

IMPACT OF THE TELOK MELANO-SEMATAN PAN-BORNEO HIGHWAY ON THE HOMESTAY SECTOR IN TELOK MELANO, SARAWAK

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Abstract

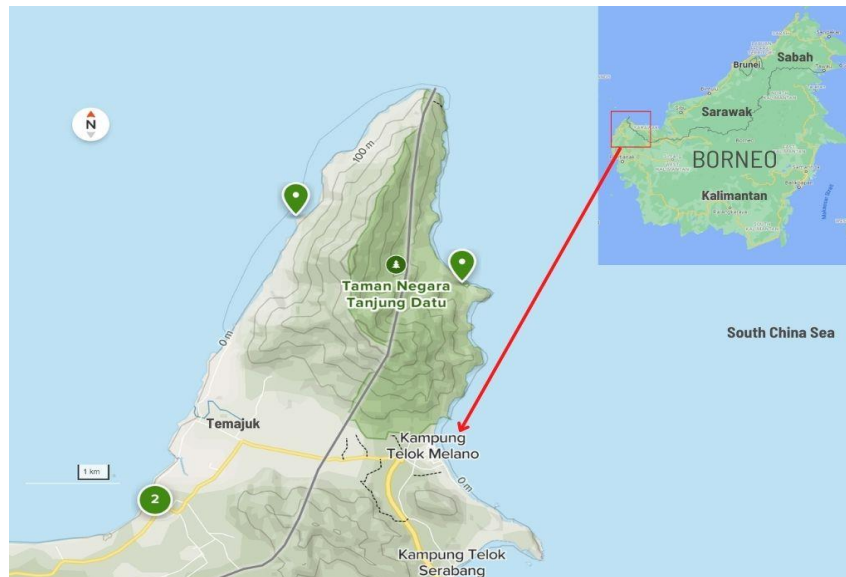
Through both library and field research, this study investigates the impact of the Pan Borneo Highway Telok Melano-Sematan route on the Homestay service at Telok Melano, Lundu, Sarawak (Malaysia). A total of ten informants were interviewed, including the village chief and the homestay owners. The findings show the Pan Borneo highway's Telok Melano-Sematan section had a positive impact on the Telok Melano homestay program. Among the visible effects are increase in visitor arrivals, an increase in registered homestays, and an increase in the economic impact of ecotourism. Homestays are estimated to grow in numbers in the upcoming years, particularly with the installation of public facilities. This study is notably important in documenting the preliminary impact of the Pan Borneo highway construction on the local economy.

Keyword: Homestay, Telok Melano, Pan Borneo Highway, ecotourism, local economy

1. INTRODUCTION

Telok Melano is a remote settlement in Sarawak, Malaysia; see Map 1. Prior to 2019, this hamlet could only be reached by boat; see also Ishikawa (2010). During the north-east monsoon, which lasted from early November to March, the turbulent seawater insulated this area from the outside. Furthermore, the unavailability of a road network connecting Sematan to Telok Melano left the area underdeveloped for decades. Despite these challenges, Telok Melano has a rich natural heritage for Sarawak's tourism market. The area's beautiful beach, bay, islands, and tropical forest are the main attractions for tourists. In recognition of the potential of ecotourism, the locals attempted to establish Telok Melano as an ecotourism destination with very little effort in the beginning. In 1996, one of the approaches was to implement a homestay program. The initiative was carried out in collaboration with the Malaysian Fisheries Development Authority and the Sematan Fishermen Association. The government introduced the Homestay program with the intention of improving rural households' quality of life and encouraging their participation in the development and

management of the local tourist economy (Chong, Dilah & Yusriadi, 2022; Ibrahim & Ahmad, 2009).



Map 1. The location of Telok Melano (Sarawak, Malaysia).

