Tourism footprints

Should beautiful Pulau Perhentian, which lacks basic services, be turned into a high-end tourist spot?

Pulau Perhentian draws thousands of tourists annually but a lack of basic services – such as garbage and sewage disposal – still plagues the island. Is high-end tourism the answer? &gt;2

Beach dining: Business is bustling in Perhentian, as seen here at Coral Bay which has a mix of budget and mid-range resorts. – ANDREW SIA/The Star
Posh Perhentian?

Will turning Pulau Perhentian into a high-end tourist destination help protect its environment?

ANDREW SIA

MOUNDS of rotting garbage greeted me when I got off the jetty at the village on Pulau Perhentian, Terengganu, late last month. How could this happen at one of Malaysia’s most popular and beautiful islands?

Fortunately, the mess was only in the kampung and not at the beaches and resorts where tourists visit. But garbage has a nasty habit of travelling.

“Tourists have complained of used diapers floating in the sea,” says Long Seh Ling, the coordinator of the Ecoteer voluntourism (tourists who do volunteer work) outfit on the island.

I have heard of similar complaints of kampung garbage when doing beach clean-ups in Pulau Redang in the 1990s. The “solution” then was to move the seaside village inland.

What about Perhentian?

Prof Ibrahim Mamat, who heads the economics faculty at Universiti Malaysia Terengganu, proposes a Langkawi-like solution.

“The people’s mindset is the problem. They are not fit to do eco-tourism. Just look at the flies and garbage in the kampung.”

He and his team of academics were on the island to gather information as they have been asked by Datuk Seri Idris Jusoh, the former Terengganu Menteri Besar and Besut Umno division chief, to prepare a long-term masterplan for Perhentian. But the kampung folks have another reason for the garbage.

“It’s not that people here like throwing rubbish everywhere,” says village elder Jidin Mohd Aris. “There are no garbage bins. There is just nowhere to throw rubbish.”

Indeed, according to the kampung chief Zainuddin Mohd, the Besut District Council (which is in charge of Perhentian) neglected to renew last year’s garbage collection contract, so rubbish has been piling up since January. (Ecoteer is proposing an experimental composting project to encourage villagers to turn food waste into fertiliser but it has not taken off yet.)

Sewage is another problem on Perhentian. When snorkelling at two points in Perhentian, I see swathes of corals choked by green algae – something often “fertilised” by improperly disposed sewage. Most chalets have built their own septic tanks but what happens when they are full?

“Some chalets will pump out their septic tanks into the sea during the monsoon season when nobody is around. That affects corals,” says one villager.

K.K. Lee, the owner-operator of Tuna Bay resort says: “Not all resorts have septic tanks, some just let the sewage soak away in (a pit in) the ground.”

He adds that Indah Water Konsortium (IWK) does not provide sewage treatment services on the island.

“The island’s Association of Business Operators has asked them to and IWK may consider.”

Imitate Langkawi?

Is high-end tourism the way to save Perhentian’s environment? The argument is that posh resorts will have the money and management skills to do things in a classy, professional and eco-friendly way.

“A lot of tourism here is at the low-end,”
observes Ibrahim. “We want to move it to the high-end, whereby visitors will spend RM10,000 a week. We can do it with big professional operators and international hotels. And we can also upgrade the ferry to a big one like in Langkawi.”

He adds that administratively, Perhentian is a “no man’s land”, claiming that only one person in the district council oversees the island. “How can they not have appointed a garbage contractor for months? Transparency is lacking in the awarding of these contracts,” says Ibrahim.

He says one role model is the Langkawi Development Authority or LADA. “Look at how big they are. I will propose that Perhentian has something similar.”

He also laments: “So much alcohol is being sold on the beach here and it’s not being taxed. The government is losing a lot of money.”

So should Perhentian become another Langkawi? But firstly, will ordinary Malaysians still be able to afford to visit one of the country’s most gorgeous islands? The case of Gunung Kinabalu is sobering – since operations there were privatised a decade ago, the cost of climbing the mountain has increased from about RM100 to over RM1,000.

Secondly, the local kampung folks are against it. Jidin explains how income from tourism here is spread out: “Some boatmen take people from the mainland to the island. Others take tourists on snorkelling trips. The snorkel guides bring guests to the kampung to buy lunch. Everybody in the community has a share.

“But in Redang, the big resorts grab everything and local kampung folks don’t get a chance to earn from tourists. Tourism has been a real blessing for Perhentian. Thirty years ago, people here were very poor. When visitors started coming, many fishermen changed to the tourism business and earned good money. Now many have their own fridges, TVs and boats.”

Helping locals

Ecoteer wants to help villagers improve their tourism earnings, and has so far trained three local women in Western cooking. In addition, once a week, Ecoteer pays villagers to host a traditional Malay dinner (for volunteers) in their homes.

Zainuddin adds: “We don’t want high-end resorts like those on Redang. What will kampung people get? Big resorts want paper qualifications which our people don’t have. But what we have is experience. What’s the use of being proud of big, grand resorts? We don’t want to be just spectators of tourism development. We want to be part of it.”

