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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Covid-19: Impacts on Tourism in Bako National Park and Survival Strategies of Local Tourism Operators

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused havoc in every field globally, including the second highest industry, tourism. This paper focuses on the impacts resulting from the pandemic on tourism activities in Bako National Park and the local communities who are dependent on this natural attraction as an important source of income. Using the case study methodology, in-depth interviews were conducted with six tourism operators in Bako National Park to gauge how the pandemic impacted the tourism activities socially, economically, and environmentally. This paper unpacks how they coped with the associated challenges to stay afloat while waiting for the border to fully reopen. It is found that different types of tourism operators employ different survival strategies depending on the resources they have. While certain strategies could offset the immediate effects of the lockdown, some are meant for survival in the future.

Contribution/Originality: This study takes a different direction and contributes to the existing literature by focusing on the survival strategies employed by individuals during the pandemic.

1. Introduction

Malaysia and the rest of the world were shaken due to the spreading of the Covid-19 virus, which has been affecting every aspect of human life as it spreads through human contacts. The coronavirus disease 2019, or in its abbreviated form, Covid-19, was first detected in a market in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 and is believed to be originated from bats (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Since then, everything became chaotic due to this virus' lethal nature that may lead to death and many countries were in lockdown. Due to the global pandemic and measures taken to curb the spreading of the virus, one of the first industries to be severely affected was tourism as it directly and indirectly connected to other industries and, may be one of the last industries to

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recover (BERNAMA, 2020b; Pololikashivili & Gurria, 2020). This can be seen through the number of tourists arrivals recorded on Tourism Malaysia (2021) website, where the number of tourists arrivals went down from 26.1 million in 2019 to 4.3 million in 2020. With this drastic drop in the statistic, it is evident that all tourism activities, including attractions like national parks, were affected. With travel restrictions, especially international travels imposed by the government, they were trying to promote domestic tourism (BERNAMA, 2020b; BERNAMA, 2020c; TTR WEEKLY, 2020), but with the situation where the cases were increasing daily, people feared to travel anywhere outside of their residences.

Based on a timeline developed by Siti Farhana (2020), Covid-19 was first detected in Wuhan, China as a 'viral pneumonia' and a public message through media statement was published on 31st December 2019. Then, on 9th January 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has reported that the Chinese authorities have identified that the epidemic is caused by a novel coronavirus. Kandola (2020) stated that coronavirus diseases are common in animals and humans but rarely spread from animals to humans. SARS disease that spread throughout 2002 and 2003 is also a type of coronavirus resulting from severe acute respiratory syndrome virus strain (SARS-CoV). As for Covid-19, it is from a new strain called severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). Covid-19 has a lethal nature that can cause symptoms to become severe, which may lead to death, especially to those who have higher risks; older adults who have chronic health conditions. Moreover, it is highly contagious if measures to prevent it are not taken. WHO then declared that Covid-19 is a pandemic as the number of Covid-19 cases increases daily and globally. As for Malaysia, the first case detected was when three out of eight Malaysian Chinese who were in close contact with an infected person in Singapore were confirmed to be infected. They are then quarantine at Sungai Buloh Hospital, Selangor. After the number of cases in Malaysia soared up to thousands, Malaysia's Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin at that time announced that the government will impose Movement Control Order (MCO) period starting 18th March 2020 on 16th March 2020 (BERNAMA, 2020a). Since then, the government has implemented several different types of measures: MCO, recovery MCO and conditional MCO to control and lessen the spreading of Covid-19 (Flanders Investment & Trade, 2021). Due to prohibitions of MCOs, many travel and tourism agencies had to freeze their activities, and all tourism centres had to stop operating. This includes Bako National Park. As the number of tourist arrivals in Malaysia decreases, the number of visitors in Bako National Park showed a major decline from 63,796 in 2018 to 60,347 in 2019 and lastly, 12,337 in 2020 (Sarawak Forestry Corporation, 2020a; Sarawak Forestry Corporation, 2020b). This is because international borders were still close since the first MCO and the national park had to stop operating a few times due to the restrictions instructed by the government. Only nearby locals were able to visit the park when it was open.

