Horizon J. Hum. & Soc. Sci. 2 (S): 87 – 102 (2020)

HORIZON JOURNALS

Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Research
www.horizon-JHSSR.com

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Coronavirus Pandemic and Tourism in Southeast Asia: Case Material from Malaysia

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history
Received: 21-Apr-20
Revised: 08-May-20
Accepted: 26-May-20
Published: 15-Jun-20

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ABSTRACT

During the past two decades there has been a substantial literature published on a range of crises in Southeast Asia and how these have affected the tourism industry in the region. These crises comprise natural and environmental disasters, epidemics and pandemics, drastic downturns in the world economy, and terrorism and political conflict. The latest peril is the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic; it has especially serious consequences for tourism development. Since the SARS epidemic of 2002-2004 the Southeast Asian economies have become increasingly integrated into those of East Asia; specifically, China's contribution to tourism in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has grown exponentially. In this paper some of the most significant literature on crises and tourism in Southeast Asia is examined, with a focus on the East Asian market taking case material on the impacts of the pandemic on one particular part of Malaysia, the state of Sabah, which has enjoyed substantial success in attracting Chinese and Korean tourists to northern Borneo. Some of the policy and practical responses to the effects on the tourism industry are also considered.

Keywords: Coronavirus, tourism, crises, impacts, responses, Southeast Asia, Malaysia, Sabah.

Introduction

The global and Southeast Asian context

Relationships between crises and tourism in Southeast Asia require urgent examination in the context of the current Coronavirus pandemic. Using case material on the impacts it is having on Malaysia and its northern Borneo state of Sabah in particular, this study reveals some of the main issues raised by the pandemic and considers some of the responses to what is a multidimensional crisis. One major factor affecting the region is the collapse in the East Asian market, especially China and to a lesser extent South Korea, Taiwan and Japan, and due attention is paid to the implications of the increasing interdependence of Southeast and East Asia, of which Sabah is a prime example. In this introduction the complex interactions between crises and tourism are addressed, the importance of tourism to the Southeast Asian economies, and some of the overall consequences of the current pandemic on the tourism industry.

Tourism, crises and Southeast Asia

The global tourism industry is especially sensitive to changes which affect safety, health and security. If tourists perceive undue risk or uncertainty then they will usually avoid sites which are seen to threaten their well-being. However, there are two important elements in tourist decision-making on whether or not to visit a site, country or region; these are both the existence of a real threat to personal safety and well-being and also the perception, anxiety, even fear that the destination poses a threat (Mansfeld & Pizam, 2006; and see Breda & Costa,

 DOI: https://doi.org/10.37534/bp.jhssr.2020.v2.nS.id1036.p87

2006). Tourism is also a system of interrelated processes and forces; it is affected by the local, regional and global political, economic, social and environmental context within which it is situated, and, it, in turn, has effects on the polities, societies, cultures, economies and environments within which it is embedded (King, 2018). This is clearly reflected in the current Coronavirus pandemic.

By definition tourism requires travel, encounters with other places and people, and the facilities and infrastructures which enable the pursuit of leisure, curiosity, and new experiences and learning opportunities. Restrictions and outright bans on travel, on entering, exiting and transiting different countries, and on social and cultural interaction with others have profound consequences for the tourism industry. Its purpose and the basis on which it functions are removed. The major sub-sectors of the industry, including airlines and other forms of transport, accommodation, the providers of food and beverages, retail outlets, tour operations and sightseeing packages, guiding and entertainment services are all placed in jeopardy. The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) has projected a possible global loss of jobs at 50 million in 2020 as a result of the pandemic, a recovery period of almost a year after the outbreak and, in the Asia Pacific region, the worst affected area, a decrease has already occurred in international air travel bookings, both inbound and outbound, at over 40% in the year to March 2020 (WTTC, 2020a, 2020b). Most recently the WTTC has revised its estimates upwards, and projects that job losses could be as many as 100 million in 2020, around 63% of those losses in Asia, and reduction in GDP worldwide is projected at US$2.7 trillion, with over US$1 trillion being lost in Asia (2020c).

The Coronavirus pandemic has already had and will continue to have an enormously disruptive effect on the global economy in terms of growth and employment. The World Bank has recently warned that poverty levels will increase, with a negative effect on social and economic well-being. In April it put in place a plan to suspend the debt of the world's poorest countries to enable them to deploy measures to combat COVID-19 (Express, 14 April 2020). The depth and duration of the shock and the extent of negative impacts are currently indeterminate.

At the time of writing (17 May 2020), 213 countries and sites have recorded cases of Coronavirus infection. The countries of Southeast Asia have a total of 65,365 cases, while deaths stand at 2,104 (Worldometer, 2020). These figures change day-by-day, even hour-by-hour, and they are in any case very likely to be underestimates across the ASEAN region, particularly in such countries as Vietnam, Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar where together only 610 cases have been listed so far, with six deaths in these four countries which had a total population of around 180 million in 2019. In close proximity to China with close interrelationships through tourism and economic activities, it seems unlikely that these figures for mainland Southeast Asia give us anything like the true picture. Those countries recorded as most afflicted have more efficient and open systems of data collection (Singapore, Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia and Thailand); and it should be noted, they also have large, well-established tourism industries. But even there, with the exception of Singapore (and Brunei Darussalam), all cases and deaths have probably not been included in the statistical count.

