

## **Between Homestay and Wetland Mangroves: A Partnership Lesson in Eco-tourism**

### **Abstract**

Kampung Perepat Timbul runs a homestay industry near Tanjung Piai Mangrove National Park, one of the largest mangrove habitats at the southernmost tip of Asian mainland. It is located in the midst of agriculture and fishing villages that can offer eco-tourism and environmental education for the visitors. It is a unique situation where the wetland mangroves are preserved and provide eco-tourism opportunities and homestay programs that could support the local economy. Efforts by the locals and the government to support local economy by proposing homestay programs initially look promising during the early establishment of the wetland mangroves. However, factors such as lack of coordination, poor partnership arrangement and lack of marketing strategies have resulted in a less than successful return for eco-tourism. This paper will assess the existing partnership between these villages and the protected natural area by proposing a partnership strategy that will help to rejuvenate the eco-tourism potentials.

**Key words:** Homestay, Wetlands, Mangrove, Ecotourism, Partnership

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

It is a well known fact that tourism along the coastal areas are providing the local communities of earnings from inbound tourists (Ming & Wong, 2001). Tourists visited resorts,

coastal cities and chalets to spend their vacations and to tour interesting features not found in their home countries. Some of these coastal areas have very interesting wetland features that are attractive to visitors and holiday makers. Wetlands are also capable of providing alternative sources of income for local communities.

Based on, in many wetland areas there is a potential for growth of forms of tourism that protect and enhance the environment (Andrew 1997). This kind of tourism is sometimes referred to as ecotourism; however this term concentrates on the goal of protecting the environment without reference to the means for its achievement and a more recent term that seeks to include the means as well as the end is responsible tourism. Responsible tourism refers to a situation where all the stakeholders, local people, business and institutions gain from the development of an industry which is set up and run according to sustainable environmental principles. Such an approach which recognizes the needs of the local people as well as their environments can be glossed as "ecotourism for people" or "community tourism". It reflects the growing acknowledgement among ecologists that local people cannot be left out of the equation and must be beneficiaries if environmentally friendly development is to succeed.

Although homestay is relatively new as an industry, the term *homestay* is merely a new word used to describe the age-old concept of travellers residing with a family other than their own. Homestay programme is part of community tourism which has appealed to budget conscious tourists apart from their vernacular atmosphere that constitute a very significant and visible form of local community participations in tourism. Homestay can be one of the most rewarding experiences. Homestay guests are to learn about other cultures, to speak another language, to try something adventurous and to try to make long lasting friendships. From the hosts perspectives the homestay program is part of the scheme to improve their socio-economic well-being and trying to market local products and attractions of exceptional and unique experience for the benefit of their guests. Homestay accommodation has unique potential to promote cultural awareness and cultural exchange through sharing life and family experience. Research into homestay is still in its infancy (Knight & Schmidt-Rinehart, 2002; Richardson, 2002), and there is a growing need for further investigation into homestay and what its environment can offer. While much of the research has focused on educational outcomes and the psychological well

being of homestay guests, there is very little research into how homestay has encouraged beneficial visits to wetlands areas, natural protected areas and new experience environmental education. This paper investigates the potential of homestay in promoting interest in wetlands protected areas and providing opportunities for partnerships lessons in eco-tourism, thus opening a world of opportunity for all primary stakeholders.

Tanjung Piai Mangrove National Park, one of the largest mangrove habitats at the southernmost tip of Asian mainland is located in the midst of agriculture and fishing villages that can offer eco-tourism and environmental education for the visitors. It is a unique situation of a loose partnership where the wetland mangroves are preserved and provide eco-tourism opportunities and homestay programs could take advantage to support the local economy. The homestay program involved gracious hosts who share their home with visitors, providing excellent local cuisine with the opportunity to explore village environment and a beautiful wetlands located along the coastal fringes to explore and enjoy. Ideally, the homestay should provide two main opportunities. Firstly, it gives the guests informal contact with the local culture. Secondly, homestay is intended to provide a safe and supportive learning environment for the guests.

However, many of the activities of the homestay and the benefit it brings to the local communities has not been clearly substantiated. These are due to several factors such as the involvement and enthusiasm of the local communities, the marketing strategy and how the homestay owners capitalize on the existing attractions of the wetland areas. This has led to some research questions that need to be explored to find out on the effectiveness of the partnership and the benefit to the local community.

1. How beneficial are the homestay programs to the local communities?
2. What extent do homestay visitors learn about the protected wetland area?
3. What benefits can the host family obtained by having mangrove wetland near them?
4. Are there any collaboration between the various stakeholders that help to provide benefits to the homestay program?

## 2. THE STUDY AREA

Kampung Perepat Timbul is a village about 5 kilometres from Tanjung Piai Mangrove National Park. About 40 families in Kampung Perepat Timbul are currently participating in a homestay programme organized by the local communities initiated by the Rural Development Ministry in 2001 (see map below).



