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# Accessible Tourism Destinations in Malaysia: Disabled Tourists' Requirements

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#### ABSTRACT

Background: Experts believe tourism as one of the largest and rapidly growing sector around the world at the present. Experts strongly stating that for every customer complaint, there are 26 other unhappy customers who just remained silent for the unresolved issues. Deep understanding regarding disability and access improvement will be the main goal in eliminating discrimination especially in the tourism sector. **Objective**: Therefore, this papers aims to find out the main requirements of the disabled tourists while visiting national parks in Malaysia to create an accessible tourism destination. National parks is selected as a scope of this paper because accessible tourism concept still in infant stage in Malaysia. Hence, this paper targets the national parks as a small portion from the entire tourism sector as whole. Results: Nowadays, many national parks cannot be accessed by the disabled people due to lack of concern and ignorance among the society. Disabled people who are been categorised as minority groups usually discriminated when it comes about rights to travel. They often perceived as weak and has low interest level to explore the beauty of the nature. In many situations, society norms and social attitude generally create stereotype and discrimination which leads to inequality in the society. Generally, when the disabled people plans to choose national parks especially as their tour destination, their wishes will be restricted by the challenges which will be faced in the national parks due to their limited physical capacity. This situation is worsened by the inaccessible facilities which are provided, resulting in disabled people to have low tendency in visiting national parks. Hence, expert opinions is highly recommended in expressing the requirements and barriers faced by the disabled tourists while visiting the national parks. Experts can be used to represent the disabled tourists because some of the experts are also disabled from birth or due to some unwanted accidents. Only a disabled person can understand another disabled people's voice. Findings from this paper can be used to develop a fully accessible national parks by all kinds of people without any complaints and hassles. Conclusion: Although this paper only targets the national parks but all the ideas and expert reviews can be implement in the tourism sector as whole. Transparency communication between all the stakeholders can eliminate misunderstandings and disputes. Collaboration from all the stakeholders are required, at least reduce the inaccessibility issues in the tourism sector.

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## INTRODUCTION

Experts recognize tourism as one of the largest and fastest growing sector around the world currently. Experts in tourism field believed that for every customer complaint, there are 26 other unhappy customers who just remained silent for the unresolved issues. It is also known that it takes 12 positive experiences to make up for one unresolved negative experience. Therefore, understanding customers is more much more important than advertising the exciting activities provided in the

tourism destination. Mouth-to-mouth words are a major factor which plays an important role in the decision making process.

According to Abbasidorcheh and Mohamed (2013), experts and researchers agree that for better understanding of cultural tourism, one must know how the world heritage sites are used in satisfying their vital needs. Currently, most experts in the field of tourism are concerned with the impact of the excessive development of tourism. This, accordingly, has provoked a lot of discussions about sustainable tourism.

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Researcher's main goal is to deepen the understanding regarding two types of tourism that will be the future trends in the tourism sector, namely, senior tourism and accessible tourism. Both of these tourism markets are interrelated to each other because of their almost similar customers' requirements. One should not forget that disability is often directly related to the elderly and that, "with increasing age, disability or restricted capacities also increase in a gradual way" (Alén, et al., 2002).

Anuar, et al. (2012), strongly arguing that even though there are many studies on various aspects of tourism destination, the shift from "mass tourism" to "alternative tourism", the changes of tourist tastes as well as an increment in travel capabilities, has made tourism destination to be more creative in offering niche tourism or more importantly, "Tourist Friendly Destination". Due to there are no specific theories, concepts, frameworks and indicators in tourists friendly destination usage, thus it leaves a gap of knowledge and misunderstanding about the formation of "tourist-friendly destination".

The nature of commitment with consumers and the expectations they have of the marketplace is rapidly shifting. Yet, one market that has continued to be underserved by the worldwide tourism industry is that of disabled tourists and those with extra access needs. Time has come for the tourism operators formally change their operations in order to guarantee access to tourism goods and service for the disabled people and people with access needs. Most importantly, such human rights should put forward as a significant force for ensuring equal rights (Darcy, Cameron, and Pegg, 2009).

