

## Research Paper

# Exploring Tour Operators' Perspectives on Responsible Tourism at Ecotourism Destination: Meaning, Motivation, and Practices

Jennifer Chan Kim Lian

*Borneo Tourism Research Centre, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Malaysia*

Fiffy Hanisdah Binti Saikim

*Institute for Tropical Biology and Conservation, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Malaysia*

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**Abstract:** The paper explores the meaning, motivation, and extent of Responsible Tourism Practices (RTPs) at Lower Kinabatangan; a premier ecotourism destination in Malaysia. Data were collected through 3 focus group interview sessions with 36 respondents consisting of tour operators, lodgers and homestay operators. Findings reveal that RTP is encapsulated in the sustainable tourism concept and related to the three sustainable pillars (environment, economic and social); and reflect less on responsible act and behaviour. Key themes that emerged include protection, conservation, and preservation; sustainability by minimising negative impacts on the environment, economy, and society; respecting rules and safety measures; creating jobs for locals and increasing awareness on local food, culture, and community; provision of quality tourism services; using solar power as an alternative energy source and educating staff. RTP strongly emphasises on the environment (including nature, and wildlife) and the sustainability of natural resources. Additionally, RT practices reduce negative impacts on the environment through conservation, preservation and protection. The social aspects of RT include collaboration with Sabah Wildlife Department, community support, control, and guidelines. Greater consideration is given to the environmental aspect, compared to the economic and social aspects; ethics, integrity, governance, and responsible behaviour are also not encompassed in RT. The paper provides an insightful understanding of the meaning and practices of RT from the perspective of tourism players and serves as useful baseline information to develop a manual for RTP. Further, the findings contribute to responsible tourism literature. The paper also suggests guiding principles for Economic, Social and Environmental Responsibility to make Lower Kinabatangan an ecotourism destination where wildlife and local people can co-exist with sustainable tourism businesses. Sound guidelines for RT are essential to ensure the sustainable development and growth of Lower Kinabatangan. Finally, more research and intervention programs are recommended to enhance RTPs for a balanced development.

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Correspondence: Jennifer Chan Kim Lian, Borneo Tourism Research Centre, Universiti Sabah Malaysia, Malaysia. Email : [jkimchan@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:jkimchan@yahoo.co.uk)

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## Introduction

Worldwide, tourism stakeholders at ecotourism destinations are increasingly concerned about mass tourism and its negative impacts. The negative impacts on the environment, natural resources, and wildlife affect the quality of tourism experiences and destination sustainability; and to a great extent, influence the economic and social aspects of the local community. Increasingly, responsible tourism (RT) is being recognised as a pathway towards sustainable tourism (UNEP, 2005a); and is capable of achieving sustainable development through tourism (Goodwin, 2012). It is widely associated with ecotourism, sustainable tourism, alternative tourism, green tourism, and community-based tourism; and considered an approach to sustainable tourism management (Tourism Department of the City of Cape Town, 2002) as it shares the same objectives as sustainable tourism. Thus, RT is an appropriate means to address unsustainable mass tourism, reduce the negative effects of tourism and hold tourism stakeholders accountable. Tourism stakeholders largely agree that responsible tourism practices (RTPs) must be implemented to enhance and maintain the quality of services (Budeanu, 2005). For instance, RT was declared as “tourism that creates better places for people to live in, and better places to visit” (Tourism Department of the City of Cape Town, 2009, p. 4); and as “tourism that maximizes the benefits to the local communities, minimizes negative social or environmental impacts, and helps local people conserve fragile cultures and habitats or species” (Centre of Responsible Travel, 2009, p. 17). Further, it improves “relationships with social and regulatory stakeholders, effective human resources management, better market standing, operational efficiencies and cost savings, along with other benefits” (Camilleri, 2016, p. 219).

