

Geoconservation and Sustainable Development in Langkawi: Opportunities and Obstacles for Geopark Rangers

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This paper analyses the opportunities and obstacles for Geopark Rangers at Langkawi, Malaysia. Since the Langkawi archipelago became a duty-free destination in 1987, the number of annual visitors has increased rapidly and now numbers over three million. The certification of Langkawi as the first Global Geopark in Southeast Asia in 2006 was thus part of a broader strategy implemented by the Langkawi Development Authority (LADA) to reposition the island's rapid development along a more sustainable trajectory. A new geopark ranger system was introduced to encourage sustainable tourism via three service missions: enforcement of regulations, conservation and maintenance. This research examines the role of the rangers, investigating the set-up, current state and challenges faced by the ranger system. A mixed method approach combined primary data from interviews with the rangers' monthly report and log books (January to July 2013) at three geoforest areas that represent the geopark core zones. Findings detail the set-up process of the ranger system, from design in 2011 under the Tourism Blueprint through to implementation in 2012. Currently there are twelve rangers within the LADA Geopark Division, but the age range (19-27) reveals most to be high school graduates with little specialist knowledge of nature parks or visitor management. Analysis of primary data shows damage reports and maintenance issues to be most frequent, with little evidence of conservation and emergency reports. Challenges were identified as job conditions and organizational capacity of ranger personnel along with inter-organizational collaboration. The Langkawi case provides insight into the new ranger system as a means of regulating visitor flows within geopark core zones toward sustainable development.

Keywords: Geoconservation, Sustainable Development, Langkawi Global Geopark, Geopark Ranger, Regulation, Visitor Management