Abstract: Sandakan Memorial Park was established to commemorate the suffering and death of British and Australian soldiers and other civilians that were imprisoned in Sandakan by the Japanese army during the Second World War between 1942 until 1945. Using Sandakan Memorial Park as a case study, this paper seeks to contribute to the literature on dark tourism by looking at the phenomenon in terms of visitor motivation and engagement. A mixed method of inquiry utilizing both qualitative and quantitative approaches was adopted in order to verify identified variables and achieve the study’s objectives. Contrary to prevailing scholarship on dark tourism, the study discovered that morbid curiosity and the contemplation of death were not among the primary reasons that western tourists visited Sandakan Memorial Park. Rather, especially in the case of Australian tourists, the perception of national heritage and a desire to learn were the key motivating factors. This paper also highlights the importance of on-site interpretation—as a means to enhance the didactic and emotional value of the tourist experience at a dark tourism site.

Keywords: dark tourism, Sandakan Memorial Park, motivation, experience

Introduction

Today, sites such as nuclear disaster zones, battlefields, the homes of serial killers or the execution chambers of former state prisons are increasingly being developed as tourist attractions. The demand for attractions or sites associated with death and suffering is growing, although according to Lennon and Foley
Reni Cacillia Polus, Christy Bidder, and Thomas Edward Jones  

(2000), the phenomenon is actually far from being a modern one. ‘Dark tourism’ might find its many precedents in the Roman colloseum’s gladiatorial spectacles, medieval pilgrimages, public executions and so on (Seaton 1996). The violence of the modern era has, however, provided some of the larger and most horrific sites and spectacles of this nature, such as the Holocaust Museum (Stone 2005; Yuill 2003) and various modern conflict-related sites around the world (Agrusa, Tanner, and Dupuis 2006; Cooper 2006; Lee et al. 2007; Lloyd 1998; Seaton 1999; Slade 2003; Timothy et al. 2004).

Though it is a relatively new concept in Southeast Asia, there are many well-established and popular dark tourism attractions in the region. In addition to the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide in Cambodia, and the Chu Chi Tunnels and other sites associated with war and atrocity in Vietnam, there are other lesser known dark tourism sites whose visitor numbers are growing, such as Hellfire Pass in Thailand and Jerajak Island in Malaysia.

Sandakan Memorial Park is one of the most visited dark sites in Malaysia by both domestic and international tourists, despite its relative lack of promotion and marketing, moreover it is one of the most visited sites in Sandakan generally (Trip Advisor 2014). In 2013, the site won the Travelers’ Choice 2013 Award (Trip Advisor 2014). Using Sandakan Memorial Park as a case study, this paper makes an ethnographic contribution to the literature on dark tourism by looking at the phenomenon in terms of visitor’s personal motivation, and the ways in which they engaged with the site.

**Background**

**Dark Tourism and Motivation**

Within the discipline of Tourism Studies there are many terms to describe this phenomenon, including: black spots tourism (Rojek 1993), thanatourism (Seaton 1996), horror tourism (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996), and morbid tourism (Blom 2000). Although all these terms and more are used (Tarlow 2005), the two most commonly used are thanatourism and dark tourism. Lennon and Foley (2000) described dark tourism as: “the phenomenon which encompasses the presentation and consumption (by visitors) of real and commodified death and disaster sites”. Dark tourism can have a profound emotional effect on the visitor, and can be imbricated with contemporary politics and social issues (Tarlow 2005).
Despite the fact that academic attention on dark tourism is growing, our understanding of the concept is still limited (Stone 2006; Stone and Sharpley 2008). The literature has excessively emphasized the ‘supply end’ of dark tourism (i.e. types or categories of dark sites or experiences). Miles (2002) points out the difference between dark tourism sites at which death and disaster have actually occurred, and those that merely represent, commemorate or associate with death. Stone (2005) argues that dark tourism sites can be categorized into six types according to their nature: darkest, darker, dark, light, lighter and lightest. He goes on to identify seven types of site: Dark Camps of Genocide, Dark Conflict Sites, Dark Shrines, Dark Resting Places, Dark Dungeons, Dark Exhibitions, and Dark Fun Factories. Miles’ and Stone’s frameworks respectively provide a good overview of dark tourism from the supply perspective, but are limited in their capacity to conceptualize the demand.