Telok Melano's Homestay program included 16 houses in 1996. In 2000, the number of participants increased to 23. The coordinator of Telok Melano Homestay, Faiza Mohamad, claims that the majority of tourists were foreigners before the Pan Borneo highway was constructed in 2019. These tourists stayed at Telok Melano's Homestay or guesthouse throughout their visit. The cost of their accommodation during their visit was RM 80.00 per person. Even though Telok Melano has immense potential as an ecotourism destination in the Lundu district, the absence of a road network to join Telok Melano to the Sematan area restricted access to other public infrastructure such as electricity, fresh water, and communication networks. According to Hamit's (2003) study, the Telok Melano homestay program only attracted 661 visitors and generated RM 40,790.00 in revenue over a five-year period (1998-2002). The projected tourist industry at Telok Melano faced challenges such as a lack of infrastructure, human resources, finance, government oversight, and so on.

After the establishment of Malaysia in 1963 and 50 years later in 2015, the government had begun to devote resources to Telok Melano. The Pan Borneo Highway, a megaproject authorized under the 11th Malaysia Plan, was scheduled to begin in 2015. The Telok Melano-Sematan-Kuching-Serian-Sibu-Bintulu-Miri route was included in the initial phase of the project. Telok Melano was assigned as KM 0.00 and served as the starting point for the Pan Borneo highway. The Pan Borneo highway's Telok Melano-Sematan route officially opened to the public in January 2019. This study examines the influence of the Pan Borneo Highway on the accommodation market, especially the Homestay program at Telok Melano, and the impact of the Covid-19 epidemic on this sector.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The construction of a decent road infrastructure, especially the connection between urban and rural areas, has a great impact on basic infrastructure construction and boosting the socio-economic status level of a certain area. Taohong Li et al. (2020) in a research on 56 countries participating in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) reported that the BRI was successful in increasing the number of tourists, creating cooperation in promoting tourism, and making tourism destinations more attractive. Economically, road networks have been confirmed to be capable of encouraging economic development (Wenjing 2020), improving community access to essential services, and providing additional market and employment opportunities (Jacoby, 1998). In contrast, the inability to develop a decent road network and transportation has limited the growth of the tourism business (Odeku, 2020). This is comparable to Telok Melano's homestay service sector which started in 1996. Telok Melano was recognized for its rich natural environment but was infrequently visited by visitors prior to the Pan Borneo Highway's commencement on January 26, 2019.

Telok Melano, an isolated place separated by physical geographic constraints has a small number of intensive scholarly work carried out on its community. Ishikawa (2010) was the only early academic work that concentrated on the anthropological perspective in Telok Melano, specifically the local and national identity of this border community. Roberts (2012: 199) noted in his review of Ishikawa's book that Telok Melano "was simultaneously isolated, poor, and backward for centuries, but the nexus where global, regional, and national developments intersected, impacting the inhabitants' lives and drawing them willy-nilly into broader imperial, commercial, political, and cultural narratives and networks." Indeed, this remark is very generic and overstated, as the present Telok Melano community is still naïve in social economy and development to this day. According to our observations, the assertion that Telok Melano is a location where global, regional, and national developments converge may be appropriately applied following the building of the Pan Borneo Highway. Telok Melano's homestay program is the only sector that has developed through time and chronically, demonstrating that this area is becoming a component of global, regional, and national growth.

The development of a homestay program in Telok Melano was first illustrated in Nazarudin's Master's thesis (2003). This thesis explored the government's tourism planning in the southwestern region of Sarawak, Malaysia, namely the Lundu-Semantan area, which includes three national parks (Gunung Gading National Park, Talang-Satang National Park (Turtle Islands), Tanjung Datu National Park, and the Samunsam Wildlife Sanctuary). Telok Melano, which is located in this area, is also taken into account by the government in state and national tourist planning. Initially, the Malaysian Federal Fisheries Development Authority characterized the homestay program as a community-based project. This program started in 1998 as a community-based initiative with just eleven participants at the beginning. Although his study depicts a very brief history of homestay in Telok Melano, his work is a primary resource on the background of the homestay program.