RTP is recognised in sustainable tourism development research (Spenceley, 2010) and has gained attention from tourism researchers (Mihalic, 2016) with numerous studies carried out in different areas. For example, in small hotel practices (Musavengane, 2019), the impact of RT on tourism destination sustainability (Sariskumar & Bhavan, 2018), tourism destination development and quality of life at Pangkor Island (Hanafiah, Azman, Jamaluddin, & Aminuddin, 2016), stakeholder participation, environment, and sustainable tourism in tourism products (Ahmad,

Rashid, Yunus, Mahmood, & Shamsuddin, 2016; Aminu, Matori, Yusuf, & Ainol, 2013), RT indicators (Tay & Chan, 2014) and at UNESCO National Parks (Tay, Chan, Vogt, & Mohamed, 2016). Past studies have pointed out the importance of RTP in achieving tourism sustainability in other areas: its potential role in visitor loyalty in memorable wildlife experiences (Rathakrishnan et al., 2020); residents' perception towards RTP (Hanafiah et al., 2016) and tour operators' perspectives on RT at ecotourism destinations. This reinforces the need for more studies on RT, especially regarding natural tourism settings or ecotourism destinations.

Tour operators are a critical connection between tourism and destination and are responsible for RT, but have no partnerships with visitors, destinations, local communities or tourism industry suppliers. While previous research has shown the value of tour operators' participation in RT (Musavengane, 2019; Mensah & Blankson, 2014), the research and realisation of this kind of tourism growth is relatively limited.

RT creates awareness and support for conservation and local culture as well as generates economic benefits and opportunities for stakeholders (Chiu, Lee, & Chen, 2014). Smith (1990, p. 480) also stated that it is "a form of tourism which respects the host's natural, built and cultural environments and the interests of all parties concerned". Tour operators are mediators between supply and demand (Risteski, Kocevskia, & Arnaudov, 2012) and considered pertinent stakeholders with considerable influence on destination development. They could take a responsible approach towards their business and encourage greater responsibility and attention on sustainability and individual responsibility through communication, education, and training of tourists and local communities. Increasingly, RT is a powerful competitive advantage that tourism operators can capitalise on to offer unique and authentic tourism experiences. Despite the positive attitude towards RT, tourism operators are reluctant to invest in RTP due to cost, lack of government support (Mihalic, 2016) and absence of appropriate practices and guidelines (Hamid, Isa & Kiumarsi, 2020). Realising the importance of the participation of tour operators, this study explores the implementation of RTP at Lower Kinabatangan.

Lower Kinabatangan is a world-renowned ecotourism destination with various natural habitats and environmental resources that can offer superb eco-experiences (Chan & Baum, 2007). Hence, it is essential to protect, conserve and preserve its natural resources and pristine environment (Newsome, Rodger, Pearce, & Chan, 2017). Sustainability in terms of quality experiences and reduction of negative impacts is of great concern, thus RTP is crucial. There is a dearth of research work on RTP; especially empirical evidence on what tourism players believe RT to mean as well as the motivation and extent of RTP at Lower Kinabatangan. In this context, the present study posited the following research objectives.

## Research Objectives

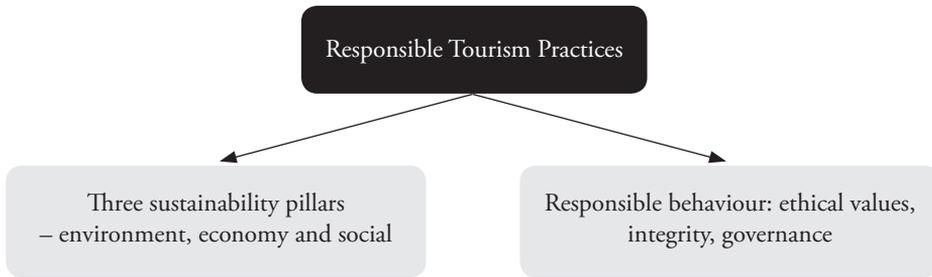
1. To explore the meaning of responsible tourism
2. To identify the motives of practicing responsible tourism
3. To describe responsible tourism practices in Lower Kinabatangan