It is worth noting that the rapid growth of tourism in the past years has brought about many global environmental issues. Some of them are increased in pollution, depletion of natural resources, overcrowding, and climate changes such as depletion of ozone layers due to greenhouse gas emissions (Camarda & Grassini, 2003; The World Counts, 2021). With the Covid-19 pandemic, which caused significant tourism activities to be paused, the world of tourism has a golden opportunity to lessen or to even flip the environmental issues into beocming more sustainable. Restarting tourism, United Nation World Tourism Organisation (WTO) (WTO, 2020) has called for a responsible recovery due to Covid-19 in the tourism field. The core of this recovery will be more towards sustainability in order to fortify the tourism field's resiliency as the current pandemic has

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revealed the vulnerability of this field in terms of the need to protect the natural environment together with the interconnecting social and economic aspects. As such, this paper discusses the impacts of Covid-19 on Bako National Park in Sarawak, from the dimensions of environmental, economics, and social, and how tourism players strategise to survive the effects.

2. Literature Review

This section begins with the dimensions that frame sustainable tourism. This is followed by unpacking some ongoing concerns related to tourism activities and this serves as a background to the descriptions about how the Covid-19 pandemic had changed the landscape of tourism activities. The concept of household survival strategies is then explored by inserting cases from past studies that highlight how tourism operators survive the pandemic.

Sustainable tourism development is a concept that has been a constant concern in the world of tourism. The World Tourism Organization (WTO) is an agency that oversees the advocacy of 'responsible, sustainable and universally accessible tourism' (Healy & Carvao, 2015). They have defined sustainable tourism as 'tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, and environment and host communities' (as cited in United Nations Environment Protection & World Tourism Organisation, 2005). There are three vital dimensions that encompassed the sustainable tourism definition; economic, social, and environmental. These three critical dimensions may be different, but they are interrelated and need to be balanced to ensure sustainability.

Nicholas and Thapa (2010, p. 843) argued that the importance of the tourism industry is undeniable, especially in terms of economic aspects. However, for sustainable tourism development, the environmental aspect takes precedent. The economic side highlights the need to promote and boost the capability of the industry by maximising the benefits while lessening the costs. For social aspect, little attention was given due to its impacts are mostly 'intangible and occur at a slower pace' in comparison to environmental and economic aspects. Social sustainability mainly promotes the involvement of tourism players including tourists, local residents, and tourism suppliers and operates with integrity. Environmental aspect emphasizes on the protection of ecological and biodiversity to ensure resource sustainability. Despite there are differences in their level of priority, sustainable tourism development should not only be ecological sustainable but also economically feasible and socially fair.

With the current Covid-19 pandemic, the tourism sector was forced to change its effort to resiliency, sustainability, and interconnectedness between the tourism players as well as other industries (Ropp & Kleschenko, 2020; Soshkin & Fenton, 2020). There were many movements made by various tourism industry players to promote sustainability. One of them is the WTO itself. The WTO has launched a programme called One Planet Sustainable Tourism Programme with the purpose of restarting tourism to become stronger and more sustainable caused by the Covid-19 catastrophe (WTO, 2020). WTO (2020) urged that sustainability should not be a niche part of tourism anymore but become the new norm of the tourism industry. This is to ensure sustainable and resilient growth throughout every aspect of tourism and especially vital to cushion future crises. In Sarawak, the idea about Responsible Tourism was introduced to make sure that Sarawak's tourism industry remains 'relevant, viable and sustainable' (TTR WEEKLY,

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2021). Essentially, the idea is to raise awareness among tourism players from public and private sectors on best practices in sustainable tourism, in line the state's aspiration to place Sarawak as a leading ecotourism destination in ASEAN. These showed that even during chaotic occurrences like the Covid-19 pandemic, the tourism sector never stops calling and promoting sustainable tourism. They made the Covid-19 pandemic an opportunity to recreate the tourism industry to be more sustainable and more importantly, to avoid overtourism. But what is overtourism?