One sterling example is that of Panorama chalets, a long-standing backpackers’ favourite on Perhentian’s Long Beach.

“My father opened this resort on his ancestral land back in 1996,” recalls Mas Ron Mustafa. “He started with only four wooden chalets containing eight rooms.”

Now, Panorama has 30 rooms and rates have risen from RM40 to RM75 per night. Mas Ron recently got an offer of RM1.5mil for his half hectare of land.

“But I won’t sell. I am doing good business here. My guests may not pay much, but du orang mulut manis (they give good recommendations). That’s how we built our business.”

He first learnt English from a tourist who gave free classes for village kids back in the 1990s – the same thing being done under the Ecoteer project now. Mas Ron is one example of a successful bumiputra businessman who has made it through hard work without government hand-outs.

“My family built up this place with whatever money we had. Every year, we would add maybe three rooms. We kampung folks didn’t know how to borrow money from banks.”

Another Long Beach establishment is Matahari chalets, which began in 1997 with just six small A-frame wooden huts.

“We were using oil lamps and candles and charged only RM15 per room then,” says Zamdil Zapen, who manages the place for the late owner’s widow.

Now, Matahari has 30 large wooden chalets available at RM50 per night, while a new two-storey concrete block with 15 more expensive rooms is being built. Zamdil is also against the idea of high-end tourism being forced upon the island now that it has become famous.

“Tourism here developed because of word of mouth among backpackers, not because the government promoted it.”

Indeed, the island is a renowned stop on the “banana pancake” (backpackers) trail through Malaysia, which goes through Perhentian, Taman Negara, Cameron Highlands and Penang, before looping back to South Thailand’s beaches.

Lee also disagrees with high-end tourism, saying that villagers in Redang do not get many spin-off benefits from the big resorts there. He also points out that some high-end island resorts (charging about RM1,000 per night) in Redang are now suffering badly because of the European economic slowdown while the mid-market range (his rooms at Tuna Bay are between RM250 and RM350 per night) in Redang is still holding up.

Perhentian is also much smaller than Langkawi and thus, is not suitable for big resorts.

“Langkawi has lots of land for roads and an airport, we don’t,” Lee adds.

Good governance

Three days after I arrived, the kampung’s garbage problem was magically solved. On
April 1, a contractor newly appointed by the
district council began collecting rubbish from
the kampung and resorts.

Rain and floods

Sweepers were also hired to clear open
ground and drains. This showed that exclusive
resorts are not the only route to a better
environment; well-executed public policy
could do the same.

One obvious government role is good old-
fashioned enforcement of existing laws. Lee
has spent RM40,000 to install two “bio-robic”
tanks that have enzymes which can clear up
bathroom water and even toilet sewage into
clean water suitable for watering plants.

Lee is glad to show me the official
Environmental Quality Monitoring report sent
to the Department of Environment showing
how clean the water near his resort is.

However, he notes that only a handful of
resorts in Perhentian are monitored closely
while others seem to get more “leeway”.

Good laws and policy intentions are one
thing, but implementation is often another
issue. One example is the garbage trap built at
the end of a major drain in the kampung.

“The accumulated garbage ends up blocking
the flow of water,” says Zainuddin. “Patut
buat kat kepala longkang (should be done at
the beginning of the drain).”

Other examples here are the spanking new
teachers and police quarters in the kampung
which look almost like resorts – from the out-
side. However, serious defects lie hidden.

“The walls are wet,” observes teacher Che
Ayub Che Deraman. “I think the pipes inside
are leaking. I fear this will cause a short cir-
cuit one day. At the police quarters next door,
water flows down the stairs like a waterfall
when it rains.”

The village also has a volunteer fire brigade
complete with equipment like water pumps.
But during a fire in March, two houses were
destroyed.

“Only one person was trained to operate
the equipment, but he did not teach other
people,” complains Zainuddin. “He lives on
the mainland in Besut and was holding the
only key (to the equipment storage area).”

If the rules are properly enforced, things
can be done – especially for the environment.
Lee has grease traps to filter his kitchen
wastewater, and he sends all used cooking
equipment for oil back to the mainland for recy-
cling.

“I tell my staff never to pour oil into
the ground because it will eventually go back
to the sea. I feel it’s a pity when I see some
resorts with their engine (generator) rooms
full of oil everywhere. It’s not just for the
environment; actually there is also a market
for used oil. I sell mine to someone who recy-
cles it.”

Lee sends bed linen to a laundry in Kota
Baru every day, not only because it’s cleaner,
but also because he does not want to con-
taminate the sea with detergent residue
(which also affect corals). And the kitchens
use biodegradable liquid dishwashing soap.

“If everybody uses eco-friendly systems, it
would help the island a lot. But some opera-
tors are reluctant to spend money, even on
something as simple as a RM600 stainless
steel grease trap.”

Another role for the government is to pro-
vide infrastructure. Water supply used to be
a big problem because water from wells was
limited. But last year, the government built
an undersea pipe to bring in fresh water from
the mainland.