## Review of Responsible Tourism and Practices

RT has been documented in literature since the early eighties (Smith, 1990; Cooper & Ozdil, 1992). Broadly, RT benefits sustainable tourism development as it curtails negative influences and generates greater economic advantages for the local community (Budeanu, 2005). It is a form of tourism that takes responsibility, responds and acts to address social, economic, and environmental issues that arise at the destination (Goodwin, Font, & Aldrigui, 2012). This implies that both tourism suppliers and consumers exhibit responsible behaviour and consumption; and a wider respect for the people, place, and environment (Leslie, 2012). Hence, RT requires all tourism stakeholders to be responsible and ensure sustainable tourism (Goodwin, 2014). However, researchers question who should be responsible for mitigating impacts (Miller, 2001; Sin, 2010).

RT is defined as: “tourism that promotes responsibility to the environment through its sustainable use; responsibility to involve local communities in the tourism industry; responsibility for the safety and security of visitors and responsible government, employees, employers, unions and local communities” (Government of South Africa Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, 1996, p.11). Meanwhile Spenceley et al. (2002, p.8) articulated that RT “is about providing better holiday experiences for guests and good business opportunities for tourism enterprises while enabling local communities to enjoy a better quality of life through increased socio-economic benefits and improved natural resource management”. On other hand, The Cape Town Declaration encouraged tourism enterprises and trade associations to adopt special responsible practices to “...work with others to take responsibility for achieving the economic, social, and environmental components of responsible and sustainable tourism” (Tourism Department of the City of Cape Town, 2002, p. 5).

RT consists of three sustainability pillars — environment, economics, and social — and encompasses responsible behaviour, ethical values, integrity and governance (Figure 1). More importantly, a multi-stakeholder process and holistic, well-defined guidelines to responsive management strategies should be accepted and implemented by all key stakeholders. The main driving forces in RT are changing personal ethics, individuals contributing to environmental and humanitarian initiatives and ethical or responsible consumption patterns.



**Figure 1.** Research conceptual framework

Sustainable ecotourism incorporates responsible use of natural resources for recreation and good practices by tourism stakeholders and tourists to protect and conserve the environment and wildlife (Backman & Munanura, 2016). It embraces the sustainable use of ecological resources and support for local economies by increasing local revenues and employment, use of local supplies and services, community empowerment through inclusive participation in managing local ecotourism activities, improved environmental and cultural awareness as well as minimal environmental effect (Clifton & Benson, 2009). RT works to amend negative impacts by affording tourism that benefits host communities and the environment, enriches working conditions, involves the local communities and promotes cultural heritage (Leslie, 2012).

## Research Method

### Research Approach and Data Sources

This research adopted the interpretivism philosophy which is widely used to reconcile interpretivist approaches (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Characteristics of interpretivism

Feature	Description
Purpose of research	Understand and interpret tourism players' perspectives on the factors that could impact successful RTPs in Kinabatangan.
Ontology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ There are multiple realities.</li> <li>➤ Reality can be explored, and constructed through human interactions and meaningful actions.</li> <li>➤ Discover how people make sense of their social world in the natural setting by means of daily routines, conversations and writings (text and visuals) while interacting with others.</li> <li>➤ Many social realities exist due to varying human experiences, including people's knowledge, views, interpretations and experiences.</li> </ul>

**Table 1** (con't)

<b>Feature</b>	<b>Description</b>
Epistemology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Events are understood through the mental process of interpretation that is influenced by social interaction.</li> <li>➤ Those active in the research process socially construct knowledge by experiencing real life or natural settings.</li> <li>➤ Inquirer and the inquired-into are interlocked in an interactive process of talking and listening, reading and writing.</li> <li>➤ More personal, interactive mode of data collection.</li> </ul>
Methodology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Processes of data collected by interviews.</li> <li>➤ Research is a product of the values of the researcher.</li> </ul>

