

The Sustainability of Fraser's Hill as an Eco-destination

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Abstract

Fraser's Hill, a popular highland retreat in Peninsular Malaysia, is rich in bio-diversity. The seven trails within Fraser's Hill is collectively the main attraction. The aim of this paper is to analyse and evaluate the sustainability of Fraser's Hill as an ecotourism destination. Three research methods were adopted for this study, namely key informant approach, participant observation and secondary analysis. The findings show that the trails are well maintained and show very little signs of stress. The rebranding and positioning of Fraser's Hill as an eco-destination and as The Little England is not in sync with the high-rise hotels which have a larger carbon footprint. Infrastructure development has to a limited extent impaired the fragile eco-system. There is also a lack of community participation in ecotourism activities within Fraser's Hill. In conclusion, the rebranding and positioning of Fraser's Hill is unequivocally appropriate. However, high-rise hotel development and the broadening of appeal towards mass tourism are not in sync with an eco-destination theme. However, the high-rise hoteliers could adopt environmentally-friendly practices to help preserve the fragile forest eco-system health. More should be done for the local community as they could partake in activities that are associated with an eco-destination.

Keywords: Ecotourism, flora, fauna, infrastructure development, local community

Aims and Background

Fraser's Hill is one of the most popular highland retreats in Peninsular Malaysia for local and foreign tourists. It is located between latitude 30 46' 25" to 30 47' 50" and longitude 1100 43' 50" to 1100 45' 15" in the district of Raub, Pahang and is east of the Titiwangsa Main Range. Fraser's Hill, an area of approximately 28 square kilometres and at an elevation of between 1000 to 1525 metres above sea-level, is covered mainly by pristine hill dipterocarp and lower montane forest. The daily temperature variation is from 160 Celsius to 250 Celsius and is a haven for a cool respite.

As the vegetation in Fraser's Hill is still mainly pristine, it has become an important biological and ecological site. It is a permanently protected nature reserve and is also gazetted as a wildlife sanctuary. The flora in Fraser's Hill is rich in diversity with a mosaic of flowering plants, mosses,

ferns, parasitic plants, gingers and nepenthes. Thus far, a total of 36 Peninsular Malaysian endemic species are located within Fraser's Hill (Latiff 2009). The fauna in Fraser's Hill has mega-diversity with an amalgamation of insect fauna like butterflies, bees, crickets, dragonflies etc., herpetofauna like snakes, frogs, lizards, geckoes etc., birds and mammals like gibbons, squirrels etc (Ng, et al. 2009).

The relatively undisturbed jungle and cool climate attract over 250 species of migratory and residential birds. The migratory birds fly to Fraser's Hill to escape the harsh winter in Russia, China and Japan. They stopover in Fraser's Hill for a few months prior to flying south to New Zealand and Australia looking for warmer climes before making the reverse journey. Fraser's Hill is designated as an Important Bird Area by Birdlife International.

Accessibility to Fraser's Hill is via road and the entrance to Fraser's Hill is known as the Gap. Previously, odd hours were for ascending traffic whereas even hours were for descending traffic during daytime. The construction of a descending road, eventually leading back to the Gap, led to the termination of the odd and even hours' rule.

The small town centre is dominated by the iconoclastic Clock Tower within a roundabout and surrounding it are the police station, post office, rural health clinic, sports complex also housing the Fraser Hill's Nature Education Centre, a hotel, a shop and eateries. With the exception of the ascending road, the other roads emanating from the roundabout lead to private or boutique bungalow and cottage accommodations, three hotels, a mosque, a food-court, a paddock, a catchment lake, seven trails, two golf courses, Jeriau waterfall and a residential enclave for hotel workers and government officials. The seven trails cover over 50 kilometres and collectively is the main attraction in Fraser's Hill.

Fraser's Hill has been positioned by Fraser's Hill Development Corporation as The Little England (Ahmad Ghazali 2008). Its British colonial history and legacy has left behind quaint old stone cottages and a nine-hole golf course. The mock-English Tudor architecture is left imprinted on almost all building facades in Fraser's Hill. Some of the bungalows have a charming garden which is reflective of an English country house.

