

Determinants of Competitive Advantage in the Tourism Sector of Langkawi Island, Kedah

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Abstract

Langkawi is not just the focal point for ecotourism on the world tourism map, but it also has the potential to become an economic driver for the country. The development of ecotourism is a concept of development which emphasizes sustainability. This study was conducted to analyze the competitive advantage determinants in the ecotourism sector using the Porter Diamond Model. A survey based on a set of questionnaires was carried out with 300 tourists. The study found that the development of Langkawi's tourism products has attracted high demand from both domestic and international tourists with its physical characteristics and existing natural resources. Strong cooperation among Langkawi Island stakeholders will produce tourist, resulting a favourable perception of Langkawi island as the preferred ecotourism destination.

Keywords:

Ecotourism; Competitive Advantage; Factor Conditions; Demand Conditions; Structure; Strategy; Opportunities

1 Introduction

The development of ecotourism is one of the focuses of the international development agenda which has an overall positive impact on all parties involved. Ecotourism typically involves traveling to destinations where flora, fauna, and local cultural heritages are the main attractions (Norhayati & Abdul Latif, 2010). According to Fennell (1999), ecotourism refers to a form of sustainable tourism that is based on natural resources, with emphasis on experience and learning about the natural, low impact, local orientation, and to be able to contribute to the preservation and conservation of the ecotourism area. In line with the national development agenda, the ecotourism sector in Langkawi Island was estimated to continue to grow in popularity by the year 2015. Besides introducing the available natural attractions, it is an industry that can generate revenues through various development activities by the various stakeholders such as government, communities, and other related industries.

Ecotourism development is a development concept which emphasizes sustainability. On the other hand, sustainability emphasizes various aspects that are taken into consideration in planning the development and upgrading of the peoples' quality of life and fulfilling the needs of the society in the long run. This is in line with the sustainable development as defined by UNESCO (2002) that is; *"...balancing the fulfillment of human needs with the protection of natural environment so that these needs can be met not only in the present but in the indefinite future."*

2 Literature Review

The ecotourism attraction factor has caused an increase in the demand for tourism activities and other tourism facilities such as transportation, accommodation, and food from both the domestic and international tourists. The importance of the attractions has caused the tourists to be more motivated to travel; moreover, due to the attraction factors of the intended destination, tourists also give importance to the special expenditure in their touring budget (Stephen & Ross, 2002).

According to Tiung and Suriani (2010), the primary factor for tourists to visit Sipadan Island is due to its natural beauty. Siong (2007) in his study of ecotourism development in Cameron Highlands found that the development of ecotourism is most appropriate in achieving sustainable development in Cameron Highlands. The research found that the natural attractions found in Cameron Highlands attracted the tourists to experience the beauty of flora and fauna, understanding the culture, and participate in ecotourism activities such as jungle trekking and visits to the village of the indigenous peoples. Based on the attractions and the tourist's characteristics, a study conducted by Sazelin (2003), categorized five major groups of characteristics which appear to be an attraction and one of the factors includes natural attraction. The five groups are:

- i. Natural factors, including climate and natural beauty;
- ii. History and historical factors inclusive of religiosity and religion;

- iii. Cultural factors including architecture and design;
- iv. Recreational and shopping facilities; and
- v. Infrastructure is inclusive of food and accommodation.

The study by Hiong (2007) shows that tourism based on natural resources with an abundance of flora and fauna is an attraction most sought after by both the domestic and international tourists. In fact, the study identified that activities based on nature such as jungle trekking, enjoying the beauty of nature (flora and fauna), visiting the indigenous people's villages and the surrounding villages were well accepted by the tourists. According to Ibrahim (2010), the natural attraction in Langkawi Island is one of the reasons that attract the tourists to visit the island. Studies show that the Langkawi Geopark can be divided into three main components that support the definition of geopark by the Global Geoparks Network (GGN) UNESCO (Shafee et al. 2007). The three components are conservation (geological heritage, biodiversity, socio-culture); the development and provision of tourism infrastructure (hotel/tourist resort, education exhibition, recreation and public awareness); and socio-economic development (economic activities, the participation of the local community, and new opportunities).

