

RISK MANAGEMENT AWARENESS AT BAKO NATIONAL PARK

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ABSTRACT

People travel to national parks to experience, anticipating a degree of adventure which ironically, the grandeur nature that attracts people to natural areas may also put them at risk. In Sarawak, there was no provision to evaluate the tour guides' awareness in risk management in the national parks and nature reserves before the implementation of licensing park guiding in 2007. This paper investigates the awareness of risk management among the candidates attending the training course in Bako National Park and their comprehension of their responsibilities during the practical examination conducted in relation to their experience in guiding. This study identifies strategic communication and demonstrative strategies employed, extends audience-centered communication to include both informal messages and demonstrative practices through observational data. The study revealed that before the Certificate in Park Guide training course was introduced in 2007, there were higher number of incidents that required emergency attention and accidents in Bako National Park. Since then, the number of emergency incidents and accidents had shown a decreasing trend.

Keywords: *Ecotourism, health and safety, licensed park guides, park guiding, risk management*

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, tourism has grown tremendously and has become a popular global leisure activity. Traditional tourism is enjoyed by a large number of people in a short space of time to places of leisure interest. Recognized as Mass tourism, activities have contributed to undesired social and environment impact such as invasion of privacy and destruction of sensitive areas. This has then evolved to more responsible type of travel activities like ecotourism, green tourism, and sustainable tourism activities which meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generation.

Ecotourism activities require small scale tourists travelling to fragile and protected areas that should be of low impact, at the same time it helps educate tourists to be aware of conservation and protection of the area and benefit return to the local community. People travel to these areas to experience, anticipating a degree of adventure which ironically, the grandeur nature that attracts people to natural areas may also put them at risk. According to Page, Bently and Walker (2005), many of the risk factors are conceptualized as “human factors” and that that adventure operators have the greatest potential to control risk associated with latent errors. As such, risk management and safety and health precaution must be incorporated with the ecotourism activities as it is also considered as adventurous and dangerous activities that requires extra precaution. This is supported by Frangialli, (2003) as the well-being of tourists has become one of the primary concerns of the tourism industry.

INCIDENCES OF RISK MISMANAGEMENT

Extracts of several reports related to incidences of risk mismanagements are as listed below.

Glasgow Press and Journal (1999)

In July 1999, 21 people were killed while canoeing in Switzerland when a flash flood swept down the valley. On recovering the bodies, rescue teams noted that many of the participants had lost their rubber boots and protective helmets.

The Christian Time Monitor Online (2011)

Six people have died in water-related accidents around Yosemite. Two hikers drowned in the HetchHetchy Reservoir on June 29, and a hiker slipped and fell into the Merced River while on the Mist Trail on May 13. Other tourist spots around the West have experienced accidents related to water and snow as well. In Oregon’s Crater Lake National Park last week, a man jumped over a wall at the edge of the steep caldera, slipped on packed snow, and slid head-first 300 feet below the rim. It took rescuers five hours to bring him out. Four family members died in Wyoming earlier this week when a road collapsed and sent their car into a raging creek.

The Associated Press (2012)

Recent incident in Halong Bay took the lives of 5 Taiwanese when their junk boat collided. The other 18 tourists were plunged into the water without life jackets fighting to survive and last year, 12 people from nine nations died when their boat sank in Halong Bay early in the morning as those on board slept. The captain of the boat was sentenced to 10 years in jail, the chief engineer to eight. An investigation into the accident found that crew had forgotten to close a valve that allowed the vessel to take on water after a pipe in the engine's cooling system broke. The accidents raised fresh questions over safety standards in one of Vietnam's most visited attractions.