Goodwin (2016) from Responsible Tourism Partnership stated that overtourism happens when 'destinations where hosts or guests, locals or visitors feel that there are too many visitors and that the quality of life in the area, or the quality of the experience has deteriorated unacceptably.' President of Malaysia Association Tour and Travel Agents (Matta), Datuk Tan Kok Liang, stressed that overtourism needs to be taken seriously (Chin, 2019). Increasing the number of tourists' arrival to help with the economic growth is essential, but there are risks in putting immense stress on tourism ecosystems like national parks, coastlines, and beaches. We are in danger of overlooking the state of the environment, which needs preserving for the future generation as well as the society. However, due to the pandemic, the travel and tourism industry had come to a standstill; international borders are closed, both domestic and international flights, hotels, and resorts reservation are being cancelled (Lee, Mui, Kim & Kit 2020; Molz, 2020) which made what once was a crowded place became instantly vacant. Therefore, the negative impacts on the environment due to overtourism are finally lessened as there are no 'external interferences.' It has been seen that Covid-19 has positive effects on the environment, and 'the waterways and rivers in the world look cleaner, the air fresher, the smog gone, the haze dispersed, and the wildlife has filled the open spaces' (Khan, Shah & Shah, 2021).

The Covid-19 pandemic causes negative impacts for both economic and social aspects globally, but it is not necessarily so when it comes to the environment. In fact, there are some positive impacts on the environment with the decreased number of tourists' arrivals. As the economic activities slow down near to a halt, the world is 'getting a bit of a break' (Huizen, 2021) as reduction in travelling can lower the level of water, air, and noise pollution. In American Geophysical Union's 2020 fall meeting, researchers found that the environment is experiencing changes due to the Covid-19 pandemic (NASA, 2020). They stated that the rates of deforestation in some places are changing, air pollution is reducing, the quality of water is better, and snow is becoming more reflective in some parts of the world. These changes were seen through images in the satellite, which shows a significant improvement to the environment. Moreover, with the absence of humans due to the movement restriction erected by the government, sightings of animals roaming around once human-populated areas are getting frequent (BBC, 2020; Tan, 2020; Huizen, 2021).

Unlike what it did to the environment, the economic impact caused by the pandemic is devastating. Datuk Abdul Karim Rahman Hamzah, Sarawak's Tourism, Arts, and Culture Minister, has claimed that 2020 is a horrible year for the state's tourism industry (Borneo Today, 2021). This can be seen from the number of visitor arrivals and tourism receipts in the year of 2019 and 2020. The total number of visitor arrivals showed a significant 74 per cent drop from 4,662,419 in 2019 to 1,199,872 in 2020, and as for tourism receipts, 75 per cent plunged with just RM2.88 billion with an approximated loss of RM8.69 billion (Borneo Today, 2021; Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture Sarawak, 2021).

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Health impact is a major concern in time of Covid-19 and this has caused a lot of fear to the people engaged in tourism activities. This is due to the fact that tourism activities involve a lot of close contact between tourists and tourism providers, not forgetting the residents who live near the tourist attraction as well. The residents may fear the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic from tourists outside their area. They may not support the opening of tourist attractions with the still growing number of positive cases and death tolls around the world. Furthermore, tourists who move from one place to another play a major role in spreading viruses, epidemics, pandemics of outbreaks between local communities' destinations (Abbas et al., 2021). However, those who are directly involved in tourism activities may feel conflicted as tourism is their primary source of income. In order to reduce the risk of virus spreading, they need to understand why tourist attractions need to be closed down. A research was done in Snowdonia National Park, which explores the views of local communities on the social impacts in their daily life due to Covid-19 (Jones, et al., 2020). The researchers found that there is a mixture of both positive and negative impacts. The positive impacts are related to less overcrowding and the number of visitors. These are probably answered by residents who are not directly involved with tourism activities. As for negative impacts, they are related to income from tourism activities, and they are unable to socialise with other people as pre-Covid-19. Local tourism operators in Bako National Park may relate similarly to the responses gathered in Snowdonia.

