

BOOK OF READING

ECOTOURISM IN THE IMT-GT REGION: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Editors:

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As a new concept, ecotourism is surrounded with countless issues and inquiries. The dimensions of issues include the management and policies for ecotourism development, the impacts from ecotourism operation, and ecotourism marketing.

Several of these issues were addressed by the paper presenters at the IMT-GT International Conference on Ecotourism that was held in December 2003 at Universiti Utara Malaysia.

This book consists of a chosen number of papers presented at the conference that may become a good resource for future discussions and research in the area of ecotourism in the IMT-GT region as well as in the global context.

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CHAPTER 7

PLACE MARKETING STRATEGY IN ECOTOURISM: THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL PERSPECTIVES

Fatimah Hassan¹
Morshidi Sirat²

ABSTRACT

In this globalization era, capability of place competitiveness will determine the continuity and sustainability of tourist location developments. Product uniqueness, sustainable management and strategic marketing are some of the indicators and determinants of place competitive advantages. This article attempts to discuss the prospects of implementing theoretical and conceptualization of the core elements of place marketing that centered upon capitalist system and are mostly practiced in urban areas towards ecotourism sites. As a result of this implementation, some issues and implications such as exploitation, degradation, intervention and commodification of ecotourism products and resources need to be clarified and reconstructed. Integrating place marketing strategy in ecotourism will ensure the prospects of place competitive advantages subject to certain challenges. This article therefore will put forward some of the challenges using examples of case studies in Lembah Bujang Kedah.

INTRODUCTION

In this globalization era, tourism not only produces jobs and income but also generates spin-off decisions regarding new residents and business locations. This is because tourism industry has become the largest industry in the world and its development has been imposed as a way of life in the modernized societies alongside recreation and leisure activities. The industry has proven resilient to change and will persist but at different rates despite hard hit by a sluggish global economy, September 11 Attacked, the Iraq War, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), and the ongoing war on terrorism that led to bombings in Bali and Jakarta. Nevertheless, changes in demographic structure, increased in income levels, flexible leisure hour, desire for new self-identity, new lifestyles pattern and requirement

for quality time with the family pushed demands for tourism activities. Increasing globalization as a next of new technologies and sophisticated communication system have resulted in space-time compression and blurred boundary between places also raised curiosity and preferences of visiting specific places.

Emerging trend in tourisms, the effects of globalization, and the liberalization of the economy have resulted in major amount deficits in many countries, especially developing countries, which engaged in promoting tourism, thus forcing them to compete for the tourist flow as a way to inject balancing mechanism in the budget. In order to compete effectively, "places" must develop an effective marketing approach. Places especially ecotourism destinations must produce products and services that are current and prospective towards consumers such as local citizens, business and international investors and foreign visitors' want or need. In other words, place must sell products and services internally and externally, nationally and internationally with appropriate approaches deemed in the medium and long term as profitable and sustainable. The task of marketing places undergoes constant change as new destinations are found, new technologies emerge, attractions expand, old attraction shrink, merge or consolidate. As customer trends, lifestyles, needs and preferences shifted and conditions change, product must be upgraded and refined. Latest products and services must be designed to meet new demands. Therefore, analytical frameworks that focus on the concept of competitiveness must guide competition between places, the development and the marketing of tourism destination.

Place marketing, a strategic procedure that integrates marketing approach to places could become an effective tool for local economic development, to achieve their development plan and could strengthen place competitive advantages because of its advantages. In recognition of these advantages, this paper will present and elucidate a framework that if implemented through appropriate place management planning and procedures, can help achieve a balance between development of an area and preservation of natural environment, which become the core elements in ecotourism.

THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: PLACE COMPETITIVENESS AND PLACE MARKETING

Place Competitiveness: Concepts and Determinants

Competitiveness, by definition, is dynamic and changing. Competition will only intensify in the future, as the world is moving toward market oriented and

