

“Natural Environment vs. Creating Tourist Product in Brunei”

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Abstract

This study characterizes the natural environment in the context of generating tourist product in Brunei. The description of Brunei's location is presented as an advantage that determines the tourist product. The elements of tourist product-place described here include rainforests and locations related to extraction of crude oil. In the second part of the study tourism space is classified and the optimal conditions for creating and development of tourist product are indicated.

Key words: natural environment, tourist product-place, Brunei, Southeast Asia

Introduction

Brunei is one of the smallest countries by area (5800 km²), however, despite its size, it is an attractive place for tourism. It features, among others, natural environment that includes natural resources (crude oil and natural gas) discovered in its rainforests. Since the natural resources are slowly depleting, tourism is becoming a pertinent opportunity that could help to overcome Brunei's economic monoculture. Based on the solutions applied in the United Arab Emirates in the Persian Gulf, Brunei could be turned into an important tourist destination, but it requires indicating the correlation between the natural environment and the development of the tourist product.

The Area of Study

Brunei is a country located in Southeast Asia located in the Northwest part of the Borneo Island. Its current territory takes up a very small area (only 5800 km²) and is a humble remnant of the country that had existed as an Islamic Sultanate since the 15th century. At that time, the entire Borneo Island and the southern part of Philippines belonged to Brunei.

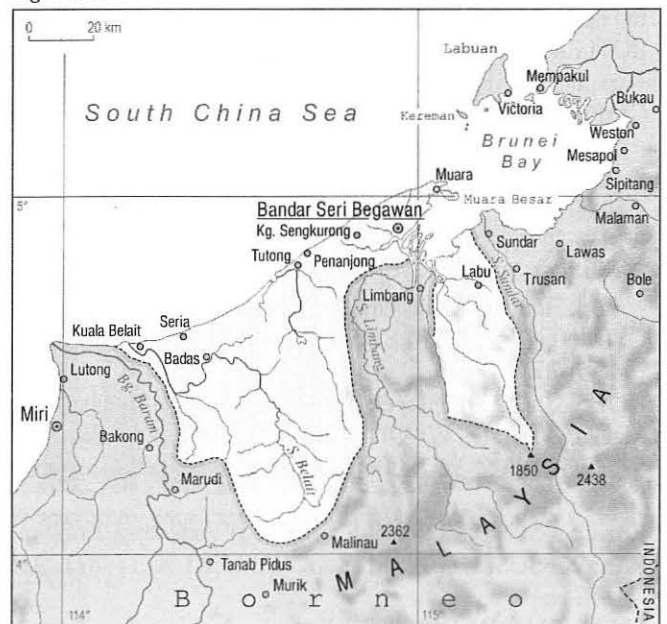
Muhammad Shah, the first sultan of Brunei, reigned from 1405 to 1515. The current sultan is the 29th ruler from the Bolkiah dynasty that has been in power in this area for over 600 years. It is the longest ruling dynasty in history. Contemporary Brunei has gained its independence as a constitutional monarchy in 1984, and its head of state is sultan Hassanal Bolkiah who has held this position since 1967. At the end of the 20th century his assets had been estimated at 40 billion USD. On account of this figure, the sultan is considered one of the richest people in the world.

Brunei borders Sarawak, a province that belongs to Malaysia. In 1890 Sarawak included port Limbang (see fig. 1) and was administered by the British, who divided Brunei. Since then the country has consisted of two separate parts. Currently, the sultanate is divided administratively into four districts: Belait,

Temburong, Tutong, Brunei Muara, with the capital in Bandar Seri Begawan.

In 2006, Brunei had population of 383 thousand, of which 73% lived in cities located mostly on the coast. The Malays are the dominating ethnic group (67%) followed by the Chinese (15%). The other ethnic groups include Hindus and Dayaks.

Fig. 1 Brunei



Source: adapted from the International World Map 1:2 500 000

Tourist Product

According to travelers, service providers, and the researchers who study tourism, tourist product has various definitions. Because tourists see tourist product in the entirety of their experience, from the moment they leave the house until the return, one should understand that tourist product includes aspects of

their experience as well as the facilities, devices and services that they use. This viewpoint on tourist product is *stricte largo* in agreement with S. Medlik's (1995) definition.