While Tarlow (2005) has discussed the connection between dark sites and the psychological state of visitors, there is no explanation of tourist motivation and behavior. As stated by Stone and Sharpley (2008), in order to give a comprehensive analysis of dark tourism, we need to address the question of why tourists are attracted to sites or experiences related to death and suffering in the first instance. Some researchers (e.g. Seaton 1999; Shackley 2001; Strange and Kempa 2003; Preece and Price 2005; Tarlow 2005; Panakera 2007; Ryan 2007; Dunkley et al. 2011; Hyde and Harman 2011; Marschall 2012; Cheal and Griffin 2013) have adopted a demand-perspective approach to better understanding dark tourism. They identify several motivational categories beyond morbid curiosity, such as learning and education, historical interest, event validation, recreation, national sentiment, pilgrimage, remembrance and commemoration, hobbies and friendship. Due to the different forms that dark tourism takes (see Miles 2002; Strange and Kempa 2003; Sharpley 2005), more specific case studies undertaken from a demand-perspective are desirable.

**Visitor Expectations of On-Site Interpretation**

Dark tourism sites offer a wide range of potential visitor engagement (Biran et al., 2011), including educational material and emotionally visceral experiences (Kang et al. 2012). Their didactic capacity in regard to historical events can be substantial (Henderson 2000; Lennon and Foley 2000), whilst for some visitors they can also facilitate emotional closure (Braithwaite and Lee 2006).
According to Tarlow (2005, p. 55), dark tourism site visitors experience four basic emotions: a sense of insecurity, a sense of gratitude, feelings of humility, and surprisingly, feelings of superiority.

Kang et al. (2012) identified three factors that are likely to influence the emotional and educational aspects of dark tourism. These are the types of on-site interpretation, site authenticity and media coverage. Being the principal means to conveying information about a site to its visitors, interpretation plays a crucial role in shaping dark tourism experiences (Wight and Lennon 2007; Sharpley and Stone 2009). Tilden and Craig (2007) defined interpretation as:

an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information.

Previous studies have offered two particular categories of interpretation, namely selective interpretation and hot interpretation. The former, which was introduced by Wight and Lennon (2007), has been adopted especially in sites associated with war or political conflicts. It offers selective or partial constructions of the past. The latter employs content and modes of presentation that are designed to be emotionally intense. Hot interpretation can offer tourists an imperative dark tourism experience, in addition to playing a role in community healing through communicating profound insights into a tragic event associated with that community (Uzzell and Ballantyne 1998). Tourists have different levels of knowledge and familiarity as well as a natural diversity of views in relation to a particular site and its subject, all of which may affect what they look for in on-site interpretation. For instance, while some tourists may be interested purely in educational material, others may be searching for an emotional, spiritual or sentimental experience. With this in mind, there is clearly reason to examine visitor needs and expectations regarding the interpretation, when attempting to give a rounded account of their overall tourist experience (Biran et al. 2011).
Methodology

The authors adopted a qualitative research method in the form of semi-structured interviews that were carried out in the Sandakan Memorial Park, Sabah Borneo, for two consecutive weekends in July 2015. The interview questions centered upon three major themes, namely visitation patterns, motivations for visiting Sandakan Memorial Park and experiences obtained from the visits. Using convenience and snowball sampling, participants were approached at the exit upon leaving the site. Each interview was conducted on a one-to-one basis and took between 30 and 45 minutes to complete. A total of 24 visitors took part in the interviews.