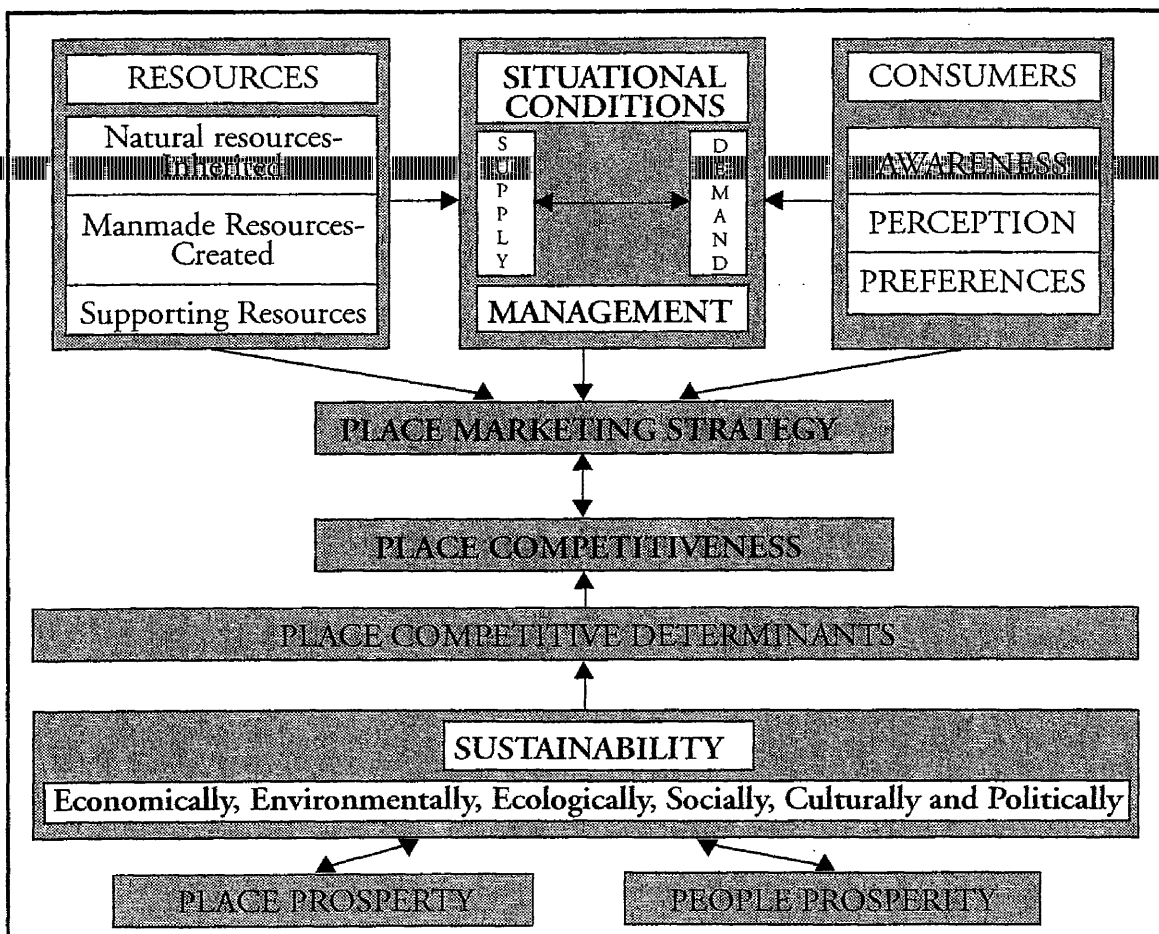
consumer-driven economy. Competitiveness is measured not by a region's performance, but by how the region's performance compares to the performance of other regions. A competitive strategy that is the conscious and creative use of human intelligence, innovation and creativity to create defensible competitive positions are critically important in order to convert natural advantages into competitive success (Poon, 1993). In addition, based on the idea of Porter (1990) in his book *The Competitive Advantage of Nations*, Poon (1993), Kotler et al. (1993) and Morshidi et al. (2003), concludes that each place, either at state, regional or city levels should be competitive by exploiting their own resources and thereby generate high and sustainable growth economically, socially and environmentally. In other words, a place with prominence competitive advantages should be environmentally excellent location for people as residents, business for enterprises and destination for visitors. These notions of competitiveness should be associated and detailed further with several perspectives such as price competitiveness perspective, historical and socio-cultural perspective, and strategy and management perspective.

In the tourism context, place competitiveness is the destination's ability to create and integrate value-added products that sustain its resources while maintaining market position relative to competitions (Hassan, 2000). Thus, when the destination depends on the uniqueness of the environment, the resources must be protected, managed and delivered intelligently to continue to draw tourists. Therefore, in order to achieve and have high competitive advantages, a tourist destination must be sustainable economically, environmentally, ecologically, socially, culturally and politically. The final focus, either short or long term, is to achieve both place and people prosperities.

Hassan (2000) has conceptually identified four major determinants of market competitiveness in sustainable environment. These determinants are comparative advantages, demand orientation, industry structure and environmental commitment. According to Hassan (2000) comparative advantage includes factors associated with both macro and microenvironments that are critical to market competitiveness such as attributes and activities at the location. While demand orientation is the ability of the destination to respond to the changing nature of market demand such as environmental awareness, levels of experience and novelty seeking. The destination's ability to compete is also associated with the existence or absence of tourism-related industry structure such as bank, tour operators, health services and basic amenities facilities and also destination's commitment to the sustainability of the surrounding environment such as tourism policy and destination image.