Another important concept that frames the analysis of this paper is household strategy. Household strategy is first employed to study the economic behaviours of the urban poor in Latin American and Africa. Also termed as 'coping strategies', 'survival strategies' and 'adaptive strategies' in the literature, this concept is akin to marginalised communities and those who are exposed to risky environment (Wallace, 2002, p. 275). This paper uses the term survival strategies as the stories presented here are mainly about individual players rather than their households. Wallace (2002) argues that the purpose of the 'strategies' is to achieve certain goals in life, primarily for survival, adapting to new environment and towards social mobility. To do so, the low income must negotiate economic, social and institutional barriers.

Oftentimes, household strategise to maximise income while minimising expenses. The strategies include income diversification such as working overtime, engage in additional employment or obtain government benefits; managing household economies where households prioritize their expenses; as well as changing labour composition. Other approaches include mobilizing household resources and using network or kinship. The latter is exemplified in the case of the floating population in China, where children of schooling age are sent back to their hometowns, to their grandparents, while the parents of the children continue working in the city to maximize their household income (Yu, 2003). By now it is clear that the concept of household strategy focuses on households' resilience to overcome negative barriers and these barriers could be in the form of economic, social and institution.

Several studies have discussed about survival strategies employed by tourism actors as part of their responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. The survival strategies could occur at the industry or individual levels. More studies have focused on what could be done at the industry level. For example, Chaudhary (2020) proposed several measures that need to be taken up by the hospitality industry such as engaging in better promotions, more flexible pricing and services, and focus on spending that could bring direct profit. Tourism businesses should focus on brand management as an art of survival, and this

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includes solid relationship and honest communication with business partners (Pongsakornrungsilp, Pongsakornrungsilp, Kumar, & Maswongssa, 2021). Kumar and Nafi (2020) stressed the importance of private-public partnership and stimulus packages to help revive the tourism industry in Bangladesh. Survival strategies at individual level was highlighted in the work of Makoni and Tichaawa (2021). It is reported that informal business operators in Zimbabwe had to resort to illegal means to survive during the pandemic, because there were hardly other options to do so. Among others, they had to defy lockdown regulations by smuggling goods between Zimbabwe and South Africa; the goods include food, beverage, bales, and cigarettes. In Indonesia, the social capital of Minangkabau women street vendors in several tourist destination areas had helped to increase their economic welfare; they lent money and goods to each other out of mutual trust, cooperation and empathy (Irwan et al., 2022). The survival strategies reported at the individual level resonate more with the tourism operators focused on this paper, although some stories shared by them are tied to external efforts such as food supplies and other aids provided by the government.

3. Methodology

The data collection procedures that frame this paper are guided by the mixed methods design. Available media reports and research papers are collected through various online databases and platforms. These secondary resources are essentially focused on the current pandemic Covid-19 and past papers related to past incidents like severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) disease in the early 2000s. These are then reviewed and discussed in the paper. To understand how the effects of the pandemic affect the tourism activities and to the local stakeholders, we conducted in-depth interviews with tourism players who operate in Bako National Park. We interviewed three boat operators, two tourist guides and the secretary of Bako Boat Association who is also managing the boating ticket counter as well as one homestay operator as there are limited amount of tourism players who are currently active, or willing to be interviewed for this study. The seven interviewees are sufficient for the study, as mentioned in the work of Dworkin (2012) that five to fifty correspondences are adequate for qualitative research depending on the nature and the scope of the study. Because this paper aims to provide a preliminary understanding about how a specific group of local actors strategise to survive the effects of the pandemic, the seven respondents we purposively chose would be sufficient as they originate from the same place and have worked in the same industry for at least five years. The interviews, that lasted 40 – 45 minutes each, were mainly on the differences on what they had experienced pre, during and post Covid-19.

The data analysis for the in-depth interview is carried out by determining suitable themes – by manual coding – using the dimension in sustainable tourism. When it comes to impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on Bako National Park, they are largely categorised into economic, social, and environmental impacts and this is followed by the analysis of the survival strategies of the tourism players by the respective categories.