A tourist product could be a service, party, place, trail, event, or object. Tourist product-place is the object of interest in this article. It is a particular geographically determined set of elements divided according to their localization (Kaczmarek J., Stasiak A., Włodarczyk B., 2002). In the case of Brunei, the subject of study are compound products comprised of various elementary products.

One example of a compound tourist product is a regional tourist product. It is considered a compound product, because it consists of various products offered by entities operating in a given region including features and services. These products are complementary (Pawlusiński R., 2007). The subject for consideration is not to point out the diverse approaches to definitions, but to describe the tourist product in Brunei taking into account varied natural environment in a small area. The purpose of the study is to indicate the correlation between the natural environment and creating tourist products in the area.

The correlation between tourism and the natural environment is co-dependent. On one hand, the environment creates circumstances that allow fulfilling many leisure needs and it attracts tourists. On the other hand, only a high quality of this environment guarantees full satisfaction from the trip (Mika M., 2007).

In the case of Brunei, the natural environment continues to create the conditions that fulfill many needs. However, because of its size and the presence of natural resources (crude oil and natural gas), these needs weren't the focus all the way through the end of the 20th century and, therefore, tourist activity was limited. On the other hand, its growth in the first decade of the 21st century is related to the need for a new platform to continue developing the country due to diminishing non-renewable natural resources. There are many opportunities for developing tourism industry, however, they require clearly defined tourist products.

Brunei's Location as an Aspect Defining the Tourist Product

Brunei is located on the Borneo Island, which is the third largest island on Earth (behind Greenland and New Guinea). Brunei is quite small, it is located in the northeast part of Borneo, and it has extensive access to waters surrounding the island. The sultanate is located on the south coast of the South China Sea with about 160km of coastline.

Its location on an island in the tropical rainforest climate could seem like a serious problem limiting one's ability to discover this country. However, in the world of globalization, ever fewer areas remain in isolation, which is an idea sometimes defined ambiguously as a process, and sometimes as the state of being restricted, secluded, and remotely located.

Geographic isolation (spatial) results from natural restrictions, for example, location on an island. But currently, geographic restrictions are diminishing, as in the case of Brunei, a socio-economically highly developed country. This results

from the fact that the effectiveness of a geographic barrier is inversely proportional to the technical advances available in the area.

The high level of technological advancement in a small country and its unique on a world scale natural attractions suggest the conclusion that Brunei's location should be considered an advantage that shapes the tourist product. The limited space, which allows to swiftly explore this corner of the Borneo Island, and the highest quality services comprise a tourist product directed at a specific group of travelers.

This country could be treated as a separate travel destination. However, because tourists do not have a sufficient knowledge about it, and because of its size, they spend there on average only a few days as a part of a longer trip to another destination.

This country could become an important destination during longer trips to Southeast Asia, especially to Brunei's neighbor, Malaysia. It could also be equally enticing for travelers visiting Singapore, or those vacationing on the beaches of the nearby Indonesian Island of Bali.

Tourist agents in Brunei believe that treating Brunei as a planned stopover between Europe and Australia & Oceania would be equally realistic. The rapid development of *Royal Brunei*, a national airline, which has received many awards for the quality of its service, creates an opportunity to reach Brunei from many countries. *Royal Brunei* operates non-stop flights to many cities such as Perth in Australia, Auckland in New Zealand, Dubai in the United Arab Emirates, London in Great Britain, and many other cities in Southeast Asia. Marketing the tourist product could become important in enticing tourists to visit Brunei for at least a few days on their way to Australia.

Due to globalization, the obstacles that used to hinder accessibility even for willing tourists, such as the sultanate's size and its location on Borneo Island, continue to become a smaller barrier for tourists visiting Brunei.

In order to formulate conclusions regarding the correlation between the natural attributes and creating a tourist product, it is necessary to characterize the natural environment in Brunei. The natural environment is an element of tourism space in that country.

