

SMALL COASTAL TOURISM BUSINESS PROFILES AND PREPAREDNESS MEASURES FOR CRISIS IN SEMPORNA, SABAH.

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents the preliminary findings that highlight the characteristics of small coastal tourism business profiles, the types of crises and tourism business preparedness measures undertaken by the small coastal tourism business in Semporna, Sabah. The findings show that the crises faced are mainly due to manmade and natural disaster. Limited efforts are taken by the small coastal tourism business operators in term of level of preparedness of measures in dealing with crisis faced. Although these small coastal tourism business operators have experienced crisis events, majority of them do not have crisis management plan. Therefore, it is suggested that more attention should be given on the crisis preparedness and relevant innovative measures and they should be part of the business operations. These findings are part of the findings from a bigger research project on assessing tourism businesses preparedness and resilience to crisis in Sabah coastal destinations.

Keywords: Tourism Business, Business Preparedness, Crises, Sabah East Coast

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Semporna is a district as well as a town located at Sabah East Coast. It is also known as a small port town and the getaway to the nearby islands like Mabul, Kapalai and Sipadan in Sabah, East Malaysia. It is well known for its beautiful scuba-diving and snorkeling spot. Semporna is predominantly populated by the Bajau ethnic community and the Palauan, or better known as the Sea Gypsies. Semporna has a population of 133,164 based on a census study by the Department of Statistics (Malaysia, 2010). The main activities are fishing, gardening and seaweed cultivation. Fish, shellfish, medicinal plants, fruits and timber are amongst the natural products that are harvested in Semporna (Project Darwin, 2001). The crown jewel of Semporna's tourism lies in Pulau Sipadan. It is regarded as a world-class diving site and is most

frequented by the high-end professional foreign market segment (Daldeniz & Hampton, 2012). Semporna is also known as diving paradise in world-renowned islands like Sipadan, Mabul, Kapalai, Matakang, Sibuan, Mantabuan, Siamil and Pom Pom among others.



Figure 1: Location of Semporna in Sabah Map

The growth of small coastal tourism businesses operating in Semporna have been seen to bring the economy benefits to the local community. In 2015, Tourism Malaysia has been actively promoting Semporna as an outstanding tourist destination. One of the activities is offering the “Best of Borneo Holiday Packages” that have been developed in line with Tourism Malaysia Sabah’s effort to boost tourist arrivals to the state (www.tourism.gov.my). In addition, similar activities by the Tourism National Key Economic Area (NKEA), collaborative efforts between the Ministry of Tourism and Culture, other Government agencies and the private sectors have been enhanced to help secure Malaysia’s position as a leading tourist destination. Twelve Entry Point Projects were introduced in this NKEA to help meet the country’s targets by 2020. One of the list of Entry Points Projects specifically mentions the aggressive promotions, marketing and work with inbound tour operators to provide more attractive tour packages in Semporna (SEDIA Corridor EPPS Tourism Sector, 2016). One of the popular events held in Semporna is Regatta Lepa, a traditional boat race, which takes place in April every year.

With all these efforts, nevertheless, tourism in Malaysia and Semporna has been regularly and negatively affected by a series of crises which have struck the industry in the past decades. In 2000, the Sipadan Island kidnapping case painted a negative image of Malaysian tourism industry. 21 hostages including 10 tourists from Europe and Middle East and 11 workers were taken to the Abu Sayyaf base in Jolo, Sulu. The repeated kidnapping cases further portrayed a

negative image of the Malaysian tourism industry especially Sabah (Ayob & Masron, 2014). The incidents continued in February 2013 whereby militant intruders in Lahad Datu who were also known as the Royal Army of Sulu Sultanate claimed that Sabah belongs to them and killed Malaysian armies and policemen (Sinar Harian, 2014).