4. Result

4.1. Economic impacts and the relevant survival strategies

With the several lockdowns in place, it was not suprising when the number of visitor arrivals in Bako National Park demonstrated a major decline from 61,270 in 2019 to 12,337 in 2020 (Sarawak Forestry Corporation, 2020b). This is attributable by the fact

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that international visitors have contributed a large share of visitors number in the past years: 61 per cent in 2017, 64 per cent in 2018, and 67 per cent in 2019. As international flights were cancelled since the first MCO was erected, the government has been pushing for domestic tourism in the hopes that the tourism industry will slowly recover (Nurul Farhana et al., 2020; Chin, 2021; The Jakarta Post, 2021). Throughout the pandemic, the national park only managed to operate for a short period of time due to MCO being enforced.

Other than the apparent decline in the number of visitors, small businesses owned by the villagers were also affected especially boating services and tour guides. This is supported by Nur Anisah (2023) whose study took place during the time of the pandemic; her study reported an oversupply of boating services and local-owned homestays during the pandemic simply because the number of visitors were very low. While everyone needs to take a boat ride to get to the national park, the homestays are usually occupied by international visitor who often desire to experience local cultures on top of visiting Bako National Park.

To get to Bako National Park, visitors must take a boat from Bako Jetty Terminal. The journey takes about 20 minutes one way. The boating services are largely operated by Kampung Bako, a village located closest to the national park. They are operating under two associations, known as the 'old' and 'new' Bako Boat Associations. They are both monitored by Sarawak Rivers Board. The old assocation has been operating since 1965. The total number of boatmen from both associations is 70 and they use roation system when they receive visitors. The maximum capacity depends on the size of the boats but the biggest one is 12 pax. However, that is pre-Covid-19. The standard of procedure during Covid-19 has limited the number to five pax per boat.

Prior to the pandemic, the majority of visitors were from foreign countries, namely Europe and America. Locals only visited the park during weekends or holidays. The number of visitors before Covid-19 could reached up to 100 per day. This number translates to about 20 boat trips per day per boatman. Most international visitors came with travel agencies or they come as backpackers. However, during the reopen in the midst of pandemic, the visitors who came to Bako were mostly local and foreigners working in Malaysia. As mentioned earlier, the number of visitors have dropped significantly and at that time, Bako only saw six to seven visitors per week after it was reopened. The low arrival was because the people were unaware that Bako National Park had reopened, probably due to the limited marketing at that time. Moreover, the fear of Covid-19 was also one of the major reasons that might have hampered people's intention to visit Bako National Park. During the initial reopening of the park, a boatman could only gain two or three boat trips per week. After Phase-4 of MCO was enforced, their business slowly recovered as interstate travels were allowed.

Despite most of their income came from visitors' trip to Bako, the boatmen were able to survive when MCO was first introduced to Malaysia. Many of them are also fishers while working as boatmen. They were able to fish, sell and share their fishery yields to their village communities throughout MCO. In other words, when they cannot ferry passengers to Bako National Park, they focused on fishing and earned an income out of this activity (see narrative by Seman below). This is made possible when fishing and agricultural activities were allowed to operate during MCO. On top of that, supports from the government, private associations and individuals were always funneled into the village.

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> *Yes, we have lesser trips compared to before Covid-19. Business was bad. So we focused on fishing, and we sell the fish to the kampong people. I also share some of the catch with my relatives. You see, we are all related here (in the kampong)… In my case, I could still survive [from the effects of the pandemic].* (Seman, aged in 30s, male, boatman and fisher)

Fishing was not the only survival strategy employed by the boatmen. According to another boatman, Bako National Park's management had contracted their boating services to deliver construction materials for the park renovation (as cited by Mael below). As a matter of fact, Sarawak Forestry Corporation (SFC) commented that the lockdown had provided them with the opportunity to organise repairs and maintenance work of high traffic areas and public facilities in Bako National Park, and these would not have been possible on normal days (HAPPENINGS Feature, 2020).