Nevertheless, since destination is also an amalgam of tourism products, tourism services and experiences (Buhalis, 2000), appropriate strategy are needed as suggested by Poon (1993) since the emergence of new tourism, and comparative advantage are no longer natural and the tourism industry has become more volatile, sensitive and is fiercely competitive. In addition, this strategy should be focused, specialized and flexible in manner and ready to move with changes in the world economy, technology and markets. A framework developed for these notions as a result of integrating ideas, proposed by various researchers and literature reviews shown in Figure 7.1. This figure synthesizes the main elements of place competitiveness and place marketing highlighting its positive impacts while implementing the strategy in any destination. It shows that elements required for the achievement and the subsequent maintenance of sustainable competitive advantages are distinctive local resource, capacity and mechanisms which are flexible in adapting and abiding to changing situational environmental conditions.

Figure 7.1
An Integrated Framework of Place Competitiveness and Place Marketing



Source: Author

Place Marketing: Concepts and Strategies

Place marketing is an acceptable and effective strategy that applies marketing approaches to a place in managing uneven, decay and negative development in an area and increases their competitive advantages. Two main objectives of place marketing are as a set of instrumental development techniques whereby to increase the place revenue and as a philosophy of place management that are liveable for the residents, investable for the investors and visitable for the tourists (Ashworth & Voogd, 1994, Kotler et al., 1993).

This approach involving new marketing concepts which broaden the ideas of marketing in non-business organizations which aimed at enhancing the consumer's well being rather than selling a specific product to an individual customer which is influenced strongly by the importance of product image. Many of its strategies are implemented in urban and metropolitan areas such as London Dockland (Burgess & Wood, 1988, Hubbard, 1996); Gronigen (Ashworth & Voogd, 1988); Manchester (Young & Lever, 1997) and Shanghai (Wu, 2001). It is successfully implemented in many urban areas because of greater competition in limited space, higher density of various consumers and the capitalist-oriented management that is spurred by entrepreneurial characteristics.

The main elements in place marketing process are the marketing systems, which bring together consumers (users of the place) and products (place attributes) in the market. Thus, in this process, place is not only a container or stage for activity-based products but also function as a product in itself. In marketing, a product is defined as a package of attributes of wants and satisfaction. The success and failure of a product depends on consumer's need satisfaction. Furthermore, place marketing means designing a place to satisfy the needs of its target markets. Therefore, it is successful when citizens and business are pleased with their communities, and meets the expectations of visitors and investors (Kotler et al., 1993).

Since places are particularly amenable to spatial and functional measures, Kotler et al. (1993, 2002) suggested that this process should make up of four components as listed below. In spite of that, the choice of measures for effective approaches is relying on the marketing strategies chosen and the mission and vision of the place management organization (Ashworth & Voogd, 1994).

1. Place as a character, whereby place needs a sound design that enhances its attractiveness and develops its aesthetic qualities and values, especially for historic preservation and natural environment. Current approach to design emphasizes its environmentally compatibility with existing physical features adaptive reuse restore the older character and tranquility of places.

2. Place as a fixed environment, which needs to develop and maintain a basic infrastructure that moves people and goods in ways compatible with the natural environment. Excellent and well-managed infrastructure cannot guarantee a growth, but its absence is a serious liability. Environmental quality and physical condition of a place also can affect tourists' decision-making.
3. Place as a service provider, which provides basic quality services that meet business and public needs such as protection and safety services. These services can contribute as value added to a place's primary attraction and product.
4. Place as entertainment and recreation, which need a range of attractions for their own people and visitors. Place should feature some attractions enough to entice visitors from reasonable distances to visit them and enough to keep them beyond a day.

According to Bosselman (1999), there are four widespread strategies in place marketing that are regularly implemented in many tourist destinations. These strategies are expansion strategy, dispersion strategy, centralization strategy and new invention strategy. Before implementing the strategic strategy, two approaches regularly used are first to collect information about current tourists and secondly, to audit the place's attractions and identify their target customers because a place would waste its money trying to attract everyone who travels. Theoretically, each place needs to develop its own unique place marketing strategy because of differences in the place's physical environment, economic activities, cultures, values, history, politics and leadership characteristics. Thus, different places must have different approaches. Uniformity in approaches will lead to redundancy and unnoticed. So, the probability of a place to be chosen and visited may decrease over time. Strategies selected also depend upon favorable events, trends and various catalyst for change such as changing demographics, values and lifestyles. For examples, the new trend towards shorter visits by two-career families who have less time to spend away from home and also the effect of higher aging couple or retired government officers that are healthy physically and mentally and indication of strengthen religious piety.