To provide some sense of the scale of the problem in the tourism industry the WTTC calculated that, in 2019, tourism contributed US$ 8.9 trillion (10.3%) of global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (2020a). It provided 330 million jobs (1 in 10 of global employment), US$ 1.7 trillion in visitor exports (comprising 28.3% of global services exports), and US$ 948 billion (4.3%) in global capital investment (2020a). In its 'Monthly Economic Impact' report for January 2020 the WTTC states 'A huge dependence on Chinese tourists sees many Asian countries reeling from China's move to cancel outbound group trips indefinitely' (2020b, p. 3). Of Thailand's international tourist arrivals in 2019, for example, 30% were Chinese, and the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) estimated potential losses of US$ 1.6 billion for 2020; this figure will rise given uncertainties about the duration and extent of travel restrictions and lockdowns. The annual growth in international tourist arrivals in 2019 in selected ASEAN countries, which have become increasingly tied to the East Asian market, ranged from 40.2% in Myanmar, through to 16.2% in Vietnam, 15.1% in the Philippines, 11.5% in Lao PDR to 9.7% in Cambodia (2020b, p. 4). The established destinations of Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore and Indonesia, which had already attracted large numbers of East Asian visitors, showed smaller percentage increases.

ASEAN and Tourism Development

In the context of ASEAN, the tourism industry is of particular importance to the economies of its constituent states, with the exception of Brunei Darussalam. It is an important vehicle for regional cooperation and supports and promotes cultural and environmental heritage and diversity. It is also undoubtedly a major force for economic growth and regional development in marginal areas (Chheang, 2013). The WTTC provided a figure for

2019 of US$380 billion generated by tourism in ASEAN contributing 12.1% to overall regional GDP (WTTC, 2020a)

Total number of visitor arrivals to ASEAN increased significantly during 2005-2018, reaching 135.3 million in 2018 – or an increase of 263.7% from 2005. The highest visitor arrivals in 2018 were achieved by Thailand (38.3 million), followed by Malaysia (25.8 million), Singapore (18.5 million), Indonesia (15.8 million), and Vietnam (15.5 million). Then some way behind came the Philippines (7.1 million), Cambodia (6.2 million), Lao PDR (4.2 million) and Myanmar (3.55 million). It should be noted that Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar have developed their tourism industries from a very low base, and these industries play a most important role in their respective economies. Given its oil and gas wealth, tourism in Brunei Darussalam contributes a very small percentage to GDP and its arrivals only reached 278,000 in 2018. Nevertheless, this figure only includes arrivals at the international airport and not by land, ferry or cruise ship. Of the overall total visitors to ASEAN, 49.7 million (36.7%) in 2018 came from within ASEAN, an increase of 212.2% from 15.9 million arrivals recorded in 2005 (The ASEAN Secretariat, 2019a, 2019b, pp. 163-179).

The more remarkable statistics are those which provide the country of origin of visitor arrivals. Of the 85.6 million non-ASEAN arrivals in 2018, 47.9 million were generated in East Asia (China [29.1 million]; South Korea [9 million], Japan [5.2 million], Taiwan [2.8 million] and Hong Kong [1.8 million]) (2019b, p. 168). Some ASEAN countries are very dependent on East Asian visitors, with Thailand receiving approximately 15.5 million visitors in 2018, two-thirds of those from China (2019b: 178). Malaysia is less dependent but nevertheless received 4.3 million visitors from East Asia (2.9 million from China) (p. 174). Within Malaysia the state of Sabah received 999,851 visitors from East Asia in 2018: with almost 600,000 from China and 340,000 from South Korea (Sabah Tourism, 2019). Its image as 'The Land Below the Wind' and its landscapes, forests, wildlife, islands, beaches and cultures, currently promoted as 'Enchanting Sabah', have proved major attractions for East Asians. (Sabah Tourism Board, 2020a)

Every ASEAN country has a government body or bodies responsible for the administration and promotion of tourism development (ministries, departments, boards); in some cases tourism is combined with culture (Lao PDR); or culture and sports (Vietnam), or sports (Thailand), or arts and culture (Malaysia), or the creative economy (Indonesia); in others it is located within trade, industry or primary resources (Brunei, Singapore) or an economic sector like hotels (Myanmar); in the remaining two countries, tourism comprises a free-standing Ministry (Cambodia) and an Executive Department of Tourism (Philippines). Moreover, at the 46th meeting of the ASEAN Tourism Ministers and National Tourism Organisations in January 2017, four committees were established to coordinate regional tourism: Tourism Competitiveness; Sustainable and Inclusive Tourism Development; Tourism Resourcing, Monitoring and Evaluation; and Tourism Professional Monitoring. More importantly ASEAN plans tourism on a regional basis expressed in two important documents which contain a wealth of statistical and empirical material: the *ASEAN Tourism Strategic Plan*, the first one operated between 2011 and 2015, and the current plan runs for a ten-year period, 2016-2025 (The ASEAN Secretariat, 2015a); and the *ASEAN Tourism Marketing Strategy*, launched in 2012-2015 with the current plan operating from 2017 until 2020 (The ASEAN Secretariat, 2017). In addition, the first Visit ASEAN Year was held in 1992 and Visit ASEAN@50 Golden Celebration was organised in 2017 to mark 50 years since the founding of the Association in 1967. The ASEAN Tourism Ministers held their first meeting in Surabaya in 1996.