> *When we could not ferry visitors, we carried supplies and materials for the repair work in Bako National Park. Because of that, we could survive the lockdown. At least we had something to do and we could earn some income from the maintenance works. They [park manager] hired quite a number of us [boatmen] for the job…* (Mael, aged in 50s, male, boatman)

Sport anglers also chartered the boatmen's boating services. Unlike Mael, Seman was less involved in the delivery services because he was more interested in engaging in recreational fishing activities. It is worth noting that recreational fishing was not allowed until 12 February 2021. Depending on when the bookings took place, there is a likelihood that Seman defied the lockdown regulations to survive the effects of the pandemic.

> *I received more bookings by avid fishers. I don't mind spending more hours in the water because I love fishing too. When they fish, I also fish and I sell my catch to the kampong people when I have more. I don't really take the transporting [of materials] job because I often have bookings and I need my boat to be in good condition for the clients.* (Seman, aged in 30s, male, boatman and fisher)

Being part of an association, the boatmen also had support from Bako Boat Asosciation. The associations were always promoting and marketing their boat trip packages through social media to spread awareness and attract more visitors. The efforts worked, not only because of the packages were attractive, but it was also driven by the people's preference to travel locally to avoid the risk of contracting the disease when they are abroad.

Compared to the boatmen, the tour guides were badly affected by the Covid-19. This is because they are wholly dependent on the visitation of tourists and they do not own assets (i.e., boats) like the boatmen do or other sources of income. Prior to the pandemic, there were seven licensed tour guides in Bako and they were always shorthanded. Their services were always in demand and fully booked. They received up to three trips per day especially by international visitors as these visitors preferred to use tour guiding services. However, after Bako National Park had reopened (but our borders were still closed), only three to four of them continued to be active because for the others, their licence have expired and it was rather expensive to renew the license as they had no source of income during lockdown. According to the tour guides, from reopening on 22

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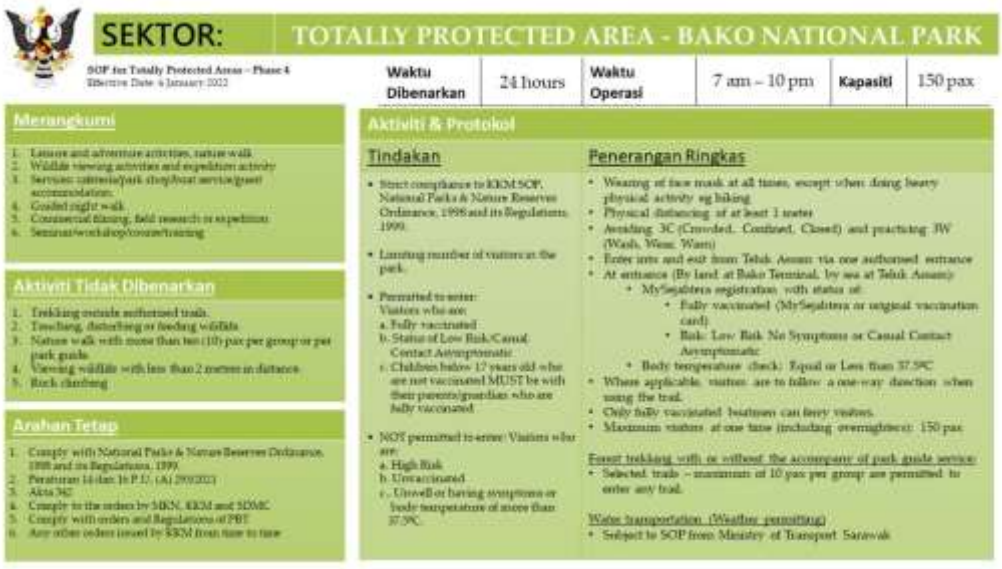
June 2020 to January 2022, no one used their services and only in February 2022 (Phase 4 of MCO) visitors starting to book for their services.

