:33). Over a three-phase period, the focus will be to further uplift tourism related infrastructure, enhance its positioning as a premier eco-adventure destination, develop new tourism products anchored by signature resorts, market Sabah as an exclusive holiday home destination, and encourage rural participation through community based tourism. Among the strategies is a programme to nurture the arts and culture scene through special events in order to promote Sabah as a lifestyle destination. The blueprint suggests “investment in the arts as central to the vitality, liveability and growth of the city” referring to the success of Melbourne and Vancouver being voted as among the world’s most liveable cities. The liveability of a city, according to the blueprint is assessed via a basket of metrics which cover safety, education, employment, healthcare, transportation and communications infrastructure, recreation and culture. Tourism can have positive economic effects on a host community but it can also change the character of place negatively. For a key loss to the host community may be to their SOP – the affective and cognitive bonds that they have with their home. This paper proposes that the liveability of a city should consider the intangible aspect of SOP which will be discussed further in the next section in the context of KK.

KOTA KINABALU

Kota Kinabalu (KK) as the main entry point, is the gateway to the State’s iconic tourist attractions. These include Tunku Abdul Rahman National Park (consisting of five islands) just outside the city; Kinabalu Park, Malaysia’s first World Heritage Site home to Mount Kinabalu; Danum Valley; Sepilok Orang Utan Sanctuary; the Lower Kinabatangan river; and Sipadan Island, to name but a few. KK offers a range of opportunities for different types of tourists ranging from the recreational-leisure tourist to the avid cultural and environmental explorer encompassing a range of coastal/island to highland activities; colourful multicultural experiences, and interesting urban and rural landscapes and settlements (Lew, 2011). As tourism related infrastructure (including modern, high rise shopping malls and hotels) outshines the ordinary downtown shops, it could be assumed that there will be a need to reactivate the relations of old versus new. Why so? The British novelist L.P. Hartley observed, "The past is a foreign country: They do things differently there". Lowenthal (1979) suggested ‘the past’ exists as both individual and collective construct, with shared values and experiences being important within cultural groups, or host communities. Group identity is therefore closely linked with the form and history of place, creating a sense of place. Presently only three pre-war buildings remain, the former post office building which now houses the Sabah Tourism Board office; Atkinson Clock Tower (built 1903) on Signal Hill and the Sikh temple, or Gurdwara (built 1924). As the city of KK continues its seeming rush to copy other modern cities catering for tourists, it might pay to pause and discover that the way it used to be might conjure a strong case for visiting the past, and indeed retaining what used to be its SOP. Kota Kinabalu in the 1980s was a quaint, coastal town, embraced by the Crocker range with Mount Kinabalu gazing down, gateway to iconic natural attractions and rich in local culture. Be that as it may, this is purely a biased description, which might contribute to but is not a factual understanding of SOP which has not been given attention in past studies. Moving into the future, what can we gain from such an understanding?

Gardner (2006) suggests vacations can nurture a SOP. With reference to KK and its SOP, questions arise including how can a visitor arrive in KK and feel a connection to and sense of appreciation of this community and town? Where lives the memory of a community which played a role in shaping this town? Does the city convey a sense of its past? It is not enough to direct tourists to the city museums, elements of SOP should be incorporated into tourism.
development. And this in turn should contribute to any discussion on the liveability of a city, particularly one where tourism plays a key role for its economy. Lew (2011) puts forward some interesting questions including ‘what makes a great tourism place?’ and ‘how do we conceptualize the idea of a best tourism place?’ His questions are most relevant to the understanding SOP.

Best places it seems are grounded in existential authenticity, both physical challenges and sensory stimulation. Lew discusses Kota Kinabalu because as a major tourist destination, it offered a range of opportunities for different types of tourists. KK as a best tourism place had the following characteristics:

- sensual diversity – sight, taste, smell, touch
- landscape diversity – physical and human
- experiential diversity – both predictable/safe and some unpredictable/risk
- mixed accessibility – mostly easy, but with some challenges
- local authenticity – local tourists and people at major sites
- tourism incognita – mysteries that prompt exploration

(Lew, 2011: 571)

Ultimately, Lew (2011) concludes that there are two very different definitions of the best tourism places: the objective best place, and the experiential best place. Each plays an important role in the tourism economy, and “tourism places need to be aware of how they define themselves both as objective places and as places of experience” (Lew, 2011:574). Therefore, it is suggested in this paper that nurturing sense of place can contribute to creating and retaining existential authenticity. The next section provides three examples of places in KK which seem to retain existential authenticity and nurture SOP. These are purely descriptions of place as an indicator, and not the findings of a dedicated study that would express personalised place meanings.

