

**DEFINING COMMUNITY RESILIENCE IN COMMUNITY BASED TOURISM:  
MISO WALAI AND PULAU MABUL IN SABAH, MALAYSIA**

Alan A. Lew

Department of Geography, Planning and Recreation, Northern Arizona University  
Email: alan.lew@nau.edu

'Sustainable development' has been a popular conceptual framework since the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) issued its report to the United Nations in 1987 (Hall & Lew, 2009). Also known as the *Brundtland Report*, its goal was to define a global agenda to deal with the deterioration of natural and social environments. Although still maintaining its dominant role as the preferred development paradigm for most actions taken by governments and enterprises today, the world remains mostly non-sustainable with ever increasing levels of greenhouse gasses, global temperatures, biodiversity losses, human populations, income disparities and social inequities (Lew, 2012).

Definitions of sustainability and sustainable tourism vary widely, but in general they center on approaching development in such a way as to maximize its positive impacts on people, places and environments, while minimizing any negative impacts. Sustainability is essentially a call to consider the common good over individual greed. This has been interpreted by some to be a criticism of liberal economic theory, which in its purest form allows market economics to be the sole regulator of common resource pools, such as air, water, and scenic byways.

The growing environmental and social challenges of our contemporary world seem to indicate that the sustainable development paradigm is not winning this battle between the commons and the free market. The concept of resilience has recently been proposed as an alternative paradigm to sustainability (Davidou, 2012). Community resilience refers to the ability of a community to effectively respond to unanticipated changes in its situation. According to Lew (2012) "sustainable development tries to prevent the shock event from occurring (by behaving more responsibly toward the environment and society), whereas resilience planning focuses more on the response and recovering after the shock event."

From a tourism perspective, the fundamental resilience question is: *"How well is a community prepared to survive and recover from a complete loss of their tourist arrivals?"* Examining two community based tourism case studies from Malaysia can give us an idea of how this alternative approach might be applied.

**BATU PUTEH, SABAH, MALAYSIA**

Batu Puteh comprises four villages with a total population of about 1800, located on the Kinabatangan River in the east coast of Sabah, Malaysia. The Kinabatangan River is a protected wildlife reserve with some of the highest levels of biodiversity in Southeast Asia. Hornbills, proboscis monkeys, and occasional elephants and orang utans can be seen from boat rides along this river.

Miso Walai Homestay was started as a community based tourism project in the late 1990s with support from WWF Norway (Hamzah & Mohamad, 2011). In 2003, it became part of a larger tourism and economic development cooperative known as KOPEL (Koperasi

Pelancongan, or The Tourism Cooperative). KOPEL has become the center of a wide range of economic and environmental initiatives, including providing local tourist guides, boat and land transportation services, food and beverage services, two rain forest eco camps (built in 2007 and 2009), contracts for lake and forest restoration from the Sabah state government, and grants for orang utan habitat restoration. The Miso Walai homestay program, which is run through KOPEL, also continues to provide a significant source of income for local participants.

The goals of these initiatives were to provide job opportunities and human capacity building to maintain a viable and thriving community. By most measures, KOPEL is considered among the most successful community based tourism programs in Malaysia and Southeast Asia.

### **PULAU MABUL, SABAH, MALAYSIA**

Mabul Island is a low lying exposed sandbar that was primarily used as a coconut plantation in the 1980s. Today it is crowded with about 2500 residents in two villages living among eight large dive resorts and nine smaller backpacker dive lodges. Mabul itself is considered a prime dive destination, but its growth and fame comes from being the closest island to Pulau Sipidan, which is considered one of the top two or three dive destinations in the world (Bremner, 2012; Lew, 2013). Sipidan island is a marine protected area with no resorts or private residences.

In essence, Mabul has become a 'sacrifice area' to protect Sipidan. Many of the residents in Mabul are from the Philippines and are not legally recognized by the government of Malaysia. Many others are not even recognized as Philippine residents and are essentially stateless. As such, formal education is non-existent for most of the islands children and modern medical care requires a boat trip to nearby cities and unsubsidized prices that few islanders can afford. While tourists are welcome to wander in the villages, there are some social tensions between the nominally Muslim locals and tourist divers from around the world (Mohamad, 2011). Environmental problems are significant, including a lack of adequate septic systems and excessive amounts of refuse.

Despite these challenges, most of the residents of Mabul are able to sustain themselves through cooperative efforts and by living off the sea. Coming from a tradition of nomadic seafaring and fishing, their traditional needs are minimal and they are open to seeking out new frontiers when local challenges arise. Some have opened gift shops and restaurants that cater to tourists and locals, and some have secured employment in the dive resorts and lodges. Most consider life on Mabul to be better than their lives in the Philippines and many young people dream of one day becoming a dive master, which is actually not possible under their unrecognized status.

