

Retaining Access to Key Tourist Assets for Local Residents: A Case of Mount Kinabalu

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Abstract. Tourism development can occur to the detriment of real or perceived access to major tourist destinations by local residents. They can find access changed due to privatization of assets or imposition of restrictions on the permissible uses. Drawing upon this subset of tourism impact on the host community, this study analyzes the access by local residents to Mount Kinabalu in Sabah, Malaysian Borneo. Specifically, it examines the retention of access to the mountain for local Sabahans. Interviews with park management were conducted and questionnaires were distributed to local residents. The results show that the number of Sabahan climbers has always been significantly lower than other Malaysian and foreign climbers, despite the introduction of the Sabahan rate. Additionally, the actual number of Sabahan climbers is lower than the allocated quota potential. The paper proposes several recommendations that the park management can consider to ensure local Sabahans will have a fair and equal access to Mount Kinabalu.

1 Introduction

Change in access by local residents to major tourist areas (beaches, trails or natural resources) has occurred in several places. Local residents may be displaced by visitors or priced out of regular use. Change in access is attributable to several causes including privatization and imposition of restrictions on permissible uses. These issues are a specific subset of community impact of tourism and can be closely related to the local residents' overall satisfaction with tourism development [18]. This study looks at a specific case of this impact, analyzing the access by local residents to Mount Kinabalu in Sabah, Malaysian Borneo. Specifically, it examines the retention of access to Mount Kinabalu for local Sabahans. This objective is based upon one of the components, or indicators, of access suggested by WTO [18].

2 Backgrounds

2.1 Impact of Tourism

Extensive research has been conducted concerning the impact of tourism. A number of the earliest studies date back to the 1970s [10-11, 16, 19]. Ever since then, a plethora of studies have been conducted on the subject [13]. The impact of tourism is typically analyzed from four different perspectives namely economic, social, cultural and environmental [5]. One particular impact of

tourism on the host community is related to access by local residents to key tourist assets [18]. Tourism affects livelihoods by changing access [9]. Its development can occur to the detriment of real or perceived access by the local residents to principal tourist areas such as beaches, trails or natural resources [18]. Local residents may find access changed [18]. In some cases previously public areas are privatized. In others, restrictions on the legitimate uses (e.g. user fees, prohibition of certain activities such as hunting or fishing) are imposed [18]. ODI recognizes tourism's impact on local residents' access to natural resources or physical infrastructure as the most important concern [9].

It is imperative that those responsible for the planning of tourism work toward optimizing the welfare of local residents while keeping the costs of tourism development to a minimum [13]. Critical to the success and sustainability of the tourism industry is the support of destination communities for tourism [4, 13], or what is termed as a 'happy host' [14]. Local communities will usually withdraw their support for tourism if they perceive the costs of tourism outweigh the benefits, thereby jeopardizing the future success and development of the industry [6]. Profit-oriented tourism undertakings may be hindered or terminated by excessive negative resident reaction toward tourism development [17]. Therefore, tourism planners must take into account the views of local residents if the industry is to be sustainable in the long run [17].

2.2 Kinabalu Park, Mount Kinabalu and Privatization

Kinabalu Park is one of the prime attractions in Sabah, Malaysian Borneo. It was established in 1964 as the first State Park in Sabah to protect and preserve Mount Kinabalu and the diverse flora and fauna species that inhabit its 75,400-hectares [3]. In 2000, UNESCO designated Kinabalu Park a World Heritage Site for its exceptional biodiversity quality [12]. The main attraction of Kinabalu Park is the majestic Mount Kinabalu. At a towering height of 4101 meters (13,455 feet), it is the highest mountain between the Himalayas and the snow-capped mountains of New Guinea [20]. The Kadazandusun people, Sabah's largest ethnic community, believe Mount Kinabalu is a sacred place, being a resting place for the spirits of their ancestors [12, 21]. In 1998, Sabah Parks (SP hereafter) privatized the accommodation and catering facilities in Kinabalu Park to Sutera Sanctuary Lodges (SSL hereafter). The rationale behind this privatization is to increase the number of visitors and improve tourism facilities and services in Kinabalu Park to meet visitor expectations. The program was also introduced to provide job opportunities for the local communities in a tourism-related business. Furthermore, it was hoped that with the privatization, the administrative, manpower and financial responsibilities of SP would be lessened, thereby allowing it to focus on conservation efforts [1-2].

