Sarawak Tourism Forum 2015

Report Prepared By
Sarawak Tourism Federation

For
Ministry of Tourism Sarawak

28 May 2015
1. INTRODUCTION

The Sarawak Tourism Forum 2015, initiated and organized by the Sarawak Tourism Federation (STF) was held in Kuching from 16-17 April 2015. A key objective of the Forum was to provide an opportunity for industry stakeholders to voice their views and opinions on what warrants attention in the tourism industry, and to recommend remedial actions as required.

The forum started with two panel discussions. The first, “Reality Check”, took stock of where we are now, while the second, “Opportunities for Sarawak”, gathered suggestions on what could be done for the tourism industry in Sarawak. The focal topics for the group discussions, which followed, came out from these panel discussions. The participants were divided into groups to discuss 12 different topics, under the format of “What are the challenges, what do you suggest ought to be done, and who should be doing it?”

This report provides a summary of the group discussions from all the participants and has been distilled into the five core areas deemed to be noteworthy and of importance (please note that “Branding” and “Marketing” have been conflated into one theme). There were a total of 218 registered participants from both private (representing the various fields in the tourism industry; compromising 43% of all participants) and public sectors (government departments and agencies; compromising 57% of all participants). Elizabeth Rich from Australia and Yeoh Siew Hoon from Singapore helped to moderate and facilitate the Forum.

This Forum was supported by:
The Chief Minister of Sarawak, YAB Datuk Patinggi Tan Sri (Dr) Haji Adenan bin Haji Satem, gave the opening address and set the tone for the forum by highlighting the following key points to consider:

➢ Make use of celebrities to put Sarawak on the map; AIFFA (ASEAN International Film Festival Award) is a good platform
➢ Invite more people and crews to Sarawak for filming opportunities
➢ Our nature is important and valuable - No new timber licenses to be issued; and
➢ No new oil palm plantations are to be established
➢ The CAN (Culture, Adventure & Nature) theme is good and highlights our assets
➢ No sex tourism
➢ There are large numbers of middle-class Indians and Chinese travelling
➢ More flight connectivity is needed for Sarawak
➢ We must be proud of our history and heritage. Which country had White Rajahs?
➢ Focus on Alfred Wallace who, along with Darwin, propounded the Theory of Natural Selection
➢ We must have better roads, especially the Kuching to Miri corridor
➢ Our waterways can be good tourism attractions
➢ Better facilities and accessibility to our National Parks; essential to have better cooperation between National Parks and the private sector
➢ Expand the tourism industry so as to benefit our communities

2 DISCUSSION TOPICS

The following sections summarise the key points highlighted during each of the Group Discussion sessions. The discussions were wide-ranging and generated some good suggestions. Some groups produced a long list of recommendations, comments and ideas. For the sake of brevity the core themes of each group have been listed rather than the whole discussion. In addition, some groups broadened their discussion beyond their own topic to other groups’ topics (e.g. the Product group also discussed Events, etc.). Where this happened we have listed those comments under the appropriate topic heading. Comments and remarks that did not fit with the format (What, How, Who) have been excluded.
2.1 Heritage

Challenges

➢ Sarawak is losing valuable heritage assets (arts, crafts, historic buildings, etc.)
➢ Lack of political will to safeguard heritage assets and invest in their preservation and revitalization.
➢ Local communities are not involved in preservation of historical assets
➢ Restoration works need guidelines and the work needs to be done by conservation-minded architects and contractors.

Ideas and Solutions

➢ Use UNESCO standards as guidelines for the preservation and management of Sarawak’s heritage buildings, e.g. Brooke-era Forts, heritage streets, heritage buildings and sites.
➢ Identify and document the important heritage sites
➢ Interpretive information and signage at significant heritage sites.
➢ More documentation on heritage resources, assets, art and craft traditions.
➢ Involve local communities to actively participate and contribute to historical and cultural preservation.
➢ Proper training for tour guides in heritage guiding, ideally under UNESCO guidance.
➢ Promote Kuching as a heritage destination
➢ Promotion of heritage in local school curricula with visits to local heritage sites.
➢ Promote themed heritage attractions within the State.
➢ Promote art tourism with elements of heritage.