Natural Environment in Brunei as an Element Creating Tourist Product

Tourist attractions that are strictly related to the main purpose of travel are crucial for tourist product. Most importantly, they significantly influence the arrangement of other elements that form this product.

From the point of view of topography, coastal plains cover the main part of Brunei's territory and they tend to develop swamps. The Tamabo forelands are located in the south and the Tamabo's highest peak, Pagon, measures 1850m above the sea level. Brunei is located in the equatorial climate, which is exceptionally humid with annual precipitation of up to 4000mm inland.

One could expect that developed economy, especially one based on the petroleum industry, would destroy its natural environment. But Brunei's inhabitants were able to preserve large

areas of forests. At the beginning of the 21st century around 70% of the country was covered with rainforests. Forest indicator is high compared to other areas, especially that in the second half of the 20th century significant areas of forests were cut down in the Malaysian and Indonesian parts of the Borneo Island. The coast is covered with many mangrove forests accessible to tourists. On the Selirong Island in the Brunei Bay, the forestry department decided to put walking trails in the mangrove forests, which allows tourists to explore the biodiversity of mangrove forests. In many areas the water canals in the mangrove forests are used as boat trails.

A National Temburong Park was established in the Tamaro forelands in eastern Brunei. Here tourists have the opportunity to explore the biodiversity of the rainforests under the watchful eye of highly qualified guides. Many theme trails were created in order to allow observing nature in the rainforests from different points of view. Besides traditional trails, several metal constructions were erected creating corridors through treetops (*Visit Brunei – A Kingdom of Unexpected Treasures – map, 2007*).

Tasek Merimbun Park in the Tutong district is another natural tourist attraction. It is included in the natural heritage list from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) where Brunei is also a member. This park is located on the largest lake in the country. Tasek Merimbun is an ideal place for observing flora and fauna, such as water birds, in their natural environment. This park is meant as a safe haven for wild animals; besides serving as a tourist attraction, it is also a site for scientific research.

Kampong Ayer – a Tourist Attraction

Kampong Ayer is one of the most compelling places that comprise the tourist product in Brunei. It is commonly called a water city and it consists of a group of neighborhoods with rural functions preserved, but is administratively included in the capitol of Brunei – Bandar Seri Begawan.

Venice is the first thing that comes to mind when one thinks of a city on water. It is also an inspiration to the creators of tourist products in areas with similar characteristics, hence the term Venice of the North is used for many European cities such as Amsterdam, Saint Petersburg, and Stockholm. The term Venice of the East can also be found in Asia, for example, Indian Udajpur that captivated the famous fairytale writers, brothers Grimm. Antonio Pigafetta, a 15th century born Venetian cartographer and traveler who also sailed around the world with F. Magellan, was the first to mention the similarity between Kampong Ayer and the European Venice in his works (*Explore Brunei, 2006*). He called it Venice of the East and it seems this name is still fully justified.

Kampong Ayer is located in the lower part of the river Brunei, about 14km from its mouth at the Brunei Bay in the South China Sea. It would be difficult to justify its location by limited living space on the land part of the Borneo Island, especially that the neighborhoods on the water used to be much larger than they are now. The establishment and development of Kampong Ayer is probably the result of the local inhabitants' attachment to water and its function, and it occurred long before oil and gas reservoirs were discovered in Brunei.

Currently, the population of Kampong Ayer is 30 thousand people (about 10% of the total Brunei's population) who live in twenty-eight villages over some 8km. This settlement is an easily accessible tourist attraction, and due to the well-developed water transport and relatively low costs, many tourists decide to visit Kampong Ayer.

Water taxis, or *tambang*, allow tourists to travel the water streets along buildings on piles submerged in water, via a motorboat. The entire area consists of over 4200 elements such as houses, stores, restaurants, gas stations, and even a school and a hospital. Individual parts of Kampong Ayer are clusters of buildings connected by wooden bridges (or *jembatans*) of over 30km in length (*Brunei Darussalam Business Guide, 2008*). Building construction in Kampong Ayer changes as technology develops, but the technology here is adjusted to the local conditions as the climate includes cycles of monsoon circulation.

