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A hidden pearl : Harnessing the full potential of marine eco-tourism in East Coast of Sabah :

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East Coast of Sabah can be positioned and promoted as a world-class marine eco-tourism destination through a holistic approach

The East Coast of Sabah contains Sulu Sea and Sulawesi Sea, two of Malaysia's maritime zones. They teem with marine life and corals which have made Sipadan and Ligitan two internationally renowned diving sites.

Blessed with calm and warm waters all year round, beautiful beaches and islands, stunning biodiversity and marine ecosystems, the two seas are brimming with huge potential to generate more tourist receipts for Sabah from marine eco-tourism. Besides natural attractions, the seas also feature communities residing along their coasts such as the Bajau Laut and Tatana whose fascinating lifestyles and culture, and sea-based activities such as cage fish breeding and seaweed cultivation, can be promoted as tourism products.

With these features, the East Coast of Sabah has the key ingredients to be promoted as a marine eco-tourism destination that can earn big revenues for Sabah and bring socio-economic development to the area. Along with land-based eco-tourism, marine eco-tourism on the East

Coast of Sabah has been a key economic driver for the state, which generated RM5.2 bil. in revenue from tourism in 2012 (or 8.5% of Sabah's total GDP) and attracted .

The Malaysian government has identified tourism as one of the National Key Economic Areas (NKEA) that can generate high income, value adding activities in a n inclusive manner to transform the nation's economic into a fully develop nation by 2020, as envisioned in the New Economic Model (NEM). The government has also identified marine tourism as an area which can potentially increase Malaysia's tourism receipts and generate the kind of economic activities that fit the features of NKEA. This is concurred by Sabah's state government which has also identified tourism is an important source of diversification to the state's economy and marine eco-tourism as a potential growth area and a lucrative revenue earner.

In this regard, is therefore important that efforts are made to look for new tourism products and optimally harness areas in which Malaysia can attract more tourists. East Coast of Sabah has the potential to be developed as a world-class marine eco-tourism destination given its attractions but marine eco-tourism is still a growing activity in the state. As such, it needs policy push from the state and Federal governments and a holistic approach to be developed in a structured manner.

The Sabah Tourism Master Plan 2011-2025 (STMP 2011-2025), which replaces the Sabah Tourism Master Plan 1995-2010, provides a useful roadmap to guide the development of the state's tourism industry. It establishes Policy and Development Strategies to realize the full tourism potential of the state, in line with national tourism policy objectives. STMP 2011-2025 is based on three underlying principles, namely developing the tourism industry in an orderly manner and to attain maximum economic benefit, minimizing negative socio-cultural and environmental impact of tourism, and tailoring tourism development to preserve the state's unspoiled nature.

To optimally harness the potential of marine eco-tourism in East Sabah, it is essential that certain conditions are in place and provided for. These include making available the necessary infrastructures and support services, ensuring comprehensive security in the area and engaging the local communities to partake in marine eco-tourism activities.

Looming threats

Any threat to the resources and the areas in the large swathes of water of East Sabah will have major implications not only to the well-being of the coastal communities and the overall security of the area but also to the state's economic interests.

One of the major threats to the area is the competition for marine resources among the marginalized coastal communities and sea-gypsies who have called the area home for generations. These communities straddle the tri-border area (which includes Malaysia, Indonesia and Philippines), blending with and moving within communities which have made a living from these waters for centuries. The competition for marine resources creates pressure on the marine environment as a result from damaging and unsustainable methods of fishing such as fish

bombing and illegal, unregulated fishing. It also leads to trespassing of maritime borders which present a threat to national security interests.

The intrusion by foreign gunmen into Sabah in April 2013 brings to light the need to have a comprehensive approach to ensure security in East Sabah. This is important to ensure economic activities, including marine eco-tourism, can be carried out without hindrance.

Without security, all the natural attractions of Sulu Sea and Sulawesi Sea and other parts of Sabah will count for nothing. Despite the success of Ops Daulat to flush out the gunmen and the repeated assurances by state and Federal government authorities that tourism activities and arrivals in Sabah were not affected by the incident, there is still cause for concern that the situation in East Sabah is still not completely back to normal. This is underscored by the travel advisories to Sabah issued by several governments which have not been completely lifted despite having been downgraded following the end of Ops Daulat.

An inclusive approach is required to provide durable security in East Sabah to complement the admirable efforts of the security forces. Such an approach involves multi-dimensional aspects including promoting socio-economic development as a buffer against internal and external security threats to Sabah.

The potential of East Sabah as a world-class ‘marine eco-tourism playground’ can only be realized through the complete buy-in of key stakeholders including the coastal communities. One way of attaining this is to introduce participatory socio-economic development programs for the coastal communities, This is essential given the strong connection between security and socio-economic development and wellbeing in coastal areas. This is especially the case in an economically underdeveloped area like East Coast of Sabah.

The development of effective and robust community development and engagement strategies can lead to job creation, infrastructure development, provision of essential services like education and healthcare and all-around improvement in the living standards and socio-economic wellbeing of communities in East Sabah. With these foundations in place, security threats in this socially and politically complex and strategically important area can be blunted.