The aim of this paper is to analyse and evaluate the sustainability of Fraser's Hill as an ecotourism destination. In the initials years, Fraser's Hill was a convalescing hill station and later evolved into a holiday hill station. However, the extent that Fraser's Hill has being transformed into an eco-destination is yet to be answered. This paper aims to fill in this gap by reviewing the development that has taken place in Fraser's Hill and whether this development is leading towards a makeover of Fraser's Hill as an eco-destination.

Research Methods

Three research methods were adopted for this paper. Key informants were selected from the public and private sectors to obtain a balanced perspective. The key informants identified for this research were senior government officials from the Fraser's Hill Development Corporation and senior hoteliers who have long-standing years of service in Fraser's Hill hotels. The key informant approach has found to be of high utility as incisive insights can be gathered in terms of the development of Fraser's Hill as an eco-destination. The data and information were gathered via direct interviews with an open-ended questionnaire.

Participant observation is used to validate the above viewpoints as well as having a deeper understanding of the above dynamics. Participant observation is carried out at the various hotels, food and beverage outlets, trails and public places especially at the Clock Tower. In addition, secondary analysis via secondary data and information from the Fraser's Hill Research Centre with regard to the physical and bio-environment were conducted. This is used as one of the means in analysing the ecosystem health.

Results and Discussion

The seven trails within Fraser's Hill range from easy to difficult terrain. Hemmant Trail is relatively easy and can be completed within twenty minutes to an hour, even for those who are relatively unfit. On the other hand, Pine Tree Trail is the most challenging and would take a day to complete. This trail ascends the Pine Hill Tree Mountain at an elevation of 1500 metres prior to descending to the trail end. Thus, the different trails with varying levels of difficulty would cover nearly the entire spectrum of different levels of fitness. Along these trails, many species of flora and fauna can be identified and would be a haven for nature lovers. The trails alone can be a distinct eco-destination but not much has been done to promote them either at the local or international ecotourism market with the exception of the International Bird Race. Most of them who do know about these trails are nature lovers. These seven trails are well maintained and show very little signs of stress.

The Fraser's Hill Nature Education Centre, rebranded as the Bird Interactive Centre, funded by both the Fraser's Hill Development Corporation and World Wildlife Fund provide information on these seven trails, inclusive of the area's fauna cum flora and organise guided trekking with minimal fees being imposed. This centre also provides an indoor interactive facility to learn more about the highland's flora and fauna. The educational role of bringing public awareness to the beauty and the need to conserve the highland forest for the current and future generations is carried out effectively by enthusiastic staff. This is especially so for school children who are on school field trips.

The tradition of Bird Race started in 1987 and recently the Fraser's Hill Development Corporation together with Tourism Pahang Malaysia, Malaysian Nature Society, World Wildlife Fund and others have organised Bird Races in June and December (Fraser's Hill Development Corporation Online 2013). The Bird Race in Fraser Hill is held in conjunction and closely in tandem with the Bird Race

in Genting Highlands which both are part of the International Bird Race Circuit. These two Bird Races have attracted bird watchers from the international and local scene. The participants of the Bird Race are to spot, identify and record the species that they can locate from an official list within a particular timeframe. The winners are adjudged based on the highest counts. The objectives of the Bird race are twofold, namely to preserve nature and to promote Fraser's Hill as a bird sanctuary. On this count, the Bird Races are a success in promoting Fraser's hill as an eco-destination.

The positioning of Fraser's Hill as Little England adds to its charm as an eco-destination. The maintenance of heritage old stone cottages or bungalows together with their gardens is an integral component of ecotourism as preservation of historical sites is a key precept. Some of these bungalows have been converted into boutique tourist accommodations with dining services. The revenues generated from hospitality help in maintaining the upkeep of these heritage buildings and their grounds. The mock Tudor architectural style for old and new buildings is to provide uniformity and symmetry to the built environment without any building sticking out like a sore thumb. However, the high-rise hotels, even with a Tudor facade, do not blend in with the ecotourism theme. High-rise hotels would definitely leave a larger carbon footprint and would not be in line with the precepts of eco-lodges which would be discussed later. However, the saving grace is that the high rise hotels are built along the contours and terrains of their locational sites. This, to a certain extent, helps in complementing Fraser's Hill as an eco-destination.