Besides strategies, other elements that may influence the efficiency of place marketing are place image and place positioning. Place image is a critical determinant of the way citizens, business and visitors respond to the place (Kotler et al. 1993, 2002). In order to be effective, the image must be valid (real), be believable, simple (many images leads to confusion), must be appealing and

distinctive and also differ from common themes. Usually place images are communicated through tools such as slogans (useful in creating enthusiasm, momentum and fresh ideas), themes (as the place for certain activities or viable alternative location) and visual symbols (landmarks which permanently etched in the tourist minds and can also appear on stationery, billboards or brochures) and mouth-to-mouth communication (the most effective tools). Since place image can be measured, the place positioning plays vital roles in enhancing the attractiveness of a place by creating a distinctive place in the mind of potential customers.

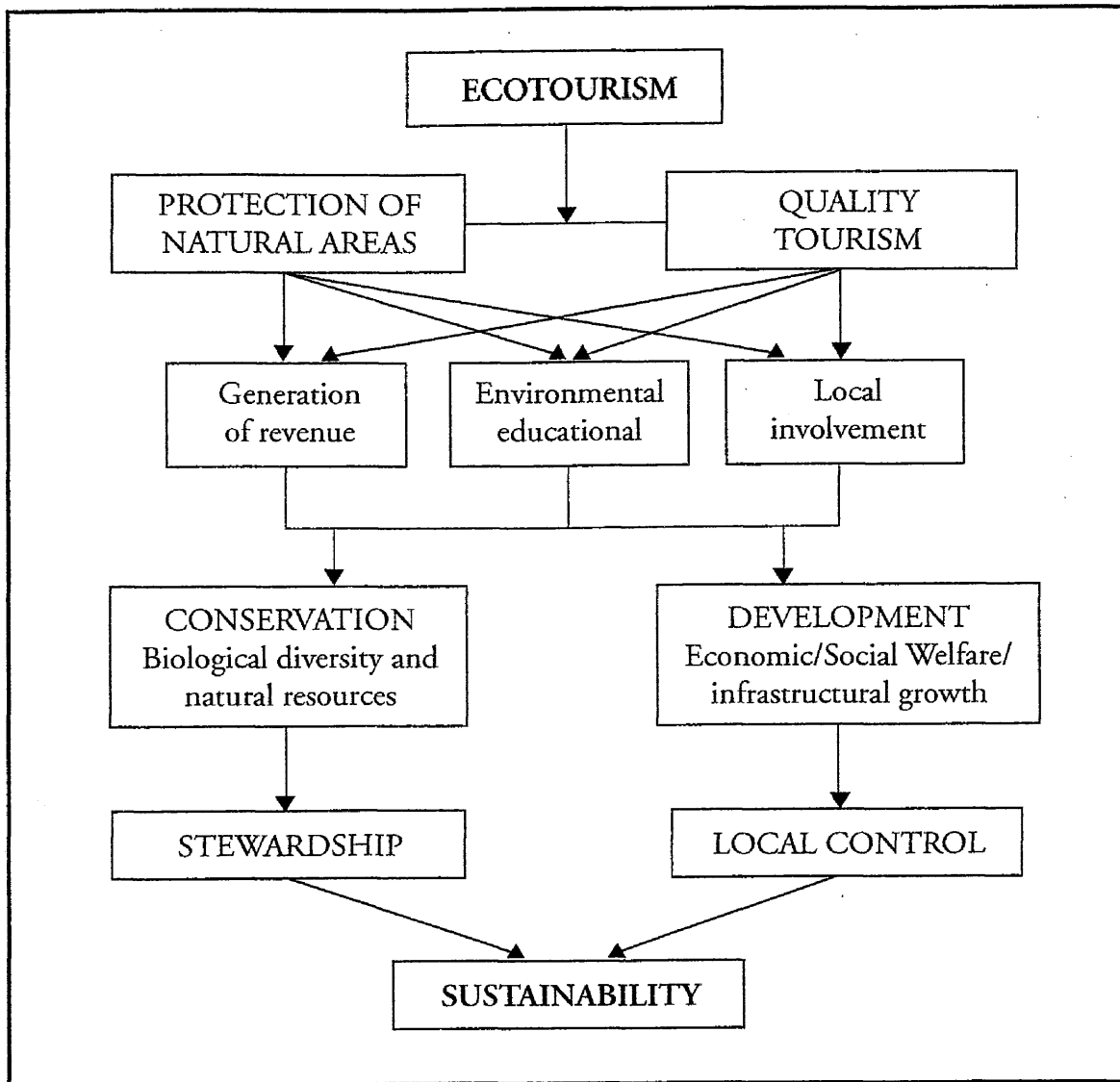
In general, many procedures are required in making place marketing as an effective tool for development and enhance its competitive advantages. This is because place marketing is a strategic procedure based on the strategic development planning of a place. Some of these procedures are related directly to place management committee that involves in the planning and marketing policies. Implementation of place marketing requires knowledge, critical and future thinking, marketing research and strategic analysis. Therefore, it is also important to have the appropriate human resources with specialized knowledge to develop and perform such marketing procedures.