Who Should Take The Lead

➢ The relevant government agencies (e.g. Ministry of Tourism, Local Councils, Sarawak Museum) in consultation with NGOs (e.g. Heritage Society, Friends of Sarawak Museum) along with other stakeholders (e.g. local communities) and interested businesses.
2.2 Government Regulations & Licensing

Challenges

➢ Unlicensed vehicles, accommodation and guides are common features of Sarawak’s tourism industry.
➢ Insufficient enforcement of present regulations.
➢ Over-regulation of tour guides and complicated guide licensing system.
➢ The high cost of obtaining guide licenses.
➢ Insufficient licensed and trained tour guides (Kuching has 190 licensed guide, Kota Kinabalu has 2,000)
➢ Difficult to get temporary permits for foreign skilled workers to overcome staff shortages.
➢ Challenge to homestays from Airbnb.

Ideas and Solutions

➢ Review the present policies on the licensing of guides; flexible policies with regards to licensing experienced and specialist guides who are unlicensed or those whose licenses have lapsed;
➢ Sensible policies (without compromising safety issues) with regards to unlicensed accommodation.
➢ STB should only list licensed tour operators, tour guides, etc. on their website.
➢ Increase the number and quality of tour guides
➢ Make it easier for tourism businesses to employ foreign specialists when local staff are unable or unqualified

Who Should Take The Lead

➢ Relevant government agencies such as the Ministry of Tourism & Culture (MOTAC), Road Transport Department (JPJ), Commercial Vehicle Licensing Board (LPKP), Immigration Department and Ministry of Tourism (MoT); with input from the private sector via Sarawak Tourism Federation (STF).

2.3 Local Community, Talent Development & Engagement

Challenges

➢ Most tourism courses focus on theory rather than practical experience.
➢ Many lecturers have little or limited experience of the tourism industry.
➢ Need to attract young people into tourism industry.
Ideas and Solutions

➢ English language skills are essential for employment – the Education system must focus on English language skills to make students employable.
➢ Educational institutions should seek greater involvement and cooperation with practitioners from the tourism industry.
➢ Provide opportunities for students to seek work experience (company internships) as part of the curriculum.
➢ Appoint young people involved in tourism as Youth Ambassadors.
➢ Develop an internship programme at Ministry of Tourism to learn and experience the policy and planning aspects of tourism.

Who Should Take The Lead

➢ Institutions of learning, relevant government agencies (Ministry of Tourism, STB, etc.) and industry associations (STF).

2.4 Marketing / Branding

Challenges

➢ Sarawak has a vague, undefined tourism brand.
➢ Maintaining consistent brand messages and imagery.
➢ Getting the right balance of regional and international promotions.
➢ Limited resources so funds have to be spent wisely.

Ideas and Solutions

➢ Determine a common vision for the Sarawak brand based on the key assets and markets; create a brand image for Sarawak (e.g. along the lines of 100% Pure New Zealand, I Love NY)
➢ Develop a marketing plan to deliver a consistent brand message in the short, medium and long-term
➢ Improve market research and analysis and distribute this information
➢ Use up to date research to analyse markets and visitor origins in order to get the right mix of traditional and digital marketing and branding strategies.
➢ While not ignoring the long haul market, focus on regional markets such as West Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan & Korea.

Who Should Take The Lead

➢ A new task force comprising the government and private sector.
2.5 Positioning & Target Markets

Challenges

➢ Overlapping responsibilities and duplication of efforts between tourism institutions (STB, MOT, SCB, etc.).
➢ Lack of research and statistical analysis to drive a marketing strategy.
➢ Insufficient private sector involvement in formulating and implementing marketing strategies.
➢ Increasingly, tourists choosing activities before destinations.

Ideas and Solutions

➢ Identify our core markets based on our assets (national parks, heritage, culture, activities)
➢ Improve research capabilities so that we have more up-to-date, accurate and relevant market data to drive our marketing efforts.
➢ Re-evaluate our marketing budget: currently too much is spent on traditional strategies (trade shows, print media) and insufficient attention is given to digital marketing and new and emerging market trends
➢ Target regional markets and those with direct flights to Sarawak.

Who Should Take The Lead

➢ A task force of relevant government agencies and private sector stakeholders.

2.6 Accommodation

Challenges

➢ Staffing problems – difficult to get good staff.
➢ Unlicensed accommodation providers.
➢ Poor condition and quality of hotels and national park accommodation.
➢ Illegal homestay operators competing with certified operators.
Ideas and Solutions

➢ Review the salary scale for Sarawak’s accommodation sector.
➢ Provide professional certified training.
➢ Improve monitoring and control systems and enforcement
➢ Better maintenance of hotels, guesthouses, homestays, park accommodation, etc.
➢ Consider appointing international hotel management companies to manage Government owned hotels.