The involvement of all parties is essential for the development of ecotourism to be carried out in a more orderly and sustainable manner. With the implementation of ecotourism development, it is hoped that the projects undertaken will provide changes to the local community. The residents were also advised to be more successful and competitive in the development of their villages for mutual benefit. This study aims to identify the competitive advantages in the ecotourism sector based on the Diamond Porter Model (1990). The findings of Er (2008a) indicates that the main determinants of competitive advantage in the tourism sector are divided into factor conditions: demand conditions: competitiveness among businesses; related industries; and the support and role of the government.

The factor condition is one of the critical determinants given the characteristics of the environment, forest, existing agro and ecotourism packages. The demand condition is mainly from the domestic tourists, namely the youth and adult. The factor condition can create the demand, particularly in expanding the tourism products to international tourists. The potential of the agrotourism and ecotourism has increased the level of competition between related industries and support services such as the developers and travel agencies. Competitiveness in tourism products and destinations that are most robust and popular in other states will encourage the 'survival of the fittest' and also act as a springboard for promoting international tourism. The government also plays an important role in developing an area as an attractive tourist destination, enforcing environmental pollutions laws and improving the development of the infrastructure that exists in the area.

In another study on Fraser's Hill, Er (2001b) indicates that opportunities and the role of government in the development of ecotourism as well as an abundance of natural factors benefited the development of Fraser's Hill as an ecotouristic destination. The domestic, as well as foreign tourists' satisfaction after their visit to the hill, motivates them to make return visits. Figure 1 shows the main determinant of competitive advantage based on the Porter's Diamond Model for the ecotourism sector in Langkawi Island.