LICENSING PARK GUIDES IN NATIONAL PARKS AND NATURE RESERVES IN SARAWAK

In Sarawak, there was no provision to evaluate the tour guides' awareness in risk management in the national parks and nature reserves before the implementation of licensing park guiding in 2007. Regulations 8 of the National Parks and Nature Reserves Regulations, 1999 of Sarawak, Malaysia stipulates that a park guide must possess a license issued by the Controller of National Parks and Nature Reserves to provide guiding service in such areas. Thus a park guide has to be evaluated to obtain a certificate in Park Guiding, as a criterion to obtain the license. The Park Guiding Certificate training course provided by the Sarawak Forestry consists of a module in Risk Management, Health and Safety in Totally Protected Areas.

Therefore, this paper investigated the number of incidents requiring emergency attention and accidents. It also included the awareness of risk management of licensed park guides and their comprehension of their responsibilities in guided tours as perceived by their clients in Bako National Park.

METHODOLOGY

The data for this study were mainly obtained through a survey using administered questionnaires with 30 respondents on guided tours provided by licensed park guides in Bako National park. The survey instrument comprised of two parts. The first part obtained data from respondents regarding their demographics and their reasons for being in the Bako National Park. The second part of the questionnaires focused on the risk management awareness of the licensed park guide as perceived by the respondent. The respondent were to circle their response accordingly from "completely disagree to completely agree" based on the Likert Scale of : 1 – I completely disagree; 2 – disagree; 3 – neutral; 4 – agree 5 - I completely agree and 6 – I don't know. The completed questionnaires were collected in a period of two weekends during a low peak season in October 2012. After the data collection, the data from the questionnaires were reviewed, followed by coding procedures and tabulated by the SPSS/PC version 17.0.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Number of incidents requiring emergency attention and accidents in Bako National Park

The number of incidents requiring emergency attention and accidents in Bako National Park incidences of accidents that occurred in Bako National Park over the period from January 2005 to September 2012 is shown in Figure 1.

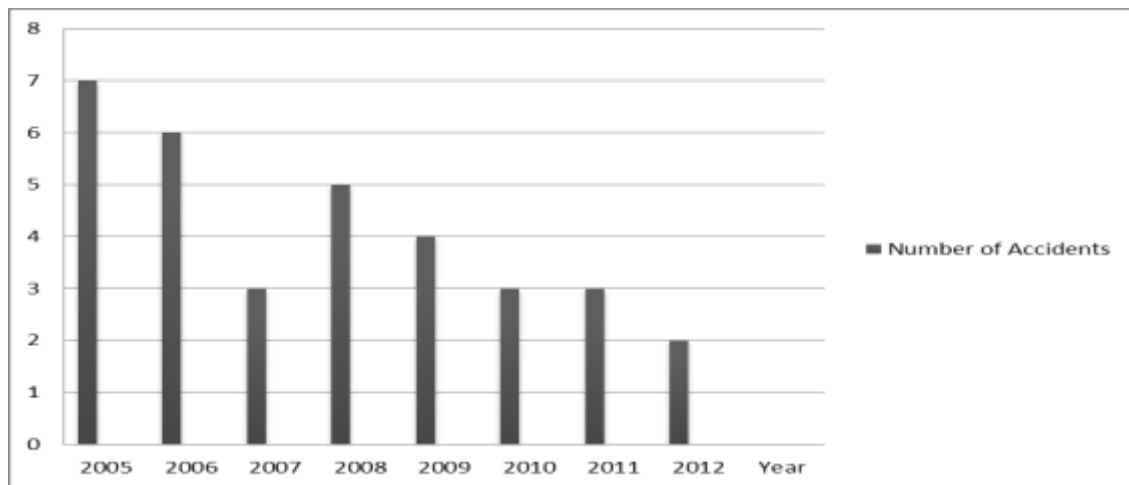


Figure 1: Statistic of number of incidents requiring emergency attention and accidents in Bako National Park from 2005 – 2012 (source: Bako National Park Record)

Before the Certificate in Park Guide training course was introduced in 2007, there were higher number of incidents that required emergency attention and accidents in Bako National Park. Since then, the number of emergency incidents and accidents had shown a decreasing trend. Although, there was no differentiation in incidence occurrence between guided and unguided tours and thus could be not be highlighted whether majority of the incidences were due to unguided tours. This outcome could still be deduced as attributed to the positive impact on the training module offered in the Certificate in Park Guiding Certificate training course creating awareness in risk management in the park guiding activities.