Apart from sun, sea, sand, shopping, sight-seeing and, in some countries, sex, in all countries of the region culture and heritage are seen as important elements in tourism activities, for both domestic and international tourists (museums, artistic productions, and the creative economy, material culture, archaeological sites, monuments, historic urban areas, natural and cultural landscapes, religious sites and pilgrimages, and living cultures [performance, dance, music, theatre, ritual, ceremony, folklore, sports and games]). Another major attraction is nature, landscapes and ecotourism (parks, reserves, animal sanctuaries, rivers, reefs, lakes, mountains, islands, and forests). In a 1984 Declaration the ASEAN Ministers responsible for the environment created the ASEAN Heritage Parks programme, administered by the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity. In 2019 there were 49 parks devoted to conservation and the protection of biodiversity and unique natural environments; seven of these are also UNESCO World Heritage Sites. ASEAN also inscribes Biosphere Reserves of which there are now 35 main sites and 82 tentative sites, including many national parks (The ASEAN Secretariat, 2018, 2019c, 2020).

It is worth noting too that, although ASEAN sees tourism as a vehicle for regional cooperation, and its main objective is to promote the region as a single tourist destination, there is competition and sometimes conflict between the Association's constituent members. There continue to be the established players in the field (Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore); Indonesia over recent years has not achieved the visitor arrival targets that it has set, and the Philippines for many years, beset by typhoons, floods, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions has failed to keep pace with some of its neighbours. Instead in 2018 over 29 million visitors went to the emerging markets of Vietnam, Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar (this trend continued into 2019). Again, the proximity of mainland Southeast Asia to the East Asian markets is a factor. But the exploration of new tourist destinations, easier and cheaper access and value for money must also play a role in tourist decision-making. On the other hand, Singapore, Bangkok and to some extent Kuala Lumpur have increasingly served as regional hubs for these newer markets and their stopover traffic has increased.

Another observation on the more problematical side of ASEAN's role in addressing transnational crises in the region is in regard to the regular occurrence of forest fires and the burning off of vegetation for planting oil palm and other commercial crops. The Association has been unable to solve this problem over the years, and one effect of the 'Haze' and burning in Sumatra and Borneo has been the disruption of air travel and the more general impact on the tourism industry in Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei and Singapore (Cotton, 1999; Varkkey, 2016). From February to September 2019 the problem even spread as far as Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines.

Before going on to examine some of the literature on disasters and tourism, we should indicate that the *ASEAN Tourism Strategic Plan* in considering constraints, challenges and threats to the tourism industry mentions in passing, and without elaboration, 'possible pandemics with resultant negative travel advisories' (2015a, p. 26). The ASEAN Secretariat does have a Crisis Communications Manual which provides a standardised 'Communications Toolkit' to address the ways in which media messages and communications strategies can be handled, devised and delivered, and reputations and images sustained and stakeholders and the general public reassured (2015b). However, it is not a particularly useful aid to respond to a region-wide and global crisis such as COVID-19 in which each country implements its own solutions to the crisis. In a rather delayed response to nation-state-based responses, the ASEAN Tourism Ministers conducted a video conference, reported on 4 May 2020, to deepen cooperation. This was to avoid projections that the ASEAN tourism industry might take five years to recover from the pandemic if the region did not coordinate its actions and share information on such matters as travel restrictions, entry and transit through airports and passage across land borders (TTG Asia, 2020).

Crises and Tourism in Southeast Asia: Literature, Materials and Methods

The distinction between 'crisis' and 'disaster' is problematic. Broadly a crisis is 'a time of great disagreement, confusion or suffering'; 'an extremely difficult or dangerous point in a situation' (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020). Thus, it is a testing time of stress, instability, insecurity and danger which points to a breakdown in or change from what is considered to be 'normal' activities, behaviours and processes. 'Disaster', on the other hand, is usually viewed as a change in human affairs that is 'sudden', unpredictable, and drastic or catastrophic in its consequences and over which there is very little, if any possibility of exercising control. Rather than human-generated, the term 'disaster' usually covers such natural events as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, floods, storms, tsunamis, and landslides; sometimes these are also defined as catastrophes or emergencies with sudden loss of life and property (Rindrasih et al., 2019, pp. 95-96).

Crises and disasters affecting the tourism industry in Southeast Asia are not new, but given, the increasing regional integration within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its incorporation into the economically advanced nations in East Asia then their impacts tend to be magnified and spread transnationally (Scott, 2020). Ahmad Puad Mat Som and Benjamin Aguenza categorise crises into health crises (SARS [Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome], HPAI [Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza] [H5N1, H1N1]); natural disasters (tsunami, Indonesian volcanic eruptions, climate change); crises generated by terrorism and political instability (Bali bombings, Jakarta bombings); global economic downturns and financial crises (in 1997-1998, 2008-2009) (2013, p. 4).

There is a considerable literature on crises and disasters and the consequences for the tourism industry in Southeast Asia as well as more general texts on managing these in the Asia Pacific region and beyond (see, for example, Henderson, 1999a, 1999b, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2007; Henderson & Tran Hai Linh, 2007; Ritchie & Campiranon, 2015). In this paper, as two researchers who have been involved in tourism studies in the region for over 30 years, we focus on primary and secondary literature and on current online materials, news reports and releases, briefings, and government and official data, to provide an overview of crises and disasters in Southeast Asia, their relationship to the tourism industry, and the specific impacts of the Coronavirus pandemic on tourism. A major concern is the consequence of the increasingly close relations between East Asia and Southeast Asia in the context of a major regional and global crisis.