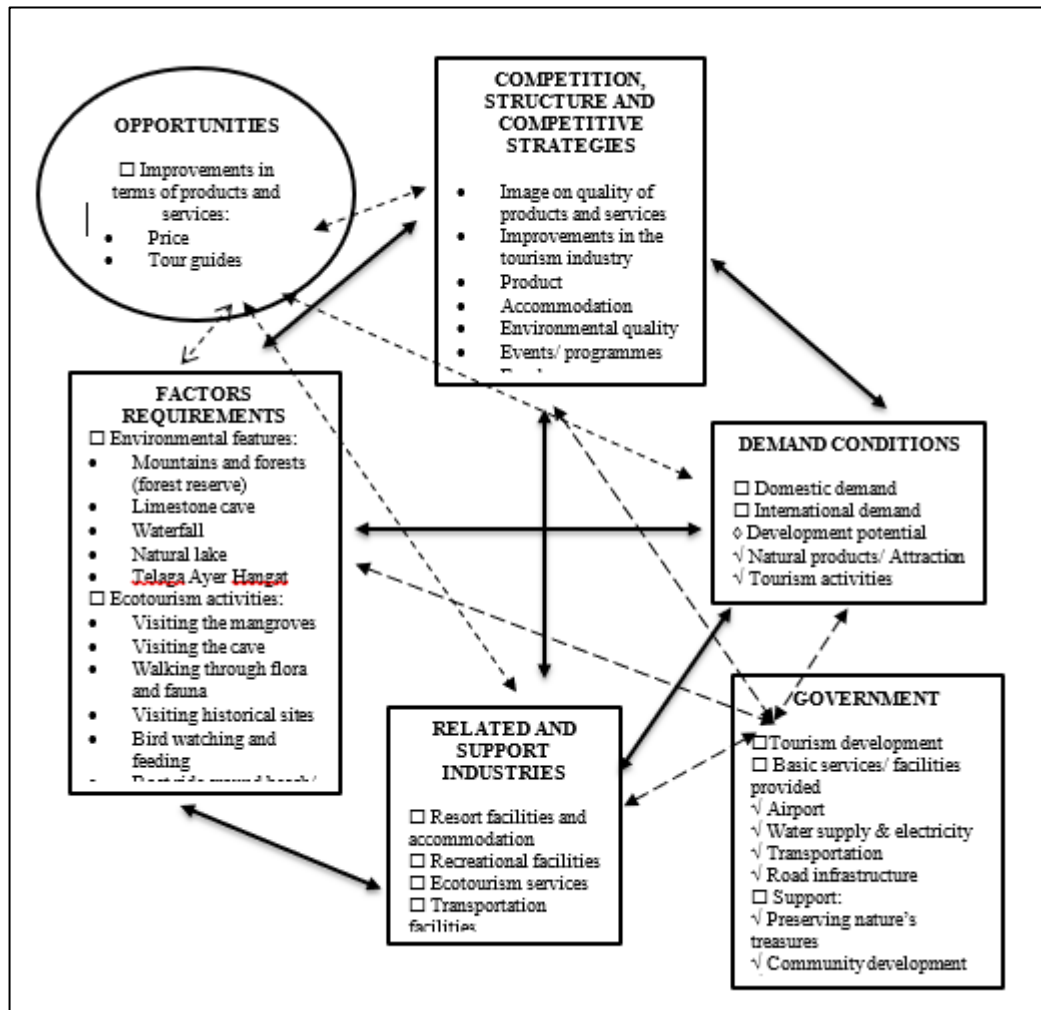


Figure 1: Determinants of competitive advantage in the tourism sector in Langkawi Island

Er et al. (2012) indicates that ecotourism potential in Lata Jarum has been identified, namely, favourable condition factor, especially the distribution of its physical resources such as natural forests, Rafflesia, waterfalls, and trails. Demand comes mainly from the domestic tourists. There is a lack of international tourists due to lack of promotional

activities in the international arena. Also, support from the government is essential to promote Lata Jarum as an eco-touristic destination.

Tourism products in the Commonwealth Forest Park such as biodiversity and nature-based outdoor activities have become an attraction for the domestic tourists (Er & Noor Dina, 2009). Ecotourism development in the Commonwealth Forest Park also received international demand due to the attractions available and the diversity of packages and facilities offered. The government’s role is to develop the Forest Park as an attractive tourist area and enforce environmental management such as proper sewage management. Methodology

The purposive sampling method was used to select 300 respondents. A survey based on a set of questionnaires was carried out at the Island. The data were analysed using the descriptive analysis with the help of a five-point Likert Scale. However, the mean score for measuring the tourists’ perception towards the development of tourism in Langkawi Island was recognized according to a five-level, and a four-level scale mean scores (refer to Table 1).

Table 1: Five-level scale mean score

Mean score value	Measurement of perception level
4.00 to 5.00	High
3.00 to 3.99	Medium
1.00 to 2.99	Low
Mean score value	Measurement of perception level
4.00 to 5.00	High
3.00 to 3.99	Medium
1.00 to 2.99	Low

Source: Modified from Chua (2006)

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Factor Condition

The factor condition in Langkawi Island was analyzed based on the characteristics of natural environment, attractions and ecotourism activities, as well as historical factors. The study shows that the characteristics of the natural environment in Langkawi Island have been fully developed into tourism products and touristic attractions such as mountains, forest reserves, limestone caves, waterfalls, natural lakes, and hot springs. Existing resources and physical infrastructures are fully exploited as a global tourism product (Er 2008a, Er 2008b, Er & Noor Dina 2009). The findings indicated that based on the existing natural resources and physical infrastructures, Langkawi Island had been developed successfully. The development of Langkawi’s tourism products has been able to attract the domestic and international visitors through the ecotourism-based activities such as visits to the mangrove areas, visits to historical places, observation and

feeding of birds, boat rides, lakes, and islands, as well as snorkeling activities and scuba diving. The results indicated that there is balanced exploitation of natural resources, thus enhancing the potential for the expansion of natural-tourism packages such as the Langkawi Cable Car, the Geo-Forest Park, *Dayang Bunting* Lake, Hot Springs, and the *Telaga Tujuh* Waterfalls.