### **LESSONS OF SUSTAINABILITY AND RESILIENCE**

From a sustainable development perspective, Batu Puteh and Mabul offer very different case studies. The KOPEL tourism cooperative in Batu Puteh is a model of sustainability. They are involved in ecological restoration work in the rain forests, in lake restoration, and in animal habitat maintenance. They are involved in human capacity building through guide training, rainforest eco camps, and staff development. And their efforts are well planned and offer an inclusive operating structure, that is open to a wide range of community members. They have been successful in providing opportunities for youths to stay in their villages and the

people of Batu Puteh are very much in control over their resources and the destiny of their community.

Pulau Mabul, on the other hand, has been built up in a haphazard manner, is populated well beyond its environmental carrying capacity, and offers very few life options, beyond being a fisherman, for its young people. The greatest fear of locals is that the Malaysian government will force them to leave Mabul, because no one living on Mabul owns any of the land there. Such an undertaking, however, would likely cause a major social uproar, if not an international headache for the government. Mabul pretty much violates most of the tenets of sustainable development, including environmental, social and economic.

From a resilience perspective, however, the differences between Batu Puteh and Mabul are more limited. While some disasters can be anticipated, many others are not. Even when a disaster is anticipated, such as a likely flood or earthquake, the precise location and intensity of those events can be difficult to predict. Other disasters are impossible to predict, such as global economic downturns, disruptive political changes, and new pandemics. Because of the challenge of disaster preparation, especially as it applies to the tourism economy, understanding the resilience of a community to a complete loss in tourist arrivals requires a broader understanding of how it survives in the broader range of challenges that it faces.

If tourists were to completely stop coming to Batu Puteh, the community would still survive, though it may not thrive to the same degree that it does today. Overall, tourism only comprises about 10% of the local gross income of the Batu Puteh villages. (The majority, almost 70%, of local income comes from palm oil sales.) Approximately 15% of the Batu Puteh villagers are members of the KOPEL cooperative. They would be the most likely to be affected by a loss in tourist arrivals. However, many of them have other sources of income, and KOPEL itself is not solely invested in tourism, though it is their dominant activity. Villagers also continue to live in close proximity of the land. As one young guide told this researcher, "I can always go into the rainforest for free food and to build my own shelter for free."

In Mabul, the loss of tourist arrivals would be devastating to the large dive resorts, where their entire income and investments are dependent on tourism. They would most likely need to completely close and hope that they do not deteriorate over time until they could reopen. Many employees would be laid off and would need to relocate to find similar employment. Smaller dive shops would also be affected, though the impacted numbers would be much smaller. They could even be converted into housing for local residents to an easier degree than could the more luxurious dive resorts. The local villagers of Mabul would be the least impacted, as most of them are dependent on fishing rather than on tourism. Tourist shops would mostly close, though the owners could probably move into more traditional livelihoods without major difficulty.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Sustainability and resilience have both become popular conceptual frameworks for community development research in recent years (Lew & Hall, 2009; Davidou, 2012). Many have argued that the two approaches are essentially the same, arguing that sustainability is required for resilience. This brief comparison of two tourism communities, however, demonstrates that a resilience perspective can be very different from a sustainability perspective, especially with regard to the tourism economy.

The next stage of research would be to understand how the differences between sustainability and resilience impact approaches to planning and community development. It is apparent from these two case studies that a diversified economy, where tourism is not a primary or even major component, makes for greater resilience. Also, local communities that are more closely tied to their natural environment may be more resilient, although this could depend more on the nature of a disaster. To fully understand community resilience, one would need go beyond the question of "How well is a community prepared to survive and recover from a complete loss of tourist arrivals?" We would also want to know how well the community could recover from a loss of a major natural resource, a major transportation connection, and other major areas that support a community's livelihood and lifestyle.

## REFERENCES

- Davoudi, S. (2012) Resilience: A Bridging Concept of a Dead End? *Planning Theory & Practice*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 299–333, June 2012 - <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14649357.2012.677124>
- Hall, C.M. and Lew, A.A. (2009). *Understanding and Managing Tourism Impacts: An Integrated Approach*. London: Routledge.
- Lew, A.A. (2012) Creative Resilience: The Next Sustainability for Tourism? *TGJournal's Tourism Place* (21 October). Online at: <http://tourismplace.blogspot.com/>, accessed 1 March 2013.
- Bremner, J. (2012) Into the deep: World's 50 best dive sites. CNN Go (6 April), online at <http://www.cnn.go.com/explorations/escape/outdoor-adventures/worlds-50-best-dive-sites-895793>, accessed 9 September 2012.
- Hamzah, A. and Mohamad N.H. (2011) The Sustainability of Community Based Ecotourism Surrounding Protected Areas in the Lower Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary: Critical Success Factors. *The Malaysian Forester* (74): 1-21
- Lew, A.A. (2013) A World Geography of Recreational SCUBA Diving. In G.Musa and K. Dimmock, eds., *SCUBA Diving Tourism*, pp. (forthcoming). Oxford: Routledge.
- Mohamad, N. H. (2011) Residents Perception of Tourism Development on Mabul Island, Sabah, unpublished M.Sc. Tourism Planning Dissertation, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Skudai