The paper is not concerned so much with strategies and management issues in countering the pandemic, though it does address some of the major responses on the part of government and the tourism industry (in our case study of the state of Sabah, Malaysia). One matter is very clear in the current Coronavirus pandemic and that is that the planning for a crisis of such magnitude and extent, and the devising of measures to counter the effects of a disease that has spread with such speed and severity, are fraught with all kinds of difficulties in decision-making, choice, strategy, resources and in the lack of knowledge of the virus and its properties. In the studies of management in relation to disasters much is made of forward-planning, the formulation of strategies and a communications plan, ensuring that resources and funds can be mobilised quickly and efficiently, the coordination between the private and public sectors involving both tourism and non-tourism stakeholders, and close cooperation between national government bodies and transnational tourism, relief and aid organisations. However, in the case of the pandemic, even this kind of preparedness might not have been sufficient to address the consequences of the rapid way in which the disease has spread and mutated, and its highly infectious nature which has overwhelmed health services and social care facilities, and the fact that carriers, some of them referred to as 'super spreaders' may be asymptomatic. The fact that there is currently no vaccine and remedy to counter the virus is a further weakness in any strategic planning and management of the impacts of the disease.

The focus on regional integration in the tourism industry also inevitably leads to the need to undertake comparative analyses of different disasters and the varied consequences of the same disaster in different places. This comparative approach has been pursued within as well as across countries (see, for example, Neef & Grayson, 2019; Rindrasih, et al., 2019). We can capture the range of crises in Southeast Asia in the context of Thailand. Erik Cohen, for example, in his work on Thailand made the distinction between crises which are exogenous to a given country or region and whose effects are more widespread and those which are endogenous and are primarily confined to one country (though again the effects might be felt in certain neighbouring countries) (2010, pp. 281-296; 2012). Cohen examined the impacts on the tourism industry in Thailand from the 2004 tsunami which affected a ring of countries around the Indian Ocean, including Indonesia (which was worst hit), and Malaysia. He compared this with the civil conflict in Thailand surrounding the then Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, and the occupation of Bangkok airports in 2008. He argues that the aftermath of the tsunami could be controlled and better managed because it did not affect the political centre and the political elite of the country in Bangkok. Relatively quickly the tourism industry and the country responded to the challenges. On the other hand, though the Bangkok crisis of 2008 was less severe in terms of loss of life and physical damage, it went to the heart of Thai politics and the conflict was unable to be resolved in the short term, and it was to continue until the military coup of May 2014 and beyond.

Kontogeorgopoulos says of the 2014 coup 'The curfew, international publicity about the coup, and the sight of military personnel in popular tourist sites scared off potential tourists and temporarily halted the rapid growth of tourism in Thailand' (2016, p. 161). It was estimated that GDP declined by 6.6% in 2014, mainly as result of the decrease in tourism activities. However, Kontogeorgopoulos qualifies this by suggesting that tourism bounces back, as it always has in Thailand since 1970, given the resilience of the industry (2016, p. 161).

Nevertheless, what is interesting about the current pandemic is that it coincides with yet another episode of political tensions in Thailand. The elections in 2019, which were hardly transparent and appropriately administered and monitored, brought back Prime Minister Prayut[h], who had led the military junta from 2014 to 2019; he returned as a 'civilian' Prime Minister in 2019. In late March 2020, his imposition of emergency rule, the introduction of a curfew from 10pm to 4am, the further restrictions on movement and the censorship of the media, when coupled with the economic downturn occasioned by the pandemic, might be part of another occurrence of 'coincidental' crises, which leads to further political turmoil in the country (Asia Times, 2020).

Cohen and Mark Neal then went on to examine 'coinciding crises' in Thailand. These comprised the 2008-2009 economic meltdown, which was generated in the US housing and loan market, and the escalating political crisis in Thailand. The interaction between the two arenas worked to form a 'mega-crisis'. Its expression was in 'the spectacular occupation of Bangkok's two airports by the opposition to the government in November 2008'. It resulted in a prolonged drop in tourist arrivals which took some time to recover (2010, pp. 455-475).

Thailand provides an appropriate case in Southeast Asia of the interactions between crises and their effects on the important tourism industry in the country. This is for the simple reason that there have been several crises during the past two decades or so, some sequential, some coincident; the 1997-1998 Asian financial crisis which began in Thailand and then spread to other Asian countries (King, 2001; Henderson, 2002); the tsunami of 2004 with a death toll in Thailand of 5,395, and 2,845 missing (Athukorala & Resosudarmo, 2005; Calgaro & Lloyd, 2008; Falk, 2015; Ozer & de Longueville, 2011); the SARS epidemic in the same year which, although not serious in terms of death-rates in Thailand, gave rise to the perception that several countries in Southeast Asia were part of a 'SARS zone' (Curley & Thomas, 2004); the Bali bombings (see below) of 2002 and 2005 also gave rise to fears on the part of some tourists that Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines ran the risk of further attacks in 'a terrorist zone'; the ongoing political crises commencing in 2005 generated especially by the military coup against Thaksin Shinawatra in 2006, the open conflicts and political protests of 2008-2010, the military coup against Yingluck Shinawatra in 2014, and currently the political tensions surrounding Prayut[h] Chan-ocha's government and his recent declaration of a state of emergency (Asia Times, 2020; Reuters, 2019; The Diplomat, 2020); the global financial crisis of 2008-2009 (Helleiner, 2011); and the Bangkok floods which occur regularly, but were particularly severe in 2011, and led to the inundation of 28 provinces in the central plains region, a significant loss of life, damage to extensive areas of agricultural land and property and a negative impact on the tourism industry (Ghaderi et al., 2011; Cohen, 2012).

