Pulau Tioman: If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it

By ANDREW SIA
Pictures by DR LEE GRISMER, PETER O’BYRNE, BERNAMA, LEE SIEW YEEN, K.L. KWANG & ANDREW SIA

Will Pulau Tioman slides from its status as one of the world's 10 Most Beautiful Islands? Are plans for mass tourism of duty-free shopping and a huge new airport on reclaimed land the best way to develop it? Or will all that end up killing the golden goose by spoiling its pristine seas and forests? In conjunction with World Environment Day today, ANDREW SIA dives into the issues.

How many visitors and hotels can Pulau Tioman handle before tourism itself becomes a menace to the tourist attraction? Will the proposed duty-free shopping paradise, yacht marina and RM100mil airport for Boeing 737’s – to be built Hong Kong-style on reclaimed land – damage sensitive corals that tourists fly in to see in the first place? In other words, will the rush for profit kill the golden goose?

There is talk of turning Tioman into another Langkawi but locals don’t quite agree.

“We are not Langkawi. They don’t have crystal clear waters or much coral. People go there for shopping and the beach,” explained Mohd Sabri Nazri, better known as Wak, the representative from the Tioman Budget Hotel Association.

“Duty free shopping is not the main draw to Tioman. Shopping is better in Kuala Lumpur. Our main attractions are our crystal clear waters and forested hills. The wrong kind of development will spoil it.
The Regent of Pahang diving in to launch the artificial reef.

Julian Hyde, owner of the Tioman Dive Centre, quipped, “Do we really need another Langkawi? Tioman is different, it has its own unique natural beauty, that’s the reason people choose to visit here.”

Actually, before Tioman was declared a duty-free island in January 2002, the government itself agreed with all this. In the Development Plan for Touristic Islands of Peninsular Malaysia, the “main assets” of Tioman were specified as “corals, beaches, highlands, forests, mangroves and lovely panorama.”

The plan’s “development concept” was for international eco-tourism since Tioman is one of the “10 most beautiful islands in the world”. Under the lists of “not allowed” were “theme parks” and “large-scale agriculture”. However, since the duty-free declaration, mass tourism has become the dominant ethos – though the authorities have repeatedly emphasised that development would be “sensitive” with “minimal” environment impact.

Then came the cargo jetty project and the callous destruction of corals last October. 6,500 pieces of coral (according to the court charges), some centuries old, were destroyed in minutes when a barge dragged its two anchors through the Tioman Marine Park just off Kampung Tekek. Only the prompt intervention of divers and residents prevented more damage.

What was even more alarming was that the cargo jetty project had proceeded even though there was no prior environmental impact assessment (EIA). How could something like that happen in a marine park?

“Why did they have to do their project there? There is a sandbed area a bit further north which can accommodate it,” pointed out Hyde.

It was ironic as just three weeks before that incident, the Tengku Mahkota of Pahang had launched a 15-ton, RM300,000 artificial reef to promote marine life and coral breeding in Tioman’s waters. Even the State Fisheries Department, which runs and protects the Marine Park, and Pahang’s Tioman Development Authority (TDA), were in the dark as to why the barge was there in
The rare Coelogyne tiomanensis orchid is only found in Tioman's hills.

**Appropriate development**

If something relatively uncontroversial like a cargo jetty can go so wrong, what of the new airport with a 2km runway to be built over the sea? In the first place, does it even make economic sense?

Currently Berjaya Air operates only one flight a day (using a 48-seater aircraft) though this is increased during peak periods.

“The old airport is vastly under-utilised. It can easily take many many more flights. Besides, if you really want 747’s coming here, why not build a big airport at Mersing and bring tourists over with nice, fast, comfortable ferries?” said Hyde.

According to a source, through a loophole in the approval process, the EIA for the airport may already have been quietly passed.

“There is this thing where sketchy preliminary EIA’s may get approved if the Department of the Environment feels there is no need for a proper, detailed EIA. This avoids the need for public comment on the project,” explained the source.

The basic issue remains that the duty-free shopping mass tourism model may not be the most efficient – in economic, let alone environmental, terms. Should Tioman instead capitalise on its strongest assets as a diving and forest eco-tourism paradise and go up-market from there?

“Look at the Maldives and Palau,” said Wak. “They have very posh resorts. Look at Pangkor Laut. That’s marketing nature at its best. We should move in that direction too.”