Interpretivism philosophy is relevant for leisure and recreation studies, as it is able to grasp the dynamics of perspectives, human behaviour, environments and sociocultural problems. Žukauskas, Vveinhardt, and Andriukaitiene (2018) explained that an interpretivism approach is important in the comprehension and decision-making process of the complicated nature of human actions. This type of research employs a qualitative method (Fodness & Murray, 2007) to collect rich, in-depth and expressive data as this method can “understand the meaning people have constructed about their world and their experiences” and “how do people make sense of their experience?” (Merriam & Grenier, 2018, p. 5). An inductive approach was adopted to tackle the research objectives, which are exploratory, subjective and contextual in nature, within an interpretative paradigm. Further, the qualitative approach was selected as the nature of the research is subjective, individualistic and contextual.

The data collection involved focus group interviews with key tourism players to explore their underlying interpretations of RTP. Focus group interviews provide multiple meanings and collective responses through group processes (Braun & Clarke, 2013) which are relevant to RT research to seek group consensus. This method also allows researchers to gather collective opinions and experiences; and to explore opinions, beliefs, and understandings about RTP in group dynamics through a form of collective sense-making.

A total of 3 interview sessions were held with 36 tourism players in February–March 2019 at 3 villages in Lower Kinabatangan (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Focus group interviews at three villages

<b>Focus group interviews</b>	<b>Number of respondents and categories</b>
3 sessions	First session: Sukau—23 respondents (20 tour and lodge operators, 3 homestay operators) Second session: Bilit—7 respondents (4 tour and lodge operators, 3 homestay operators) Third session: Sungai Lokan—6 respondents (1 tour and lodge operators, 5 homestay operators)
	Total: 36 respondents

Respondents were selected using the purposeful sampling technique and consent was obtained before interviews. Purposeful sampling refers to the researcher choosing a sample from which to learn the most from (Merriam & Grenier, 2018). It is the most popular sampling method in qualitative research and seeks information-rich cases that can be discussed extensively on issues of central significance for research purposes.

Key interview questions included: the meaning of RT, motives to practise RT, RT practices and issues faced. The dates and venues of interviews were finalised based on prior agreement with respondents. Each focus interview lasted 2-3 hours and was tape-recorded and transcribed with the respondents' approval.

Participation, cooperation and commitment are the main terms of this approach (Sifle & Melling, 2012). The researcher is a mere observer (Jacobs & College, 2018) who participates and discerns the importance of behaviour in a particular social context.

### Data Analysis

Data were analysed using a qualitative-phenomenological approach through thematic analysis. Analysis was guided by the definition and concept of RT, RTP and sustainable tourism and involved searching for, reviewing, defining and naming themes. Emerging themes were categorised based on research objectives and the concepts of RT, RTP and sustainable tourism.

## Findings and Discussion

### Meaning of Responsible Tourism

The responses on the meaning of RT are presented in Table 3, with themes categorised into environment, social and economy.

**Table 3.** Meaning of responsible tourism

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Sukau: Responses</b>	<b>Bilit : Responses</b>	<b>Sungai Lokan: Responses</b>	<b>Responsible Tourism Concept</b>
Protection, preservation and conservation	Protect the environment and wildlife (TO1, 18, 23) Conservation (TO19) Keep the environment and surrounding clean (TO2)	Keep the environment and river clean (TO5) Conservation (TO7)	Preserve the natural environment and habitat (TO3)	Environment