PLACE MARKETING STRATEGY ON ECOTOURISM

Ecotourism needs marketing like all other forms of tourism. The main challenge is to transform the tourism potential into appealing tourism products (like tours, trekking, package tours, trips, holiday stays etc.) that are internationally and domestically competitive and marketable, and at the same time assure the sustainability of fragile ecotourism resources. Furthermore, as tourists have matured and become refined as described by Poon (1993) the competition between destinations is such that tourists by hedonic value will select the destination with combination of products and services that provide the best quality experience for their money. In order to be competitive, all destination players must work together by identifying the elements that make up the destination, beginning with the reasons tourists will travel to the area, the services available to them and the activities that support the tourist services. Therefore, the success of a particular form of tourism in a destination depends on the resources it possesses whereby competitive advantages are based on the control of assets which are valuable, rare, difficult to imitate and substitute.

Figure 7.2 below explains the overall concepts and purpose of ecotourism, that is to protect the natural environment through the environmental education, local

Figure 7.2
The Basic Concepts and the Roles of Ecotourism



Source: Adapted from Ross & Wall, 1999

involvement and revenue generation while contributing to conservation of resources and socio-economic development and thus strive for sustainability.

As discussed before, place marketing is a procedure that could help places to achieve their development plans and be competitive. It procedures involve a multidimensional combination of activities, strategic decisions and efforts that take place under place management planning and process. To implement place marketing strategy on ecotourism, some procedures have to be considered. Some of these procedures include:

- (i) Destination vision identification
- (ii) Financial ability and capacity
- (iii) SWOT and PEST analysis – the identification of place strength, weakness, opportunities and threats and also the impact of political, economical, social and technological factors on place
- (iv) Identification of place distinctive characteristics
- (v) Creating and managing the place's image
- (vi) Ranking and positioning analysis through feasibility study and market research
- (vii) Segmentation of place consumers and target markets
- (viii) Creation of place promotional package based on place distinctive characteristics
- (ix) Developing strategic planning for specific strategies, tactics and alternative scenarios to achieve flexibility and innovative action plans
- (x) Feedback procedure so that the evaluation of outcomes and measures of effectiveness and their impacts on the place development can be identifies.

Since ecotourism is a nature-based tourism that involves interpretation and education, it should be managed ecologically, environmentally and culturally sustainable, in order to foster understanding, appreciation and conservation of the resources. Comprehending these objectives through the place marketing strategies they are subjected to some challenges. Some of the challenges in implementing the place marketing on ecotourism include:

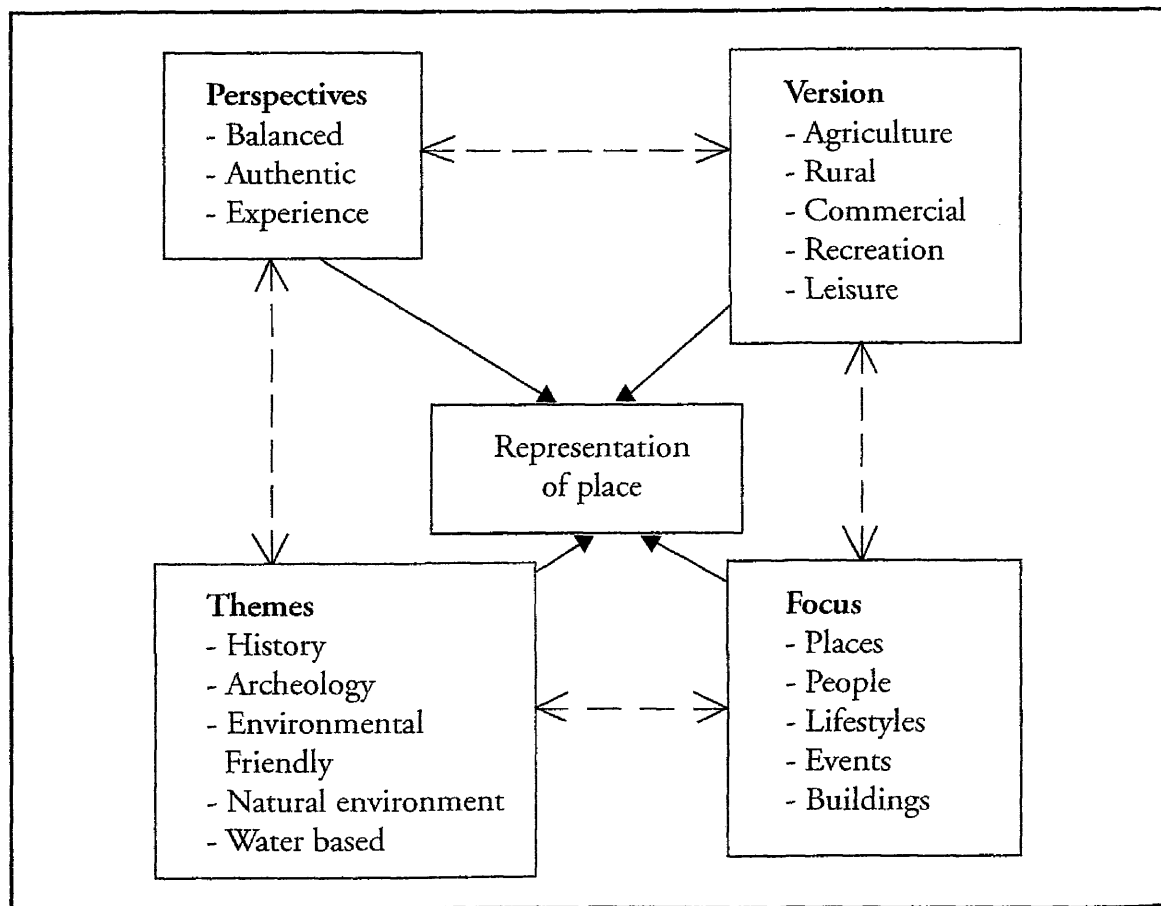
- (i) Identification of distinctive place products,
- (ii) Commoditization of the products and
- (iii) Information about place consumers and place competency. These challenges will be discussed comprehensively in the next section in relation to the selected study area, Lembah Bujang.