Due to this incident, several foreign countries, such as China, Canada, Australia and New Zealand have advised their citizens to avoid coming to Sabah without taking into account that the occurred intrusion was in a remote area (Yang 2014) and nowhere near to the tourism areas. This resulted in sharp declines in international tourist arrivals throughout South East Asia and threatened the sustainability of some tourism businesses and destinations. Based on the state's tourist arrival statistics on the Sabah Tourism website, the state saw the lowest number of foreign tourists in February, March and April 2013 — i.e. during the intrusion (Malay Mail Online, 2013). Another disastrous kidnapping incident took place again in November 2013 where armed men raided three of the five water villas at Pom Pom Island. The most recent kidnapping case involving tourist in Semporna was on April 2, 2014 whereby Abu Sayyaf kidnapped a Chinese tourist, Gao Huayun, 28, and a Filipino worker, Marcy Dayawan, 40 from Singamata Reed Resort, Semporna. Both were released to Malaysian Security officials on May 30, 2014 (The Star Online, 2013)

With all these incidents, small coastal businesses in the area are gravely impacted. This paper aims to discuss on the crises faced by these small coastal tourism businesses in Semporna and the level of preparedness these businesses have in dealing with crises such as kidnapping which can bring negative image towards tourism industry in Semporna.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism is the world's largest industry and makes a major contribution to the economies of most developed and developing countries because it is being used as a ubiquitous vehicle for economic development and diversification and an integral element of economic development policy at local, regional and national level (Sharpley, Richard and Telfer & David J., 2002). The term tourism business embraces transportation businesses, accommodation businesses, tour operators, travel agents, tourism promotion and advertisement businesses, businesses engaged in tourism insurance and finance, food and beverage businesses, entertainment businesses, nature parks, zoos, businesses that organise concerts, theatres and shows, gaming businesses,

convention and meeting organising businesses, translation and guiding services, businesses that produce and sell travel goods, and so forth (Uriely, Yonay, & Simchai, 2002).

According to Hall (2001) coastal tourism is widely regarded as one of the fastest growing areas of contemporary tourism. The concept of coastal tourism embraces the full range of tourism, leisure, and recreationally oriented activities that take place in the coastal zone and the offshore coastal waters. These include coastal tourism development (accommodation, restaurants, food industry, and second homes), and the infrastructure supporting coastal development (e.g. retail businesses, marinas, and activity suppliers). The activities in this type of tourism include recreational boating, coast- and marine-based ecotourism, cruises, swimming, recreational fishing, snorkeling and diving (Hall, 2001).

The growth of tourism in coastal areas has reached its peak in recent decades. The economic importance of this coastal tourism is unquestionable, although there is no analysis forecasting what would be the direct share of coastal tourism in the tourism sector, or its likely contribution to the economy as a whole (UNEP, 2009).

There are various measures that can be used in identifying the size of a tourism business. They can be classified based on number of employees; total salaries and wages paid in a certain time period; amount of capital; sales revenues; number of rooms/beds; provision in some of facilities such as conference, banqueting and restaurant halls and their capacities; existence of ancillary services such as swimming pool, car parking, shops, etc. Among them, the number of employees is the most widely accepted and used measure (Thomas et al., 2011). In term of small coastal tourism business, in general, it can be categorized as:

- Most likely be a sole trader or a partnership but may also be a limited company. It will typically have fewer than twenty employees, but may have as few as one (the owner-manager) or as many as 500. (Cressy and Cowling, 1996).
- Owned and managed by the owner (59.5%), with the remainder operated by a manager. And most of the managers had a family relationship with the owner. This was explained on the basis that the owner was more likely to trust a family relation in comparison to an employee who was not. (Ahmad, 2005)
- Water/sea element is predominant and is considered to be the main asset and advantage. (Papageorgio, 2016).

3.0 TYPES OF TOURISM BUSINESS CRISIS

Recently, crises were more frequent compared to before because of few possible reasons such as pressure on business and industry from global market demands, and these impacted the industry more than before. The term crisis in tourism industry usually refers to an event that leads to a shock resulting in the sudden emergence of an adverse situation (Law and Prideaux, 2005). Selbst (1978 in Faulkner 2001, p. 136) defines crisis as "any action or failure to act that interferes with an organisation's ongoing functions, the acceptable attainment of its objectives, its viability or survival, or that has a detrimental personal effect as perceived by the majority of its employees, clients or constituents". Selbst's focus on perceptions implies that if a public organisation or stakeholders perceive a crisis, a real crisis could transpired. This illustrates that perception management is an important consideration in managing crises.

A study by Parson (1996) categorizes crises into three types based on its gestation. The first type is immediate crises: where little or no warning exists therefore organisations are unable to research the problem or prepare a plan before the crisis hits. The second type of crises is called emerging crises where these are slower in developing and may be able to be stopped or limited by organisational action and the third type is sustained crises where that may last for weeks, months or even years. Small changes in the parameters of a crisis may ultimately cause enormous changes in its outcome as minute initial differences are magnified and transformed by the dynamical processes at work rendering the crisis extremely sensitive to the initial conditions of its evolution (Paraskevas, 2006).