3 Methods

This study bases its objective and methods on the guidebook produced by the WTO [18]. To examine the retention of access to Mount Kinabalu for local Sabahans, statistics of Mount Kinabalu climbers from 2000 through 2013 were obtained from SP. An interview with SSL was also conducted to better understand the rationale behind the price increases. Additionally, a survey was conducted to assess local Sabahans' perception of the importance of climbing Mount Kinabalu and the expected percentage of Sabahan climbers. Using convenient sampling method, self-administered questionnaires were distributed in local villages, educational institutions and shopping malls.

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Profile of Respondents

Of the 300 questionnaires distributed, 263 questionnaires were returned. 14 incomplete questionnaires were excluded. Table 1 shows there were an almost equal number of male (49.2%) and female

(50.4%) respondents. Almost half of the respondents (49.2%) were aged between 20 and 30 years. All of the respondents had completed some level of education: high school or equivalent (28.6%), some college (30.2%) and a Bachelor's Degree (23.8%). The majority of them (81%) were native Sabahans, Kadazandusun. Almost all of the respondents (92.3%) had a source of income with almost half of them (47.8%) earning less than RM2000 per month and 34.4% are earning between RM2001 and RM5000 per month. Only 38.6% of the respondents had previously climbed Mount Kinabalu.

Table 1. Profile of Respondents (n = 249)

Items		%	Items		%
Gender	Male	49.2	Source of income	Yes	92.3
	Female	50.4		No	7.3
Age	< 20 years	5.6	Average monthly income	< RM1000	26.3
	20 – 30 years	49.2		RM1001 – RM2000	21.5
	31 - 40 years	27.4		RM2001 – RM3500	19.0
	41 - 50 years	12.5		RM3501 – RM5000	15.4
	> 51 years	5.2		RM5001 – RM7500	5.3
				RM7501 – RM10000	2.4
Highest level of education	High school or equivalent	28.6	> RM10000	2.8	
	Vocational or technical school	0.8	Have you climbed Mount Kinabalu?	Yes	38.6
	Some college	30.2		No	61.4
	Bachelor's Degree	23.8			
Ethnicity	Master's Degree	13.7			
	Doctoral Degree	2.8			
	Malay	12.9			
	Chinese	5.6			
	Indian	0.4			
	Native Sabahans	81.0			

4.2 Retaining Access to Mount Kinabalu for Local Sabahans

In 2007, SSL increased the cost of accommodations on Mount Kinabalu and other properties in Kinabalu Park. The cost of a dorm bed increased from RM30 to RM188 (meals included). That was an increase of about 500%. In 2009, the cost of the package was further increased to RM330 per person [8, 15]. Prior to privatization, climbers had an option to bring their own food, thereby saving some cost [8]. When asked about the rationale for increasing the accommodation prices, SSL representatives informed the researchers that prior to the price increases, there were complaints that the facilities on Mount Kinabalu were substandard. Acting upon those complaints, the private company decided to upgrade and renovate the facilities (e.g. bathrooms, beds, mattresses, insulation) in order to meet the demand of climbers and to establish Mount Kinabalu as a tourist destination that meets international standards. Additionally, five meals are now included, hence the price rise. Transportation of the cooking necessities up the mountain also adds to costs. SSL indicated the inclusion of meals in the accommodation price was for preservation purposes (i.e. to mitigate the problem of littering that occurred when climbers were given the option to bring their own food or cook on the mountain). While the cost has an impact on climber statistics, a full analysis of the effect of these cost increases is beyond the scope of current study.