3.2 Demand Condition

The demand condition by the domestic and international tourists for the tourism industry in Langkawi was analyzed based on the demographic profiles of the respondents, type of visits, source of information regarding destination, mode of transportation used, places to stay at the destination, duration of stay, tourist spending budget as well as the understanding of the ecotourism destination in Langkawi Island. The findings indicated that Langkawi Island attract not only domestic tourists but also attracts international tourists from various parts of the world. This shows that the government’s efforts to promote Langkawi Island as an eco-tourist destination at the global level has been successful. The results showed that most of the domestic tourists are aged between 26-35 years, followed by 21-25 years and 45-54 years (Figure 2).

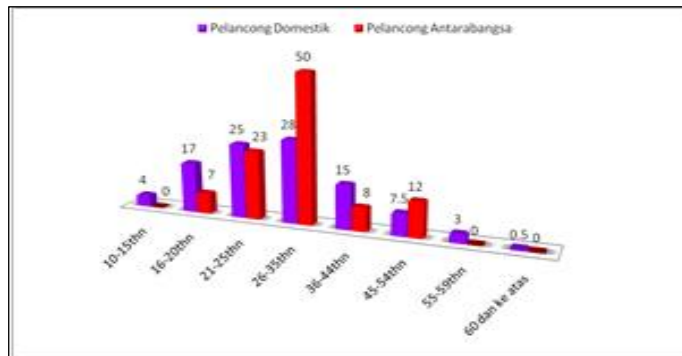


Figure 2: Tourists’ age group

These groups are attracted to visit the island because there are various packages offered which are suitable to the concept of family vacation. The study found that majority of the domestic and international tourists had special purposes for visiting Langkawi Island, namely for holidays, recreation and relaxation with family and friends. The tourists’ demand condition determining the Island as a destination of choice is also influenced by the source of information. Domestic tourists obtained the information about Langkawi as a tourist destination from relatives and friends, while most of the international tourists obtained the information from websites or through the Internet.

Various tourism-based activities attract the tourists to Langkawi Island such as visiting mangroves sites, visiting caves and visiting historical places. Through the packages offered, the tourists can enjoy the beautiful flora and fauna either by boat

along the lake, island, and beach or by walking through the jungle. They will have the opportunity to know and learn the Geo-Forest park concept as introduced by the Forestry Department of Peninsular Malaysia, which is a form of conservation that combines the elements of forest and geology (rocks). There are some very valuable heritage and interesting geo-sites to explore such as the Bat Cave, Curtains Cave, Rat Island, the Gulf of the Dead Chinese, Lake Langgun, Mango Bay, Cherita Cave, Dedap Cave, and the Tanjung Rhu area.

With the attractive packages such as visits to the eagle’s area, tourists will have the opportunity to gain experience in feeding the eagles. The eagle is the main attraction in Langkawi Island, and there are two species of eagles in Langkawi, namely the Red Eagle (Brahminy Kite) and the Sea Eagle (White Bellied Sea Eagle). Also, the study found that the tourists are interested in sports and recreational activities such as snorkeling and scuba diving. Information regarding the tourists’ place of origin is important to identify the distribution of tourists visiting the island. The domestic tourists mainly came from Kedah due to the proximity and transportation facilities. Table 2 depicts the mode of transport of tourists to Langkawi Island.

Table 2: Mode of transport of tourists to Langkawi Island

Mode of transport	Domestic Tourists		International Tourists	
	N	%	N	%
Own car	31	15	1	1
Taxi/ Car rental	167	84	92	92
Cycling	0	0	1	1
Motorcycle	2	1	6	6

N = Domestic tourists (100%), and N= 100 International tourists (100%)

Most of the international tourists were from China. However, the researchers found that the arrival of international tourists from various countries is increasing. Some international tourists came from Sudan, India, The Netherlands, Indonesia, Australia, London, Taiwan, Singapore, United Kingdom, Tunisia, Canada, France, and Russia. The duration of the visit by tourists to Langkawi Island affects the demand of the islands as the main tourist destination.

On average, the domestic visitors to Langkawi spent between RM101 to RM1000, for three days and two nights. On average, the international tourists spent between RM1001 to RM2000 during the visit for five days. The survey found that most of the tourists came to the Langkawi Island not just to spend their money on shopping, but also to find solace in the beauty of its nature.