Strategies to deal with these different crises will vary depending on time pressure, the extent of control and the magnitude of each incident. A study by lepp and Gibson (2008) state that a few crises that happened locally can affect the tourism internationally such as terrorism, natural disaster, political instability and war and epidemic/disease. Understanding crises and disasters, their lifecycle and potential impacts and actions can help in the development of strategies by related organisations to deal with such incidents. By understanding these phenomena more effective strategies can be developed to stop or reduce the severity of their impacts on business and society, despite their complexity.

4.0 THE PREPAREDNESS MEASURES

Crises preparedness, defined as actions taken in advance of a disaster to ensure adequate response to its impacts and the relief and recovery from its consequences, is performed to eliminate the need for any last-minute actions (Coppola, 2015). In response to a crisis, invariably, urgent management decisions, which are not part of an organisation's normal operating procedures, will have to be made. Pearson and Mitroff (1993, p. 59) suggest that 'the purpose of crisis management is not to produce a set of plans; it is to prepare an organization to think creatively about the unthinkable so that the best possible decisions will be made in time of crisis'.

Organisations of all shapes and sizes all have to deal with change at some point in their lifecycle, and all destinations will have to deal with a disaster at some stage (Faulkner, 2001). Kash and Darling (1998, p. 179) claim that it is no longer a case of 'if' an organisation will face a crisis; it is rather a question of 'when', 'what type' and 'how prepared' the organisation is to deal with it. Effective crisis management means that senior management must manage the impact of the crisis on various sections of the organisation, such as information systems, operations and human resources (Hickman & Crandall, 1997). It is vital for the organization to have a guideline on how to deal with crises when it happen which would help guide responses to the next crisis which will inevitably occur.

5.0 DATA COLLECTION

The study was carried out in Semporna, Sabah involving a small-scale survey of 10 operators of small tourism-related businesses in accommodation (hotels and resorts), event operation, transportation, dive shop and restaurant. They were Zwin Resort Pom Pom Island, Arung Hayat Sipadan Adventure Lodge, Celebes Beach Resort, Chalet Warisan Kg. Tampi Tampi, Scuba Junkie (Mabul Beach Resort), Seahorse Sipadan Scuba, Seven Day Holidays, Singamata Adventures & Reef Resort, Sipadan Dive Centre and Spheredivers Scuba. The sample was drawn based on the availability and approachability of the companies to be involved in the study. The survey was administered by face-to-face structured interviews, with the aim of investigating the respondents' point of view, their perceptions and experience about crisis, the implementation of crisis preparedness and business resilient in their company as well as how their business would respond to any disturbance in tourist market.

Semporna district was chosen as the geographical area for this study, consists of two main areas, i.e. the mainland and the islands. The district is well known for its richest marine biodiversity, and therefore develops substantial amount of small-scale coastal tourism businesses in the district. The exact total population of these small tourism businesses is not available in any reports. Therefore, the samples of this study were selected conveniently based on the availability and approachability of the respondents, representing both the mainland and island of Semporna district. All 10 interviews were conducted at each respondent's preferred place and time, and they were contacted in advance in order to ask their permission and to obtain informed consent to be involved in the study. Ritchie and Lewis (2003) mention that it is important for an interviewer to provide respondents with information about the purpose of the study, the funder, the researcher, how the data will be used and what participation will require from them. Therefore, a cover letter stating the purposes of the interview together with the key topics to be discussed were also provided to the respondents prior to interview.

All responses from respondents were recorded on a hard copy questionnaire by the interviewer. The questions included dichotomous and attitudinal of 5-point Likert Scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree/very unlikely) to 5 (strongly agree/very likely) as well as an open-ended question relating to respondents' experience and perceptions on crisis management measures. Attitudinal questions were used to ask respondents' perceptions on the likelihood and agreeableness on a particular statement about the impact of crisis to their business.

The questionnaire contained seven sections, comprising 92 questions altogether: (i) Section A asked about respondents' demographic backgrounds, (ii) Section B collected data pertaining to respondents' business characteristics, (iii) Section C consisted of questions that asked respondents to indicate the likelihood impact of crisis to their business, (iv) Section D collected data relating to the frequency of respondents' crisis preparedness measures, and (v) Section E asked about the agreeableness on statement relating to resilient measures.