Along with boatmen and tour guides, homestay owners are also tourism players who contribute significantly to the tourism scene in Bako. There are a few Bako villagers who are operating homestays as part of their sources of income. Like other business operators, they had to close down their homestays business during Covid-19. As mentioned in methodology section, only one homestay operator managed to be interviewed. He has been in the industry over ten years and it is a family bsuiness. Prior to MCO, the homestay operator frequently received both local and international tourists equally in percentage. He provides additional services by hosting various traditional activies that can be done in the village such as *silat*, *ketupat* weaving, cooking traditional food, jungle tracking and visiting traditional products manufacturing factories. In a month, his homestay was usually booked from two to seven days. True enough, with the MCO, the number of booking went down rapidly. This brought heavy impact to the homestay operator as this business was his main source of income. Despite so, he has a catering business that was able to support his livelihood during MCO. He sold kuih and other types of home-cooked food. His clients include government workers whose income were less affected by the lockdown. As a matter of fact, the lockdown had changed the communication strategies that he uses to promote his business. After Bako National Park has reopened, the homestay operator continues to market his product using social media such as Facebook, along with physical marketing using bunting in Bako Village.

4.2. Social Impacts and survival strategies to negotiate the impacts

According to the boat operators and tour guides, there are fears of Covid-19 from both sides of tourism players and visitors. Despite the fear, the tourism operators bravethrough as tourism activities are their main source of income. Standard of procedures (SOP) was created and applied at their business locations in order to reduce the risk of infections from Covid-19. For boat operators, only five visitors instead of 12 are allowed in one boat and to wear face mask at all time. As for Bako National Park, the SOP is as follow (Figure 1):

Figure 1: Standard of Procedure (SOP) to enter Bako National Park



Source: Sarawak Forestry Corporation (2022)

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With SOP being enforced, the management are limiting visitors to avoid overcrowding and maintaining social distancing to lessen contacts among visitors. Homestay operators also sanitise and clean their houses regularly to maintain the hygiene. Before accepting visitors, they will check the visitors' vaccination status as they only accept fully vaccinated visitors. Hence, this can be seen that the tourism players are playing their parts to reduce the change of Covid-19 infection.

During the pandemic, the bond between the community of Bako became closer as they helped each other to endure the harshness of Covid-19. They shared fishing yields and food so that everyone could ease through their daily life (as narrated by Seman). However, in May 2021, Bako village had a lockdown due to some of the villagers were infected with Covid-19 virus. They had a hard time as their food stocks dwindled down and they were unable to go down to the sea. With this, the government, private associations, and individuals support were channelled into the village especially food stocks.

4.3. Environmental impacts and how these be part of the survival strategies

As Bako National Park as closed for a long time due to MCO, there are some changes to the park as it is a natural reserve rich in flora and fauna. With the absence of human presence, the water become clearer, and the level of noise pollution reduced as there is less boating service operating and less traffics as there are no visitors. This is especially true as there are frequent sightings of even rare animals such as Doria's angle headed lizard, rough-necked monitor lizard and double-headed snake in the park as well as Irrawaddy dolphin (Majestic Leisure & Tours, 2021) frolicking in the water since fewer boats are operating. This coincides with Nur Anisah (2023), in which her work reported that 'visitors mentioned the flora and fauna are in good condition'. In particular, Nur Anisah (2023) conducted a study to investigate the sustainable tourism performance of Bako National Park and her data collection took place across the different periods of the MCOs. The result of questionnaire conducted is heavily influenced by the global lockdown due to the pandemic. She found that the visitors are highly satisfied with the state of flora and fauna sighted at the park. There were even rare sighting of animals noted by the tour guides. These are good changes to the environment as the natural world needs its well-deserved 'breaks' from the busy human activities.

The improvement of the environment serves as a tool for one tour guide's survival strategy. He noticed that unusual animals that were rarely sighted before the pandemic had emerged. He took the opportunity to capture pictures of the rare animals and uploaded them on his social media (see Andi's narrative below). His strategy manage to garner and attract attention, not only from prospective foreign visitors, but also from local visitors who wished to have him to guide them when they visited the park. He estimated that by the time international visitors are allowed to enter Sarawak, he would be very busy tending to his clients.