Other countries in Southeast Asia also experienced some of these disasters, and others internal to the country. Generally, they were not so frequent or prolonged as in Thailand, though Indonesia comes close and has also had serial and coinciding crises. The Asian financial crisis of 1997-98 was a major factor in the downfall of President Suharto and the political turmoil that was generated at that time, followed soon after by the Bali bombings in 2002 and 2005 (Suparwoko, 2012). Serious setbacks in the tourism industry were experienced by Bali following the terrorist bombings. There was a dramatic decrease in tourist visitors to Indonesia, especially from established source areas like Australia and other Western countries (I Nyoman Darma Putra and Hitchcock, 2006, 2009; Hitchcock and I Nyoman Darma Putra, 2005, 2007; Henderson, 2003). Yet these did not interact with other crises at the time, although Indonesia, but more particularly the island of Sumatra, suffered badly from the tsunami in 2004. The December 2017 eruption of Mount Agung also led to a brief downturn in tourism with hotel occupancy rates falling by between 20-30% in Bali's peak season; Balinese tourism industry workers also suffered a significant decrease in income (Rahmawati et al., 2019).

In the Federation of Malaysia there has been some political turmoil with the departure of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak on corruption charges and the abuse of power, and the return of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, followed by his resignation on 24 February as the Coronavirus began to emerge. The succession of Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin as Prime Minister does not amount to the kind of political crises experienced in Thailand, significant enough to escalate the effects of the Coronavirus. Nevertheless, in introducing a stringent lockdown from 13 March under the Movement Control Order (MCO) and three economic stimulus packages in March and April in addition to the first package under the previous Prime Minister, it represents a testing time for the new Prime Minister in his attempts to establish his legitimacy; it also marks the introduction of a degree of political authoritarianism in Malaysia (Wong, 2020).

Coronavirus, Southeast Asia, Malaysia and Sabah

Southeast Asia

Space does not permit a detailed discussion of the regional context in which Malaysia is situated in regard to the recent pandemic. However, as with other parts of the world the predictions for the economies of Southeast Asia, particularly in the tourism industry, are bleak. Regular live updates on the pandemic and its effects are posted in *ASEAN Briefing* (2020) and in such a fast-moving contagion it is impossible to capture day-to-day events and developments, the ever-increasing record of new cases, deaths and the spread of the infection, and the measures that governments and the tourism industry are taking to address a deteriorating situation. Some countries in the region are reporting more cases and deaths than others, but it must be emphasised that, without widespread testing, tracking, tracing, diagnosis and recording it is impossible to calculate the real extent of cases and deaths.

All reports from the press and expert and regional commentators on Southeast Asian affairs and on the tourism industry are uniformly pessimistic on the outcomes over the next few months with such headlines as 'Coronavirus exposes cracks in south-east Asian economies' (Reed and Palma, Financial Times, 2020), 'Coronavirus and Southeast Asia: Can catastrophe be avoided? (Maude, Asia Society Policy Institute, 2020), 'Coronavirus: effect on Asian tourism will carry into 2021, experts say' (South China Morning Post, 2020), and 'Southeast Asian tourism likely to be worst hit due to Coronavirus, says GlobalData' (GlobalData, 2020). The *ASEAN Briefing* service documents the increasing strengthening of restrictions and bans on international and domestic travel, and on the conduct of everyday life, gatherings, and shopping and recreation. As an example of this tightening of controls, the *Briefing,* in the case of Thailand, records the curfew introduced by the Prime Minister for April, and in the Philippines and Malaysia, the increasing role of the police and military in ensuring that government orders and regulations on 'lockdowns' are followed. Michael Vatikiotis has also drawn attention to the intervention of the military in the COVID-19 crisis in Indonesia, through the appointment of Lieutenant-General Doni Monardo to head the special COVID-19 task force, and similar evidence of the military coordination of the response in Myanmar (2020). He suggests that this might be the prelude to the return of military rule in various countries in Southeast Asia, or, at least signal a move towards increasing authoritarianism.

Malaysia

Tourism has become one of the major sectors of the economy and provides a large component of Malaysia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The Malaysian Tourism Promotion Board calculates the contribution of tourist expenditure to the GDP in 2018 as RM84.1 billion (US$19.3 billion), a 2.4% increase from 2017, which amounted to 13.3% of GDP. Employment in the industry also reached 2.217 million, 14.7% of the working population. International visitors totalled 25.8 million; the top ten source countries were all Asian (Singapore, 10.6 million; Indonesia, 3.28 million; China, 2.9 million; Thailand, 1.9 million; Brunei, 1.38 million; South Korea, 616,783; India, 600,311; Philippines, 396,062; Japan, 394,540 and Taiwan 383,922 [some figures are rounded up]). ASEAN countries provided 70.1% of all visitors with East Asia providing a further 8.7% (Tourism Malaysia, 2019a). From January to September 2019 as compared with the same period in 2018 tourist expenditure was up 6.9% and visitor arrivals 3.7% (Tourism Malaysia, 2019b).

From January 2020 the Chinese began to cancel group packages to Malaysia, and Malaysia suspended visas for Chinese tourists from Hubei on 27 January and then extended this to other provinces in February , and the government imposed the Movement Control Order (MCO), with a combination of quarantine, closures of non-essential shops and businesses, work-from-home, social distancing and internal and external travel restrictions from 18 March. As a result, visitor numbers and tourist expenditure slumped dramatically. The planned Visit Malaysia Year 2020 was cancelled on 18 March, further restrictions were introduced and then various measures were introduced to support the rapidly declining economy (Tourism Malaysia, 2020). GlobalData projects a loss of revenue in each of the largest tourist destinations of Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore of between US$3 and 6 billion this year (2020). The outbreak of COVID-19 has already hit Malaysia's tourism sector hard, with an expected loss of RM3.37 billion (US$773.8 million) within the first two months of the year (Dzulkifly, 2020).