Nor Shuhada et al. (2019) wrote a paper on the homestay program in Telok Melano, and this research was carried out during the transition phase of this area, namely just a few years before

the Pan Borneo Highway was completely finished. In general, their paper discussed homestay management, the role of Malaysia's Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture in supporting this program, advertising strategies, and detailed the problems in the operation of Homestay in Telok Melano. All of the issues mentioned were intimately tied to the accessibility of the outside community and vice versa, and the growth of this program is greatly dependent on changes in the transportation system.

Chong, Dilah, and Yusriadi's (2022) recent work may be regarded as the most current update on the Telok Melano homestay program. Their research focuses on the social and socioeconomic changes that emerged as a result of the Pan Borneo Highway route's construction. They noted that the construction of the Pan Borneo Highway from Sematan to Telok Melano has had an impact in terms of the influx of local outsiders and the growth of tourism in this area, including the establishment of a homestay program. As a consequence of this construction, the basic infrastructure, including electricity and water supply, has improved in this area, benefiting the Homestay program. The homestay is now well-equipped with complete facilities, which is in complete contrast to the account of Shuhada et al. (2019). In regards to culture, their research found that cultural erosion is a continuing phenomenon that existed prior to the construction of this new route. Overall, their research only devotes a small part of its attention to this program, despite the fact that it is the most remarkable program in Telok Melano.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

In this study, two methods-library research and field research-were employed. In library research, books and related published materials serve as the primary sources of secondary data (George, 2008). The field research, on the other hand, gathered information on-site through conversations and interviews with homestay owners, and the targeted data are the statistics of tourists who checked-in, total income generated, as well as activities provided by homestay operators at Telok Melano. The Telok Melano field research was carried out from January 6 to January 12, 2022. 10 informants in total, including the village head, the homestay coordinator, and the hosts, were interviewed. The data collected during the field survey was compared to data from studies undertaken by Hamit (2003) and Shuhada et al. (2019) prior to the Pan Borneo Highway's Telok Melano-Sematan planning. The Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia notarized and authorized this study on February 1st, 2022 (UKM PPI/11/8/JEP-2021-878).

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section examines the impact of the Telok Melano-Sematan route, Pan Borneo highway, on the Telok Melano homestay tourism business. There are three topics highlighted: 1) the number of tourist arrivals; 2) the management and services provided; and 3) the impact of Covid-19 on the Telok Melano homestay program.

4.1 The Number of Tourist Arrivals

As previously stated, the Telok Melano homestay program began in 1996. However, the unavailability of a road infrastructure, electricity, and treated water prevented the homestay program from growing and resulted in a lack of visitor interest. According to Hamit (2003), the majority of tourists that visited were foreigners. Table 1 provides statistics on visitors to the Telok Melano homestay from 1998 to 2002.

Table 1. Tourist numbers at Telok Melano homestay (1998-2002)

Year	Total number of tourists
1998	6
1999	98
2000	77
2001	381
2002	99
Total	661

Source: Hamit (2003)

The number of tourists began to increase after the Pan Borneo highway's Telok Melano-Sematan route was launched on January 26, 2019. According to Faiza Mohamad, the Telok Melano homestay coordinator, the majority of visitors who stay in the homestay are now locals. Table 2 displays the tourist arrival statistics at the Telok Melano homestay in 2019.

Table 2. Statistics of tourists at Telok Melano homestay in 2019

2019	Total number of tourists
January	1130
February	1930
March	1667
April	742
May	98
June	367
July	225
August	483
September	227
October	224
November	318
December	1788
Total	9199

Source: Coordinator of Telok Melano's Homestay (2020)

The statistical data shown in Tables 1 and 2 clearly demonstrated a staggering increase in inbound tourists for the homestay program in 2019. It clearly illustrates that the completion of the Pan Borneo highway's Telok Melano-Sematan route in a remote, underdeveloped area at Telok Melano may attract a significant number of tourists. The presence of tourists in Telok Melano can supplement the revenue of homestay entrepreneurs while also improving the local

economy. The number of stalls run by the local inhabitants at Telok Melano beach supports this. In addition, the Pan Borneo highway project brought together other essential facilities such as electrical supply, treated water, and communication networks.