The high-rise hotels also bring into question the market segment that Fraser's Hill intent to tap into. High-rise hotels with a relatively larger number of rooms would, to a certain extent, be focusing on the mass tourism market. If mass tourism were to be pursued in filling up the rooms, the question mark is the impact on the ecological health. Firstly, most of the tourist accommodations with the exception of some boutique bungalows are managed as any commercial entity with revenue, cost and efficiency as main considerations. Accommodation facilities, transportation, employment, energy, water and local produce consumption would be typical of a city hotel. This would be in contrast with the precepts of being small with less than 30 rooms, energy efficiency, water reduction and water conservation, training and employing local people at fair wages and ecological awareness and provision of an economic return to the local community as advocated by eco-lodges or green hotels (Worldwide ecolodges.com 2013). Secondly, mass tourism will encourage more private vehicles to traverse up and down Fraser's Hill and consequently more tourists in utilising the trails and facilities there. Landslide and erosion have happened occasionally and there is no in-depth study done on the impact of tourism on the ecosystem health. Thus, the carrying capacity of Fraser's Hill is yet to be determined. A definitive guideline for carrying capacity would help in delineating the type(s) of market segment(s) that Fraser's Hill can pursue.

According to Glenda & Yeap (2001) and Ahmad & Abdullah (2009), signs of impairment to the ecosystem health can be observed. Overlapping of lowland and highland bird species occur for some altitudes such as at Jeriau Waterfall. At altitudes below or higher than these, no overlapping occurs at all. The competition for food minimises via this sharp division. Habitat disturbance has

been postulated for the shift in the altitudinal distribution of birds. Lowland birds are now very common at the peak of Fraser's Hill whereas highland species are sighted as far down as the gap. The change in behaviour and distribution is postulated to land-use change i.e. the construction of roads, golf course, apartments and new private homes. This land-use change has resulted in negative impacts like landslides, soil erosion and habitat loss.

Other studies also pointed to the fragility of Fraser's Hill physical environment. A study on landslide distribution along the main road of Gap-Fraser's Hill revealed that most of the cut slopes were associated with slope failures (Rahman et al. 2009). Another study on surface slope erosion in Fraser's Hill showed remarkable slope erosion at the tested areas (Khor et al. 2009). Laboratory test also revealed that low soil cohesion, low plasticity, acidic soil and low organic content can weakened soil aggregation and subject the soil to rapid surface runoff. Despite all these, the forest ecosystem in Fraser's Hill is still relatively intact.

The people working in Fraser's Hill are mainly a mixture drawn from the nearby local communities and migrant labour. The common reason given for the need of migrant labour is that the locals, especially the younger generations, are not interested in menial or relatively poor paying jobs. There are also limited avenues for the local population to participate in business activities that revolve around Fraser's Hill.

The minimum wage requirement implemented in January 2013 in Malaysia would to a small extent reduce this problem. The local business community should search for more innovative approaches to tackle the issue of a lack of local community participation.

Conclusions

The flora, fauna and nature trails in Fraser's Hill is an ecological asset that is worth preserving as it is relatively intact. Other hill stations in Malaysia like the Cameron Highlands and Maxwell Hill have an impaired forest ecosystem due to overdevelopment. Thus, Fraser's Hill is the last bastion of a relatively pristine highland retreat in Peninsular Malaysia. Thus, the decision to rebrand Fraser's Hill as an eco-destination is unequivocally appropriate. In conjunction, the positioning of Fraser's Hill as The Little England is in sync with the eco-destination theme. The preservation of these English heritage stone cottages is an integral constituent of an eco-destination.

The rebranding and positioning of Fraser's Hill as an eco-destination as well as The Little England is not in consonance with the mass tourism market segment. However, the later developments of high-rise hotels point to that direction. These high-rise hotels, even with a mock Tudor façade, are run as a pure commercial entity and are not in keeping with the precepts of an eco-lodge. Even though these high-rise buildings are not in symmetry with the eco-destination theme, the hoteliers can definitely adopt the precepts of ecological preservation and maintenance, resource conservation and the

involvement of local communities as part of their corporate policy in terms of ecological conservation or corporate social responsibility.

Signs of impairment to the Fraser's Hill ecosystem can be observed even though it is still relatively pristine. The later developments have led to the disturbance of bird habitats and the occasional occurrence of landslide. Thus, determining the carrying capacity via scientific research is the long-term solution for sustainability.

The lack of local community involvement is reflected in the need for migrant labour. More innovative intervention strategies have to be deployed to ensure local participation. The local community involvement is not just merely in employment but also in the wider arena of business opportunities that are related to the ecotourism and The Little England themes.

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