The Malaysian Economics Stimulus Package

Several immediate government and tourism industry initiatives have been implemented. The economic stimulus package of RM250 billion (US$57.5 billion), introduced in February focuses on tourism, consumption, and investment aimed at stimulating domestic tourism (Rahim, 2020). Then, the second RM20 billion (US$4.8 billion) package was disclosed to help mitigate 'the cash flow crunch, assist those severely impacted, and stimulate demand for travel and tourism' following the suggestions of the Malaysian Association of Tour and Travel Agents (MATTA). The packages assisting the reduction of major business overhead expenses included discounts for electricity bills; lowering the minimum contribution to the Employees Provident Fund (EPF); exemption from the Human Resource Development Fund; provision by banks of financial relief with payment moratoriums comprising restructuring and rescheduling loans; special loans for SMEs for working capital; lowering rents by property-owners; matching grants for tourism personnel training; enhancing digital skills and marketing through subsidies; and introducing personal income tax relief of up to RM1,000 (US$ 232) on expenditure related to domestic tourism (MATTA, 2020).

On the other hand, a review by the Travel and Tourism Research Association (TTRA) indicated that MATTA, the Malaysian Association of Hotels (MAH) and the Malaysian Association of Convention and Exhibition Organisers and Suppliers (MACEOS) were unhappy with the economic stimulus package. Simply, the RM250 billion provides relief to individuals and businesses; and the additional RM20 billion is aimed at fiscal stimulation. According to Tourism Associations and SMEs, both packages fail to address the issue of job retention, cancellations of event businesses and the fundamental needs of SMEs. Consequently, they may result in companies having to lay off employees in order to stay in business which will have long-term ripple effects on other industries. Indeed, the event business industry has already accumulated an estimated loss of RM1.5 billion (US$ 345.2 million), with 53 business events cancelled, while another 57 events have been postponed indefinitely (TTG Asia, 2020). A further two 'topping up' packages were announced on 27 March and 6 April (Wong, 2020).

Also, there are several operational issues raised in the implementation of stimulus packages. Firstly, the Federal Government has to optimise the resources available and coordinate with the State Governments in implementing the stimulus packages effectively, the efficient delivery of funds, the delivery medium, and identifying target groups. Several assistance programmes in the stimulus packages such as deferment of EPF contributions and staff retention subsidies are subject to meeting criteria and approval which delays the whole process through unnecessary bureaucracy. Furthermore, it was found that the existing data system recorded the specific category of low-income people, and excluded groups such as freelance tour guides, self-employed small rural businesses and daily workers who need immediate financial assistance.

Sabah and Coronavirus

Sabah and Tourism

Tourism is Sabah's third largest economic sector in terms of revenue and employment behind oil and gas production and agriculture. Directly and indirectly it employs 23% of the labour force and generated over RM 8 billion (US$ 1.85 billion) in 2018 (Sabah Tourism, 2019).

Visitor arrivals to Sabah and the growth in tourism, particularly generated by the East Asian market, have shown significant increases since 2010. Then, total arrivals were 2,504,669; of these 1,708,716 were from West Malaysia and Sarawak whilst 795,954 were international visitors. Of the latter, 227,751 came from East Asia (including 43% from China and 25% from South Korea, and the remainder from Taiwan, Japan and Hong Kong) (Sabah Tourism Board, 2020a). In 2015 total arrivals were 3,176,226, with 978,426 international visitors (see Table 1). By 2019 overall visitor arrivals were 4,195,903 with domestic Malaysian visits comprising 2,726,428. But the dominance of East Asia in the international visits of 1,469,475, had increased by more than four times the 2010 figure to 1,065,211 (China, 598,566; South Korea, 396,660, Japan, 24,435, Taiwan, 45,550) (Sabah Tourism Board, 2020b). In addition, 95% of arrivals come by air, and though there are scheduled flights by national airlines (Malaysian and East Asian) and several budget flights run by such carriers as Air Asia, most are chartered flights, particularly from China and South Korea.

Table 1: Domestic and international tourist arrivals 2015-2019

Year	Total Domestic arrivals	Total International tourists	Total tourist arrivals
2015	2,197,800	978,426	3,176,226
2016	2,299,132	1,128,776	3,427,908
2017	2,449,556	1,235,178	3,684,734
2018	2,517,846	1,361,567	3,879,413
2019	2,726,428	1,469,475	4,195,903

Source: Sabah Tourism Board, (2020b), sabah.tourism.com/statistics/?locale=en)

In terms of tourist profile, the 2019 data show that tourists visit Sabah mainly for recreation (86%) followed by visits to friends and relatives (VFR) 5%, then business / work (3%). The majority prefer hotels and resorts for accommodation. There is a range of good quality hotels from budget to five-star (Sabah Tourism Board, 2020c). Since 2015, the state government also recognised rural and community-based tourism as crucial components in the extension of tourism development from Kota Kinabalu. Rural areas on the West Coast of Sabah and offshore islands provided new tourism sites including the Mantanani islands to the north-west of Kota Belud, and Gaya Island and Tunku Abdul Rahman Marine Park, eight kilometres by boat from Kota Kinabalu. Two of the popular resorts for 'sun, sea and sand tourism', a short distance onshore from Kota Kinabalu, are the Shangri-La Tanjung Aru and Sutera Harbour complexes.

Aside from recreational tourism the other major attractions for ecotourists comprise the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Mount Kinabalu National Park, the Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre and the Bornean Sun Bear Conservation Centre near Sandakan as well as the wildlife and forest reserves on the Kinabatangan River area in eastern Sabah.