As Figure 1 shows, since 2005 the number of foreign climbers has substantially exceeded the number of Malaysian climbers. Figure 2 indicates that the number of Sabahan climbers has always been significantly lower compared to the number of other Malaysian and foreign climbers. From January to August 2010, the numbers were particularly low (Figure 3), and a Sabahan rate was introduced in September 2010. The Sabahan rate, for local Sabahan residents, is significantly lower than the non-Sabahan rate, being only RM80 for accommodation and meals (excluding permit, insurance, porter and guide fee). It is offered on a 25-Sabahans-daily-quota basis.

The number of Sabahan climbers increased due to the introduction of the Sabahan rate. To translate the 25-Sabahan daily quota to a monthly expectation or quota potential, there would be at least 700 Sabahan climbers monthly (700 climbers for February; 750 climbers for months with 30 days; and 775 climbers for months with 31 days). However, as demonstrated in Figure 3, with an exception of several occasions (i.e. December 2010, December 2011 and November 2012), the actual number of Sabahan climbers has always been lower than the allocated quota potential. For instance, in January 2011, there were only 380 Sabahan climbers, instead of 775. This seems to be at odds with the frequent feedback provided by prospective Sabahan climbers that when they called SP to enquire about the availability of space allocated to Sabahan climbers, they were informed that the quota was already full and therefore they were advised to contact SSL regarding the general Malaysian climbing packages or to wait for the next available space which usually was 6 months ahead of time.

As shown in Figure 4, the majority of respondents (68.6%) would like Sabahan climbers to constitute at least 25 to 50% of the total number of climbers. However, Figure 3 shows that the present number of Sabahan climbers is quite a way from that "at least 25% Sabahan climbers" expectation. This is possibly due to the 25-Sabahan daily quota. Currently, the total number of Mount Kinabalu climbers per day is limited to 192 based upon the total number of beds (SSL and another private company called Mountain Torq control 146 beds and 46 beds respectively). It appears something needs to be done to facilitate meeting the monthly expectation, not just the daily quota. However, even if the quota is met, the 25-Sabahan daily quota represents only 17.12% of the total space controlled by SSL. Unless the quota is raised, the percentage of Sabahan climbers will always remain less than a quarter. Figure 4 shows that almost all of the respondents (95.2%) think it is important for local Sabahans to climb Mount Kinabalu at least once in their lifetime for such reasons (based on the additional comments shared by many of the respondents) as Mount Kinabalu being part of Sabahan heritage, Mount Kinabalu being a proud landmark of Sabah thus it would be an honor for local Sabahans to climb it, it would be a shame if local Sabahans do not climb a globally known mountain in their own backyard, to be able to share the climbing experience with future climbers especially visitors, and to enjoy and appreciate the beauty of Mount Kinabalu. For the very few (4.4%) who think it is not important for local Sabahans to climb the mountain, they state that it really depends on one's financial capability and physical fitness/health condition.

In our viewpoint, Mount Kinabalu seems to be on the verge of being dominated by climbers other than local Sabahans. The statistics seem to forewarn us that Sabahans may be at the risk of losing a fair and equal access to Mount Kinabalu. A portion of the higher profit from non-Sabahan climbers can be utilized for projects or activities that would benefit everyone such as conservation, continuous improvement of facilities, provision of new facilities or funding of community-based projects. Nonetheless, the present number of Sabahan climbers seems to fall short of the total quota potential. Something needs to be done. One direct solution would be to implement a monthly quota of 700 to 800 Sabahan climbers rather than the daily quota. This would give local Sabahans greater flexibility in planning. Another solution would be to provide and maintain information on the availability of quota space on the websites of SP and SSL. This would help prospective Sabahan climbers to better plan to utilize the available quota. These two solutions could be a good first step to getting more Sabahan climbers. In general, the total number of climbers of Mount Kinabalu is increasing from year to year. Once the current quota potential is fulfilled, perhaps the park management could consider increasing the monthly quota to at least 1000 Sabahan climbers in order to come as close to fulfilling most local Sabahans' at-least-25%-Sabahan-climbers expectation as possible. The local Sabahans might not be very happy and satisfied knowing the current number of Sabahan climbers is significantly lower than their expectations. Resentment and stress in the local communities can cause bad feelings toward visitors [7], and perhaps in the case of Mount Kinabalu, toward the park management as well. Critical to the success and sustainability of the tourism industry is the support of destination communities for tourism [4, 13] or what is termed as a 'happy host' [14]. It is crucial to ensure that the discrepancy between the actual number of Sabahan climbers and the total quota potential was/is/will be not due to some negligence meted out toward Sabahan climbers or preference for more-profitable climbers in the pursuit of a higher profit margin.