Holistic approach

Promoting socio-economic development in East Sabah goes beyond just creating jobs and economic opportunities for locals and foreigners residing in the area. Initiatives must also encompass other areas such as security, sustainability, environmental protection, investment, knowledge building and even preservation of culture and heritage. These aspects are admirably included in the thoughtful STMP 2011-2025 which seeks to balance environmental protection and cultural preservation with promoting tourism.

The merits of undertaking a holistic approach to promoting marine eco-tourism in East Sabah lie in the following :

- i) Promoting marine tourism activities such as eco-tourism creates opportunities for sea-centric local communities in East Sabah like the Bajau Laut people to fully utilize their know-how and skills related to the seas. Being involved in the tourism sector such as providing guide service to eco-tourists will help engage their valuable knowledge of the local seas knowledge in an economically useful manner, which can help preserve their 'cultural DNA' and leverage on their maritime-related skills and knowledge. It also creates options for those in the community who might want to pursue shore-based jobs. Take homestays which have become an increasingly popular tourist product. These communities can work at homestays and play a part in making them a unique experience as tourists can immerse themselves with exotic cultures endemic to the region while staying in homestays. With such an experience, tourists can go away from their vacations with cherished memories of Sabah and Malaysia, especially for those searching for unforgettable family adventures. The sea going communities can as well be gainfully employed as tour operators as they are familiar with the landscape and will have interesting information and 'local stories' to tell to the tourists. They can also be supported and provided with entrepreneurial skills and funding to set up and run their own homestays or tour agencies.
- ii) The marine heritage of the sea people, their history, culture, medicine, weapons, boat building, navigation, fishing acumen etc can be harnessed as a value-added tourism potential. The United States cherishes its native American heritage in ways that has become a tourism package, and the same approach can be adopted in the East Coast of Sabah which has interesting cultures. The fact that many of the attributes of the sea people are slowly disappearing in the trappings of the modern world is a cause for concern, hence efforts must be made to preserve the unique maritime heritage. Promoting marine eco-tourism is one way of doing so.
- iii) Enabling foreigners residing in Sabah to work legally could help reduce the negative effects of competition for marine resources and activities that could damage the marine environment and deplete its resources. The environmental damage and friction arising from this competition can be reduced, if not totally eliminated, by providing them with proper employment opportunities, for example in fishing projects. The sea people have vast knowledge of the sea and its resources which can be put to good use in the fishing industry. To capitalize on their knowledge, they need to however be registered as fishermen so their activities can be planned and regulated to enable them to be carried out in a sustainable manner. This approach would go a long way towards reducing conflicts and enhancing cooperation between them and local fishermen.
- iv) The caged fishing industry is a thriving business on the East Coast of Sabah. Where the caged fishing industry is concerned, it reduces the strain on endemic marine reef population. Since reef fishes are an expensive delicacy, products from caged fishing are a cheap alternative to tourists. Through cage fishing, products can be supplied to local restaurants and coastal communities can partake in the activity by working at the caged fish farms or even set up farms of their own, after being provided with the necessary skills.

- v) Non-traditional security threats like smuggling, trafficking and piracy are essentially motivated by commercial gains. They are often carried out by people lacking in gainful employment opportunities. By providing them with employment opportunities, they can be deterred from pursuing illegal activities like the ones mentioned.
- vi) Addressing security issues and concerns in Sabah will create a secure environment to pursue economic activities. This will encourage investors, businesses and tourists to come to Sabah and contribute to its economy. Their presence will generate multiplier effects such as infrastructure development, employment generation, eradication of poverty, distribution of wealth, transfer of skills and technology to the locals and many others.
- vi) The development of infrastructures to support tourism activities in the Sulu-Sulawesi Sea (for example, hotels, resorts, homestays, passenger jetties) will uplift the standard of living of the coastal communities and provide them with employment. This will compel them to help protect security of these infrastructures from which they earn a living and benefit the local economy.

Realizing full potential

To enable Sulu-Sulawesi Sea to realize its full potential and optimally harness its natural attractions and advantages to become a tourist magnet and an economically vibrant area, the issues and challenges mentioned above need to be overcome. The state and Federal governments need to work in concert to put in place the necessary elements to ensure marine eco-tourism can flourish in the area and also to brand and promote it as a must-visit tourism destination.

As demographics changes and tourists' preference shift, amid a dynamic global tourism marketplace, competition to attract tourists is hotting up. For Sabah to remain in competition with other tourism destinations, it must be creative and constantly think out of the box to create new products, strengthen existing ones, and provide the necessary infrastructures and services to attract and handle more tourists to the state. Failure to compete would result in the state's inability to increase the revenue from tourism to its GDP and, worse, declining tourist arrivals.

This calls for firm, resolute actions to ensure Sabah stays in the game in this very competitive and potentially lucrative field. Policies for sustainable development opportunities must be introduced in order to boost marine eco-tourism in the East Coast of Sabah, especially involving participatory development programmes, social innovation and resource management for the coastal communities. These opportunities can be supplemented with micro financing that can enable coastal communities to be engaged in gainful activities instead of those that can pose a threat to the environment and security. Such policies will go a long way towards safeguarding the marine ecosystem of the East Coast of Sabah from the negative impacts of resource competition and to promote socio-economic wellbeing among the local communities. They can also help elevate the socio-economic status of East Sabah and change its negative image arising from the gunmen intrusion to a positive one associated with a world-class marine eco tourism destination.