Sabah tourism and crisis

The recent downside for Sabah in the context of the Coronavirus pandemic from late January 2020 is that the state is much more exposed than the neighbouring Malaysian state of Sarawak to the dramatic decline in East Asians travelling abroad. With over one million visitors to Sabah from East Asia in 2019 the impact of their loss to the local tourism industry is already substantial. In the first two months of 2020 international tourist arrivals had decreased by 161,586 (a 35.4% decline), largely due to the collapse of the East Asian market, and all visitor arrivals, including domestic tourists, declined by 567,108 (comprising an overall 16.4% decrease) (Sabah Tourism Board, 2020b). As a result, employees across all tourism sectors have been asked or forced to take annual, unpaid or half-paid leave or have been made redundant as businesses retrench or close. Some have already declared bankruptcies. Prior to the pandemic, tourism industry in Sabah had been affected regularly by air pollution (the 'haze') from fires and burning in Kalimantan, the criminal activities of illegal immigrants, and sporadic abductions, shootings and murders by militant Islamic groups operating along Sabah's east coast and the offshore islands (Yang et al., 2015; Hashim et al., 2018). Studies had also been undertaken of rural homestays in Sabah following the earthquake of magnitude 6.0 in the Ranau area near Mount Kinabalu in June 2015. As concluded in the research, in examining the response to disaster we should not rely on government support and rescue packages but also on human agency in the face of crisis, and the importance of positive attitudes towards recovery, resilience and local self-support (Kamarudin et al., 2019; Kamarudin et al., 2020). But these crises have been much less significant in their impacts on tourism in comparison with the Coronavirus pandemic, and Sabah is generally seen as a relatively safe destination (Kuilis-Bosimin & Chan, 2018).

Not only has Sabah had to face the almost complete disappearance of East Asian visitors, but domestic tourism in Sabah was then affected by the MCO from 18 to 31 March including travel restrictions both within and between East and West Malaysia. The MCO was then extended in a Phase 2 (1-14 April); Phase 3 (15-28 April); Phase 4 (29 April-3 May); and the most recent Conditional MCO phase 5 (4-May-9 June).

The response

In early February 2020, Sabah's State Government took firm actions and, in addition to the federal packages, it put in place its own stimulus package to assist tourism. Initially, several actions were taken to target domestic tourism and tourists from neighbouring countries, and reducing hotel rates and rentals at shopping malls. This ultimately made little difference due to the MCO which started from 17 March 2020. Then, the Sabah State Government introduced a follow-up stimulus package worth RM670 million (US$15.8 million), intended to support various communities, not only for frontline workers such as the District Disaster Committee in every district but also those in rural areas who have lost their sources of income and are in dire need of aid and food supplies. The State Government took into account the welfare of the Village Community Management Council (MPKK), Chairmen and Secretaries throughout Sabah affected by the changes introduced by the ruling Federal Government by allocating allowance payments throughout the year (Borneo Post, 2020). The second stimulus package aimed to target and save existing business sectors like tourism, agriculture, fisheries, food, construction and forestry in Sabah.

Measures by Rural Tourism Communities

At the micro-level, several tourism associations at district level have taken initiatives to assist their members such as homestay owners and local guides to prevent the virus from spreading through rural tourism areas. Rural tourism operators together with district tourism associations have outlined procedures to stop rural tourism activities and businesses at all rural sites. Local village communities are working as a team to monitor the travelling activities of their villagers. Banners, created with a clear message for people, 'Outsiders are prohibited to visit the village', 'Foreigners are prohibited from entering' have been placed at several village road junction points, for example in Tuaran District (Gonzales, 2020). The closure of tourism businesses in rural areas such as homestays, has had a great impact on the sources of income for the rural tourism operators. The district tourism associations have therefore allocated special funds for the purchase of essential products such as rice, sugar, and oil for distribution among their respective members.

Impacts of Coronavirus on Accommodation and Airlines

Accommodation is one of the top three tourist expenditures in Malaysia. Hotels, lodgings, inns and motels are among sub-sectors of tourism that have been most affected by the pandemic and experts predict its impact to last from 6 to 12 months. Since February 2020, 2,041 employees in the hospitality industry have been laid off, while 9,773 have gone on unpaid leave and another 5,054 were forced to take pay cuts, according to the Malaysian Association of Hotels (MAH) (Tourism Malaysia, 2020). The number will increase over the next few months due to travel restrictions, the MCO and the cancelling of group packages. Popular resorts in Kota Kinabalu like the Shangri-La Tanjung Aru and the Sutera Harbour complex enjoyed occupancy rates of 90% or more in 2019. Within the last two months these have dropped to around 10 to 12%.

On the positive side, hotel management has come up with several strategies to cope with the downturn of their business. For example, the Hilton and Shangri-La hotel chains, both of which have presence in Sabah, have introduced flexibility into their hotel reservation systems in terms of room cancellation, extension, rebooking and non-cancellation fees for existing bookings. According to Hotel Magazine (2020), most of the hotels in Asia, including Sabah are also actively involving employees in activities related to maintenance, repairing furniture and housewares, renovation, cleaning of hotel facilities and rooms, and training for new skills and jobs in other sectors, and in employee retention activities such as redeployment, learning, and development.

Furthermore, according to the Malaysian Hotel Association (2020), a total of 11,993 hotel rooms were converted as quarantine centres in Malaysia. These are situated mainly in Selangor, Penang, Johor, Kedah, Sarawak and Sabah. In Sabah, the Pan Borneo Hotel, Ming Garden, Hotel Sixty3, Oyo Hotel and Monaco Boutique Hotel are taking in quarantine 'guests' as an alternative source of income.