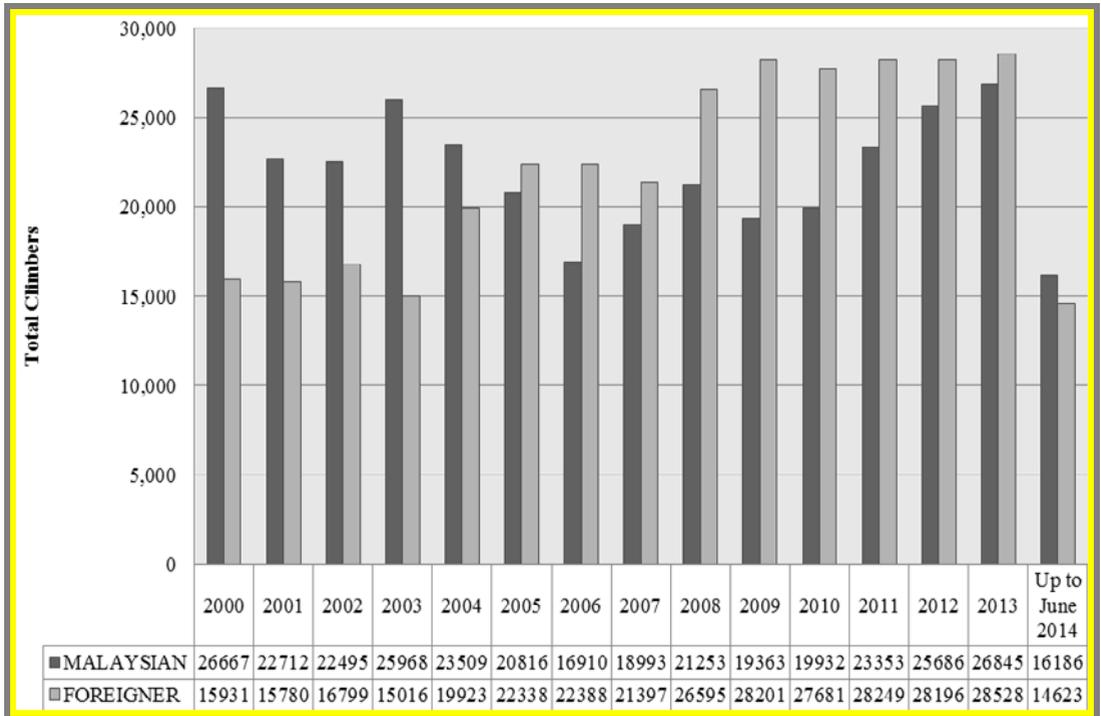


Figure 1. Annual Statistics of Mount Kinabalu climbers (Malaysian and Foreigner) from 2000 to June