Table 4: Estimated tourist expenditure

Expenditure(RM)	Domestic Tourists		International Tourists	
	N	%	N	%
Less than100	24	12	0	0
101-1000	107	53	25	25
1001-2000	28	14	26	26
2001-3000	18	9	26	26
3001-4000	5	3	9	9
4001—5000	2	1	10	10
More than 5000	0	0	4	4
No	16	8	0	0

N=200 Domestic Tourists (100%) and N=100 International tourists (100%)

The study found that majority of the domestic and international tourists made this island a top destination to visit. However, regarding frequency of visits, Langkawi Island is not the first choice among the domestic tourists because the majority of them had visited the island at least more than two to three times, and some between four to ten times in the past. As for the international tourists, it shows that most of them had visited at least two or three times before their latest visits. Most of the domestic and international tourists choose taxi or car rental as their mode of transportation during their stay in Langkawi Island.

3.3 Competition, structure, and strategy

The competition will increase the competitive advantage of the businesses (Er 2008a). According to Er et al. (2012), strategy, structure, and competition are reviewed regarding current and future strength of firms to exploit ecotourism potentials, weaknesses that hinder the progress of the organization, ways of adding value to the services offered, and the strategy of attracting customers. Thus, the study suggests that competition will increase the competitive advantages among the tourism-related businesses in Langkawi Island, but intense competition will enhance efficiency and improve the image and quality of the products and services, thus improving the image of Langkawi Island as a destination of choice for ecotourism at the global level. Based on the tourists' opinions and views regarding the quality of products and services, the study also shows that the business sector needs to complete and create new strategies to improve the tourism sector in Langkawi.

The results of observation and opinions on Langkawi Island revealed that high demands are derived from the domestic as well as international tourists who are satisfied with the products and services provided. Therefore, competition among operators increase choices for the tourists with a wide range of services and facilities such as tours and events, cleanliness and the surrounding environment; accessibility and quality of road networks and parking; accommodation and food; safety of tourists; tour guide services, information resources, and promotion. Hotels and resorts facilities that

are comfortable and affordable has led to high tourist demand. Thus, the demand for accommodation such as homestay and chalet are also developed as a relaxing tourist destination with the natural environment that is rich in flora and fauna to attract both domestic and international tourists. The concept of village accommodation and homestay can help to overcome the shortage of hotels and chalets, especially during school holidays, besides assisting the entrepreneurs among the residents to be involved in the homestay services.

The Kilim Village is a village that has a highly valuable natural treasure. Surveys and observation indicated that the Kilim Geo-Forest Park is one of the ecotourism destinations for domestic and international tourists. Competition among the business sectors, especially the locals, helps in ensuring that the services provided are the best such as boats, restaurants, and tourists' guides.

3.4 Related industry and support

The results showed that the related and supporting industries played important roles in the development of tourism in Langkawi Island. This is because the stakeholders offer attractive packages of services that meet the needs and requirements of each customer. Resorts and accommodation facilities in the Langkawi Island are excellent and safe with attractive recreational facilities, based on natural attractions and recreational activities suitable for families that draw in the domestic and international tourists to the island. The results of the field observations and surveys also found that one of the resorts, The Frangipani Langkawi Resort and Spa offer special packages such as the Eco-Walk, bike tours, horse riding, and walking in the jungle while learning to appreciate the beauty of flora and fauna.

Travel agencies were found to mainly focus on the comfort and satisfactions of domestic and international tourists. There are a variety of ecotourism packages based on natural attractions, water sports, island hopping, jungle paintball, and paragliding. Kampong Kilim Cooperative Community is responsible for managing and providing boats and piers for ecotourism activities in the Kilim Karts Geo-Forest Park. Among the service packages and boat tours offered by the cooperative is the one-hour package at RM250, the two-hour package at RM350, the three-hour package at RM450, and four-hour package at RM500.

The demand and satisfaction of tourists towards transportation and tour guide services who are friendly and informative, facilitate the transportation requirements of the tourists during their stay on the island. The tourism industry in Langkawi Island can open up more job opportunities for the people, especially the locals, thus contributing to the country's economy. The interested parties should intensify their efforts in promoting the services provided by each business to meet the needs and satisfaction of the tourists.