> *We tour guides were badly affected [by Covid]. I lost my income for a long time [because there was no visitors]. So I thought I should make use of my time to see if I could find rare animals at Bako National Park. [Showing an image of a frog on his phone] I have not seen this frog for years and now it is back! I uploaded the pictures on social media. I have been receiving calls from potential clients asking me to show them the*

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animals. I never expect such responses from my postings! (Andi, aged in 40s, tour guide for 15+ years)

5. Discussion

The pandemic has affected the tourism activities and the tourism players in Bako National Park in three major dimensions: economic, social and environment. The impacts are both positive and negative. The negative impacts are mainly felt by the local tourism operators whose livelihood strategies are strongly linked to the tourism activities in Bako National Park. The positive impacts, on the other hand, appear to be more apparent to the environment. When observed together, they are all interlinked, and one cannot exist without the other. Around the world, the pandemic had put on hold tourism activities when borders were closed to prevent further spread of the disease. This is no exception to Bako National Park when local and international visitors, who have been the source of income of local tourism operators, stopped coming in because of the lockdown. And when people could travel domestically, many were still afraid of being infected by the virus, and they preferred to stay at home. This has resulted in a slow recovery of the industry. Consequently, local tourism operators had to deal with the situation much longer.

Much of the survival strategies related to the tourism industry are about what government or corporations could do to 'bounce back' into business. Several studies discussed about business strategies that are more agile and how government could intervene to help improve the situation (Chaudhary, 2020; Kumar & Nafi, 2020; Pongsakornrungsilp et al., 2021). These strategies echo the efforts carried out by the Malaysian government in the form of stimulus packages to sponge the effects of the pandemic on small businesses.

The survival strategies narrated in this paper are enabled by several factors. First, one needs to have assets to allow them to explore measures that could materialise their efforts. This is demonstrated by the boatmen who used their boats to go fishing, and to transport materials to compensate for the loss on income from ferrying tourists to and from Bako National Park. A similar example is observed in the case of the homestay operator who used his cooking skills to sell food. Another factor is government policy that allows certain operations to continue during the lockdowns. In the earlier lockdowns, essential operations are allowed to operate. These include activities related to food and transportation. The permission had enabled to the boatmen and the homestay operator to continue earning an income. Having said that, one boatman could have defied the conditions set during the lockdown when he transported recreational fishers to fish. This example shows that defying rules is another form of survival strategy, although it is risky. Unlike the situation in Zimbabwe, the action could have occurred during the later phases of the lockdown when the situation was more relaxed. For the tourist guides who are without the suitable skills or assets to materialise a survival strategy, the effects of the lockdown hit them longer but this does not that mean that they succumb to the situation. As noted earlier, one tour guide took the opportunity from the improved physical environment to further establish his portfolio to attract clients. In other words, his survival strategy will not garner him immediate benefit, but it is something for the near future.

The findings presented in this paper is limited to Bako National Park or that of similar contexts. Nevertheless, we need to be mindful that a qualitative study does not aim to

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generalise but to provide rich narratives about processes and experiences, just like how this paper has carried the stories of the tourism operators. Essentially, we have learned how individuals respond to the situation of the pandemic, using relevant skill and assets, within the economic, social and institutional barriers.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, there is a mixture of both positive and negative impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the tourism industry and, in this case, Bako National Park. From the changes caused by the pandemic, the management can improve the tourism policy better as the existing policy may have put too much stress on the natural resources which can be seen from the frequency of animals that were rare to spot became common after lockdown. Educating and promoting the definition of sustainability is also essential for all levels of stakeholders to sustain and preserve the improved state of the environment due to the pandemic when the park starts to operate again. Critically, promoting awareness should be done constantly so that visitors are aware of do's and don'ts as well as consequences of certain actions on the economic, social and environment towards Bako National Park.

All in all, this writing only provides briefly on what had happened to the tourism players mainly the boatmen, tour guides and homestay operator. There are both positive and negatives impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic in Bako National Park. Further research on visitors' perspectives on their purpose to visit Bako National Park during MCO and their opinion on the standards of procedures being imposed should be done to understand visitors' behaviour post-Covid-19.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The researchers used the research ethics that have been cleared and approved by the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities (UNIMAS) Postgraduate Research Committee during the Main Author's proposal defense. All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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