**Table 3** (con't)

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Sukau: Responses</b>	<b>Bilit : Responses</b>	<b>Sungai Lokan: Responses</b>	<b>Responsible Tourism Concept</b>
Wildlife protection	Protect the wildlife and jungle (TO1, 2, 5)	Not disturb wildlife (TO1, 5)	Do not disturb the wildlife (TO1, 2)	Environment
Replanting trees and environment-friendly	Replanting trees with tourists and locals (TO16, 18)	Replanting trees with tourists (TO1, 2, 3)	Replanting trees (TO4, 6)	Environment
Sustainability, eco-labelling	Ensuring the sustainability of the environment—wildlife and nature (TO6, 10) Eco-labelling and eco-green (TO8, 12)	Sustainability of environment (TO7)	Making the environment more sustainable (TO5)	Environment
Minimise impacts	Reduce negative impact on society, economy and environment (TO2, 3, 7, 9)	Tourism activities have no effect on the environment (TO3)	Reduce negative impact on the environment (TO6)	Environment, social and economics
Awareness and education	Awareness about different cultures (TO14)	Awareness of culture (TO5)	Educate staff (TO1)	Social culture
Caring	Care about forest and wildlife (TO8, 10, 12, 15, 20) Taking care of the environment (TO1, 3, 7, 9)	Taking care of cultural aspects (TO1, 4, 7) Taking care of tourist safety and environment (TO1, 2)	Taking care of the jungle, environment (TO1, 3, 5) Taking care of tourist safety and tourism attractions (TO2, 4)	Social
Rules and safety	Follow rules from the tourism department (TO12, 15) Ensure tourist safety (TO4, 11)	Ensure tourist safety and the environment (TO3)	Respect rules to protect animals (TO3)	Social
Respect	Respect nature (TO6, 10, 11)	Respect local culture (TO4)	Respect local people (TO5)	Social
Job opportunities	Provide jobs to locals (TO6, 8, 23)	Job opportunities for locals (TO2, 4)	–	Economics

**Table 3** (con't)

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Sukau: Responses</b>	<b>Bilit : Responses</b>	<b>Sungai Lokan: Responses</b>	<b>Responsible Tourism Concept</b>
Good services and business	An important concept for business (TO13, 19)	Delivering good services and make them feel comfortable (TO5, 6)	Delivering good services (TO1, 5)	Economics/ Business
Energy saving	Solar as alternative energy (TO1, 5, 23)	–	–	Economics

The themes reflect responsible act and behaviour in RT. The meanings of RT were consistently associated with protection, preservation, conservation, environmental-friendly, sustainability, eco-labelling, minimising negative impacts, awareness, education, caring, rules and safety, respect, job opportunities and good services and business, with the exception of energy-saving at Sukau. The themes also correspond well to sustainable tourism practices which are related to environmental conservation and protection (Park, Jeong Kim, & McCleary, 2014). Many respondents interpreted RT in association with the environment, followed by economy whilst the social aspect was largely ignored. Respecting nature and environment, eco-labelling, and sustainability are consistent with the beliefs of Goodwin (2012) and Chan (2010). Eco-labels enable ecotourism enterprises to cultivate excellent and environmental-friendly tourism products and services (Budeanu, 2005); and tourists can make informed choices (Sasidharana, Sirakayab, & Kerstetter, 2002). Besides, certification aims to promote responsible environmental, social, and cultural behaviour to produce and consume environmental-friendly products (Furqan, Som, & Hussin, 2010). Only a few respondents expressed RT as a means of providing jobs for locals.

The economic aspect of RT concerns job opportunities for locals and business operations that minimise negative impacts. Interestingly, from the respondents' perspectives, RT is an important part of their business through the provision of better services and safety measures as well as awareness of local culture, food, and community including educating staff on these concepts. This finding echoes with Budeanu (2007) that RT means continuously improving the quality of tourism services.

