

The Formation of Mountain Guide Professionalism in Malaysia: An Analysis of History and Institutions

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ABSTRACT

Mountain guiding is a profession that has been recognised in Malaysia and has come about through a historical and institutional process. The aim of this study is to explore the professionalisation of mountain guiding in Malaysia from the informal local knowledge to a structured national program. The research adopts a qualitative document analysis approach to analyze government policies, historical documents and literature. The results reveal three periods of professionalization: the colonial period informal practice, the transitional period in the context of recreational expansion, and the more recent crisis-driven formalization period. The Forestry Mountain Guide (MGP) program was introduced in 2020 and is a pivotal institutional action towards addressing the rising number of safety incidents and fatalities in forest reserves. The study concludes that the MGP program represents a great step forward but there is a need to invest more in professional empowerment and international recognition for its long-term sustainability.

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1. Introduction

It is not an accident nor sudden that mountain guiding is now a recognised profession in Malaysia. It is the result of a lengthy and complex historical process, influenced by colonial experiences, increasing popular demand for recreation activities based on nature, institutional responses to safety issues, and a national policy on sustainable ecotourism. To understand the evolution of mountain guide professionalism in Malaysia, this evolution must be traced, from informal mountain guides in the forest to formal mountain guides who participate in a structured national programme.

Organised mountain guiding in Malaysia has its roots in the British colonial days. Local knowledge holders were already essential to expeditions of the colonists in hard-to-reach mountain regions as early as 1851. Sir Hugh Low's climb of Mount Kinabalu was the first professional guide in the area, with the help of Gunting bin Lagadan from Bundu Tuhan. Today, Gunting is remembered as the first pioneer of mountain guiding, a local guardian of the mountain, who made the climb possible with his expertise (Nur Widiyanto & Emanuela Agra, 2019). In a similar way, the Gunung Tahan expeditions in Peninsular Malaysia were undertaken for resource extraction and scientific mapping and heavily depended on the local and indigenous guides who had the local knowledge of the forest ecosystem. Although these were informal and primarily economic in nature, they provided a precedent that local knowledge of mountainous terrain was of great value (Sam Shor, Saidon, Azlizam, Mohd, & Abdullah, 2009).

The shift from informal guiding to a formalised profession continued to gain momentum during the twentieth century, fuelled by two related factors: the increasing popularity of recreational mountaineering and the increasing demands of managing the risks associated with it (Cohen, 1985). The formation of mountaineering clubs in universities, social media groups and the initiation of high-profile government mountaineering expeditions that propelled Malaysian climbers onto the international stage contributed to a surge in public interest in mountain climbing in the late 1990s (Sam Shor et. al 2022).

A crisis of safety, however, was a factor that eventually pressured institutional action. The Fire and Rescue Department of Malaysia (JBPM) reported 1,072 hiking-related incidents and 62 deaths in Permanent Forest Reserves (Hutan Simpan Kekal, HSK) from 2017 to 2021 (Forestry Department of Peninsular Malaysia, 2025). These numbers revealed a key deficiency: a community-based and organized system of forest recreation safety management. To address this, the Forestry Department of Peninsular Malaysia (JPSM) has launched the Forestry Mountain Guide (MGP) programme in 2020, with the dual mission to improve the safety of hikers and to empower the local communities through professional certification and sustainable participation in ecotourism (Malim Gunung Perhutanan website).

The process of building professionalism in the mountain guide profession in Malaysia thus lies at the crossroads of various factors, namely historical, institutional, ecological and social factors. The process of professionalisation of mountain guiding has been well documented and followed a similar trajectory around the globe, starting with informal mountain guides in the European Alps in the early 19th century (Van Loocke, 2015: 274), moving to the founding of La Compagnie des Guides de Chamonix in 1821 (Eikje, 2017), and finally to the establishment of the International Federation of Mountain Guides Associations (IFMGA) in the 1960s, which now represents more than 24 member countries and around 6,000 certified mountain guides worldwide (IFMGA, 2016).