The site

Sandakan Memorial Park commemorates an atrocity that occurred in Sandakan under the Japanese occupation in Borneo during the Second World War. Being the former site of a Japanese Prisoner of War (POW) camp and the starting point for the notorious ‘Sandakan-Ranau Death Marches’, this site witnessed the death of nearly 2,400 Australian and British prisoners of war held by the Japanese in the Sandakan POW camp. Today, the site of the camp has been converted into a quiet forest orchard and series of gardens. Still present in these are large, rusting machines, such as an excavator used for construction of an airport for the Japanese and generators as the main power source for the camp in their original positions, testifying to the camp’s forced-labor program. The park also contains an obelisk of black granite commemorating those who died, and a pavilion featuring accounts from survivors and photographs of personnel, inmates and liberators. The motif system used in the park uses flowers to represent the people of the three nations who suffered in Sandakan during the war. In addition, Sandakan Memorial Park is also the venue for several events including the annual Anzac Day held on April 25th and the Sandakan Day held on August 15th (Department of Veterans 2014).
Results and Discussion

Respondent Profile

As shown in Table 1, the majority of the participants were Australian, followed by American and British. The pattern of the participant’s country of origin corresponds with the assumption that Australians and British are personally connected to Sandakan Memorial Park by virtue of their national identity and history. Findings show that the participant’s ages ranged from 16 to 70 years old, but the majority were aged 51 or older. There was almost an equal number of males and females. The participants were well educated, with 21 out of the 24 participants having a tertiary level of education. In terms of time spent at the park, only two out of the 24 participants spent more than 2 hours exploring the site. They were independent travelers in their late 50s and were highly educated. This finding suggests that independent, older travelers are predisposed to spend more time at the site. This is in line with Issac and Cakmak’s (2013) findings that highly educated visitors are more motivated by the ‘conscience’ factor.

Table 1. Profile of the Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Time spent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>16 – 20 years</td>
<td>Less than 2 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>20 – 30 years</td>
<td>2 – 3 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>31 – 40 years</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>Master’s degree</td>
<td>41 – 50 years</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>Doctoral degree</td>
<td>51 – 70 years</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Assisted by Tour Guide</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summary of Main Motives

Participants were asked about their main motives for visiting Sandakan Memorial Park. Most of them indicated a number of motives for their visits. These motives were analyzed, coded and summarized as five major motive themes, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Main Motives Themes and Number of Participants with each Motive

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Motive Themes</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning and Education</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event Validation</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leisure</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pilgrimage/ Personal heritage</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morbid Curiosity</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table shows that ‘learning and education’ was a strong and primary motive for visiting Sandakan Memorial Park. All of the participants indicated that they visited the park because they wanted to learn about the Second World War in Sandakan during the Japanese occupation. They decided to visit because of the historical significance of the site. They wanted to understand how such a devastating event could happen. They also opined that the site would serve as a lesson for new generations. As suggested by Lennon and Folley (2000), the past becomes an instrumental teaching tool for the future.

The second main motive was ‘event validation’. Participants who were driven by this motive wanted to find out what really happened on the site itself, and wanted to understand the tragedy first hand by engaging intimately with the physicality of the landscape. This supports the findings of Biran et al. (2011) in that the participants held it necessary to physically visit the site to concretize what ‘really happened’ there, better building an impression of events that could otherwise remain somewhat abstract.

The third major motive was ‘Leisure’. It is important to note that visits to Sandakan Memorial Park are undertaken solely upon the request of the participants, as opposed to being already included in the typical Sandakan tour itineraries. Those participants commented that the visit was a side trip, and that they had wanted to see it based upon acquaintance recommendations, and
the status of the park as one of the prime tourist attractions in Sandakan. This contradicts the findings of some previous scholars (such as Logan and Reeves 2009; Issac and Cakmak 2013) who asserted that dark tourism is a ‘derived demand’, which is characterized as a random stop and is not pre-planned. A large number of the participants (18 out of 24) also indicated that the trip was like a pilgrimage for them as they were directly affected by the tragedy that occurred at Sandakan Memorial Park. The site is part of their personal heritage. Most of those 18 participants commented that they were related to the victims (for instance, two of the participants informed the researchers that they were the grandchildren of one of the victims). They visited the park because they wanted to feel closer to their heritage, and for some, to achieve some sort of emotional closure. This motive was a ‘push’ factor that drove the participants to the site. These participants were the ones who were emotionally affected the most when they visited the park. According to Poria et al. (2006), when visitors feel that a dark tourism site is part of their heritage, their visit should not be seen as leisure, but as a form of pilgrimage related to personal heritage.

