

Covid-19: Impacts on Tourism in Bako National Park and Survival Strategies of Local Tourism Operators

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused havoc in every field globally, including the second highest industry, tourism. This paper focuses on the impacts resulting from the pandemic on tourism activities in Bako National Park and the local communities who are dependent on this natural attraction as an important source of income. Using the case study methodology, in-depth interviews were conducted with six tourism operators in Bako National Park to gauge how the pandemic impacted the tourism activities socially, economically, and environmentally. This paper unpacks how they coped with the associated challenges to stay afloat while waiting for the border to fully reopen. It is found that different types of tourism operators employ different survival strategies depending on the resources they have. While certain strategies could offset the immediate effects of the lockdown, some are meant for survival in the future.

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Contribution/Originality: This study takes a different direction and contributes to the existing literature by focusing on the survival strategies employed by individuals during the pandemic.

1. Introduction

Malaysia and the rest of the world were shaken due to the spreading of the Covid-19 virus, which has been affecting every aspect of human life as it spreads through human contacts. The coronavirus disease 2019, or in its abbreviated form, Covid-19, was first detected in a market in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 and is believed to be originated from bats ([Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020](#)). Since then, everything became chaotic due to this virus' lethal nature that may lead to death and many countries were in lockdown. Due to the global pandemic and measures taken to curb the spreading of the virus, one of the first industries to be severely affected was tourism as it directly and indirectly connected to other industries and, may be one of the last industries to

recover (BERNAMA, 2020b; Pololikashvili & Gurria, 2020). This can be seen through the number of tourists arrivals recorded on [Tourism Malaysia \(2021\)](#) website, where the number of tourists arrivals went down from 26.1 million in 2019 to 4.3 million in 2020. With this drastic drop in the statistic, it is evident that all tourism activities, including attractions like national parks, were affected. With travel restrictions, especially international travels imposed by the government, they were trying to promote domestic tourism (BERNAMA, 2020b; BERNAMA, 2020c; TTR WEEKLY, 2020), but with the situation where the cases were increasing daily, people feared to travel anywhere outside of their residences.

Based on a timeline developed by [Siti Farhana \(2020\)](#), Covid-19 was first detected in Wuhan, China as a 'viral pneumonia' and a public message through media statement was published on 31st December 2019. Then, on 9th January 2020, the [World Health Organisation \(WHO\)](#) has reported that the Chinese authorities have identified that the epidemic is caused by a novel coronavirus. [Kandola \(2020\)](#) stated that coronavirus diseases are common in animals and humans but rarely spread from animals to humans. SARS disease that spread throughout 2002 and 2003 is also a type of coronavirus resulting from severe acute respiratory syndrome virus strain (SARS-CoV). As for Covid-19, it is from a new strain called severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). Covid-19 has a lethal nature that can cause symptoms to become severe, which may lead to death, especially to those who have higher risks; older adults who have chronic health conditions. Moreover, it is highly contagious if measures to prevent it are not taken. WHO then declared that Covid-19 is a pandemic as the number of Covid-19 cases increases daily and globally. As for Malaysia, the first case detected was when three out of eight Malaysian Chinese who were in close contact with an infected person in Singapore were confirmed to be infected. They are then quarantine at Sungai Buloh Hospital, Selangor. After the number of cases in Malaysia soared up to thousands, Malaysia's Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin at that time announced that the government will impose Movement Control Order (MCO) period starting 18th March 2020 on 16th March 2020 ([BERNAMA, 2020a](#)). Since then, the government has implemented several different types of measures: MCO, recovery MCO and conditional MCO to control and lessen the spreading of Covid-19 ([Flanders Investment & Trade, 2021](#)). Due to prohibitions of MCOs, many travel and tourism agencies had to freeze their activities, and all tourism centres had to stop operating. This includes Bako National Park. As the number of tourist arrivals in Malaysia decreases, the number of visitors in Bako National Park showed a major decline from 63,796 in 2018 to 60,347 in 2019 and lastly, 12,337 in 2020 ([Sarawak Forestry Corporation, 2020a](#); [Sarawak Forestry Corporation, 2020b](#)). This is because international borders were still close since the first MCO and the national park had to stop operating a few times due to the restrictions instructed by the government. Only nearby locals were able to visit the park when it was open.

It is worth noting that the rapid growth of tourism in the past years has brought about many global environmental issues. Some of them are increased in pollution, depletion of natural resources, overcrowding, and climate changes such as depletion of ozone layers due to greenhouse gas emissions ([Camarda & Grassini, 2003](#); [The World Counts, 2021](#)). With the Covid-19 pandemic, which caused significant tourism activities to be paused, the world of tourism has a golden opportunity to lessen or to even flip the environmental issues into becoming more sustainable. Restarting tourism, United Nation World Tourism Organisation (WTO) ([WTO, 2020](#)) has called for a responsible recovery due to Covid-19 in the tourism field. The core of this recovery will be more towards sustainability in order to fortify the tourism field's resiliency as the current pandemic has