IMPLEMENTING PLACE MARKETING STRATEGY ON ECOTOURISM IN LEMBAH BUJANG, KEDAH DARUL AMAN

The benefits of ecotourism are tremendous especially to underdevelop areas such as Lembah Bujang. Lembah Bujang is always synonymous to the history of Old Kedah State. The area which covers almost 400 square kilometers is bordered by Sungkop Para Hill at the north, Straits of Mallaca at the west, Muda River at the south and Ah Teng Hill in the east. The area is managed by Sungai Petani Municipal Council with a total population of 339,898 until the year 2000.

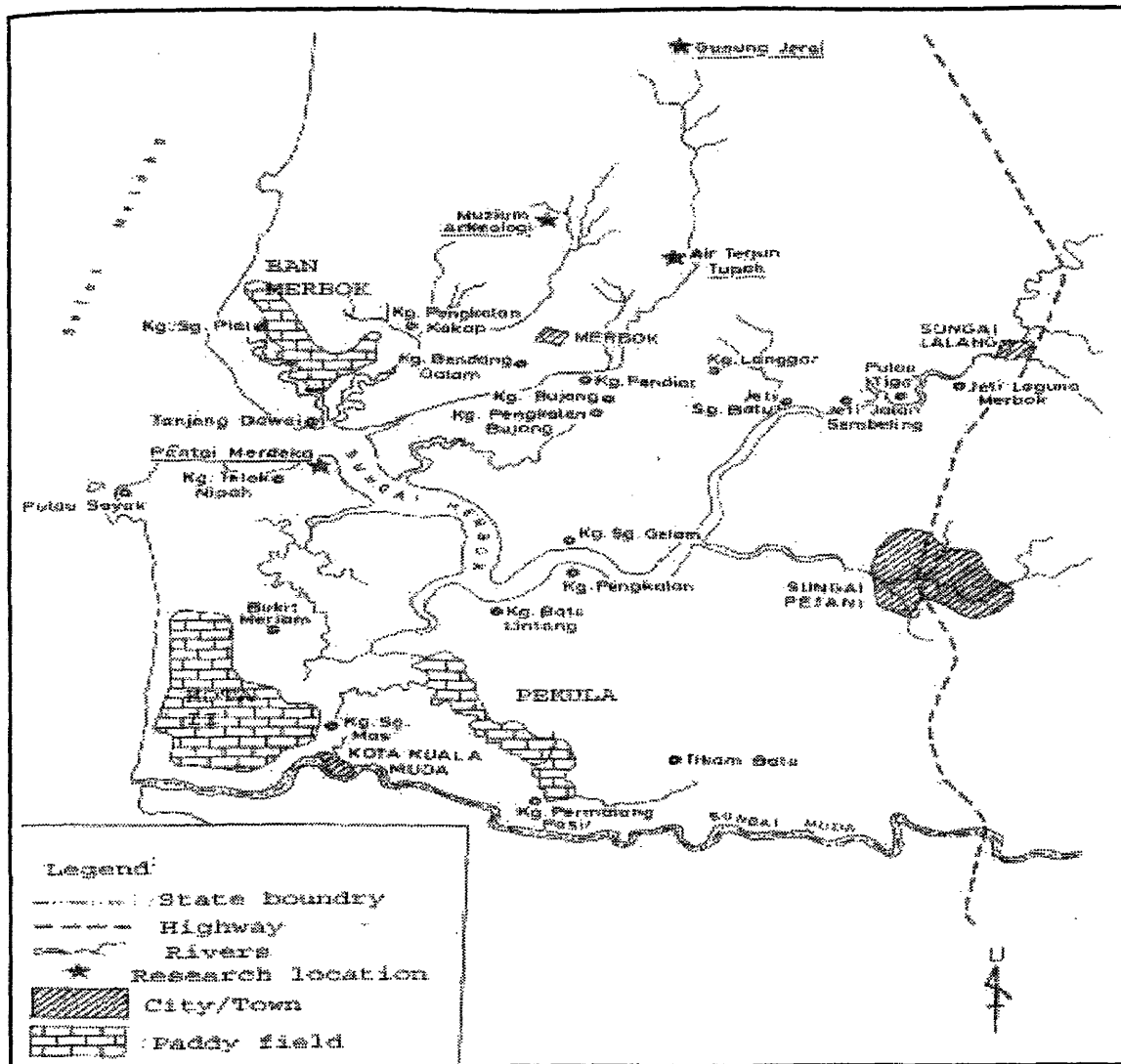
The potential of this area for ecotourism products is tremendous but unknown due to its low publicity and for it always overshadowed by Langkawi, Kedah's most popular tourist destination. Lembah Bujang is the only area in the mainland of Kedah that is prosperous with diverse attraction resources that include highland (Gunung Jerai), beaches (Pantai Merdeka), islands (Pulau Sayak), forests (Gunung Jerai Reserved Forest, Merbok Mangrove Forest), rivers (Sungai Merbok, Sungai Muda), historical sites (Kota Kuala Muda), archeological heritage sites and museum (Batu Pahat, Bujang), fisherman villages (Tanjung Dawai, Kuala Muda), traditional villages (Kampung Bujang) and various recreational parks and forests (Sungai Tupah, Sungai Batu Pahat, Sungai Kuning). The locations of these potential tourism attraction sites are shown in Map 1. While competing variables in the representation of Lembah Bujang are summarized in Figure 7.3. The figure shows how the approaches to marketing of the area could take different views such as perspectives, version, themes and focus.