Map of study area

They were selected based on several criteria that includes willingness to host their guests, underwent training with the ministry and ownership of traditional Malay houses (see pictures 1-2). Apart from hosting the guest several activities were included in the homestay programmes. About 3000 homestay guests have participated in this programmes. The majority of the guest were Japanese (60%), Singaporeans (20%), Indonesians (10%) and the rest were

locals, Bruneians, Sweden and guest from the United States. These guests were connected with the homestay operators through the ministry, tour agents, and non-governmental organizations.



Picture 1 and 2. Two examples of homestay houses

The activities that support the homestay programmes are as follows: The local apiary where the tourists can see how honey is collected and taste fresh honey straight from the honeycomb. Other activities included visits to several aquaculture farms or kelongs by the sea or take a boat trip around the Tanjung Piai Mangrove National Park to get up close and personal with mangrove wildlife (See Pictures 3-7). These trips are either part of the homestay package or provided on an optional basis based on the needs and interest of the visitors. Some of the visitors who are independent minded would prefer to explore these places by bicycling to the areas of interest on their own.



Picture 3. A homestay participant at the Tg Piai Mangrove National Park



**Picture 4. Getting into boats for visit to Kelongs**





**Picture 5. One of the mangrove species at Tg. Piai National State Park**



**Picture 6. A demonstration of honey collection at an apiary**



**Picture 7. Japanese Homestay guests enjoying durian fruits**

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

Focus group interviews were conducted on two different groups. The homestay owners were interviewed to collect the data based on homestay program activities and the benefits from these



activities. 20 homestay operators or 50% of the total operators were interviewed using a modified Delphi technique. This method is a systematic interactive method for obtaining information forecasts from a focus group of homestay operators. The method was appropriate because it allowed the researchers to obtain detailed information about the participants' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in a way that quantitative methods such as a questionnaire survey would not. The participants were selected to answer questionnaires in two rounds. The purpose of the focus group interviews was to allow the homestay operators to express their experiences and opinions, give insight into their ideas regarding homestay and indicate suggestions to improve the programme. Firstly, questionnaires were distributed to homestay operators, which allowed for analysis of host profiles, and preliminary probe into the hosts concerns and issues. The questionnaires consisting of 20 questions were posed to the homestay operators for their opinions and feedbacks. After the first round a summary of the operators' answers were provided for the second round discussion. The participants are encouraged to discuss together their earlier answers in a group. Finally, the group discussion will summarises the feedbacks of the programs and provide suggestions on how to improve the homestay programme.

A group of ten park workers ranging from the guides to the managers were informally interviewed to solicit their opinions on the importance of mangrove wetlands in complimenting the homestay activities within the area. They were selected based from their nature of work in receiving, briefing and providing guided tours to the park visitors. They were provided with 20 questionnaires asking them on their role in providing informational tours, their interaction with the visitors and their relationship with the homestay operators in terms of cooperation, promotion and cooperation to promote the wetlands mangrove park. Their opinions were sought on how enhance the effort to "sell" the wetlands mangrove park to the homestay guests.

#### **4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

From the focus group discussion it was found that the homestay house owners are mostly retired government officers, local fishermen, orchard growers and local businessmen who are encouraged by the government to open up their communities to tourists. The guests that they hosted were from Japan, Singapore, Brunei, Indonesia Malaysia, Sweden, the USA and from a few other European countries. They have benefited from the homestay program being located in one of the largest coastal wetlands of mangrove ecosystem in the world and home to hundreds of land and aquatic species such as fascinating tree-climbing mudskippers and scavenging macaque monkeys.

The inhabitants people and otherwise, have learned to live off this strip of land and play their role in preserving the environment. The homestay owners understood the many functions of mangrove ecosystem. Its physical stability helps to prevent shoreline erosion, shielding inland areas from severe damage during hurricanes and tidal waves. They have also realized the importance of preserving the mangrove wetlands as a transit station for the migratory birds on their way south. These happenings compliment the homestay programmes that supports community based activities related to ecotourism by creating awareness towards how important for people to preserve their environment. The homestay in this village complemented the need to preserve and to promote the wetland as an environmental education. The homestay program combined with visits to wetlands of Tanjung Piai supports community based activities that relates to tourism and at the same time heightened interests of the tourists and local community in the preservation of a sustainable wetlands. The homestay owners agreed that the existence of the Tanjung Piai Mangrove State Park has contributed to the popularity of the homestay programme. By understanding the opportunity that wetlands has to offer to the homestay visitors such as fishing, boating and bird watching, sunset watching the homestay owners can generate extra money from the visitors and provides sustainable development opportunities. Therefore, the existence of the Tanjung Piai Mangrove State Parks should enrich the experience of the homestay visitors and provides a worthwhile tourism and recreation activities.

