



International Conference on Responsible Tourism and Hospitality (ICRTH): Post-Event Reflection and Assessment



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ABSTRACT: International Conference on Responsible Tourism and Hospitality (ICRTH) was planned by Sarawak Research Society (SRS) in 2019 with the aim to advance the discourse on responsible tourism for sustainable development. The first conference was held virtually in May 2021 and the second version was organised in Sarawak in September 2022 using a hybrid approach. It is a conference that brings governments, academics, researchers, industry players, associations, and communities together to harness partnership for a greater cause. Despite being a young conference, it receives some attention from the regional and international delegates, including officials from the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) and Emerald Publishing. In particular, ICRTH2022 was purposefully designed to (1) involve local enterprises and support their business/products, (2) engage local communities and maximise travel benefits, (3) empower the youth and work with them, and (4) incorporate sustainable practices into the conference. This conference notes, however, also highlight some limitations or constraints in organising the conference for future consideration. The intention is to reflect on the shortcomings and evaluate what can be done better. The originally Sarawak homegrown ICRTH has now spread its network and partnership beyond its border to Southeast Asia and Asia Pacific. More importantly, it enables the responsible tourism movement and missions to gain more ground in the said regions.

KEYWORDS: ICRTH; responsible tourism; stakeholders; partnership; sustainable practices

Background

The International Conference on Responsible Tourism and Hospitality (ICRTH) was planned by the Sarawak Research Society (SRS) in 2019 with the aim to advance the discourse on responsible tourism for sustainable development. Calling for tourism's responsible actions by

the stakeholders, responsible tourism ensures that tourism is manageable and beneficial to the local communities in a long run (Ting & Yusrini, 2022). With the theme “*Towards Responsible Tourism: Convergence of Knowledge and Practice – Co-creating Values for a Sustainable Future*”, the ICRT2020 was designed to facilitate communication and partnerships among tourism stakeholders in order to effectively realise responsible tourism initiatives. Instead of being just another academic conference, the event intended to bring governments, academics, industry professionals, associations, and communities together for a common purpose. The plan was presented to the Ministry of Tourism, Creative Industry and Performing Arts (MTCP, previously known as the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture) in Sarawak, where it was well received. Topics of the conference included leadership and stakeholders in tourism, tourism and hospitality for tomorrow, sustainable travel, nature and heritage tourism and the roles of host communities, youth empowerment in the travel industry, women in tourism and hospitality, as well as responsible production, consumption, and disposal.

Due to the COVID-19 outbreak in March 2020 and the uncertainty it entailed, the plan to organise the ICRT2020 in August was put on hold. Multiple meetings were held with the MTCP and key partners, such as UCSI University Kuching Campus, Emerald Publishing in East Asia, and the Southeast Asia Research Academy (SEARA), to inaugurate the ICRT while making sure health and safety were not compromised. It did not take long to reach the consensus to hold the ICRT virtually via Zoom Meeting and Facebook Livestream on the 27th and 28th of May 2021. With the support of the MTCP and 16 national and international institutions, the ICRT2021 was held as scheduled. Aligning with contemporary issues pertaining to preparing the tourism industry for the post-COVID-19 era, the ICRT2021 employed the theme “*Rebuilding Tourism for the Future through Sustainable Development.*” Three keynote speeches, one expert dialogue, and 21 forum sessions, featuring 100 speakers from 28 countries, were conducted smoothly with minor technical glitches. In addition to the opening remarks from the Deputy Minister of Tourism in Sarawak and the Director of the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) in Asia Pacific, ministerial and government officials from different countries also shared their views about tourism recovery. Most notably, the Sarawak Commitment to Responsible Tourism was pledged during the conference (Louis, 2021). Based on registration numbers and website traffic records, the ICRT2021 attracted more than 3,500 delegates from 96 countries and six continents. The recordings of all speeches and sessions are available at www.responsibleborneo.com/icrth2021.

Development



Figure 1: Photo session with the Honourable Minister for MTCP and Distinguished Guests from the UNWTO and PATA

With the ease of movement restrictions and gradual return of international travel, the SRS decided to organise the ICRTH2022 in hybrid mode at UCSI Hotel Kuching Campus (Sarawak, Malaysia). Scheduled to take place from 1st to 3rd September 2022, the conference adopted the theme “*Mobilising Responsible Tourism into Actions: Towards Economic Prosperity, Socio-Cultural Inclusivity and Environmental Sustainability*”. Forty topics were discussed in the conference’s different sessions (including two keynote speeches, two expert dialogues, 26 panel sessions, and 10 workshops) by 150 speakers from 30 countries. All the topics and their respective recordings are available for viewing at www.responsibleborneo.com/conferenceprogramicrth2022. Additionally, 81 academic delegates presented their papers in concurrent presentation sessions and were offered the opportunity to publish their work in the conference proceedings and selected international journals. While the conference also attracted many online delegates, it was physically attended by more than 250 delegates from 27 countries.