The main analytical techniques used were:

(i) descriptive test to explore the kind of crisis that posed the most potential impact to tourism business, as well as the level of agreeableness of respondents towards their preparedness and resilient towards crisis measures;

(ii) qualitative analysis for the open-ended data to analyse the ideas, and views given by respondents in relating to their responses towards disturbance scenario and the adoption of

crisis management measures, in which all of the answers then were sorted into categories based on concepts and theories from the literature related to the study.

6.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Respondent profiles

A total of ten small coastal tourism businesses participated in the data collection. Majority of the respondents were from Semporna with bachelor degrees. Most of the respondents had 6-10 years working experience in tourism industry. The respondent profile is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Profile of Respondent

	Number
<u>Respondent Gender</u>	
Male	7
Female	3
<u>Origin</u>	
Semporna	6
Lahad Datu	1
Tawau	1
Peninsular Malaysia	1
United State	1
<u>Education Background</u>	
Primary School	2
Secondary School	1
Diploma	2
Bachelor's Degree	5
<u>Years in Tourism Industry</u>	
Less than 3 years	1
3 - 5 years	2
6 - 10 years	4
11 - 20 years	2
More than 20 years	1
<u>Current Position</u>	
Owner	1
General Manager	1
Operator	2
Operation Manager	3
Marketing / Sales Manager	1
Regional / Area Manager	2

Table 2: The Profiles of Small Coastal Tourism Business

	Number
<u>Business type</u>	
Island Resort	1
Dive Resort / Lodge	7
Tour Operator	1
Restaurant	1
<u>Number of Employees</u>	
Less than 5 employees	0
5-20 employees	7
21-50 employees	2
51-100 employees	1
<u>Years of Operation</u>	
Less than a year	0
1-2 years	1
3-5 years	0
6-10 years	4
11 years or more	5

The business profiles of the small coastal tourism businesses are presented in Table 2. The types of coastal tourism businesses can be categorised as dive and island resort, tour operators and restaurant. Majority of the small tourism businesses falls under the dive resort type. In other words, Semporna is a well-known world class dive destination. Most of the small tourism businesses employ 5-20 employees. Most the small coastal tourism businesses have been in operations for at least 6 years or more.

6.1 Preliminary findings types of crises faced

Empirical data reveals five types of crises faced by the small coastal tourism businesses in Semporna, as presented in Table 3 below. The type of crises were related to the manmade activities (kidnapping and shooting and economic crisis) and natural disasters (aircraft crashes, fire and pollution). It is interesting to note that these small coastal tourism businesses were also affected by both crises that happened in Semporna and also external crises. Nevertheless, majority of the respondents indicated that kidnapping and shooting and aircraft crashes were the key crises they faced in their business operations. Their businesses suffered severely due to the kidnapping and shooting and aircraft crashes and this is visible in the dropping number of tourist arrivals in Semporna.

Table 3: Types of Crises Faced By Small Coastal Tourism Businesses in Semporna

Type of crisis	Number of responses
Kidnapping & Shooting	4
Aircraft crashes (MH370)	3
Pollution	2
World Economics Crisis	2
Fire	1

6.2 Crisis preparedness measures by the small coastal tourism businesses

The preliminary finding shows that small coastal tourism businesses have taken several crisis preparedness measures in dealing with the crises faced. Their preparedness measures are largely related to the government regulation or requirements and enforcement to reduce the risk and crisis according to their past experiences, their awareness of environmental protection and tourist safety. Simply, the small coastal tourism business operators view these as necessary measures to be taken as part of the regulations and enforcement by the government. They feel that these measures are part of the crisis management with regard to their business operations. These evidences are reported in Table 4.

In order to understand their preparedness in dealing with crisis by the small coastal tourism businesses in Semporan, a five likert scaled rated as "always", "often", "sometimes", "rarely", "never" was used. The survey finding shows that majority of the respondents indicated "sometimes" as the highest response followed by "rarely" and "often".

A small number of respondents indicated that they "always" prepare for the crisis. These respondents paid attention to the creation of strategy for minimizing the crisis impact on their business, followed by conducting a threat and vulnerability analysis for each business activity, inventory internal resources and capabilities, integrating crisis management into business planning and management and review, evaluate and update their crisis plan. However, majority of the respondents indicated that they did not include crisis management as part of the business organization statement of purpose, but they did consider crisis management as part of strategic business management program; and some of them set up crisis management advisory committee.