Andrew Sebastian, executive officer with the Malaysian Nature Society (MNS) said that a study is needed to see if
Tioman can sustain all the big development ideas and the projected number of visitors.

“Can the island cope with all that?” he asked.

The basic concept is of “carrying capacity” – whether its environment can cope with the stresses of increased garbage, erosion, siltation, demands for water, boats with fumes, careless snorkellers, soapy bath water etc.

“You cannot impose a development plan on Tioman. The plan should suit Tioman and not the other way around,” explained Sebastian. “The study is also needed to determine zoning. Some areas with sensitive corals cannot tolerate too much development. Other areas can.”

“Things have changed so much in the last ten years,” said a local business operator. “Tulai (an island off Tioman) used to be the most beautiful place. But there were too many poorly supervised snorkellers who just stepped on and broke corals.”

“It’s all about appropriate development,” noted T.C. Lim, who has dived here several times. “Not huge hotels. People don’t want to go to another Port Dickson.”

Then there are the current management problems. According to Wak, there are sometimes water shortages during the peak season.

“The old pipes get stuck with leaves and such. We villagers have to go up and help the waterworks department clear them.” He added that there are also problems with garbage disposal as one of the incinerators is spoilt. “If the authorities cannot fully cope with basic infrastructure even now, what of the future?”

The locals of Kampung Tekek also fear being marginalised with the new development plans and call for a more organic growth – from the ground up.

Divers doing a reef check, ensuring that all's
“Tourism should be gradually developed by the islanders, with government help, instead of being imposed upon us. Look at those who had to leave their land to make way for the Berjaya resort. Yes, they got compensation but now they live like squatters. If they had stayed on, maybe they could have become bosses of their own chalets,” said Wak.

“My father started his tourism business in the 1970s with RM5 home-stay rooms. Then in the 1980s, he slowly built up A-frame huts and wooden longhouses. Now, we have concrete air-conditioned chalets. Prices at our Nazri Beach Cabanas at ABC Beach have moved up from RM50 to RM150 per room. One day, we want to aim for Pangkor Laut status,” outlined this mechanical engineer who returned from Kuala Lumpur to manage the family business.

“We are definitely not anti-development. We just want appropriate development that will benefit the local community. But as it is, we villagers have never even seen Tioman’s development masterplan,” said Wak.

Hyde commented, “No one here really knows what will happen. There are rumours of projects being on or off. One TDA officer even said that the projects seem to fall out from the sky, like revelations. Development plans are not discussed with the locals. This is their island. I’m from England. I can always go back home.”

The forest too

Another basic problem is that the management of Tioman is split between the sea and land. The Fisheries Department, which oversees the Marine Park coral reef sanctuary, has jurisdiction over waters two nautical miles from shore. But the adjoining land is under the jurisdiction of the respective State Governments. As a result, according to Sebastian, development on land has been approved with little regard for its impact on the adjoining sea.

MNS has proposed that the management of land and sea be integrated. Sebastian highlighted the example of Johor’s islands just to the south of Tioman where, two weeks ago, five islands off Mersing – Besar, Aur, Sibu, Pemanggil and Tinggi – were gazetted as protected areas.
Leptolalax family was only discovered last year in Pulau Tioman. Johor Parks Corporation, manages both land and sea. Might Pahang want to follow Johor’s lead?

While the focus has been on the sea, the forested hills of Tioman also have much to offer as an eco-tourism goldmine. According to Wak, Tioman was recently featured in an Animal Planet Channel series on reptiles worldwide while National Geographic came two years ago to shoot part of their “wild snacks” series.

“Many youth groups come here for jungle trekking or to climb Gunung Kajang (1,047m). Rock climbing at the famous rocky twin peaks is only now being slowly opened up,” revealed Wak. “European bird-watchers and Japanese butterfly collectors come here too. Orchids enthusiasts visit. It’s amazing. At different elevations, there are different micro-climates, different species of orchids.”

Prof Lee Grismer from La Sierra University, the United States, has discovered several unique species of animals found nowhere else in the world. *Ansonia tiomanica* (the Tioman Slender Toad), *Dibamus tiomanensis* (the Tioman Dibamid Lizard) and *Cyrtodactylus tiomanensis* (the Tioman slender-toed gecko) among others.

“According to Prof Grismer, Tioman’s forest makes it the most biologically diverse island in the South China Sea,” said Hyde. “The authorities should have a proper biological expedition to document and highlight what’s here. We’re actually Malaysia’s Galapagos island!” W

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