Figure 7.3
Competing Variables in the Representation of Lembah Bujang



Source: Author

Map 7.1
Location for Potential Attractions in Lembah Bujang



Source: Author

Some of the major challenges to Lembah Bujang while implementing place marketing strategies are:

Identification of Distinctive Place Product for Commodity or Commercial Advantage

Almost everything around us is a commodity (Kotler, 1993). The ability to render something for sale is called commodification process. As for natural and protected

areas, their products can be viewed as natural laboratories, living museums, retreats, havens and outdoor schools and provide unique interactive opportunities for promoting environmental stewardship for visitors (Ross & Wall, 1999). Thus, the abundance of products can be produced through commodification procedure. In Lembah Bujang, the diverse range of products and value-added products especially in the Gunung Jerai Reserved Forest and Sungai Merbok Mangrove Forest will surely produce unique, authentic and diversified natural tourism experiences. Gunung Jerai Reserved Forest, which covers 5,417 hectares, is part of the amazing Malaysia tropical rainforest; one of the oldest tropical rainforest in the world with evolution spanning over a period of 130 million years, hence the area is rich with spectacular florals and faunas. Whereas Sungai Merbok Mangrove Forest is famous with its natural and undisturbed habitats that made it to be recognized as an educational forests. Pantai Merdeka Hill, famous with its Raja Bersiong legend and myths is also rich in creepers and shrubs, which is a feature of a coastal hill forest.

Unfortunately, research findings show that the attraction attributes for each location did not meet consumers needs and expectations. For instance, poor management of the basic infrastructure such as limited parking lots, scattered shopping and eating venues, and improper rest area management, leaves the areas littered, crowded and degraded. Meanwhile, the construction of any man made resources is really unnecessary because the area is rich with its natural resources ranging from the lower level as at the Sungai Merbok until the highest level as at the peak of the Gunung Jerai.

The low operating and living cost in the area and its close proximity to Sungai Petani (12 Km) and Butterworth (30 Km) should be used as important factors in promoting the place as an affordable and alternative destination for family holidays. Swimming and picnicking in natural environment settings are common and popular recreational activities. Similar activities could be found in Pantai Merdeka, Tupah Recreational Forest and Gunung Jerai Recreational Forest. Eventhough these places have extensive natural resources and ecologically important forests, research findings show that the majority of visitors go to these places not for these main reasons. Majority of the local visitors visited the area and engaged in activities indirectly related to enjoying natural elements such as exercising, picnicking, the social experience of being with family and friends, swimming or barbecueing. Hence, it can be infered that recreational activities have little impact on the conservation focus or educational purposes in ecotourism. Thus, it is important to identify the distinctive place products that can be turned into competitive advantages for the area.