### **Motivations of Responsible Tourism Practices**

The responses for motivations of RTP relate significantly to the environmental aspect and are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Key motivations of responsible tourism practices

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Responses/Respondents / Village S: Sukau, B: Bilit, SG: Sungai Lokan</b>	<b>Responsible tourism concepts</b>
Preservation	Nature preservation (TO1S, TO5B, TO3SL)	Environmental/ wildlife
Conservation	Nature conservation (TO16S, TO2SL, TO6S)	Environmental
Cooperation/ protection	Cooperation with wildlife conservation officials to protect animal habitats and to maintain forest ecosystems (TO2S) Protect the forest and wildlife (TO5B)	Environmental/ wildlife
Protecting	Government should protect the nature and wildlife in Kinabatangan (TO17S) Wildlife and tourism departments should do more to protect the forest and wildlife (TO2B)	Environmental
Guidelines and enforcement	Lodges should follow wildlife watching guidelines, to be enforced and monitored by SWD (TO5S, TO7B, TO10SL)	Environmental
Create awareness	Awareness program on endangered species through signboards (TO9S, TO23S) Raise awareness through campaigns (TO1B) Awareness for tourists to see the uniqueness of nature and the diversity available (TO6SL)	Environmental
Taking care/ education	Taking care of nature and wildlife by educating the local community (TO21S)	Environmental
Education / poaching animal	Educate local people to stop animal poaching (TOB7B)	Environmental
Areas of interest	Interest to be more cooperative, like river cleaning and tree planting activities (TO23)	Environmental/ river, tree planting
Education / ecotourism	Educate tourists and local community (TO11S) Educate locals about ecotourism (TO6B) Educate locals so they are more resilient (TO15S)	Environmental (ecotourism) & Social
Encourage	Encourage tourists to join tree replanting activity (TO11S, TO12B)	Environmental & Social
Alternative energy source	Solar panel as an alternative energy (TO14S, TO8B)	Economic & Social

The key themes include preservation, conservation, protection and taking care of the environment, wildlife and forest ecosystem, the importance of sustainability and educating the local community and tourists to care for wildlife, cooperation, creating awareness and encouraging the replanting trees and the use of alternative energy. The

responses consistently infer that respondents act responsibly and take accountability for the destination's sustainability through the abovementioned practices.

The majority indicated that their motives are related to protection, conservation, preservation and cooperation to protect the environment as ecotourism depends on natural resources as key attractions. Respondents were also motivated to enhance the knowledge of the local community and tourists about conserving nature and endangered species. Others were motivated to obey and enforce wildlife viewing guidelines. This indicates the importance of the environmental aspect of operations. Using solar energy was the only response that was economic-related.

The absence of economic and socio-economic impacts in the responses suggests that respondents do not fully comprehend the benefits of RTP, especially in cultural preservation, improvement of living standards and stimulation of local pride for cultural heritage (Budeanu, 2005).

### Practices of Responsible Tourism

The themes from RT practices can be categorised into three aspects as shown in Table 5 and reflect well the definition and practices of RT.

**Table 5.** Practices of responsible tourism

<b>Themes of RTP</b>	<b>Sub-themes /Responses (three villages)</b>
Environment: conservation and preservation	Conservation with the local community (TO18S & TO19B) Responsible community in conserving (TO14S, TO5SL) Conservation (TO2, 6, 8S, TO1, 3, 4B, TO1S, TO1B) Preserving wildlife and nature (TO1B, TO6SL)
Rehabilitation and restoration	Rehabilitation (TO1B) Conservation with the local community (TO9S) Restoration of the natural habitat (TO2SL) Improve activities such as the restoration of destroyed trees (TO12S)
Sustainability	Sustainability; land conservation; educational talks; preservation of wildlife (TO46)
Cleanliness and taking care	Maintain the cleanliness; keeping a distance when watching animals (TO40) Undisturbed wildlife, proper waste disposal and vegetation (TO23) Taking care of and accommodating tourists (TO41)
Replanting	Replanting trees (TO2, TO5S, TO11, TO2B, TO1, 5, 7, SL)
Education	Daily education talk (TO8S) Learn about nature and environment (TO3SL) Sharing information about wildlife; sharing enjoyable experiences with tourists (TO10B, TO19S) Awareness through signboard (TO8SL)