Tenaga Nasional Berhad (TNB) had also
spent RM13mil in 2007 to build two wind
turbines and install 100kWh of solar panels.
But the wind turbines no longer work after
parts were stolen last year. The solar panels
were working well – until transformer wires
connected to the panels were stolen a few
months ago.

Now, according to Ali Akbar Abd Rahman,
the TNB officer on the island, some RM20mil
has been allocated to install four 500kWh
diesel generators, which can supply power
not only to the kampung but also some of the
(smaller) resorts.

(On the wind turbines, Akbar says although
the theoretical capacity is 200kWh, in reality,
they only got 40kWh because of insufficient
winds.)

Seawage treatment

If water pipelines and electrical supply can
be provided as a public infrastructure here,
why not sewage disposal services too? After
all, if the government (or government-linked
companies) can provide infrastructure for
foreign businessmen to set up factories, why
not support tourism in one of the country’s
loveliest islands?

Julian Hyde, general manager for Reef
Check Malaysia, says that there have been
several rounds of discussion between IWK
and the island’s Association of Business
Operators on solutions to the seawage issue.

“One idea is for a big seawage treatment
plant like on the mainland which is estimated
to cost RM30mil. A more cost-effective measure
would be for every resort to improve
their own seawage treatment facilities. Even
if all the 35 to 40 resorts on Perhentian
put in a good system like in Tuna Bay, that
would only come up to between RM2mil and
RM3mil.”

Hyde adds that another option is to contin-
ue using septic tanks. IWK could go in twice
a year with a special barge (estimated to cost
RM2mil) to clear all the septic tanks.

“The barge is a fairly low-cost option
which could also cover all the islands in the
East Coast, including Redang and Tioman. RM2mil may seem like a lot of money, but perhaps the company or the government should see that it’s actually a small investment to protect the Perhentian tourism market worth some RM100 million annually.

Filling Perhentian with exclusive resorts may not be the best way to maintain a pristine environment.

Surely stricter enforcement of existing eco-guidelines will ensure that all resorts, big and small, will clean up their act?

With support from appropriate, well-managed investments in infrastructure, the resorts (and residents) will have every reason to do the right thing.

**Trawler trouble**

WHILE pollution from sewage and grey water (soapy water from bathrooms and kitchens) may have jeopardised marine life in Pulau Perhentian, over-fishing from trawlers has been a major problem too, points out the locals.

Kampung chief Zainuddin Mohd recalls:

"Back in the 1970s, we could catch a whole basket full of fish right at the kampung jetty within one hour. Now, big commercial trawlers sweep up most of the fish in waters around the island."

He says traditional fishermen know how to maintain the ecological balance.

"We know the waters well. We won’t throw our nets over corals because we don’t want to damage our own nets. Now, when the kampung people fish a little with our traditional nets, the Marine Park people will catch us."

Village elder Jidin Mohd Aris adds: "The trawlers drag and grab everything. During the monsoon, they become even more daring. We have reported to the authorities but they said it’s difficult to come (and do enforcement) then."

K.K. Lee, the owner and operator of Tuna Bay resort, hails from Besut and first came to Perhentian 40 years ago.

"There was so much fish in those days. The trawlers are affecting the marine life."

He explains that the bigger the boat, the further they should stay away from the island. For instance, the biggest “D zone” fishing boats are required to stay 30 nautical miles clear, while the smallest “A zone” boats should stay two nautical miles away from the island.

"But the rules are not really enforced," says Lee. "Many formerly illegal Thai trawlers have now been legalised with Malaysian licences. Our fishing industry is not as developed as theirs. In the end, it’s the locals who are losing out."

One fisherman who declined to be named says: "We know they are Thai boats but they are flying the jalur gemilang (Malaysian flag). The marine park authorities should be on alert 24 hours against trawlers breaking the rules. But these people have money, so you know how it is lah..."

Treasured Island is a project by The Star and Ecoteer to improve the livelihoods of Pulau Perhentian villagers, protect the marine environment and promote responsible tourism. You, too, can be a voluntourist at Perhentian. To find out how, go to ecoteerresponsibletravel.com or facebook.com/ecoteer or e-mail explore@ecoteer.com.
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Village drains were clogged with rubbish when garbage collection and cleaning services were not contracted out earlier this year by the Besut District Council.

Garbage from the island has to be bagged and shipped to the mainland for disposal.
Tourism footprints

Sheer hard work:
Resorts at Perhentian consist mainly of small, family-owned outfits, such as Panorama, which was built by Mas Ron Mustafa’s father. This ensures that the local community gets a share of the tourism pie.

Matahari chalets started in 1997 with RM15 a night hut by oil lamps and candles, says Zaini Zapen (left). They are now upgrading to a new two-storey concrete block.
Tourism footprints

Tuna Bay resort owner K.K. Lee has installed two bio-robic tanks with enzymes which can turn bathroom water and toilet sewage into clean water. (Pic inset) A grease trap filters kitchen wastewater at the resort.

Teacher Che Ayub Che Deraman at a flooded classroom in the local school. The teachers and police quarters nearby face similar problems of water leakage.