4.2 Homestay Management and Services

There were 16 households which participated at the beginning of the Telok Melano homestay program. In 2000, the number of households increased to 23. In terms of management, the arrival of tourists was managed and handled by the homestay coordinator, who served as a liaison between the hosts and the guests. Tourists were also provided with cultural and art events as part of this initiative, such as Sarawak Malay drum performances and other cultural activities. Visitors were also given the chance to take part in the everyday activities of the local villagers, such as fishing, harvesting black peppers and rubber tapping. This arrangement for homestay programs was maintained until the end of 2018.

When the Pan Borneo highway's Telok Melano-Sematan route was launched on 26 January 2019, the basic concept of homestay service had changed significantly since 1996. For example, during the program's initial stage, the visitors stayed with the owner in a separate room designated for homestay. During their stay with the host, they will have the chance to participate in local cultural activities and even dine with the host's family. Today, the services offered have changed and are similar to those of a commercial lodge. Field research showed that no longer did tourists have access to cultural and artistic events. The number of homestays in Telok Melano has increased to 32 by the end of 2020. Along with the growth in homestay registration numbers, it was discovered that the operators were adding more rooms or developing additional accommodations close to their own properties. A comparison of Telok Melano's total number of homestays before and after the Pan Borneo Highway's Telok Melano-Sematan route opened in 2019 is shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Total number of homestays at Telok Melano

Year	Total number of homestays (Unit)
1996	16
2000	23
2020	32

Source: Coordinator of Telok Melano's Homestay (2020)

4.3 The Impact of Covid-19 to the Homestay Programme at Telok Melano

In December 2019, SARS-CoV-2 (Covid-19) virus was detected in Wuhan, China and spread globally to 25 countries (as of June, 2020) in Thailand, Korea, Japan, United States, Philippines, Vietnam, etc. (Wu et al., 2020). In Malaysia, the first Covid-19 infected case was detected on 25 January 2020 which involved 3 Chinese citizens (Elengoe, 2020). On 16 March 2020, the Prime Minister of Malaysia announced travel restrictions called Movement Control Order (MCO) effective 18 March 2020. As a result of MCO, all everyday operations, including Telok Melano's homestay program were halted, suspended and strictly monitored. Telok Melano's homestay program has seen a 58.8% decrease in visitor arrivals since the

implementation of MCO. This situation had an impact not only on the revenue of homestay operators, but also on the local economy of the villages, such as small businesses that depend on tourist arrivals. The total number of tourists at Telok Melano as a result of Covid-19 is shown in Table 4 below.

Table 4. The Impact of Covid-19 to the Homestay programme at Telok Melano

Year	2019	2020
Month	Total number of tourists	Total number of tourists
January	1130	2887
February	1930	898
March	1667	0
April	742	0
May	98	0
June	367	0
July	225	0
August	483	0
September	227	0
October	224	0
November	318	0
December	1788	0
Total	9,199	3,785

Source: Provided by the Telok Melano's Homestay Coordinator in 2020

5. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

In conclusion, the completion of the Pan Borneo highway's Telok Melano-Sematan route has had a positive impact on the homestay programme in Telok Melano. The previously rural and backward location has been transformed into a new tourist destination in the southwest part of Sarawak. The influx of tourists to Telok Melano enhanced the local community's socioeconomic status. Telok Melano will undoubtedly grow as a well-known ecotourism destination in Sarawak in the next years. This study provides valuable insight into the early impact of the homestay programme in Telok Melano following the presence of new basic infrastructures.

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