There were only a small number of participants whose visits were driven by morbid curiosity. These participants admitted that while exploring the site, they could not help but imagine the cruelty and death that occurred there, and to contemplate their own mortality. This small number is consistent with the findings of some previous studies (e.g. Dunkley et al. 2011; Hyde and Harman 2011; Marschall 2012; Cheal and Griffin 2013; Issac and Cakmak 2013) that stated visiting dark sites is not always motivated by a fascination with death and suffering, as suggested in the definition of dark tourism provided by Lennon and Foley (2000).

Overall, the findings of this study support the opinion of Dunkley et al. (2011) that the visitation of dark tourism sites can be for a wider variety of reasons than simply morbidity. Additionally, the findings reveal that the ‘level of darkness’ of dark tourism sites is significantly dependent upon the extent to which visitors attach personal meaning to those sites, that is, the greater the perception of personal heritage or meaning attached, the darker the site is (Muzaini et al. 2007). Visitors who were driven by ‘learning and education’, ‘event validation’, ‘leisure’ and ‘morbid curiosity’ were on the dark side of Miles’ (2002) dark tourism spectrum, while those driven by a sense of personal heritage were on the darker or the darkest end of the continuum.
Visitor Expectations of On-site Interpretation

The second objective of the study was to explore visitors’ expectations in regard to the on-site interpretation in the Sandakan Memorial Park. Cheal and Griffin (2013) suggest that interpretation is a form of communication that helps tourists understand, make sense of, or connect with the site and its history. It can be planned or incidental. The on-site interpretation in the Sandakan Memorial Park is planned, consisting of interpretation panels, a Commemorative Pavilion, an audio-visual presentation and an official visitor information booklet. The Commemorative Pavilion is a key source of information about the atrocities that took place on the site. The 24 participants revealed three main themes in their expectations of on-site interpretation: affective engagement, physical engagement and cognitive engagement.

Affective Engagement

‘Affective engagement’ was the primary theme. It was about the inner feelings that the participants experienced in relation to their visit. Many of the participants described their experiences in terms of fulfillment and satisfaction, because the site allowed them to connect with their own heritage. One participant remarked that:

…the interpretation was very educational, emotional and important for me to learn as part of my heritage [Australian, late 40s].

Another participant described the experience as emotionally intense. He said:

…such tragic events as the death marches have demonstrated the cruel nature of humanity. I experienced a sense of horror from this site. The transition from civilization to savagery as evidenced in the death marches is beyond my understanding [American history teacher, 50s].

Being an Australian seemed to increase the impact of visiting the site. Some participants described the tragedy as ‘part of Australian history’, hence it was harder for them to accept what had happened in Sandakan Memorial Park. Walking through the park and seeing the historical remnants was described as ‘too shocking and sad’. One participant, who was travelling independently,
declined to take part in the interview as he became overwhelmingly emotional after visiting the interpretation center. A dark tourism site may provoke both positive and negative emotions. Despite the shocking aspects of the site’s history and its presentation, some of the participants stated that they profoundly admired the endurance, bravery and comradeship displayed by the POW’s. This supports Cheal and Griffin’s (2013) findings that in addition to feelings of loss, frustration, anger and empathy, visitors may also experience such positive emotions as feeling proud and being moved. One participant said:

Very moving, very emotional. Saddened by the loss of precious life by human cruelty, but proud of the bravery and resilience of our men [Australian, 20s].

Additionally, 18 out of 22 participants communicated that they felt sympathy for the victims of Sandakan Memorial Park’s tragedy. One of the respondents expressed his sympathy in the following way:

I felt sad for the death and suffering inflicted on the victims – of our brave British, Aussies and the local prisoners [British, late 50s].