This article explores the process of professionalization of mountain guiding in Malaysia from the early informal colonial mountain trips to the establishment of formal national programs.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Conceptualising Professionalism in Mountain Guiding

One of the first systematic discussions of the role of the guide is that of Holloway (1981) who discussed it in the context of role theory. Holloway described the guide as a figure with multiple roles within the tourism system: information provider, awareness raiser, motivator and educator, cultural ambassador, group leader and disciplinarian. In an extension of this analysis Cohen (1985) investigated the various types of guiding styles used in practice, and the difference between guides who act as pathfinders (geographical leaders helping tourists to move about in unfamiliar or inaccessible environments), and those who take on more interpretive and experiential roles. This was further refined by Gurung (1996) who differentiated between the tour management and experience management role of the guide. They believed guides are not just logistical coordinators but also cultural agents, whose main job is to influence the attitude and increase the understanding of the environment that visitors inhabit. Guides serve as cultural intermediaries, who help travellers avoid negative and disrespectful interactions with the host culture while helping to create more positive and respectful interactions between host and guest.

Recent research has further confirmed this multi-dimensional view and has introduced other dimensions. Hiew Soon Sang and Sharifah Rahama Amirul (2025) found that there are six core competency domains for mountain guides in Kinabalu Geopark: environmental awareness and sustainability, cultural competency, visitor management and personalised service, advanced technical skills, safety and emergency preparedness, and communication and language proficiency. This framework reflects the scope of the work of professional guiding, and implicitly questions a definition of professionalism that is limited in scope to technical aspects. Likewise, Mackenzie and Raymond (2020) highlighted the importance of three key skills for professional mountain guides: technical skills, personal experience and practical skills, while Wilson and Dashper (2023) pointed out that many guides, especially in the Global South, still lack opportunities for professional development due to a lack of financial support and institutional incentives.

As a whole, this body of scholarship demonstrates that mountain guiding professionalism is a multifaceted accomplishment that is based on technical training, institutional recognition, social legitimation and community embedding. This holistic understanding is used in the present article to explore the ways in which these same dimensions have been negotiated and institutionalized, in the Malaysian context.

2.2. The Global Historical Trajectory of Mountain Guiding

The formalisation of mountain guiding as a profession started in the European Alps in the early nineteenth century, when the Romantic culture ideal, the rise of tourism in the Alps and the need to cross the dangerous mountains all combined. In Europe, mountain guiding started as an outgrowth of existing rural livelihoods (Van Looke, 2015: 274). The Chamonix and Argenti re valleys in France were home to farmers, hunters and chamois catchers who were among the first to monetize their local expertise about the Alps and provide a service to tourists, as described by Van Looke (2015). This knowledge was the result of generations of economic activity in the mountains, such as game tracking, herding livestock and passes (Diemberger, 1983). This experiential depth was important for making local guides essential to an increasing number of educated people who were attracted to the Alps by Enlightenment curiosity and Romantic aesthetics (Van Looke, 2015: 274). With the growth of alpine tourism in the mid-nineteenth century, came an increase in the risks of unguided ascents, leading to a

number of accidents on Mont Blanc and the establishment of La Compagnie des Guides de Chamonix (CGC) in 1821 (Van Looke, 2015: 275).

The CGC was a turning point in the development of the professionalism of guiding. It implemented systematic regulation, the so-called *tour de rôle*, which aimed to provide equal distribution of guiding assignments to registered local guides, avoiding favouritism and ensuring a stable distribution of income (Van Looke, 2015). The organisation established fixed price for guiding services, determined client to guide ratios (Van Looke 2015: 275), and limited the activity of foreign guides in the Chamonix-Mont Blanc area, which also had the effect of protecting local livelihoods and providing safety measures and quality standards (Colonel 2009, 21–23, 81, 115–117; Hansen 2013, 156–158). According to Hansen (2013) the CGC had a hegemonic power in Chamonix and for many decades influenced the norms and symbols of mountain guiding culture without being questioned (SNGM 2017a, 2017b). This mixture of professional self-governance and local exclusivity (Colonel 2009, 21-23, 81, 115-117; Hansen 2013, 156-158) created a model which would have various forms of expression in systems of guidance around the world.