It goes without saying that the success of the ICRTH2022 is attributed to the effective partnership among its stakeholders. Managing priorities and fostering responsible stakeholder partnership are increasingly important for tourism development and recovery (Yusrini et al., 2022). The unwavering support from the MTCP and government agencies, such as Business Events Sarawak, the Sarawak Museum Department, and the Sarawak Forestry Corporation, as well as the participation of various academic institutions and international bodies like the UNWTO, the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA), The International Ecotourism Society, Emerald Publishing, the Asian Development Bank, and the SEARA in the conference, were pivotal in achieving its aim and missions. The involvement of 33 national and international partners was another testament to our collective commitment to responsible tourism not only in Sarawak but also in the region. Furthermore, the ICRTH2022 was purposefully designed to engage the locals, including community members (such as by inviting them to sell their local products at the conference venue and bringing delegates to visit several rural destinations) and the youth (such as by encouraging them to showcase their talents through a poster competition and to sing the national anthem during the conference).

Conference Design with Responsible Initiatives

Even though the ICRTH is a young conference, it has received significant attention from the regional and international community. There are multiple reasons for this spotlight. First, the ICRTH is more than just an event — it is part of the responsible tourism movement. Hence, the conference serves as a platform or avenue for delegates to network, collaborate, and perpetuate the collective commitment to responsible tourism. Second, responsible tourism is not just about tourism. Rather, it uses tourism as a driver or vehicle to make changes happen. Moreover, “responsibility” in tourism involves every person or organisation, not just those in

the tourism and hospitality fields or sectors. Contemporary issues, such as green investment, capital development, equal opportunity, and climate change, are pertinent to responsible tourism and societal well-being. Third, the ICRTM advocates behavioural change and collective action from multiple stakeholders for the common good. While cooperation among leaders and managers is essential to make an impact on the society and environment, individual efforts count. Every individual, whether he/she is a politician, tourism adviser, woman, young person, or community member, is regarded as an equal partner. In the spirit of leaving no one behind, all have a role to play in creating value and making a meaningful contribution to sustainability. The fourth, which intertwines with the aforementioned, is that the ICRTM necessitates and heightens partnership. This explains why it is not a pure academic conference, and why it calls for the participation of industry players and global tourism bodies, such as the UNWTO (Tommy, 2022). It is high time that academia and industry, corporate leaders and community members, and international bodies and local entities bring their resources together, see their differences as strengths, and find ways to work together. These are the messages of the ICRTM. The following section elucidates some of the responsible initiatives implemented during the conference.

Involve Local Enterprises and Support their Business/Products

At the ICRTM2022, beside the sharing and discussion sessions, the exhibition of local products was another highlight. More than 30 small and micro local enterprises owned and run by local communities were allocated prime spots at the entrance of the conference to introduce their products to the national and international delegates. Numerous products were displayed, from tuak (a local rice wine) to gula apong ice cream (a local palm sugar flavoured ice cream) to Sarawak-patterned batik clothes and more. Despite their varying types, these products shared the same feature as representatives of Sarawak's unique cultural diversity and heritage.

As the ICRTM highlights the importance of responsible tourism actions with benefits to local business at its core, making profit was never its primary goal. Hence, all the local enterprises who opened booths at the ICRTM2022 were not charged any vendor fees. Local vendors were also provided basic facilities and decorations to help them set up their booths for maximum exposure. This arrangement not only benefited the local communities directly but also enriched the experience of the delegates too. During the conference's break times, delegates visited the booths and talked to the local vendors, learning more about Sarawak through the products they offered. While the delegates came to know more about the beauty of the local culture and people through these conversations, local vendors were able to share their backgrounds and improve their essential service skills in preparation for welcoming delegates of other events in the future.



Figures 2 and 3: Booths displaying and selling local products during the ICRTH2022

Engage Local Communities and Maximise Travel Benefits

The involvement of local communities was not limited to the booths and exhibitions during the ICRTH2022, as they were also engaged in the post-conference programme. Involving local communities in tourism activities develops the sense of pride that leads to a sense of belonging towards the community's heritage (Ting et al., 2022). An excursion was arranged after the conference to bring the delegates to several designated destinations in the Bau District. These locations have been developed or managed by the local community with the support of the local authorities. Tour guides during the excursion were local people who knew the places' authentic origin and took pride in introducing them to the delegates. Delegates were not only impressed by the majestic scenery but also felt inspired by the historical stories tracing back to the pre-Brook administrative era, which remains mostly unspoken and unheard of, especially about how these places were found and developed. As such, the excursion was not a mere visitation for leisure, but more about connection to the people and culture to enhance the delegates' appreciation and experience.

This excursion created a significant economic impact on the local communities because every ringgit (Malaysian currency) or dollar spent was directly injected into sustaining local supply chain activities and building an ecosystem of responsible practices. When visiting local destinations like the Paku Rock Maze Garden, the Borneo Keranji Farm, and the Siniawan Night Market, the delegates also learned about the people, nature, and culture. They then shared their excursion experiences with their friends and family via social media upon their return home, which in turn, has helped attract more visitors to these destinations with a sense of responsibility. This has benefited homestay providers, food and beverage businesses, tour guides, souvenir sellers, and many more parties towards long-term responsible tourism development.