In general, dark tourism sites that are linked to actual events are almost completely lacking in positive associations, and they usually elicit negative emotions such as fear, horror, sadness, depression, empathy, sympathy and feelings of vengeance. In the case of the Sandakan Memorial Park, most of the participants reported that they felt both sadness and admiration or respect for the prisoners’ courage and forgiveness.

**Physical Engagement**

The second theme was physical engagement. The site’s location, physical contents and infrastructure play a vital role in the visitors’ engagement with the park, and can determine whether they visit at all (see Yuill 2003). Sandakan Memorial Park is easily accessible, and visitors can come either as an independent traveler or as a member of a guided tour. Visitors are provided with an information booklet that facilitates independent exploration of the park. A hands-off approach that allows the visitor to absorb the site at their own pace tends to be an effective presentation technique at dark tourism sites (Seaton 1999). One participant commented:
I spent about 90 minutes to get around this park just with the visitor booklet. It is worth a visit for every Aussie. It is very educational and very moving [Australian, late 50’s].

The participants were also satisfied with the maintenance of the site and the surrounding infrastructure. One participant remarked:

The amount of information available at this park helped me to create a deeper emotional connection to the site [Australian, late 50s].

**Cognitive Engagement**

For most of the participants, the on-site interpretation helped them to engage with the site at the cognitive level. It helped them gain a deeper understanding of the atrocities that occurred at the Sandakan POW camp. One participant commented:

I have read a lot about the history of this place and what I have seen today significantly increased my knowledge. Well-presented and appreciated [American, late 50s].

Moreover, the participants agreed that the on-site interpretation made them want to pass on the knowledge gained to the people around them. A majority of them felt that the visit was a valuable experience, especially for those travelling with children. One participant said:

Please continue to remember those who suffered during the war – we must not forget [British, late 40s].

Although the information booklet was helpful for the independent visitors, some participants still thought an interpretation provided by a guide would be more insightful. One participant commented:

The disappointing thing is that there is no information on who was there and what the Japanese intended with the death marches. Apparently the victims were buried on Labuan Island, south of Kota Kinabalu which is not mentioned at the information center. A tour guide’s explanation would be nice [American, late 40s].
Conclusion

This study investigated dark tourism from the perspective of visitor motivation and perception. Previous studies that have looked at the phenomenon from this angle concluded that, like heritage tourism also, most dark tourism visitation is incidental or unplanned, that is, visitors happen across the site, or the site is part of a bigger itinerary. The findings of this study showed otherwise. Sandakan Memorial Park is not included as standard in any tour program. Rather, its inclusion on tours is requested tourists, and the high levels of visitation are made up of tourists who have planned specifically to visit the park. This is especially true for visitors from Australia, who consider the site as part of their historical heritage. Hence, their visit to Sandakan Memorial Park is specifically motivated, in this case, as a pilgrimage.

The findings of this study also demonstrated that a visit to a dark tourism site can be simultaneously driven by several reasons, as has been indicated by some previous scholars. The perception of national heritage and paying respects to their country’s war dead were the most compelling factors for Australian visitors, but their visits were also motivated by a desire to learn more, and to come to term with the atrocities that occurred at the site through some form of physical engagement.

Finally, the study highlighted the importance of on-site interpretation as a means to enhance the didactic and emotional value of the tourist experience at a dark tourism site. The freedom of movement and the visitor’s booklet allowed tourists to engage with the site on their own terms, affectively, physically, and cognitively.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has focused exclusively on western visitors, and as such, the findings may characterize a very western response to the Sandakan Memorial Park. This limitation offers an avenue for future study that examine domestic visitors’ motivations, expectations and experiences at the site. An ethnography of Japanese visitors and their agendas would be equally interesting. An analysis of any resulting differences between these visitor groups could then be conducted, which would round out a fuller and more comprehensive understanding of this particular dark tourism attraction.
Notes

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