However, the homestay programme is not without any problems. A few of the homestay owners are not well informed or well versed with the opportunity to promote visit to

Tanjung Piai National Park. Some of the homestay visitors have to explore on their own. Lack of promotion is one of the factors that has dwindled the number of participants both in terms of owners and visitors. Even though the homestay operators tried their best to accommodate the guests, feelings of dissatisfaction by a few number of guest often crops up. Some examples are the comparison of comfort between homestay and hotels, the needs for private bathrooms, and different expectations of room cleanliness. Most of the homestay owners are not engaged fulltime in the homestay programme and a few has quitted because they are more inclined to concentrate on more profitable businesses such as selling local products, fishing, retailing, restaurants or farming. The sizes of some of these houses are not suitable for many people in a group and as a result either they were accommodated separately in several houses or they were frequently put up in larger houses. This has lead to feelings of dissatisfaction, fairness, jealousies and exclusion. Not much effort was made to market the homestay programmes through local hotels, newspapers or the internet. This was due to the fact that they lack the knowledge to market them. Most of the visitors (95%) that participated in the homestay programmes were informed through group tours, government agencies and the park authorities. Only a few contacted the homestay owners themselves. However, these are few and far between. The level of communication for some homestay owners is very low and this is a factor that needs to be addressed. They need to be able to communicate in several languages such as English, Japanese, Korean and German. The other factor is that the majority of the participants are seasonal visitors that come during school vacation, long holidays or based on special programmes organized by group tours. As a result these programmes are seasonal in nature. Some events not conducive to tourism activities such as tsunami warnings, bird flu, floods, economic downturn, or piracy are other factors which affect the homestay industry.

The discussions with the Tanjung Piai Mangrove Park authorities reveal some interesting findings. Most of the park workers knew about the existence of the homestay programmes within their park's vicinity. They comprised of 30% of the park visitors but half of this percentage found out about the parks existence through their own initiative. The other 70% are from group tours, foreign tourists, students, day visitors or holiday makers. There is no formal arrangement between the park authorities and the homestay owners to include Tanjung Piai

Mangrove National Park to be part of the itinerary of the homestay visitors. Most park workers agree that some of the homestay owners are not aware of the benefit and incentives of having the park close to their villages. They agree that an educational tour should be conducted for the homestay owners to capitalize on the existence of park for their benefit to inform their house guests. This will provide added value to the homestay industry. However, the park workers' relationships with the homestay committee are very good but more close cooperation should be worked out to create a win-win situation. By bringing in the homestay visitors to the park extra revenue for the park will be generated and the park workers efforts in managing sustainable wetlands will be appreciated by both the locals and visitors alike.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

The research suggests that there should be more cooperation between homestay operators and wetland park officials in providing a new experience and added attraction for homestay guests. The suggested cooperation should be in the form of more joint programmes between homestay operators and park workers in promoting the Tg Piai National Park together. Whatever information that the homestay operators knew about the park should be channeled by the park workers. Homestay program is a potential form of eco-tourism industry if it has a well structured quality program to include visits to wetlands areas. Several steps need to be taken to improve the partnership formula between wetland park workers and homestay operators. The steps suggested are:

- To equip homestay operators with, knowledge and understanding of wetlands attraction and to provide a package tour with the cooperation of the park workers. This sharing of socio-economic benefits between homestay operators and Tg Piai National Park will bring increase management of eco-tourism enterprises and added attraction to the homestay guests.
- To enhance the appreciation of wetland values and their importance among homestay owners to realize the potential of smart partnership between the park authorities and homestay owners that will improve the effectiveness of efforts to promote awareness in the environmental impact of the wetlands park. This can be done by educating the



homestay operators through workshop sessions, discussions and training seminars as part of the park outreach programme.

- To provide assistance in the form of short term loans and for informal training geared to help out small homestay owners to be competitive and knowledgeable in the field of homestay industry. This is also to ensure that the homestay industry will continue to exist and attract new operators and in the long run will be able to complement and sustain the wetland mangroves.
- To provide homestay operators with information on the environmental education and other educational benefits for their guests. This can be achieved by the wetland park administrators and homestay operators establish lasting and effective partnership through effective communication between them in promoting educational awareness to the homestay guests on of the importance of wetland mangroves.

Improved communication and information should be extended among the various stakeholders: park authorities, tour agents, homestay owners, local government bureau, support institutions for education, are needed to facilitate a proper ecotourism industry. Good collaboration and efficient partnerships are vital to achieve mutual benefits. Homestay programmes lacking in publicity and close cooperation with the various stakeholders will result in the decline of the visitors and tourists alike. For the mangrove wetlands park this will not assist the park authorities to create awareness and gain the support of the various communities and visitors in the promotion of park for conservation purposes. For these reasons the concept of homestay and wetland mangrove as a Improved coordination, proper partnerships arrangement and better marketing strategies will result in a is necessary. Improved coordination, proper partnerships arrangement and better marketing strategies will result in a win-win situation. The homestay program in the study area should bring together the operators and Tg Piai National Park workers to better understand their role and benefits in terms of economics, social and environmental education. By developing a proper marketing and promotional activities by well trained homestay operators who are enthusiastic in their roles will help to bring in good financial returns and better understanding of their cultural differences between the operators and their guest. The homestay operators should

also be in a better position to offer their guests the opportunities to visit the mangrove wetlands as part of the homestay itinerary. The officials of the Tg Piai Mangrove National Park should work together with the homestay operators by providing guided tours to guests to experience the on site environmental education. It is hoped that recommendations derived from this paper will make a difference to the present homestay programmes and wetlands mangroves in terms of partnership lessons.

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