Seeing life in these houses on piles up close could be very appealing for tourists. Primitive technology from the past is visible in some buildings; the citizens of Brunei are not proud of this part of Kampong Ayer. Here, buildings bring back the memory of the former function this area served (fishing, trading). To this day, competently managed business in this water environment continues to bring profits to the citizens of the city. Aquaculture is a trademark of this city and could be of interest to tourists. Modernity and tradition are interlaced here – primitively looking buildings have access to electricity, hot water, and the Internet.

Buildings destroyed by fire visible in Kampong Ayer are one factor that disturbs life in Kampong Ayer and reduces the attractiveness of this area from the point of view of developing tourism. The presence of water everywhere does not protect Kampong Ayer from fires that occur once every few years.

However, one factor that adds value to this city is the unusual hospitality of its citizens, who are open-minded toward people of different culture or religion. Often a trip through the water canals ends with a visit to homes of the representatives of the local society. This element is an additional attraction that is difficult to find in offers sold by travel agents.

Brunei seems also an ideal destination for tourists who do not expect to get to know the lifestyle of the local people, but rather look only for a wide range of opportunities to rest in the vicinity of water. Utilized sections of the coast with sandy beaches that offer tourists a wide variety of attractions, such as water sports, can be found in various districts.

Crude Oil as an Element of Tourist Product-Place

In the past, discovering crude oil reservoirs was an important factor deciding about the population distribution on Earth. Currently, having access to ample reservoirs could become one of the elements that generates tourist product.

The year 1931 marks a growth period in Brunei with the commencement of crude oil reservoir exploitation. The reservoirs were discovered two years earlier but were not capitalized on at that time due to the world wide economic crisis. But toward the end of the 1970s Brunei was extracting its record amount of petroleum (240 thousand barrels a day in 1979). In the first decade of the 21st century its daily extraction does

not exceed 200 thousand barrels a day. Due to a relatively low internal need for oil, this amount allows for a significant export of these reserves. Around half is exported to Japan, but also the United States and the ASEAN member countries are important consumers (*Brunei Darussalam Business Guide*, 2008).

There is a shortage of crude oil, which is predicted to run out in 2015. Brunei plans to exploit other reservoirs discovered under the sea, but at the same time Brunei could go through economic makeover by investing in tourism. Brunei could become an important tourist destination in Southeast Asia, as seen in the United Arab Emirates on the Persian Gulf.

Brunei could use petrodollars to create tourist products out of the elements of natural environment that are unrelated to crude oil extraction, although this industry also served as an inspiration to those creating tourist products.

There are several important tourist attractions in the Belait province near Seria, where oil extraction began in 1931. These attractions could be of interest not only for foreign, but also for local tourists. *Oil & Gas Discovery Centre* serves as a museum and educational center and is located in this area. The center sports exhibits and state of the art multimedia boards that show how oil and gas reservoirs were discovered and exploited in Brunei, and how oil and gas are extracted and refined. A visit to the center is an important educational and investigative element especially for youth taking part in a school trip. Children and students can enter the center free of charge.

Another tourist attraction that can be included in tourist product based on crude oil extraction is a monument commemorating the billionth barrel of petrol. The millionth barrel was extracted in Brunei in 1991. The monument in the shape of an arch is located south of Seria. In addition to the monument and the museum, tourists can see nearby operating pump jacks and wells.

Finally, another tourist attraction that the author of this article experienced is an excursion to places where crude oil is still being extracted. It is possible to observe operating wells in the town of Seria and beneath the South China Sea, since these extraction centers are located near the shore or relatively close under water.

Natural Environment in Various Phases of its Lifecycle in Different Locations of Tourist Interest

When generating tourist product-place, especially when it is a unique natural biologically diverse area, it is essential to understand the correlation between the natural environment and the tourist product in different stages of its existence. It is essential especially in the context of the two-way interaction between these aspects. B. Włodarczyk (1999) presented the detailed lifecycle of a tourism space from its initial phase to the final phase of its collapse. According to this author, tourist product passes through the discovery phase (phase I), introduction (II), development (III), strengthening (IV) and the final phase where he indicates regeneration, stagnation, and collapse (V).