The institutional structure in Switzerland evolved parallel but separately. Starting in the 1850s, each Swiss canton enacted legislation to regulate their guides, publish official guidebooks with set prices and place responsibility for the guides with cantonal authorities (Hungerbühler, 2013). The Swiss Alpine Club was established later and had an important complementary role, propagating training standards and harmonising with governmental regulations. These separate systems in the different cantons slowly merged over the course of decades and in 1942 the Swiss Mountain Guides Association (Schweizer Bergführerverband) was formed and in 1990, guide training and certification was recognised at the federal level (Hungerbühler, 2013). In their comparative study on the institutional development of French and Swiss ski systems, Climaz and Langenbach (2019) highlight that there are two different models: a more centralised and state-diploma approach in France (e.g. École Nationale de Ski et d'Alpinisme (ENSA)), and a more distributed approach in Switzerland, with strong professional self-regulation and alignment to international standards. Both models, however, followed a similar path of increasingly formal training, certification of competences, and convergence of national systems to new international frameworks.

The international aspect of guiding professionalism became more and more concrete in the 60s of the last century with the creation of the International Federation of Mountain Guides Associations (IFMGA) by the guiding associations of France, Italy, Austria and Switzerland (IFMGA, 2016). The IFMGA was reorganized in the 1990s under its present name, and now consists of over 24 member countries and represents some 6000 certified guides around the world. It is responsible for the harmonisation of training courses, certification processes and codes of ethics, the ultimate aim of which is to achieve the harmonisation of IFMGA certified guides across national boundaries. By extending membership to non-European countries, such as Nepal, Ecuador and other mountain countries, the federation's development was a process of globalisation of the concept of professionalism in guiding and a system of institutional practices (Einang, 2007).

In addition to the historical study of mountain guiding, a new dimension has been added by contemporary scholarship that looks at how environmental change is impacting mountain guiding in real time. In the French Alps, Mourey, Perrin-Malterre and Ravanel

(2020) discovered that the seasonality of mountaineering has been drastically reduced by warming temperatures and erratic weather, compelling guides to adapt or opt for lower altitude and non-traditional activities. This transition, they say, can sometimes lead to conflict with professional identity and guides need to redefine their roles, which may be in opposition to their training and self-perception. Hanly, McDowell, and Tricker (2023) found similar trends in the Canadian Rockies where changes in the glaciers and thawing permafrost have impacted climbing conditions, the objective risk of climbing, and early career guides who are climbing in more dangerous conditions. Hanly and McDowell (2024) took this analysis back in time and showed that the risk landscape guides operate in has changed dramatically in the Lake Louise area over the past century due to climatic change. These literature reviews highlight a general point that is relevant to Malaysia: professionalism is an ongoing process and not an accomplished fact, but a continuous process of reacting to environmental, institutional, and socioeconomic pressures.

2.3. The Historical Development of Mountain Guiding in Malaysia

The development of mountain guiding in Malaysia did not start with policy documents or professional associations, but rather with the local knowledge of local communities that have lived and travelled in the highland forest environment long before the advent of formal tourism and state governance. This was the ecological, spatial and experiential knowledge that was the basis of the development of Malaysian mountain guiding. It was recognised by colonial authorities in the nineteenth century, and was the first, informal stage of the development of a structured national profession.

The exploration of the mountain ranges of Malaysia by the British from the mid-nineteenth century was more for the purposes of resource exploitation, scientific mapping and geopolitical reconnaissance than for recreational purposes. These journeys were made possible by the knowledge and navigational skills of local guides, as described by Sam Shor et al. (2009), and without them the dense and ecologically complex tropical forest environments would have been impassable. The Scrivenor expedition to Gunung Tahan in 1906 demonstrated that effective collaboration with local guides was an essential part of the work of the expedition, and not a luxury. The knowledge of the guides of the terrain, weather and forest ecology proved to be the key element to the success of the expedition. Payments and rewards were given to local guides (Sam Shor, Saidon, Azlizam, Mohd, & Abdullah, 2009).