**Table 5 (con't)**

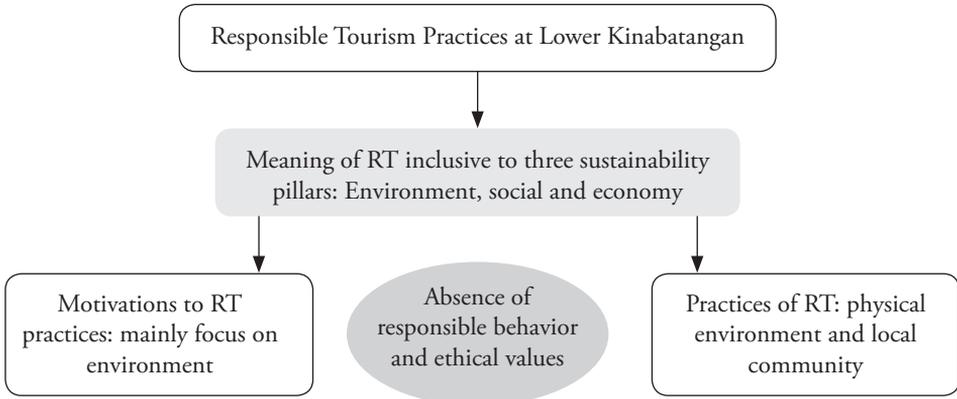
<b>Themes of RTP</b>	<b>Sub-themes /Responses (three villages)</b>
Economic/Job Opportunity	Raise awareness on the palm oil issue and explain how unique Kinabatangan is by showing pictures of wildlife (TO9S) Give them sensible and practical guidelines in planning, management, and operations (TO4B) Provide jobs to the community; increase tourist awareness on wildlife and forest (TO5B) Buy local products (TO6S)
Business practices	Guidelines for tourists to take care of the environment and wildlife (TO8) Company introduced program to educate locals about the importance of nature (TO36) Education about the environment and replanting trees (TO2,7) Provide information on the climate, safety and forest restoration and rehabilitation (TO21)
Guide	Guide for tourists, local community and business operators (TO3S) Guidelines for wildlife watching; solar panel; educational talks (TO19B)
Support and Collaboration	Embrace local culture (T04B) Interact with villagers where possible (TO1, 4SL) Support the community in terms of culture and food, lifestyle (TO22S) Working closely with SWD (TO23S)
Control	Greater SWD control on boat cruises and protect and expand the reserve (TO9S)
Promote	KiTA and FAB promote conservation, sustainable tourism, and preservation of indigenous tribes' culture/history (TO1,4,5,6S) Working together to promote culture, nature, wildlife, food, music and be responsible (TO22S, TO9B)
Changing	Focus on activities with nature and environment (TO5B) Stop animal poaching (TOB) To continue loving nature and wildlife (TO5SL) Changing the pattern of thinking in terms of income, jobs, and others (TO20S)

RTPs seem to concentrate on the physicality of the destination, namely, the environment, forest, and wildlife; and the central activities including conservation and preservation, rehabilitation and restoration, replanting trees and sustainability,

cleanliness and caring about flora and fauna. These practices are central to protecting the pristine environment and ensuring sustainability. Tourism players reconciled the importance of involvement and support given to the local communities including education and training related to RT, benefitting the local community and ensuring that tourism activities are carried out in a responsible manner. These findings concur with past studies which state that RTP contributes to destination sustainability (Musavengane, 2019; Sariskumar & Bhavan, 2018; Ahmad et al., 2016; UNEP, 2005b). Many denoted RTPs implemented in their business activities (Table 5), comprising of buying local products, promoting local culture, and working with locals, which enhance the economic status and well-being of the local community. RTP emphasises on the control of riverboat cruise activities to avoid river congestion and collaboration with Sabah Wildlife and Forestry Department (Table 5). The provision of education and awareness-raising activities are vital RTPs as they enable tourism players to change tourists' attitudes from being reactive to being proactive. This is consistent with Budeanu (2007) who utilised RTP in influencing tourist attitudes towards responsible tourism packages.