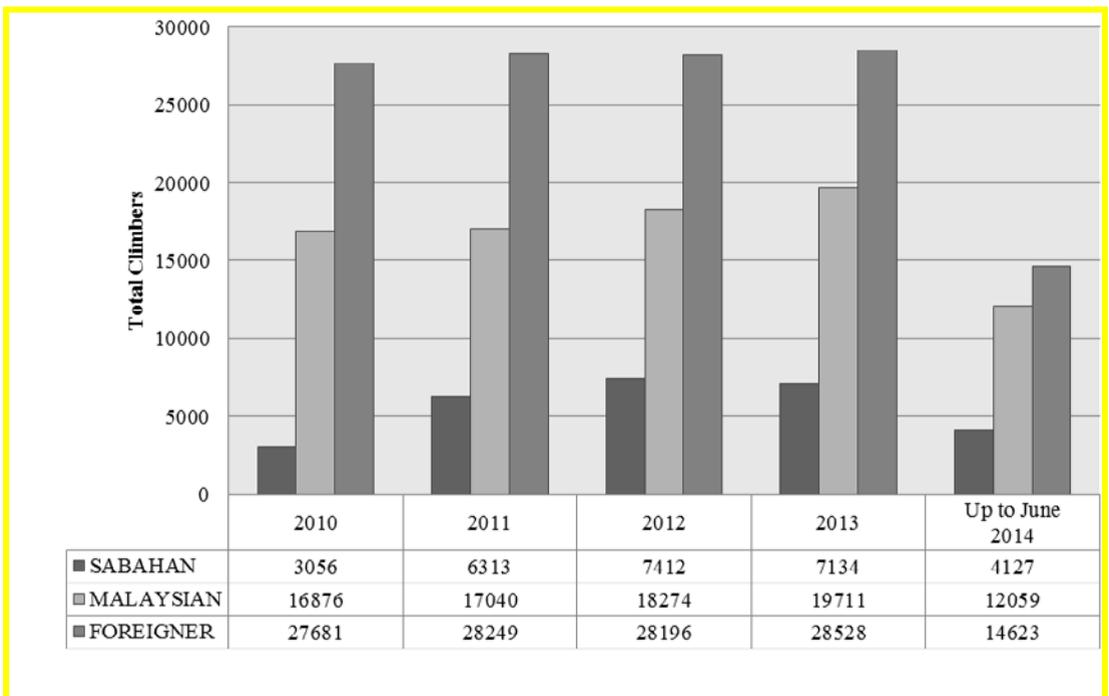


Figure 2. Annual Statistics of Mount Kinabalu Climbers (Sabahan, Malaysian and Foreigner) from 2010 to June 2014

