This case study compares two tourism communities in terms of how well they might be prepared for a Fast Change impact on Individual and Site Tourism.

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Resilience in Community Based Tourism: Batu Puteh and Pulau Mabul in Sabah, Malaysia

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'Sustainable development' has been a popular conceptual frame for community planning and development since the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) issued its report to the United Nations in 1987 (Hall & Lew, 2009). Also known as the *Brundtland Report*, its goal was to define a global agenda to deal with the deterioration of natural and social environments. Although still maintaining its dominant role as the preferred development paradigm for most actions taken by governments and enterprises today, one could argue that the world remains mostly non-sustainable with ever increasing levels of green house gasses, global temperatures, biodiversity losses, human populations, income disparities and social inequities (Lew, 2012).

Definitions of sustainability and sustainable tourism vary widely, but in general they center on approaching development in such as way as to maximize its positive impacts on people, places and environments, while minimizing any negative impacts. Sustainability is essentially a call to consider the common good over individual greed. This has been interpreted by some be a

criticism of liberal economic theory, which in its purest form allows market economics to be the sole regulator of common resource pools, such as air, water, and scenic byways.

The growing environmental and social challenges of our contemporary world seem to indicate that the sustainable development paradigm is not winning this battle between the commons and the free market. The concept of resilience has recently been proposed as an alternative paradigm to sustainability (Davidou, 2012). Community resilience refers to the ability of a community to effectively respond to unanticipated changes in its situation. According to Lew (2012; 2013b) sustainability tries to prevent the shock of change from occurring by conserving environmental and social resources for future use, whereas resilience planning focuses more on the capacity of communities to respond to, and if necessary recover from, significant shock and change events.

From a tourism perspective, one of the fundamental resilience questions is: *How well is a community's tourism sector prepared to survive and recover from a loss of their tourist arrivals?* This question focusses on what Lew (2013b) has called "*Fast Change affecting Individual or Site Tourism*", which is different from *Slow Change* variables and broader community interests beyond tourism. Examining two community based tourism case studies from Malaysia shows how the alternative approach of resilience might be applied.

Batu Puteh, Sabah, Malaysia

Batu Puteh comprises four villages with a total population of about 1800, located on the Kinabatangan River in the east coast of Sabah, Malaysia. The Kinabatangan River is a protected wildlife reserve with some of the highest levels of biodiversity in Southeast Asia. Hornbills, proboscis monkeys, and more rarely, pygmy elephants and orang utans, can be seen from boat rides along this river.

Miso Walai Homestay was started in Batu Puteh as a community based tourism project in the late 1990s with support from WWF Norway (Hamzah & Mohamad, 2011). In 2003, it became part of a larger tourism and economic development cooperative, known as KOPEL (*Koperasi Pelancongan*, or *The Tourism Cooperative*). KOPEL has become the center of a wide range of

economic and environmental initiatives, including providing local tourist guides, boat and land transportation services, food and beverage services, two rain forest eco camps (built in 2007 and 2009), contracts for lake and forest restoration from the Sabah state government, and grants for orang utan habitat restoration. The Miso Walai homestay program, which is run through KOPEL, also continues to provide a significant source of income for local participants.

The goals of all of these initiatives were to provide job opportunities for youth and human capacity building to maintain a viable and thriving community. By most measures, KOPEL is considered among the most successful community based tourism programs in Malaysia and Southeast Asia.

Pulau Mabul, Sabah, Malaysia

Mabul Island is a low lying exposed sandbar that was primarily used as a coconut plantation in the 1980s. Today it is crowded with about 2500 residents in two villages living among nine large dive resorts and nine smaller backpacker dive lodges. Mabul itself is considered a prime dive destination, but its growth and fame comes from being the closest island to Pulau Sipidan, which is considered one of the top two or three dive sites in the world (Bremner, 2012; Lew, 2013). Sipidan island is a marine protected area with no resorts or private residences.