Tourists are heterogeneous in nature and travel for different reasons, identifying and attracting the 'right' visitors is a must, for sustainable tourism to be achieved. Looking from this perspective, successful sustainable tourism calls for a strong tourist database that accounts and relates the characteristics of holiday makers, their travel motives, knowledge and attitudes towards sustainable tourism, intention to act, responsible behaviour, and travel satisfaction. To attract tourist's attention, the management must make sure a minimal challenges to access the information and user friendly database (Daud and Rahman, 2011).

According to United Nation Economic and Social Commission of Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) (2000), tourism is a quickly growing industry in the Asian and Pacific region whereby disabled people and elderly are becoming a growing customers of travel and other leisure-oriented products and services. Disabled rights to travel allowing them to enjoy travel leisure experiences as much as others. Moreover, families with toddlers are becoming part of this increasing tourist markets too, due their similar requirements with the disabled and the elderly. However, their travel experiences are still marginalized by transportation barriers, inaccessible

lodging and tourism sites and insufficient customer services. Thus, tourism should be made accessible to everyone due to larger number of users. Though larger group of tourists would benefit from accessible facilities and services but most tourism services providers in the United Nation Economic and Social Commission of Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) region have yet recognized the significance to take corrective actions on this issue.

Number of elderly people in Malaysia is increasing gradually since the year 1980. According to Sanmargaraja and Wee (2012), Sanmargaraja and Wee (2013) elderly people are those who are 65 years and above. World Assembly on Aging in Vienna (1982) also defined elderly as those who are 60 years and above (world Assembly on Ageing 1982). Today, elderly people who are retired tend to travel to relax and escape from their routine schedule but currently the built environment is inaccessible for this specific group of people. Generally, elderly people are related to health problem and mobility limitation. Therefore, most of them usually use an additional walking aid to move around independently namely walking stick, walker, quad cane and others. Thus, elderly need an accessible environment to enjoy their entire tour without any obstacles.

Elderly are those who can self-sponsor without needing support from their children because they have their own funds to travel overseas or domestic location to relax their mind. Today, elderly have more money compared to the past, more leisure time to participate in tourism and this potential market cannot be overlooked elderly people groups as target market (Esichaikul, 2012). However Chen & Wu (2013) highlights several number of travel constraints which elderly need to face such as inadequate facilities, information, time and money, fear of condemnation by others, physicals restrictions and lack of social networks that encourage them to travel. This group of people need to consider many aspects than the younger tourists and encounter many challenges during travelling (Lee and Tideswell, 2005).

Hindrances often defined as factors that prohibits or reduce an individual's frequency, rate or pleasure as a participant in a leisure activity (Tsai 2010). Barriers are a physical structure which restricts or hinders something. Travel barriers can be categorized into three main categories, namely intrapersonal obstacles, interpersonal obstacles and structural obstacles (Sanmargaraja & Wee, 2013, Sanmargaraja & Wee, 2014). Intrapersonal obstacles self-confidence, includes lack of lack encouragement or lack of information about prospects for leisure that effect favourite or lead to a lack of interest in a specific kind of leisure activity.

Interpersonal obstacles are those related with others including lack of leisure partners or lack of social interaction skills. Structural obstacles are those that exist between individual favourites and participation in a leisure activity, including lack of finances, shortage in transportation, limited abilities and lack of time or architectural barriers. Means of transportation will be another major issue in tourism which will restrictions the tourist's travel satisfaction. Poor transportation service will impede the potential customer from taking up vacation (Wang & Yang 2011).

In modern era, large group of elderly people wants to take up a vacation but grey tourism personalized service does not achieve the designated position and it has very low tourism quality due to inadequate specialization. Domestic tourism still lacks special tourism services are offered for the elderly and the professional travel middle-aged tourism market. Most of the travel agency in the development of tourism products less consider the elderly consumer demand or features design the procurement of professional products, the existing product for the old psychological and physiological analysis of tourism is not doing good enough, most eagerly for the elderly, there is no efforts of design tourist service products (Patterson 2006).