Commoditization of Tourist Products

Since the function of tourism is to sell a commodity to a group of consumer, the offering of tourist products and practices for their exchange value could be regarded as not genuine in the sense that it is staged, controlled and modified from natural condition. This situation worsened as place managers opt for convenience. Hence, exploitation and degradation of ecotourism products and resources persists and consequently diminishing the competitive advantages of the area. The construction of Semeling Bridge and a new project to develop a jetty and tourist facilities next to the bridge have consumed large areas of mangrove forest. Many of the mangrove trees have been cut down and the beauty of the area had been tarnished unfortunately. On the other hand, facilities for the visiting public such as walkways, open sheds, toilets, rest huts, observation posts for experiencing the sight of the floras and faunas at the swamp areas were not available. As we know, the fundamental success of ecotourism is the awareness, appreciation and respect for nature instilled through learning experience with nature. Nevertheless, Gunung Jerai Reserved Forest has the facilities such as the Tangga Kenari and jungle trekking route but the infrastructures are not properly managed and informations regarding the forest were not available in the form of information boards or signboards.

Lembah Bujang which is famous for its archeological artifacts and shrines, concealed the remains of lost civilization of the Hindu Kingdom, Srivijaya dating from the fourth century. Original location where the artifacts were found are scattered in Lembah Bujang areas such as at Bukit Choras, Bukit Pendi and Pengkalan Bujang. These areas are left unattended and became prohibited areas under the authority of Archeological Museum. This is because some of the main artifacts and shrines have been reconstructed at Bukit Batu Pahat, next to the Archeological Museum of Lembah Bujang for the purposes of staged tourist benefits and reducing management costs. If the originality of the areas were preserved and well maintained, bigger areas in Lembah Bujang will be a unique ecotourism destination.

Information about Place Consumers and Place Competency

Achieving competitive advantages through strategies either by creating new ecotourism products or the extension of existing ones requires a thorough market assessment. Therefore it is important to understand the consumers and the capacity of the place to accommodate development. Based on recent trends in tourism, the target consumers should be both domestic and international tourists. As consumer's lifestyle attitudes toward environments and identities have changed, a careful design and product development is crucial for success. As discussed earlier, majority of

the visitors visit the natural based environment for certain activities that defeat the purpose and intention of ecotourism, hence the area should make available several beneficial recreational activities such as for educational and experience purposes. Availability of educational facilities such as information boards, observation posts, rest huts and promotion of educational activities in the area such as story telling, essay competition, drawing contest and etc, could instill appreciation and increased understanding towards natural environments.

Lembah Bujang major attractions especially from the forests and recreational parks include streams, waterfalls, picnic areas, outlandish floras such as ferns, epiphytes and exotic faunas such as butterflies, birds and insects could play a role in aggregating its competitive advantages. Additional value such as the use of cows or buffalos caravan as public transport to selected areas and cruising in traditional yacht while wearing “Merong Mahawangsa” costumes will bring some nostalgia and unforgettable experience for the visitors. Indirectly, these features will be among the most distinctive products for the area and strengthen its competitive advantages.

In so far as place management is concerned, specifically revenue collection, facilities use, facilities rentals, sales, royalties and some related taxes such as lodging taxes and transportation taxes should be the main concern. Admission fee is only advisable if the place product is well known locally and internationally.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Place marketing, which functions as a development tool in enhancing place competitive advantages could be implemented in any place either at state, regional or city levels but with some prerequisite strategic planning procedures. Therefore, if the strategic planning procedures are well developed, the place marketing strategy could be implemented successfully in any ecotourism destination. The strategies and approaches implemented should not be a duplicative of other areas as place needs to develop its own unique and distinctive place marketing strategies based on its capabilities.

Theoretically, it has been shown that satisfying consumers, needs and the capacity of a place to accommodate development are two of the primary factors for a place to become competitive. However, practically these are the biggest challenges when implementing the place marketing strategies. From the study, it shows that the adaptation of place marketing strategies in Lembah Bujang progresses accordingly due to higher demand for recreational and tourism activities. Unfortunately, many

of the place marketing approaches, in terms of planning and policy are duplication of the other areas. These strategies will lead to similarities in place developments and activities, thus weakening its competitive advantages.

Confidently, Lembah Bujang is actually capable in preserving its own natural richness even after commodification process. Therefore, the relevant authority should effectively manipulate and promote its various distinctive products in strengthening its competitive advantages. The potential of the area in meeting consumer needs for recreational and educational experience in a natural environment could be further realized if the strategies implemented are in complements with its neighboring areas, inclusive of the IMT-GT area. Complementing each others' strengths and capabilities will consequently lead to healthy competitiveness among each IMT-GT tourist destination in this fierce, complexed and challenged industry.

END NOTES

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