The Coronavirus pandemic has also crippled the aviation industry. The International Air Transport Association (IATA) projects that globally airlines might incur between US$63 billion to US$113 billion losses in 2020. It is estimated that passenger revenue of Asia Pacific airlines could be reduced by 37% to US$88 billion for 2020 (IATA, 2020). Similarly, in Malaysia, major airlines like Malaysia Airlines, Malindo Air and Air Asia, all of which service Sabah, have been affected severely, which, among other things, has placed in doubt the viability of Malaysia Airlines. Rumours circulate about a possible merger with Air Asia, or KLM and Air France taking a stake in the airline. However, mergers, consolidations and takeovers are subject to approval by the Malaysian Aviation Commission.

Stakeholders in Sabah have adopted a 'new normal' and mitigation strategy. Market demand for tourism, tourist purchasing behaviour and business operations will be different post-COVID-19. Likewise, hotels and restaurants are shifting to short-term strategic adaptation. Airlines in Sabah have developed mitigation strategies by either reducing flight frequency and routes, temporary suspension of international routes, especially to China and other East Asian countries, capacity management, carrying more cargo instead of passengers, and phasing in domestic flights as a first stage (Anna Aero, 2020).

A Sabah Tourism Recovery Plan was introduced on 5 May 2020 involving six state agencies related to tourism including financial allocations to upgrade and improve existing tourism products, including infrastructure and maintenance facilities. It also indicates a shift from mass tourism to higher-yielding, higher quality tourism, the adoption of digital marketing as the main promotional tool and a focus on domestic discounted prices for major tourism sites **(**The Star, 2020). The plan requires a strong partnership between government and stakeholders in the tourism industry.

As of 11 May 2020, domestic tourism has been identified as the key to recovery and the Sabah State Government has announced the operations within Sabah only, including accommodation deals, adventure and recreational vacations, food and beverage sales, ticketing services and transportation, and the reopening of hotels except facilities such as prayer rooms, gymnasia, spas, sauna, lounges, swimming pools, meeting rooms, seminar halls, training rooms and buffets. There are also plans to increase the number of domestic flights within Malaysia and to and from Sabah. In Phase 5 of the MCO with effect from 9 May, 2020, domestic tourism has been allowed to resume operations but must comply with the health and safety 'standards of operating procedures' (SOP) set by the Ministry of Health and related authorities (Dzulkifli, 2020).

Conclusion

Given the uncertainties surrounding the future development of the Coronavirus pandemic and its socio-economic, political and health consequences, it is difficult to make firm predictions about the future of the Southeast Asian tourism industry. The seriousness of the pandemic, its rapid spread across more than 200 countries and the lack of knowledge about the virus itself suggest that the repercussions on tourism will continue well into 2021, and the wider economic impacts will extend well beyond that. In writing this paper it has been difficult to provide information on the scale of the problem and the direction in which it is heading. New cases and deaths, impacts on economies and counter-measures, specifically as these affect the tourism industry, change by the day.

Certainly, we need to know more about the changes in travel behaviour and perceptions of risk and decision-making occasioned by the pandemic. More specifically in the Malaysian tourism industry and the wider Southeast Asia, ultimately the effectiveness and impact of stimulus packages, cross-sectional financial loss analysis, and new measures and business strategies, which includes business resilience and crisis management issues, will need to be addressed. In addition, social distancing and MCO measures are likely to continue for some time to influence the way tourism businesses operate, how humans behave and respond to the contraction of the tourism industry and their adjustment to the continuing threat that the virus poses when people resume travelling. The tourism industry is one of the most affected by the Coronavirus outbreak and the cancellation of the 'Visit Malaysia 2020' campaign is a clear case in point.

What is also of interest are the ways in which the consequences of the pandemic play out and interrelate with other areas of life and behaviour. For example, in some parts of Southeast Asia, it may turn out to have a profound effect on the future direction of political life (Vatikiotis, 2020). As we have seen Erik Cohen has examined the coincidence, antecedence, interaction and dynamics of crises in the context of Thailand (2010; Cohen and Neal, 2010). Clearly post-COVID-19 the tourism industry may never be quite the same again; some businesses will disappear; some destinations may well be avoided for some time to come; people may also continue to be wary of the close contact entailed in airline, train, river and bus travel and on cruise liners. The overdependence on the East Asian market of states like Sabah, and countries such as Thailand has already given rise to calls for the diversification of tourist source countries, for encouraging more domestic tourism, and, in certain sites, to move away from low-revenue East Asian mass tourism. However, the influence of China and East Asia and the revenue and employment generated in Southeast Asia may be too significant to resist and may already be too embedded in Chinese regional supply chains across a range of industries to encourage more radical changes in tourism plans and strategies and a future significant reduction in the numbers of Chinese tourists. But clearly some rethinking is required when this crisis ends about the kinds of tourism which Southeast Asia, including Sabah and Malaysia more generally, intend to promote and the relationship between mass package tourism directed to East Asia and other more sustainable forms of tourism activity with a wider spread of visitor source countries.

Competing Interest Statement

All authors have read and approved the manuscript and take full responsibility for its contents. The authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the reviewers and editors of this manuscript.

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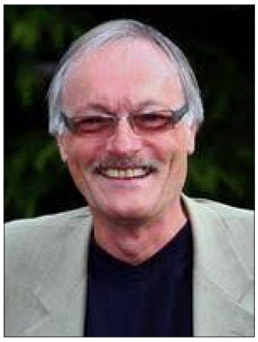

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