Darcy (2006) said that collaboration between the stakeholders are required to produce a document of shared knowledge whereby the academic researchers have to interpret problems and issues to create a research agenda for accessible tourism. Basically, industry engagement had both demand and supply components, whereby the disabled people seek to express their needs and wants to providers while the industry expressed a desire to engage with 'one voice" to represent disability needs. Both recognised that functional actions needed to be undertaken to engage each other in accessible tourism provision. The outcome of the discussions will be involving the establishment of a body to galvanise accessible tourism from the external government stakeholders' perspective (supply and demand) and for the need for a government driver of accessible tourism (coordination or regulation).

Disabled tourists market is very profitable since they the loyal customers compared to other group of customers. Accessible tourism is not only beneficial to the disabled people but is it also beneficial to everyone, namely elderly people, parents with baby pram, toddlers, people with permanent and temporary injuries, pregnant ladies and others because all the people in this group requires the same requirements as the disabled people. Therefore, this papers aims to find out the main requirements of the disabled tourists while visiting national parks in Malaysia to create an accessible tourism destination. National parks is selected as a scope of this paper because accessible tourism concept still in infant stage in Malaysia. Hence, this paper targets the national parks as a small portion from the entire tourism sector as whole. Findings from this paper can be used to develop a fully accessible national parks by all kinds of people without any complaints and hassles.

## Methodology:

This research were conducted using experts regarding accessible tourism. In-depth interview session were conducted to list down the requirements and opinion regarding accessibility in Malaysia. Questions were asked based on their requirements and experiences while visiting national parks in Malaysia. Experts were divided into two (2) groups namely, Malaysian respondents and Non-Malaysian respondents. They are from various field and have vast experiences with the disabled people. Respondents were selected randomly, therefore there is no gender discrimination. Selection of respondents was carefully done from various fields to represent opinion from all the parties involved in the policy making, designing and construction process. The respondents were selected namely from government academicians, non-governmental departments, organizations (NGO's) and architect as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Categories of the Respondents

Respondents	Field of Organization	Gender		Total	Grand Total
		Male	Female	Total	Grand Total
Malaysian	NGOs	7	1	8	12
	Government	-	2	2	
	Architect	1	-	1	
	Academician	-	1	1	
Non-Malaysian	NGOs	8	10	18	20
	Government	-	-	-	
	Architect	-	-	-	
	Academician	2	-	2	
					32

## Results:

## Eliminating Barriers:

Respondents were questioned about their main expectations while visiting national parks in Malaysia. All their opinions and comments were listed carefully to identify the key elements which determine their opinions. There are several prime

requirements of the disabled people on accessible tourism destination namely eliminating barriers, barrier-free facilities, implementation of new technology, information on tourism destination, tour guides with proper training and safety and usability. Eliminating barriers is discussed in Table 2.

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Generally, we are not interested in removing barriers of limited access unless we experience the accessibility issues ourselves or we personally know someone who does. Hence, it is time for all of us to learn about difficult world of disability and perceive that disabled people are not someone who are inactive or silent. Extra aid can be provided to remove the current barriers in temporary basis. It is known that implement of the accessible tourism is solely dependent on the external resources, thus restructuring the entire environment is depends of the availability of the resources.

Table 2: Respondents' response regarding eliminating barriers

Question	Respondent's Response	
What are the main requirements of the disabled people on	Signs and	- Install Braille for the visual impairment
accessible facilities in the national parks?	symbols	- Provide sign language assistance for the hearing and
		speech impairment
	Pedestrian	- Provide blinking or sound signals at tourist areas to
	crossings	facilitate movement and crossing of pedestrian ways.
	Toilet	- Install alarm bell in the toilet to alert in case of
		emergency
	Ramp	- Provide more ramps for the wheelchair users
		- Replace stairs with ramp so that everyone can
		benefit from it
	Steps	- Provide low steps on buses, trains, aircraft,
	_	walkalators, etc.