NURTURING SENSE OF PLACE IN KOTA KINABALU

In KK, a good example is Gaya Street, in the heart of old town. The street itself has transformed from catering to the locals, towards meeting the needs to tourists. In the last ten years, open-air coffee shops with ordinary furnishings have evolved into colonial style coffee parlours complete with wooden stools and tables from the era. This strategy has transformed the street into an attractive area of town where the past seemingly lives on. A weekly Sunday market turns the entire stretch of Gaya Street into a pedestrian walkway with stalls selling local handicrafts, daily wares, and is itself a tourist attraction. Here, visitors can gain a sense of KK, both through the sights, sounds and smells as well by mingling with the local people. A stone’s throw away, at Australia Place, there are more cafes in this design and style surrounded by backpacker lodges which impart a sense that here tourism development has nurtured SOP.

The Tanjung Aru Beach area is another example which provides a balance between the past and present (often tipping towards the latter). The experience might differ according to the time of your visit, but early weekend mornings, and most evenings, the beach area is a hustle of life at play. Looking out at the horizon, it is possible to gain a 180° view of the coastline: islands are dotted about, solo fishermen in their sampan out in the distance, aircraft coming in to land at the international airport close by, local families with young children, joggers, tourists from nearby resorts on a refreshing walk, and by sunset, all eyes are on what is acclaimed as one of the best sunsets in the world. There are local open-air
food stalls next to classy restaurants and bars, catering to both locals and tourists. Often tourists prefer local food stalls where food is more authentic. Here again, both the senses and place come alive, and exude what it means to be in KK.

KK is a coastal city where once the coastline, its islands and the sunset were visible throughout the then town. At present, a view of the prized local sunset has become even more elusive for locals as the best seafronts have been allocated to shopping malls, condominiums or hotel projects. There are pockets of visibility, along seafront promenades custom built (some have food stalls and bars again catering for both locals and tourists) where the public can enjoy strolls or views but these are small in comparison to the past. Currently, the 7km stretch of Likas Bay where the road leads North remains an area which has been set aside without development. Here there are recreational parks, picnic grounds, a cycle path is being built, and the islands and sunset are accessible. The city mosque is resplendent within its setting on a man-made lake, and the bay is an attractive area for both locals and tourists. This is perhaps one of the few areas where SOP has been nurtured even while areas adjacent to it have given way to the development of shopping malls, condominiums and hotels.

CONCLUSION

As the discussion on SOP in KK comes to an end, it is imperative to locate this discussion within the context put forward. Tourism continues to develop in the state of Sabah, and with it arrives change. The SDC blueprint with its aim to make Sabah one of the most liveable places in Asia needs to consider SOP as an essential ingredient that could foster this objective, and create a competitive advantage in the tourism market. The tourists of the future will prefer to visit Sabah over other destinations due to its iconic attractions. However, by paying attention to the element of SOP, tourism could nurture an ingredient missing in other destinations which would benefit both the local people who already live here (and have no choice over the growth of tourism), as well as the tourists seeking authentic experiences. At this juncture, it is necessary that the conceptual ideas presented in this paper be investigated through a dedicated study. All four aspects of SOP could be studied and findings could be applied to revising the SDC blueprint. This paper suggests that the preservation of SOP will enable KK to retain uniqueness and character and also allow the local community to maintain their sense of belonging. Finally, this paper suggests that the SOP of a community should be studied before tourism development is implemented, for ultimately, to make a place liveable requires a thorough understanding of geography and history.

REFERENCES


Website: [http://www.sabahtourism.com](http://www.sabahtourism.com)