However, further detailed investigation should be conducted and if such cases were to have occurred, the management of the Park should consider imposing compulsory guided tour for all tourists. On a similar note, Queenstown in New Zealand, despite being marketed as the “adventure capital of the world” with active measure in place to ensure safety of the activities, accidents in the industry do occur. In the accident reports for all of fatalities of Queenstown, the overriding was clearly human error, with conclusions such a ‘negligence’, ‘trip should not have taken place’, ‘pressure on guides due to late start’, and ‘failure to fully explain the trip’ and ‘what happens being when a

problem arises' as being suggested by Page (1997). According to Cater (2006), adventure tourists cross boundaries in pursuit of thrills therefore; adventure guide must ensure that all procedures are followed to eliminate accidents or fatalities. He added participant in the adventure activities also must be aware of the risk and must apply the rules imposed by the adventure guides. The most successful ecotourism or adventure tourism operators are those that have reduced their actual risk levels whilst effectively commodifying the thrills within.

Risk management awareness of licensed park guide as perceived by clients

Demographics of respondents

There were about 60 visitors at the park at that period of time but only 30 respondents were willing to answer the questionnaires. From the 30 respondents, there was an almost equal representation of sexes: 50.0 percent male and 46.67 percent female with the majority accounting to 63 percent from age group of 30 year to 50 years of age. The percentage of the respondents for the age groups of above 50 years of age was about 73.33 percent. This indicated that the activities in relation to ecotourism are popular among those who are younger and considered physically fit.

From the data gathered, 60.0 percent of the respondents were single while 40 percent were married. Those respondents who were married either came together with their spouse or family while those who are single apparently came alone or with friends or associates. International tourists from the western countries mainly from Germany, Netherland, Canada and United Kingdom made up of 83.3 per cent of the respondents while 16.67 per cent came from others states in Malaysia.

Awareness of risk management of licensed park guides as perceived by their clients

Pre-Tour Risk Management Preparation by Tourists

The month of October was considered as a low peak season and therefore, not many tourists could be captured within the span of two weeks. Based on information drawn from Questions 1 and 2 relating to the pre-tour risk management preparation by the tourists, 73.3 percent of the respondents were advised to take a travel insurance policy from their country of origin in case of an accident or emergency that might occurred while they travelled overseas either by their local agent or overseas agent. Most respondents agreed that they know about the place they are going and the activities they going to engage.

Awareness of Risk by Tourists

The awareness of risk by the tourists was reflected in Questions 3 to 5. 83.3 percent of the respondents agreed that risk management with 63.3 percent in the completely agreement was a very important issue indicating they would be very concern with activities which would jeopardise their safety. 76 percent of the respondent disagreed

that they did not care about the risk they were facing while doing the ecotourism activities. There were 70 percent of the tourists who believed that they knew how to avoid risk.

Awareness of Risks by Tourists in Bako National Park

The awareness of risks that tourist would encountered in Bako National Park was drawn from Questions 6 – 7. It was shown that only 40 percent of the tourists thought they had prior knowledge of the level of risk they would be encountered in the park while 30 per cent did not know about the level of risk and 20 percent responded with neutral answers. 53.3 percent of the tourist knew about the activities they would be engaging in the park. In the investigation of the Fox and Franz Josef glaciers, popular tourist attractions on the West Coast of New Zealand's South Island by Espiner (2001), it was discovered that many visitors especially international visitors have relatively poor awareness of natural hazards, and behave in ways which potentially compromise physical safety. He argued that perceptions and behaviour are a consequence of diverse individual and situational factors including limited knowledge of the sites, beliefs about management, poor comprehension of hazard warning signs, and freedom from the normative constraints of everyday life.