### Barrier-Free Facilities:

Holidays becoming part of our life due to increment in our standard of living, hence holidays becoming an unachievable dream for certain group of people. Tourism also plays role in social development. Social tourism policies aimed on two main areas namely support for the infrastructure and support for the person. The purposes of barrier-free

environment are to increase involvement of the disabled people in the society and cultivating social inclusion and independent living. In addition, barrier-free environment promising equal access to an excellence health and social care as well. Barrier-free facilities is highly recommended avoid discrimination in the tourism destination. Barrier-free facilities is discussed in Table 3.

Table 3: Respondents' response regarding barrier-free facilities

Question	Respondent's Response	
What are the main requirements of the disabled people on	Equal access	- Hoping wheelchair users will able to access all the
accessible facilities in the national parks?		areas without any problems
		- Wanting accessible facilities plays a role as aid
		tools
		- Provide user-friendly facilities
	Signs and	- Set "Arrival information board" in the bus stops
	Symbol	- Set "Alarm Signal" at cross-road for the visual
		impaired
		- Braille information
	Ramp	- Provide non-slippery ramps with handrails
	Transportation	- Provide waiting information with low floor bus
		- Provide accessible transportation via "Mobile
		Application Service"
		- Increase the number of special vehicles within 30
		minutes
	Guiding Blocks	- Provide tactile flooring
	Trails	- Provide accessible trails in the parks
	Tour Guide	- Tour guide with sign language proficiency

## Implementation of New Technology:

Innovation and technology are meant to boost business and destination competitiveness and increase tourist's travel experience indirectly. By using technology, accessibility is not an impossible matter and is feasible in short period of time. Changes is becoming more apparent and continuous, similar to the opportunities that it is creating. Toward

the end, we have no other way to go but to understand and accept changes by implementing the innovation resulting in cultural change. We must contribute to make sure that changes assist to build more accessible, more inclusive, more creative and more ambitious tourism that is originated in a firm belief in ethics and social unity. Implementation of new technology is discussed in Table 4.

Table 4: Respondents' response regarding implementation of new technology

	8 1				
Question		Respondent's Response			
What are the main requirements of the disabled people on		Positive	That will be very good due to everyone need accessible		
	accessible facilities in the national parks?	Impact	tourism. It will give a good impact too to the Malaysian		
			economic.		

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### Information on Tourism Destination:

All this while, the establishment of accessibility information has been highly fragmented, incorrect and incomplete. Information require models that affect tourism selections and tourist satisfaction levels expose the significance of two main circumstances. First, society and tourism providers need an awareness and understanding regarding the modification of information requirements and secondly the enhancement of specific communication sources that fulfil individual needs.

The plan of a holiday can be both dream and nightmare resulting from insufficient information which can leads to mistakes and dissatisfaction. Past tourism research frequently revealing that disabled people are very loyal customers and often thinking of making multiple visits to the place which provides greater level of accessibility. Other group of people may also obtain advantage from improved accessibility, namely parents with baby pram, people with temporary injuries and tourists with many wheeled luggage. Information on tourism destination is discussed in Table 5.

Table 5: Respondents' response regarding information on tourism destination

Question	Respondent's Response	
What are the main requirements of the disabled people on accessible facilities in national parks?	Information	Prior information to planning holidays     Provide adequate about accessible tourism destination     Provide information on accessible facilities regarding access and support aids
	Tour Guide	- Send tour guide to proper training

## Tour Guide with Proper Training:

Good public relation can make a significant variation for any tourist. Hence, it is unfortunate that staffs often lacking of self-confidence and personal service skills when delivering servicing to the disabled tourists. Sending staffs to the disability awareness training and communication skills courses will increase the positive thoughts towards the guests with a disability, they have no different from other guests and it is not complicated to fulfil their

requirements. Disability awareness training programs not only increase the participants' sensitivity towards the abilities and requirements of guests with disabilities but it also enriched them with the essential communication skills. Usage of unusual and offensive words which generates stigma can be avoided totally. By providing a welcoming service to the disabled people, we can actually deliver an excellence service to all. Tour guide with proper training is discussed in Table 6.