Who Should Take The Lead

➢ Malaysia Association of Hotels (MAH), Sarawak Tourism Federation (STF) and Ministry of Tourism (MoT).

2.7 Tourism Related Products

Challenges

➢ Poor maintenance of core tourism products (e.g. facilities at national parks, heritage buildings, etc.).
➢ Poorly maintained infrastructure
➢ Some tours and products are looking tired and need revitalising.
➢ Customer service standards are dropping
➢ Safety and security issues (e.g. crime and bag snatching in tourism zone / city centre).

Ideas and Solutions

➢ Allocate sufficient budgets to government-owned tourism attractions.
➢ Each attraction should have a maintenance schedule and plan.
➢ Increased and more visible policing in tourism areas.
➢ Improve customer service through training, service programmes and tourism ready campaigns.

Who Should Take The Lead

➢ Relevant government agencies for assets owned by the government (e.g. Sarawak Forestry for maintaining national parks, SEDC for Sarawak Cultural Village, etc.)
➢ Police & local councils for crime and tourist safety issues.
➢ Ministry of Tourism for industry training programmes focused on improving customer service.
2.8 National Parks

Challenges

➢ Low priority and insufficient funds are allocated to national parks for staffing, enforcement, conservation, park management, facilities and maintenance.
➢ Many park wardens and rangers (trained by Lincoln University) are not given the opportunity to manage, develop and maintain parks.
➢ Hunting, logging and encroachment are degrading Sarawak’s National Parks.
➢ Inappropriate and poorly designed park facilities.
➢ Park revenues from entry fees and accommodation are not re-invested in the national parks but goes to the State treasury.
➢ Disproportionate funding, for example large budgets for Mulu but small budgets for Bako.
➢ Booking the accommodation is difficult and lacks transparency
➢ Garbage handling at key national parks.
➢ Public confusion over the responsibilities and roles of the Forest Department (FD) and Sarawak Forestry Corporation (SFC).

Ideas and Solutions

➢ Manage the parks to protect the core conservation assets with tourism managed to provide support to this objective.
➢ Increase overall government funding for the National Park system; revenues generated from entrance fees should be used to manage, maintain and upgrade the national parks
➢ Have a booking engine to enable local tour operators and the general public to book accommodation online
➢ Conduct a review of national parks and their tourism potential; invest on priority parks; have a proper market-based feasibility studies before developing new park infrastructure (not all parks are suitable for tourism; not all parks require the same tourism infrastructure)
➢ Explore conservation financing options and new ways to generate revenue using the user-pay principle (provided this revenue can be directed to park management and supporting conservation).
➢ Consider creating a new agency independent of the Forest Department/Sarawak Forestry Corporation; this agency will then act as the State’s conservation arm and take responsibility for the management of national parks, nature reserves and wildlife sanctuaries
➢ Consider outsourcing tourism services and activities – leaving conservation management the responsibility of the parks authorities
➢ Better maintenance to regularly clear up refuse and rubbish in the Parks
➢ Involve Park wardens in a more meaningful way with regards to the management of the park
➢ Increase enforcement to prevent illegal hunting and logging.

Who Should Take The Lead

➢ Existing government agencies (e.g. Forest Department, SFC, etc.), in consultation with industry stakeholders.
➢ State Financial Secretary to examine revenue, funding and conservation financing options.

2.9 Events

Challenges

➢ Lack of brand awareness.
➢ Need to improve the promotion of Sarawak’s major public events.
➢ Need to broaden the mix of events to address changing trends.

Ideas and Solutions

➢ Create more sporting (cycling, golf, extreme sports, etc.) and lifestyle events (film and music festivals).
➢ Develop a signature event.
➢ Create (or be consistent with) a brand for Sarawak (refer to Branding / Marketing above).
➢ Create an umbrella group to promote events.
➢ Seek more sponsors and investors for events.
➢ Broaden number of organisations beyond government and universities willing to host business events.

Who Should Take The Lead

➢ A partnership between government and private stakeholders.
2.10 Transport

Challenges

➢ Limited international air connectivity.
➢ Overcrowding and overloading of express boats.
➢ Poor maintenance of public transport; aging bus fleet and lack of information (maps of bus routes).
➢ Poor road conditions, especially on the Pan Borneo Highway.

