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DEVELOPING AND MANAGING ROCK ART TOURISM: THE IMPORTANCE OF SITE HISTORIES, VISITOR CENTRES, VISITOR BOOKS AND VISITOR EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

Archaeotourism is a major global industry that takes many forms, from onsite visitation to museum visits and, increasingly, various sorts of virtual experience. Of the different types of places people like to visit those with rock art can be particularly powerful. Rock art consists of paintings, prints, stencils, petroglyphs, bas relief and other human-made marks in caves and rock shelters, as well as on boulders and rock platforms. Worldwide there is growing public interest in visiting rock art sites or replicas of important sites closed to the public. Across Southeast Asia there are a range of sites open for public visitation with widely variable infrastructure, management strategies, custodial arrangements and funding. Management and conservation plans are rare as are long-term monitoring programme. However, sites remain popular with tourists and often are a source of national pride. In this paper, these issues are explored with examples from various Southeast Asian countries, especially Malaysia. Lessons from new research into Australian rock art tourism is also referred to. Among other things, the importance of site histories, visitor books and visitor centres for rock art sites open for tourism is emphasised, as well as the nature of visitor information and experience. It is concluded that rock art site visits should be grounded in other sorts of archaeological tourism as well as experiences of nature wherever possible. Also, we need to make sure sites are well looked after and not 'loved to death'. Lastly, these sorts of tourism experiences can be promoted as a way of enhancing personal health and well-being given recent happiness' research results from many parts of the world.

Keywords: rock art, tourism, Southeast Asia, well-being



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INTRODUCTION

Rock art tourism, a form of archaeotourism, is a global phenomenon that has its roots in the ancient past in various parts of the world. However, since the 1950s it has steadily accelerated. Today it occurs in almost every country where there is rock art and in some places, such as parts of France (Duval *et al.* 2018) or China (Gao 2017), rock art tourism is big business. Not only are actual rock art sites receiving much tourist attention but also rock art museums and rock art replicas, such as those of Chauvet, Lascaux (now up to replica 3) and Altamira in France and Spain which attract hundreds of thousands of visitors each year (Duval *et al.* 2018, 2019). In many parts of the world rock art tourism not only connects visitors with other peoples and past cultures at rock art sites but also visitors have encounters with the natural surrounds, exotic flora, wild animals and astounding geology. A sense of both natural and cultural history can be experienced when visiting rock art sites and often personal well-being is enhanced (Taçon 2019; Taçon and Baker 2019).

Global research on rock art tourism began very recently, initially in the 1980s and 1990s in the context of site and visitor management (e.g. Deacon 1997; Gale 1985; Gale and Jacobs 1986; Jacobs and Gale 1994; various papers in Ward and Ward 1995), then in the 2000s more specifically in relation to rock art conservation (e.g. Deacon 2006) but in the past few years much more broadly (e.g. Agnew *et al.* 2015). Most general rock art tourism research has taken place in South Africa and Western Europe but recently began in Australia. In this paper the focus is on rock art tourism in Island Southeast Asia and, in particular, Sarawak, Malaysia where little rock art tourism research has been conducted.

Archaeotourism and rock art tourism

In its broadest sense, archaeotourism can be defined as follows:

Archaeological tourism also labeled as “archaeotourism” is a travel that focuses on visiting and experiencing ancient sites and historical places. The motivating forces behind archaeological tourism are a passion for the past and an interest in learning about the ancient or historical cultures that inhabited the area being visited. “Archaeotourists” are also attracted by the exotic (and often hard to access) nature of the locations in which many archaeological sites are found and often desire unique experiences. Archaeological tourism may include visits to museums, places of historical