Interestingly, the findings reveal that the meaning, motivations, and practices of RT are constantly attributed to the three sustainability pillars, consistent with the definition and concept of responsible tourism and sustainable tourism. This implies that RTPs could make Lower Kinabatangan a better ecotourism destination through environmental conservation and wildlife protection, which would also benefit the community and facilitate sustainable tourism operations. Nevertheless, the findings show that RTPs pay less attention to the social and economic aspects. Also, the elements of responsible behaviour, ethical values, integrity and governance, all important components of RTPs (Leisle, 2012), have been largely ignored. More importantly, tour operators need to recognise that RT is not the same as sustainable tourism (Spenceley, 2010). Other stakeholders (government, local community and tourists) should also be proactive in promoting and adopting RTPs at Lower Kinabatangan.

Conclusively, the findings reveal that the meaning of RT reflects adequately on the definition of RT, consisting of three sustainability pillars and responsible behaviour. However, the empirical findings on motivation and practices slant towards the physical environment and local community (Figure 2). This may be attributed to the context of the destination where natural attractions is key. Hence, it is unsurprising that there is greater concern for the protection of the environment and responsible behaviour. Nevertheless, in RTP, equal attention should be given to social and economic benefits to locals.



**Figure 2.** Responsible tourism practices (RTPs) at Lower Kinabatangan

The paper suggests that RT is a sound and relevant strategy to strengthen the sustainability of ecotourism destinations, especially Lower Kinabatangan. It argues that the responsible behavioural trait and responsible actions from tourism stakeholders are essential to making Lower Kinabatangan a more sustainable and competitive destination; and the three sustainable pillars are also important components. With appropriate RT practices and guidelines in place, there will be significant positive impacts on destination sustainability (Paul & Rupesh, 2013).

### Conclusion and Contributions

The paper concludes that the meaning, motivation and RT practices from the tourism operators at Lower Kinabatangan are consistent with the related existing literature — a subject matter that has not been actively researched. RT practices reduce negative impacts on the environment through conservation, preservation, and protection. The scope of RT practices is posited within sustainable tourism, confined within the three pillars at different magnitudes and significantly focuses on environmental responsibility.

This paper makes several contributions. It adds to the existing literature of RTPs and serves as useful baseline data and guideline to formulate or develop an RT manual for Lower Kinabatangan. It explores a growing need for RTPs and guiding principles at ecotourism destinations. The paper suggests implementing RTPs in a holistic manner to improve destination sustainability and competitiveness. This includes a proper committee or agency to implement, monitor, and enforce RTPs at Lower Kinabatangan. Greater alliances with clear leadership, strong environmental ethics, support from the local community and agencies (Eligh, Welford, & Ytterhus, 2002) as well as effective partnerships, collaboration, and formulating codes of conduct

between tour operators and local communities (Bramwell & Lane, 2000) are also essential. Furthermore, RT can be the future branding for Lower Kinabatangan. In this regard, Sharma and Kaushal (2017) highlighted that the picture of a destination perceived by destination stakeholders, in this case the tour operators, can contribute towards effective destination branding in the RT context. Further, Mathew and Sreejeh (2017) observed that RTP has a significant positive relationship with destination sustainability and quality of life of the local community. Indeed, this is reflected in the findings.

The paper recommends more research and intervention programmes to enhance RTPs for balanced development; and to pay greater attention to economic and social impacts. The achievement of sustainability and RT must consider the coexistences of the three pillars and responsible attitudes of tourism stakeholders.

Nevertheless, there are several limitations of RTPs at Lower Kinabatangan. Firstly, ethical values, responsible behaviour, governance as important elements of RT, were not acknowledged by respondents. Secondly, the importance of partnerships between private and public sectors for education, training, and control have not received sufficient attention. Thirdly, RTPs have not been adequately understood and holistically implemented by tourism players, as local communities should be equal players in the decision-making process.

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