Table 4: Crisis Preparedness Measures

No	Crisis preparedness measures	Responses and Respondents
1	Government Regulation or requirement for to an organization or a business during their setting up. (Dive resort/lodge)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"Safety equipment at the resort required by the DOSH for licensing"</i> (Respondent SPR2, SPR3, SPR9) • <i>"JKKP (DOSK) required all resort to install fire extinguisher."</i> (Respondent SPR6 , SPR8)
2	Enforcement of regulations by ESScom and local authority based on the current situation in Semporna coastal area (Island resort).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"Curfew imposed by ESSCOM. We have to follow"</i> (Respondent SPR3) • <i>"Rule imposed by the authority on Mabul.. All tourist data and activity must be recorded and reported to ESSCOM"</i> (Respondent SPR10)
3	Past experience of external or internal crisis that is affecting the business (Dive resort /lodge)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The crisis happened before, its affected the business and it may happen again"</i> (Respondent SPR3) • <i>"Past experience...chalet was destroyed in fire"</i> (Respondent SPR5) • <i>"After the previous kidnapping, we learnt that such incident can jeopardize not only the safety of our in-house guest and staff, it also give huge impact to the business"</i> (Respondent SPR8) • <i>"The crisis happened before and effecting the business"</i> (Respondent SPR3)
4	Awareness on current pollution level on Mabul Island that will harm the marine life (dive resort /lodge)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"Environmental efforts towards a sustainable tourism"</i>(Respondent SPR5) • <i>"Pollution is absolutely happening now and the impact is irreversible. In 10 years, pollution may cause the tourism industry in Mabul Island to collapse entirely."</i>
5	Awareness of the safety of their customer during the tour (tour operators)	<i>"For the safety of our guest during the tour"</i> (Respondent SPR7)

On other hand, there is a small number small coastal tourism businesses responded that they "never" or did nothing about the preparedness of crisis. Simply, these respondents have limited knowledge with crisis management and the size of their business operation does not encourage them to prepare for any crisis. These findings correspond well with the study by Spillan and Hough (2003) that crisis management planning receives little attention by the small businesses. Likewise, most of the small businesses experienced crisis events but they do not have crisis management and crisis management teams.

Evidently, the preparedness of measures and level of preparedness crisis for these small coastal tourism businesses in Semporna is considered limited. These are small businesses that have not been exposed to crisis until recently. Furthermore, these operators have been in the business for long period and they have no experience in dealing with crisis management. However, it suggests that they need to enhance their knowledge and skill in crisis that may potentially take place in the area, especially to integrate some of the relevant and innovative measures or steps to prepare the crisis that may affect their business operations. Simply, these small coastal tourism businesses are no longer operating in a safe zone.

It is vital for these small businesses regardless of size to have a guideline on how to deal with crises when they happen which would help guide responses to the next crisis that will inevitably occur, as suggested by Pearson and Mitroff (1993). Furthermore, coastal destination like just any other places may have to deal with a disaster at some stage (Faulkner, 2001) and crisis can happen any time as pointed out by Kash and Darling (1998). In view of the current scenario in Semporna which has been gazetted as a high security zone due to the unforeseen kidnapping activities, it is vital for all those tourism business operators to pay more attention and improve their crisis management measures. These can be done through giving relevant training to the operation staffs, good communication system for emergency purposes and installation of security equipment at the business premises. In addition, they also need to review, evaluate and update their crisis measures so that these are relevant to the situation from time to time.

7.0 CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

The preliminary finding seems to conclude that small coastal tourism business operators in Semporna faced five different types of crises that resulted from the manmade and natural disaster. The preparedness of measures taken was based on the government regulations and enforcement. In term of level of preparedness measure for crisis, only a small number of business operators have introduced some measures and activities in preparation for the crisis but not the specific set of plans for crisis management. Majority of the small coastal tourism business operators believe that crisis preparedness measure or crisis planning is less important. The paper suggests that small coastal tourism business operators need to pay more attentions on crisis measures and improve the necessary measures that directly deal with the crisis, which may happen anytime within the context of Semporna. Furthermore, these small coastal tourism businesses have limited resources and thus they are vulnerable to potential crisis events. They should generate greater concern for crises and have better preparedness measures.

The limitations of the paper include the nature of the findings which is a preliminary finding and the small number of respondents.

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