3.5 The role of the Government

The government is responsible for ensuring that tourism development in Langkawi Island is balanced and has a positive impact on an overall basis. The study found that the domestic and international tourists were satisfied with the services and facilities provided such as airport services, electricity and water supply, transport and road infrastructure. The assessment shows that the government played their role well in ensuring that all requirements, needs and customer satisfaction are met.

After Langkawi was recognized as a Geopark by UNESCO and became an ecotourism destination of choice for the domestic and international tourists, the study showed that there are some aspects of supports and efforts that have been identified to potentially promote Langkawi Island to a higher level. The study found that the natural heritage should be maintained and preserved in order to retain Langkawi Island as an ecotourism destination worldwide. Therefore, the state government has an important role in preserving the authenticity of the island from being destroyed by irresponsible parties. In ensuring that Langkawi Island is kept clean and well-maintained, the government has taken the initiative to inform all parties, including travel agencies and tourists about legal action that will be taken in the event of any damage to the environment. The results of observations and surveys by the researchers found that the call by the government to take care of the cleanliness was welcomed by the stakeholders such as the boat drivers. This is because, during the trip on boat by tourist, tour guides or boat drivers have to constantly remind tourists to keep the environment clean. In fact, while waiting for the tourists to visit the *Gua Cherita* Forest Reserve and swim at the beaches, tour guides take the initiatives to clean up the beach areas.

In line with the recommendation of the government to make this island a progressive and peaceful global ecotourism destination, the community development and economic development should also be the products that are attractive and of high quality. There are a variety of opportunities and activities offered by the responsible parties, especially the state government to the local people in tourism development projects such as businesses, and floating restaurants in the Kilim Karts Geo-Forest Park area. Thus, the community development and economic development can occur in tandem, and the organized development process can also be one of the supportive ways to enhance the Island as a destination for ecotourism. Also, efficient security will support the development of Langkawi Island as a safe ecotourism destination. The authorities, particularly the state government, are concerned about the safety and comfort of the tourists which includes safety on the road, beaches, or places of recreation. Attractive tourism products accompanied by excellent and comfortable facilities, equipped with good security system will attract more tourists to the island.

3.6 Opportunities

The high demand by the domestic and international tourists for the nature-based tourism in Langkawi Island has opened up opportunities for resources and existing physical infrastructure to be exploited through more attractive packages. Improvements

to the products and services offered in Langkawi Island will create more opportunities for stakeholders to make changes and subsequently allow for shifts in the competitive position. The results showed that the most of the tourism products and services offered on Langkawi Island do not need significant improvements. The existence of market opportunities was analyzed based on the tourists' views and opinions on several aspects such as price, tour guides, and directional signs. Domestic tourists think the price is an area that requires improvement compared to the tour guide while international tourists feel that the signage aspect should be improved as compared to the price. However, there is always room for improvements in all aspects.

The findings and observation found that all operators in the various sectors such as food, accommodation, transportation, and recreational activities will endeavor to seize the opportunity to improve their services so that all their customers can afford to shop and enjoy the best services at reasonable prices in Langkawi Island. Moreover, more effort and opportunities can be done to increase the competitive advantage of the operators in their respective fields. For example, the seaweed cultivation project is an opportunity to generate income for the economy.

4 Conclusion

The study concluded that Langkawi Island has its unique attractions such as the physical characteristics and natural resources which in turn creates demand as a preferred destination among the domestic and international tourists. The competitive advantage of the tourism sector in Langkawi Island has created the cooperation among domestic and international tourists. The quality of life of the local people was also enhanced as a result of the development of the tourism sector. Improvements in various aspects such as tour packages, recreational activities, accommodation, food, transportation and other travel services have created market opportunities and opportunities to further develop the tourism sector in the Langkawi Island. Strong cooperation among all parties in the development of Langkawi Island will create satisfaction among the tourists thus resulting in a good perception of the island as the preferred ecotourism destination.

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