Table 6: Respondents' response regarding tour guide with proper training

Question	Respondent's Response	
What are the main requirements of the disabled people on	Tour	- Tour guide with proper training and adequate
accessible facilities in the national parks?	Guide	information about the tourist destination
		- Tour guide must provide Braille for the visually
		impaired
		- Talented tour guide who can understand about
		disabilities and provide an excellence services

## Safety and Usability:

Although the Universal design approaches have used to deliver accessible characteristics for disabled people, yet the disabled people normally faces difficulty to identify and use it. When the disabled people try to fight for their rights by demanding for accessible facilities, the situation as minority users always becoming main reason for abandoning their

requirements and participation. By showing their ability as disabled people in public area not only boosting their confidence level in social life but also showing others about their situation and barriers faced by them caused by the inaccessible environment. Safety and usability is discussed in Table 7.

**Table 7:** Respondents' response regarding safety and usability

Question	Respondent's Response			
What are the main requirements of the disabled tourists on	-	Safety, usability and accessibility PLUS have		
accessible facilities in the national parks?	Usability	Universal Design principles.		

### Discussion

From the Table 2 to Table 7, it is found that all the respondents have their own requirements regarding accessibility in the national parks in Malaysia. Since accessible tourism is still considered as a new concept and it is not well-known yet in Malaysia, thus expert opinions are highly welcomed.

Requirements of the respondents covers all the accessible elements which need to be considered in the provision of accessible tourism in Malaysia.

Requirements of the respondents consists of several elements namely, eliminating barriers, barrier-free facilities, implementation of new technology, information on tourism destination, tour

guide with proper travel training and safety and usability. There are different level of acceptance disabled people in the society. In delivering the best accessible facilities, there often will be misunderstanding between the service providers and disabled people. Lack of communication will be the main reason for misunderstanding which often leads to confusion everywhere.

Many stakeholders in the tourism industry feels that renovating or upgrading existing facilities in the tourism destination is waste of time. Profit from tourism destination is not profitable because the cost of upgrading is more than the profit. In some cases, even though the staffs of the tourism destination or stakeholders knew about the special requirement needed by the disabled people but they tend to be ignorant because they are not willing to accept extra costs, therefore they are saying that they could not understand the requirements as an easy way to escape from social responsibility. It is easy to give excuses when the intention of solving the accessibility issues are not there. Insufficient of external resources cannot be seen as a barrier in providing accessible environment especially in the tourism destination because tourism sector is the only sector usually makes money due to there will no one who does not like vacation or holiday. Thus, all the accessible features can be turn into revenue by the service providers without any doubts.

Cameron (2010) strongly stating that the criticism of the social model of disability is not new and has been a hot topic for many writers in disability studies since a long time ago as it is written in the Affirmative Model. This model require us to be different and think differently about being different and every one of us will benefit out of it collectively. Hence, we must stop considering disability as a big hindrances in our daily life which can limits our wills. Prevention is better than cure, therefore we must be ready to handle the disability issues effectively rather than waiting for this issue to be an alarming issue to react.

# Conclusion:

The acceptance level in the society is very low due to excuses which are been given in implementing new concepts. Unavailability of required training and courses are also used to neglect the minority users in tourism sector. Generally, disabled people are neglected due to their physical deficiency and they are not provided with enough assistance. Most of the time, they are even unaware about their own rights and they are always been blamed for not understanding the instructions given by the staffs at the tourism destination. After each trip, disabled people usually feels blissful and blessed. They will be passionate to travel more because they can feel the belongings and highly self-esteem. These positive feelings usually makes the person to be happier and excel in their career.

Although this paper only targets the national parks but all the ideas and expert reviews can be implement in the tourism sector as whole. Transparency communication between all the stakeholders can eliminate misunderstandings and disputes. Communication in the same place and same time are highly recommended to reduce the bureaucracy system. More research need to be conducted in this field to educate the society and to be an eye-opener to everyone that accessibility is not only provided for the people with disabilities but accessibility is required to all us who have different requirements when we are planning for tour. More number of researches will make this issue as an alarming issue in the society. When the disability is perceived a part of the society, then separation of the people with disabilities from the society can be diminished.

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