

When tourism meets conservation in small tropical islands: The case of Pulau Kapas, Malaysia

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Close your eyes and imagine waking up with the sound of the waves and the sight of palm leaves, heading for a sunny day, ideal to dive in to experience the coral reefs... For sure, tourists in search of a gateway on white sandy beaches are having a good time in small tropical islands. But wherever the main source of income is nature-based tourism, impact on socio-ecological systems (SESs) must be carefully monitored to preserve touristic attractiveness and the well-being of the local communities for the long term. How can conservation and tourism coexist in a form of ecotourism, while the cultural identity and relationships with the ecosystem are preserved? On small islands, natural resources are limited and trade-offs necessary for the coexistence of tourism and conservation of the nature. Protection status should allow the development of tourism activities in a sustainable way for conservationists, tourism workers and local communities. To this end, the building of durable agreements on ecosystem conservation and tourism must include the diversity of perceptions among all stakeholders.

Focusing on Pulau Kapas, a small island located off the coast of Terengganu on the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia, we combine stakeholder-based methods (Mukherjee *et al.*, 2018) – namely Q-Methodology and Social Network Analysis – with conservation science to understand tourism-conservation interactions and challenges in the SES. We conducted 18 interviews, where in stakeholders selected statements that resonated the most with their conceptions of conservation and tourism in Pulau Kapas. These selections were statistically studied through a principal component analysis (Schmolck, 2018), and were translated into several “worldviews” (Zabala *et al.*, 2018) about tourism and conservation on Pulau Kapas. Additionally, these worldviews were linked with the stakeholder positions and interconnections in the social network.

We expect to find phase disagreements between the stakeholders who perceive different interests in Pulau Kapas (*i.e.* business opportunity *versus* conservation priority); those who have different backgrounds (*i.e.* academic education *versus* holding the family business); and those who nurture different conceptions of “sense of place” (*i.e.* islanders *versus* outsiders). In a nutshell, this research is aimed at (i) identifying stakeholders relevant to conservation or tourism in Pulau Kapas; (ii) mapping the degree of connectivity between them; and (iii) overlaying this map with the differences or similarities in opinions about conservation and tourism.

Concepts like ecotourism, local ecological knowledge (Rist and Dahdouh-Guebas, 2006) and spiritual value of the nature will be discussed, to explore the ties between conservation of the nature and economic viability in Pulau Kapas SES. Sustainable management depends on acknowledgement of social influences among stakeholders and their perceptions of what constitutes a desirable future for tourism in the island. Results of this research may prompt joint efforts for integrating conservation in tourism practices in Pulau Kapas, and support conservation-sound governance in small islands. This research may provide guidance for the study of similar SESs in Malaysia and beyond. Research ongoing (August 2020 to August 2021).

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