In essence, Mabul has become a 'sacrifice area' to protect Sipidan. Many of the residents in Mabul are illegal immigrants from the Philippines and are not recognized by the government of Malaysia. Some are also not even recognized by the Philippines as citizens and are essentially stateless. Under these circumstances, formal education is non-existent for most of the island's children and modern medical care requires a boat trip to nearby cities and unsubsidized prices that few islanders can afford. While tourists are welcome to wander in the villages, there are some social tensions between the nominally Muslim locals and tourist divers from around the world (Mohamad, 2011). Environmental problems are significant, including a lack of adequate septic systems and excessive amounts of refuse.

Despite these challenges, most of the residents of Mabul are able to sustain themselves through cooperative efforts and by living off the sea. Coming from a tradition of nomadic seafaring and fishing, their traditional needs are minimal and they are open to seeking out new frontiers when local challenges arise. Some have opened gift shops and restaurants that cater to tourists and locals, and some have secured employment in the dive resorts and lodges. Most consider life on Mabul to be better than their lives in the Philippines and many young people dream of one day becoming a dive master, which is actually not possible due to their unoffocial status.

Lessons of Sustainability

From a sustainable development perspective, Batu Puteh and Mabul offer very different case studies. The KOPEL tourism cooperative in Batu Puteh is a model of sustainability. They are involved in ecological restoration work in the rain forests, in lake restoration, and in animal habitat maintenance. They are involved in human capacity building through guide training, rainforest eco camps, and staff development. And their efforts are well planned and offer an inclusive operating structure that is open to a wide range of community members. They have been successful in providing opportunities for youths to stay in their villages and a good number of the people of Batu Puteh have a sense that they are in control over their resources and the destiny of their community.

Pulau Mabul, on the other hand, has been built up in a haphazard manner, is populated well beyond its environmental carrying capacity, and offers very few life options, beyond being a fisherman, for its young people. The greatest fear of locals is that the Malaysian government will force them to leave Mabul, because no one living on Mabul owns any of the land there. Such an undertaking, however, would likely cause a major social uproar, if not an international incident for the government. Mabul pretty much violates most of the tenets of sustainable development, including environmental, social and economic.

Lessons of Resilience

From a resilience perspective, the differences between Batu Puteh and Mabul are more limited. While some disasters can be anticipated, many others are not. Even when a disaster is anticipated, such as a likely flood or earthquake, the precise location and intensity of those events can be difficult to predict. Other disasters are impossible to predict, such as global economic downturns, disruptive political changes, and the spread of new pandemics.

Both Batu Puteh and Mabul have recently encountered a major drop in tourist arrivals due to a series of tourist kidnappings by groups from the southern Philippines that claim ownership of the east coast of Sabah (dela Cruz, 2013; Palani, 2014). As a result, tourist arrivals in 2013 and 2014 to the state of Sabah have been down by about 30%, which is probably closer to 50% for Batuh Puteh and Mabul (MTN, 2013). This case study is not an assessment of how these places have actually responded to this situation. Instead it is theorized based on field work undertaken in 2012, prior to the recent troubles and tourism downturn.

Because of the challenge of disaster preparation, especially as it applies to the tourism economy, understanding the resilience of a community to a complete loss in tourist arrivals ("Fast Change/Tourism Site") requires a understanding of how it survives in the broader range of challenges that it faces ("Slow and Fast Change/Tourism Community", in Lew 2013b).

If tourists were to completely stop coming to Batu Puteh, the community would still survive, though it may not thrive to the same degree that it does today. Overall, tourism only comprises about 10% of the local gross income of the Batuh Puteh villages. (The majority, almost 70%, of local income comes from palm oil sales.) Approximately 15% of the Batu Puteh villagers are members of the KOPEL cooperative. They would be the most likely to be affected by a loss in tourist arrivals. However, many of them have other sources of income, and KOPEL itself is not solely invested in tourism, though it is their dominant activity. Villagers also continue to live in close proximity of the land. As one young guide told this researcher, "I can always go into the rainforest for free food and to build my own shelter for free."

On Mabul, the loss of tourist arrivals would be devastating to the large dive resorts whose entire income and investments are dependent on tourism. They would most likely need to completely

close and hope that they do not deteriorate over time until tourists returned and they could reopen. Most employees would be laid off. Local islanders could shift to more traditional livelihoods, while more skilled employees, such as dive guides, would need to relocate to find similar employment. Smaller dive shops and resorts would be similarly affected, though the impacted numbers would be much smaller. The smaller dive resorts could be converted into housing for local residents to an easier degree than could the more luxurious dive resorts. Both, however, could be converted into other business activities.