Awareness of Risk Management of Licensed Park Guides

The awareness of risk management of licensed park guides and their practices as perceived by the clients was drawn from Questions 8 to 17. More than 56.7 percent of the respondents agreed that the guide gave them a pre briefing while 33.3 per cent was neutral. The later could be attributed to not understanding the park guides as 66.7 percent of the respondents agreed they were given sufficient information before going to the park. As 70 percent of the respondents agreed that they were asked to take a local insurance by their local tour operator, this would have led the park guide to request only 13 percent of the tourists to sign a waiver or contract. The 33.3 percent respondents did not know anything about it. However risk is argumentatively subjective as Cater (2006) suggested that while real risks are quantifiable and statistical in nature, perceived risks are more emotive and “profoundly qualitative”. Individuals’ perceptions of risk are influenced by a complex interaction of a number of factors that included an individual’s past experiences, media presentations, vicarious experiences and a predisposition to anxiety (Davis-Berman et al, 2002).

33.0 percent of the respondents responded with “I don’t know” upon being asked whether their guide informed them about risk management, while 30 percent said their guide did inform them about risk management. This could be attributed the meaning of risk management as understood by the tourists or the differences in the interpretation of risk management by the two parties i.e. the park guides and their clients. Thus, the comprehension of risk management by the park guide might be lacking. The perception of only 46.0 percent of the respondents believing that the park guide knew about the risk they were facing in Bako National Park and 56.7 percent responded that they were reminded about being careful while trekking by their guide. Thus it indicated that either the park guide did not practice risk management or they were not able to comprehend the risk perceived by their clients as 60.0 percent of the respondents were sceptical

about the park guide's knowledge of risk they were facing. This contrasted to the 66.6 per cent of those guided tourists agreeing that their guide was very professional. In addition, 60.0 per cent of the guided tourists would engage the same park guide again in their next trip to Bako National Park. However, this could be attributed to the personality of the park guide or their knowledge of the park products.

However, in any circumstances, according to Beeton (2001), the key factor is that no matter how potentially dangerous the crisis might have been, the operator must be in control and manage the situation without exposing guests to unnecessary danger. She further stressed that risk management and accident prevention were integral aspects of the preparatory phases of crisis management, in that they not only pre-empt so-called unpredictable circumstances, but also provide the operator with strategies to handle a crisis. The data collection process might have included respondents' emotional experience in their relationship established with their park guides with protectionism instinct. This could also be due to the need of projecting good image of themselves in front of researchers or they might feel obligated to answer the questionnaires even when they were in hurry.

CONCLUSION

Since the implementation of the Certificate in Park Guiding Certificate training course, there was a decreasing trend in incidents that required emergency attention and accidents in Bako National Park implicating the positive impact on the training module offered in creating awareness in risk management in the park guiding activities. The overriding factor of risk mismanagement was clearly human error and park guides must ensure that all procedures are followed to eliminate accidents or fatalities. Majority of the tourists accounting to 70.0percent were aware of risk management and prepared for adventure activities however only 40.0percent coming to Bako National Park thought they had prior knowledge of the level of risk they would be encountered in the park while 30.0 percent did not know about the level of risk and 20.0 percent responded with neutral answers. More than 50.0 percent of tourists' perceived that the licensed Park Guides' demonstrated risk management through both communication and practices in a professional manner. In contrast, more than 50.0 percent of the tourists perceived that the park guides did not know the knowledge of risk management.

Risk is very subjective depending on individual perceptions of risk as influenced by a complex interaction of a number of factors that included an individual's past experiences, media presentations, vicarious experiences and a predisposition to anxiety. However, the park guides must be in control and manage the situation without exposing their clients to unnecessary danger. It is therefore, recommended the management of the Park should consider imposing compulsory guided tour for all tourists. Further research should be expanded to include non-guided tourists on their awareness of risk management. In addition, the differences in the perception of risk between the park guides and their clients should be investigated to enable designing training courses on risk management. Finally, the management should develop a tool to continual

monitoring of the comprehension of risk management of the park guides and the practices.

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