The most famous name in this early history is that of Gunting bin Lagadan of Bundu Tuhan, Sabah who, in 1851, helped Sir Hugh Low make the first recorded ascent of Mount Kinabalu. Today, Gunting is remembered for his pioneering the mountain guiding in Malaysia. He was a person who was locally knowledgeable and physically familiar with the mountain, which made it possible for him to achieve success despite the absence of formal training and institutional certification (Nur Widiyanto & Agra, 2019). Beyond its historical value, his story has symbolic significance as it establishes indigenous and local community knowledge as the core resource of Malaysian mountain guiding. This created a link between the professional identity and ecological rootedness, which still influences the development of the profession today.

The shift from unorganized guidance of colonial times to a formal profession of guidance continued to gain momentum during the twentieth century. This change occurred as recreational mountaineering became more popular and the government became more

aware of the management needs of the ecological and safety aspects of recreational mountaineering (Goh Hong Ching, 2009; Sam Shor et al., 2022). In this article, Sam Shor et al. (2022) describe the changes in the nature of mountaineering in Malaysia since the late 1990s, when it was still a rather specialised activity for specialist clubs, to becoming a popular recreational activity. This shift in attitude was evident in the growth of mountaineering groups and societies, university climbing clubs and the rise of social media groups with hundreds of thousands of members sharing routes, experiences and safety advice online. A number of high-profile, government-sponsored expeditions thrust Malaysian climbers into the international spotlight and encouraged greater public interest in mountain recreation. In addition, the development of these big mountain trails gave physical substance to this developing interest, and helped to hasten the demand for organized management.

The formalisation of mountain guiding in Sabah had its final institutional push with the enactment of the Kinabalu Park in 2002, which required all climbers to be accompanied by licensed mountain guides, who were local residents (Goh, 2009). The importance of this legislation was manifold. It provided the legal framework for compulsory professional guiding in a large recreation mountain area, provided a formal employment opportunity which benefited directly rural communities around the park, and established a process of regular licensing and assessment which held guides to a constant professional standard. The recruitment and licensing of guides in Kinabalu Park has been carried out by a special mountain guide committee under Sabah Parks since 2005, which includes annual interviews, examinations and fitness assessment (Goh, 2009). Although confined to Sabah, this was one of the earliest and significant examples of institutionalised mountain guiding which would lead to the national programme that was to come in Peninsular Malaysia almost 20 years later.

In Peninsular Malaysia, a more immediate safety crisis was the impetus towards formal guiding institutionalization. Between 2017 and 2021, the Fire and Rescue Department of Malaysia (JBPM) reported 1,072 incidents and 62 deaths related to hiking activities in Permanent Forest Reserves (PFR) which revealed a gap in the management of forest-based recreation (Forestry Department of Peninsular Malaysia, 2025). The study on outdoor adventure accidents at Gunung Ledang conducted by Sidi, Sulaiman and Remeli (2019) revealed that severe weather, rough terrain, forest location, and lack of dedicated rescue facilities were the main risk factors, whereas the study by Nik Jazwiri Johannis et al. (2020) showed that Malaysian hikers, especially novices, had low levels of preparedness. Preventable accidents were due to lack of equipment, lack of physical fitness and lack of safety knowledge; and the lack of a preparedness framework left hikers and rescue agencies without a clear plan of action. Nik Jazwiri (2022) then created the Mountain Hiking Preparedness Model (MoKeMM) as an evidence-based attempt to fill these gaps, but noted that individual preparedness models would only be able to solve part of the issue. Also, there was a need for a systematic institutional intervention at the point of access to the mountains themselves.