The local villagers of Mabul would be the least impacted by the loss of tourists, as most of them are dependent on fishing rather than on tourism. The tourist-oriented shops would either close or shift their products for the local market. Lower purchasing capacity within the community, however, could make that latter option more of a challenge. The owners of closed shops could probably move into more traditional livelihoods without major difficulty.

Table 1 applies the *7 Principles for Building Resilience in Social-ecological Systems*, as proposed by the Stockholm Resilience Center (SRC, 2014). The evaluations were based on field work conducted prior to the recent downturn in tourism to this region of Sabah, Malaysia (as noted above). The scores assigned to the rating scale are simplistic, and some of them require further confirmation by field work. Despiter those shortcoming, the scores show a considerably higher level of tourism sector resiliene in Batu Puteh, as compared to Mabul. In addition, for both of the communities, resilience is higher at the Community Overall level than with the more narrowly defined Tourism Sector. This is most likely because the shock scenario is narrowly defined to primarily impact the Tourism Sector.

One significant pattern from Table 1 is that the Community Overall on Mabul Island is far more resilient than its Tourism Sector. On the other hand, for Batu Puteh the Community Overall is only slightly more resilient than the Tourism Sector (although note that additional field work is required to confirm this). The differences between the two communities in this comparison most likely reflects the degree to which the Tourism Sector is integrated within the larger Community Overall, which is a strong point for Batu Puteh and a major challenge for Mabul, especially for the large resorts there.

Table 1. Evaluating Socio-ecological Resilience in the Tourism Sector and the Community Overall for Batu Puteh and Mabul Island, Malaysia, measured by the *7 Principles of Resilience*.

	Batu Puteh		Mabul Island	
7 Resilience Principles	*Tourism Sector*	*Community Overall*	*Tourism Sector*	*Community Overall*
1. Maintains diversity & redundancy	Some (2)	Good [4]	Poor (1)	Good [4]
2. Manages connectivity	Good (3)	Good [4]?	Some (2)?	Good [4]
3. Manages slow variables & feedbacks	Some (2)	Some [2]?	None (0)	Some [2]
4. Fosters complex adaptive systems thinking	Some (2)	Some [2]?	None (0)	Some [2]?
5. Encourages learning	Good (3)	Good [3]?	Poor (1)	Some [2]
6. Broadens participation	Good (3)	Good [3]?	None (0)	Poor [1]?
7. Promotes polycentric governance systems	Some (2)?	Some [2]?	None (0)	Poor [1]?
TOTAL SCORE	(17)	[20]?	(4)	[16]?

Notes:

- Scale/Score: None-0, Poor-1, Some-2, Good-3, High-4
- *7 Principles of Resilience* based on SRC (2014)
- "?" scores require additional fieldwork to confirm

Conclusions

Sustainability and resilience have both become popular conceptual frameworks for community development research since the late 1980s (Hall & Lew, 2009; Davidou, 2012). Many have argued that the two approaches are essentially the same, or that sustainability is required for resilience. This brief comparison of two tourism communities, however, demonstrates that a

resilience perspective can be very different from a sustainability perspective, especially with regard to the tourism economy, and that resilience varies considerably between different types of communities and different forms and structures of tourism.

The next stage of this research would be to confirm the speculated evaluations in Table 1, to assess the impact of the recent downturn in tourism to the state of Sabah, and to understand how the differences between sustainability and resilience impact approaches to planning and community development. It is apparent from these two case studies that a diversified economy, where tourism is not a primary or even major component, makes for greater resilience. Also, local communities that have more formal governance structures and which are more inclusive of its members may be more resilient. To fully understand community resilience, one would need go beyond the question of *"How well is a community prepared to survive and recover from a complete loss of tourist arrivals?"* We would also want to know how well the community could recover from a loss of a major natural resource, a major transportation connection, and other major areas that support a community's livelihood and lifestyle.

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