The bidirectional interaction between the natural environment and the tourist product varies in each phase. In the discovery phase, the natural environment influences the tourist

product while the product does not have a significant effect on the environment. The influence of the natural environment on tourist product is described as stimulating (in the introduction phase), encouraging (in the phase of development and strengthening), co-dependent (in the phase of regeneration) and limiting (in the phase of stagnation and collapse). The influence of the tourist product on the natural environment changes from insignificant to neutral, significant, and finally harmful and degenerating.

In the case of Brunei, where the natural environment is an important element in creating tourist product, the negative influence on the environment could help to retain its biodiversity.

During the phase of developing a tourism center, destroying or contaminating the swamps with wastewater or covering lagoons in order to obtain ground for infrastructure seriously interferes with the coastal ecosystems.

Another negative affect of tourism in seaside areas is the destruction of dunes, which serve as a natural protective barrier. The negative influence here is the result of developing the infrastructure or simply because tourists trample the flora. Due to its isolated location on an island, Brunei has also limited natural resources and supplies such as drinking water.

Characterization of Brunei's Tourism Space

Tourist product-place contributes to creating various types of tourism space. It could have a positive, neutral, or negative (degenerating) effect.

The development cycle of tourist product-place is characteristic in the way that it is located in a particular geographic space (the so called tourism space) and because it is necessary to take into account social problems of the its inhabitants (Kaczmarek J., Stasiak A., Włodarczyk B., 2002).

Brunei is an interesting place for tourists who have unconventional lifestyles. Despite its small territory, the sultanate has areas suitable for a variety of tourist needs. S. Liszewski (1995) pointed out five types of subspaces of tourism space: exploration, penetration, assimilation, colonization, and urbanization.

In Brunei, due to the type of tourist activities and the degree it is shaped by geographic space, one could distinguish the following tourism subspaces: exploration, penetration, assimilation and colonization. There is a horizontal co-dependence between these subspaces in Brunei because these subspaces co-exist in this area.

Tourism exploration subspace is used by the tourist-explorer in harmony with the natural environment. Due to a relatively low tourist activity, tourists do not leave a permanent investment in the environment.

Tourism penetration subspace can be established due to the type of tourism activity in Brunei, relatively short-term visits preferred by tourists, and still underdeveloped tourism industry in areas valuable for their natural environment. An important goal for tourists visiting this part of Brunei is exploration.

Tourism assimilation subspace is the type of activity, where tourists visit local settlements and stay with the locals in Kampong Ayer and have direct contact with the local society. In the case of this type of interaction, it is not necessary to create

a new infrastructure for tourism purposes. As a result, it is the type of subspace where tourism activity primarily adjusts to the local environment.

Tourism colonization subspace is also present in this area. Due to its intensity, this subspace is aggressive in its influence on the area and has already caused a transformation of the original environment (Pantai Seri Kenangan Beach).

Tourism urbanization subspace is described as a place, where city inhabitants move to an area they formerly used as a tourist destination, and it cannot be distinguished here due to the type of tourism activity in Brunei in its limited total area.

Summary

The natural environment allows people to fulfill many of their needs. It should also be pointed out that the natural environment in Brunei is quite varied over a relatively small area.

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Diminishing non-renewable natural resources have left the sultanate's government with a task of changing the country's economic structure. Tourism has become an important opportunity to overcome its economic monoculture. One of the possible solutions is investing in tourism and making Brunei an important tourist destination, as seen in the United Arab Emirates in the Persian Gulf.

An opportunity arises to develop the tourism industry, but it involves defining tourist products. „New space“ for tourist activities is limited (swamps, forests or areas with economic infrastructure).

It would be useful to form a synergy in order to create tourist product. An optimal solution would involve engaging various institutions such as government agencies, tourist and social organizations, the academia, the media, the industry and the residents of Brunei.