In 2020, JPSM, in collaboration with JBPM, launched the Forestry Mountain Guide (MGP) programme, which was exactly that kind of intervention. The MGP was originally designed to train and certify locals as a professional mountain guide with responsibilities to ensure that safety issues are addressed, sustainable forest management is carried out, as well as to ensure that the locals are prepared for first aid and emergency rescue (Official Website of the Forestry Department of Peninsular Malaysia, 2025). Its first cohort of 60 certified guides was launched in Johor and by

2022, the government had pledged to grow the programme to 1,200 guides in Peninsular Malaysia. The programme was granted legal powers with the introduction of certified guides from 2023 at specific high-risk zones which were previously lacking in the previous interventions (Amran Mulup, 2022).

3. Research Methods

The present study uses a qualitative document analysis approach in analysing the historical formation and institutional development of mountain guide professionalism in Malaysia. The documentary collection consists of government policy documents, official publications of the Jabatan Perhutanan Semenanjung Malaysia (JPSM) and Malim Gunung Perhutanan (MGP) programmes, international guiding documents, peer-reviewed scholarly publications, historical expedition records and selected media documents. The data collection was done systematically with the academic databases and institutional websites based on the criteria of relevance and credibility. Analysis was conducted in three stages: preliminary reading, inductive coding and thematic interpretation, each of which was based on three historical periods: informal practice during the colonial era, recreational expansion during the transitional period, and formalisation during the crisis period at the national level. This is epistemologically suitable for historical and institutional research questions, the goal of which is not to glimpse at the lived experiences of individuals at a given moment, but to follow the trajectory of the construction of professional norms and regulatory frameworks.

4. Results

4.1. Historical Formation: From Informal Knowledge to Institutionalised Profession

The evolution of mountain guide professionalism in Malaysia is a story that can be both globally recognised and yet uniquely Malaysian. The Malaysian experience spans three broad stages: informal practice during the colonial era, transitional growth due to recreational expansion, and crisis-driven national formalization, which all reflect the basic pattern found in the global literature, but also the ecological, cultural and institutional context of a tropical forest nation. It is crucial to understand this trajectory as it will help assess the historical contribution of the MGP program and what it needs to still do to realize its developmental potential. The initial period of Malaysian mountain guiding, from the mid-nineteenth century to the colonial era, was indeed the type of practice that was informal, community-based and experiential, and which predates formal institutionalization in all the countries studied in the comparative literature.

The guides who accompanied the British teams to Gunung Tahan and other mountain ranges were not certified guides who worked under a system of regulation. Rather, they were members of their own community, whose skills and expertise with the highland forest terrain was gained from many generations of working and living in forested landscapes, and which was a form of professional competence which predates and underpins the formal recognition of guiding as an occupation. The guide is indeed as Cohen (1985) described him, a pathfinder. These early guides were geographical leaders, whose chief use was to guide the colonial visitor through an environment to which he was without local knowledge and which was inaccessible or dangerous to him without their help. This knowledge was not the result of training or certification processes, but of experience in particular landscapes. This is a kind of expertise that Van

Loocke (2015) found to be the universal basis of alpine guiding prior to formalization, in the form of local farmers and hunters' ecological knowledge being transformed into economic practice.

Gunting bin Lagadan, who led Sir Hugh Low to the top of Mount Kinabalu in 1851, has an analytical significance in addition to his historical significance. According to Nur Widiyanto and Agra (2019), Gunting is the first pioneer of mountain guiding in Malaysia and his success proves that indigenous knowledge of the area was not supplementary to mountaineering success, but fundamental to it. This positioning contradicts the notion of professional guiding that is limited to the technical and institutional aspects of the profession. Rather, it argues that "ecological rootedness" and "community embeddedness" are an integral part of professional competence in mountain guiding. The Malaysian case thus from its inception sets up a model for guiding professionalism that is inextricable from the community knowledge and professional function. This fundamental relationship has far reaching implications for the design, evaluation and development of the current MGP programme.