Figures 4 and 5: Excursion after the ICRTH2022 to learn about local destinations, nature, and culture

Empower the Youth and Work with Them

The ICRTH places great emphasis on youth involvement because they are future leaders who can drive responsible tourism initiatives further. When the conference was first organised in 2021, a group of undergraduate students from the Faculty of Hospitality and Tourism Management, UCSI University Kuching Campus was approached due to their tech-savvy skills. Although holding an international event virtually was challenging, they were up to the task with good preparation and guidance. Subsequently, when the conference was held in hybrid mode in 2022, these students, together with other students, continued their engagement and trained themselves in the breadth and depth of logistics and physical event coordination. Their two consecutive years of involvement have deepened not only their hard and soft skills but also their sense of responsibility. Their delivery greatly impressed the delegates when they learned that almost the entire event was operated by students under 25 years old instead of an event management company. As a result, the youth were directly empowered, their skills were acknowledged, and they were encouraged to do more to benefit society as responsible citizens.

In addition, the ICRTH2022 took an extra step in being more inclusive by involving children. Forty children aged six from five kindergartens in Sarawak were invited to perform the national and state anthems during the conference's opening ceremony. Another cohort of young people was invited to play wind instruments during the conference registration and networking dinner. Such arrangements were useful to create their early awareness towards responsible tourism, regardless of age. The children's participation was also intended to convey a strong message to the delegates that the youth are not too young to assume responsibility. Instead, they are agents of change and responsible tourism partners, whose responsible actions in tourism are as important as that of any tourism stakeholder.



Figures 6 and 7: Children's performance and youth involvement in organising the ICRTH2022

Incorporate Sustainable Practices into the Conference

Resonating with the theme of the ICRTH2022 “*Mobilising Responsible Tourism into Actions*”, the conference itself was a good platform to embrace sustainability and put responsible tourism into practice. Numerous discussions were held among the SRS, UCSI University Kuching Campus, UCSI Hotel (the conference venue), and other relevant personnel to ensure the conference adhered to the “practice-what-you-preach” adage. For instance, a local vendor selling banana chips promoted zero food waste. This showed ICRTH2022 advocated sustainable practices by inviting local vendors and by reducing food waste, whereas in the hospitality industry, it is a big issue (Ong et al., 2022). While guidelines exist for sustainable event planning and organisation, decisions for the conference were mostly guided by practical reasons. Some of the initiatives during the ICRTH2022 were as follows:

- a. Requested the venue provider to not provide drinking water in plastic bottles;
- b. Prevented food waste by portioning out food via paper packs based on the headcount and using the “tapas style” during the networking dinner;
- c. Encouraged delegates to stay back throughout the event to network with others, thus maximising planned consumption and minimising waste;
- d. Distributed a cotton fabric conference bag with no plastic properties to delegates;
- e. Arranged buses and carpools, rather than separate vehicles, to transport delegates for excursions to minimise carbon emissions;
- f. Chose a responsible conference accommodation provider where friendly reminder notes on the responsible use of water, facilities, and services were made available; and
- g. Designed the excursion to allow delegates to connect with the local authorities and community members.

Concluding Notes

This paper has shared the organising experience of the ICRTH conference, particularly to introduce what the conference is about and elucidate its missions, and design. As much as a desirable plan can work or be expected to work, there are always limitations which lead to constraints or imperfections, and subsequently further improvement. For example, despite our aspiration and request to be plastic-bottle-free, the conference venue provider was unable to fulfil this requirement due to insufficient resource and manpower capacities. A suitable alternative to bottled mineral water was not readily available, which made the switch a

challenge in this case. In truth, the entire green supply chain ecosystem in Sarawak is still in its infancy; thus, most, if not all, green replacement items (e.g., paper utensils, recycled paper and decorations, green energy supply, etc.) are relatively expensive in the absence of economies of scale. We also learned that local community members who are vendors themselves should ideally take the lead in responsible practices by avoiding the use of plastic in their packaging or products. By shedding light on these shortfalls in the ICRTM's organisation, we hope to open room for improvement in the practice of others.

The ICRTM has forged great relationships with its international partners, specifically with IPB University (Indonesia). As such, the ICRTM2023 will expand its footprint to be hosted there with the theme “*Reviving Tourism through Green Investment.*” With the tagline “Inspiring Innovation with Integrity”, and commitment to create various innovations and discoveries for the benefit of the community, IPB University is in line with ICRTM noble aspiration. Originally a homegrown Sarawak conference, the ICRTM has now spread its network and partnerships across borders to Indonesia and may be hosted in rotation around Southeast Asia and Asia Pacific in years to come. The conference has been, and will continue to be, a useful vehicle for knowledge sharing and creation, awareness installation, stakeholder collaboration, and community benefit in support of responsible tourism for broader impacts.

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