Ideas and Solutions

➢ Have regular and better road repairs and maintenance.
➢ Produce a user-friendly city bus map.
➢ Improve public transport in Kuching; conduct a study on how to ease traffic congestion in Kuching; consider viability of a mass transit system or efficient airport link for Kuching.

Who Should Take The Lead

➢ Relevant government agencies (Land Public Transport Commission (SPAD), MoT, etc.) in consultation with private sector transport operators.

2.11 Collaboration

Challenges

➢ Need to break down silos between different organizations.
➢ Difficulty in getting the right people together at the right time.

Ideas and Solutions

➢ Regular meetings between decision makers on an informal and formal basis
➢ Set up ad-hoc groupings when required to address pressing issues.
➢ Close communication (via newsletters, website, etc.)

Who Should Take The Lead

➢ Existing government agencies and private sector industry associations.
2.12 Concluding Remarks

Many of the issues and challenges highlighted in the Group Discussions as well as in the Chief Minister’s address relate to five core areas:

1. **Collaboration and Smart Partnerships** - Participants made it clear that the private sector and government and its agencies need to communicate and to collaborate on major issues affecting the tourism industry. This has to be done on a regular basis, both formally and informally. There should be a Forum on an annual basis to track progress on the issues and challenges identified.

2. **Heritage and Conservation** - We have to conserve and protect our major tourism assets and products both tangible and intangible: heritage buildings, material culture, iconic wildlife, forests and national parks. Maintenance of existing facilities and tourism products should be a top priority.

3. **Branding and Marketing** - There is a need to develop a strong and consistent brand for Sarawak as a destination; the traditional means of marketing has to make way for new ways of reaching new and changing markets.

4. **Re-thinking the Institutional Framework and Policies** - Times have changed and some of our regulations and licensing regimes are dated and may no longer be relevant in today’s tourism marketplace. Previously, some agencies played a small role in tourism but are now major players. The State government owns the majority of Sarawak’s primary tourism attractions (national parks, museums, heritage buildings) and some consideration has to be made to meet global expectations.

5. **Strategic Planning** - Better and more relevant market data is essential for charting our progress; proper feasibility assessments would be useful before we embark on building new facilities and attractions. Also beneficial would be to create a think-tank comprising a pool of professional and experienced tourism stakeholders to map out strategies and options for future business development. It is acknowledged that there are many business segments other than the leisure sector, which contribute to tourism receipts. These include the business and conference sector as well as entertainment, food, and shopping outlets.
3 TEN BIG IDEAS

Initially, Yeoh Siew Hoon posted 10 Big Ideas, which could be implementable and were meant to stimulate and focus thinking in that direction. From the group discussions and feedback, we have identified 10 implementable tasks.

1. **Establish a heritage body** - To identify all examples of heritage, tangible and intangible, for support and preservation, leading to a management plan to gazette and to allow other actions to be taken for heritage preservation, including the use of UNESCO guidelines for the preservation and conservation of heritage buildings and training of heritage guides.

2. **A review and audit of National Parks** - This should be a joint task force (private and public sector) to look into present Parks attractions, assets, management, funding, accommodation (if applicable), and the maintenance of facilities, conservation, trails and other parks services.

3. **One stop online booking system development** - To be developed for the National Parks accommodation.

4. **Rejuvenate Bako National Park** - Through increased investment and increased focus on conservation values. This also requires the necessary repairs and maintenance work, clearing of refuse and to improve on the quality of food and service at the park canteen.

5. **Establish a Branding and Marketing Task Force** - That would analyse market mix, identify marketing opportunities, establish a stronger web presence and to allocate appropriate resources.

6. **A Licensing of accommodation providers** - That would review current regulations and legislation and make recommendations for improvements.

7. **A thorough review of tour guide licensing** - There is a need to rationalize the current guide licensing system that does not serve the industry well; the cost and length of training has to be re-examined, and a more realistic entry level is required and the syllabuses need to be reviewed. Guides with lapsed licenses should be allowed to renew their licenses without having to go through the whole syllabus again.

8. **An Events and Festivals Body** - That would oversee the creation of new events, better promotion of current events, including GLC’s role in events management; this body will identify key events and festivals and consolidate the events calendar.

9. **A “Gen Y” project** - that would look into street art, create work opportunities for the younger generation, and help to create “champions and ambassadors” as well as to promote tourism as a career choice.

10. **To establish a link** - to and from Kuching International Airport to Kuching city, possibly connecting up with Kuching Sentral Bus Terminal.