From the late 1990s to the 2010s, mountain recreation in Malaysia underwent a transitional period, moving from a niche activity to a more popular one, and hence the institutional pressure to formalise it at the national level. Sam Shor et al. (2022) record how this change was manifested in the growth of mountaineering clubs at universities, workplaces and communities; the creation of online communities with hundreds of thousands of members; and a number of government-sponsored expeditions that helped to popularize mountain climbing. The growth of recreational use led to a greater demand for the infrastructure of mountain management. Government agencies, including JPSM and DWNP, responded with more formal interventions, such as carrying capacity protocols, standard operating procedures and ratio of guides to climbers. But these steps were taken piecemeal, and were not accompanied by the full institutional structure to which a high level of public involvement eventually led. This is similar to the trend that Mourey et al. (2020) and Hanly et al. (2023) found in their research on guiding in the French Alps and Canadian Rockies, respectively. As these authors explain, professionalism in mountain guiding is often not a process of organic professional development from within the guiding community but rather the result of external pressures, whether demographic, environmental or accident-driven that make the costs of informal arrangements unacceptably high.

The formalization phase that led to the creation of the MGP program in 2020 is the critical institutional response to the buildup of safety failures, driven by the crisis. The 1,072 hiking related incidents and 62 deaths from 2017 to 2021 provided the political and administrative impetus that voluntary safety measures and partial regulation were not able to provide. This situation is similar to the historical case of the Mont Blanc accident, which led to the establishment of the Compagnie des Guides de Chamonix in 1821 (Van Loocke, 2015). In both instances, tragedy was a force that provided the institutional impetus not provided by professional self-organization. The empirical foundation for understanding the need for voluntary safety education to be inadequate and the need for mandatory professional guiding as a proper institutional response was provided by Nik Jazwiri Johannis et al. (2020) who found that overall level of preparedness among Malaysian hikers was consistently poor, with insufficient equipment, inadequate physical conditioning and limited safety knowledge contributing to preventable accidents.

This was further supported by the development of the Mountain Hiking Preparedness Model (MoKeMM) by Nik Jazwiri (2022) which through systematic research showed that evidence-based intervention models were needed and possible, but that their effectiveness required institutional enforcement models that could only be realised with a formal guiding programme. It is not the underlying scenario that informal knowledge first and formal institution later, and crisis promotes formalization, which is common to the European and North American historical trajectories, that is unique to the Malaysian scenario. Rather, it is the particular institutional avenue through which formalization has been pursued that is different. While European professionalization has been initiated from the bottom by guiding associations looking to become autonomous and standard setters, Malaysian professionalization has been initiated from the top by the state and is integrated into a forestry governance environment, instead of a sports management or tourism industry environment. The implications of this distinction will be explored in detail in the next section in the context of professional identity, community involvement and sustainability of the institutional model.

5. Conclusion

The professionalism of mountain guides in Malaysia is a work-in-progress, a historically rooted, real and important institutional achievement with incomplete aspects of empowerment, weak economic bases, and is still under development in aspects of international recognition and professional self-governance. The MGP programme is the most significant institutional development towards professionalism of Malaysian mountain guides since the compulsory licensing of guides in Kinabalu Park in 2002 and was initiated in 2020 due to the safety issues that had resulted in the deaths of 62 people over a span of four years. It has established a legal structure, a training system and a deployment model based on the community, which are the bases of a guiding profession recognized by the nation. However, the foundations don't make up the whole structure. From the analysis in this article, it is clear that the mountain guides' full potential as a developmental profession for the guides, the rural and indigenous communities they represent and the forest ecosystems they are entrusted to protect, cannot be realised without sustained institutional investment. Beyond safety certification, this investment should include professional empowerment, economic security, international recognition and true community ownership. The formation of mountain guide professionalism in Malaysia is, ultimately, a story about how local knowledge becomes institutional authority, how community practice becomes professional identity, and how the state's response to crisis can, with the right institutional investments and the right developmental commitments, become a genuine instrument of sustainable rural transformation. That story is still being written, and its most consequential chapters remain ahead.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Ethical approval was not required for this study as it is based entirely on the review and analysis of existing published literature and publicly available data. No human participants were directly recruited, interviewed, or studied.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest in writing this article.

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