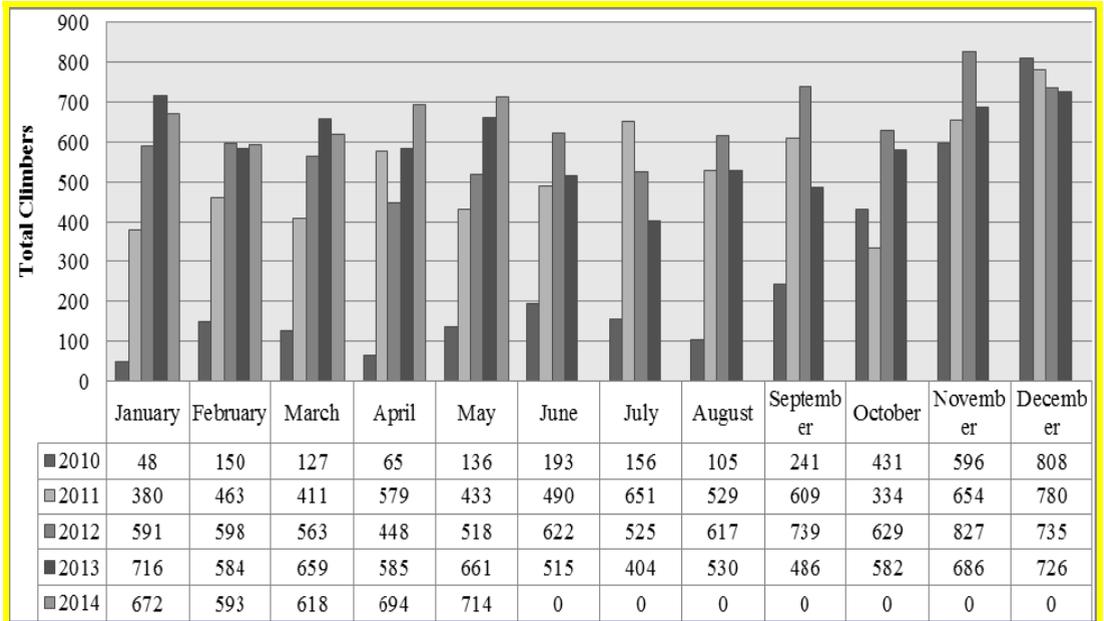


Figure 3. Monthly Statistics of Sabahan climbers from 2010 to June 2014

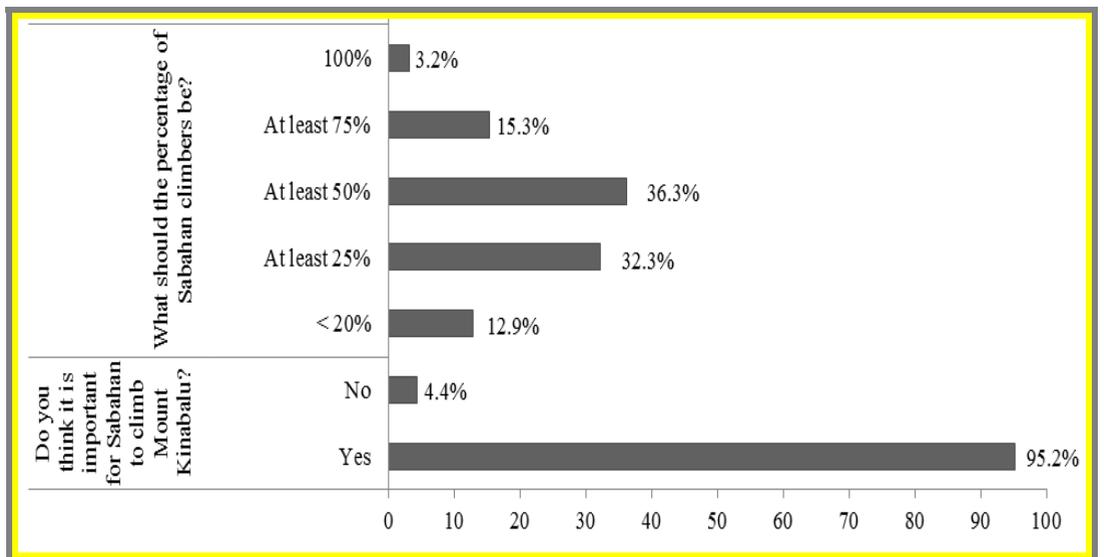


Figure 4. Respondents' perception of climbing cost, percentage and importance of Sabahans climbing Mount Kinabalu (n = 249)

5 Conclusion

Tourism development can affect the local residents' access to key tourist areas. In the case of Mount Kinabalu, it might be feared that local Sabahans are on the verge of losing a fair and equal access to Mount Kinabalu. The number of Sabahan climbers has always been significantly lower than other Malaysian and foreign climbers, despite the introduction of the Sabahan rate. The actual number of Sabahan climbers is also lower than the total quota potential. Overall visitor satisfaction is higher due to the improved quality of visitor facilities.

The Sabahan rate is affordable for most local Sabahans. However, it is simply poignant to discover that Sabahan climbers represent only a tiny slice of the Mount Kinabalu climber pie. It is distressing to imagine Mount Kinabalu being a predominantly international activity that excludes the very people that 'own' it. It is vital to keep in mind that native Sabahans consider themselves to be the guardians of the mountain, that the mountain is sacred being the resting place of their ancestral spirits. Mount Kinabalu is not a mere physical asset for most local Sabahans.

Thus, it is important to ensure that the cultural and spiritual connection between local Sabahans and Mount Kinabalu is respected and maintained. Perhaps the park management can consider establishing a monthly quota rather than the daily quota. This would give local Sabahans greater flexibility in planning. Another solution is to provide and maintain information on the availability of quota space on the websites of SP and SSL. This would help prospective Sabahan climbers to better plan to utilize the available quota.

Once the current quota potential is fulfilled, perhaps the park management can consider increasing the monthly quota to at least 1000 Sabahan climbers in order to come as close to fulfilling most local Sabahans' at-least-25%-Sabahan-climbers expectation as possible. The privatization program also needs to be continuously monitored to ensure the private operators stay in line with the main objective of privatization. It is important to make certain that local Sabahans have a fair and equal access to Mount Kinabalu to ensure the long-term sustainability of and overall local satisfaction with tourism development on Mount Kinabalu.

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